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# Oral history interview with Bruce Metcalf, 2009 June 10

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

## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bruce Metcalf on June 10, 2009. The interview took place in Bala Cynwyd, Penn., and was conducted by Edward S. Cooke, Jr. for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

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

### Interview

EDWARD COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bruce Metcalf at his home and studio in, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, on June 10, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is card number one.

So, Bruce, I thought we'd start off just by talking a little bit about where you were, going to college, your exposure—early exposure—to the concept of making a craft, what your level of consciousness was about people making things. And were you in Amherst, Mass., [sic] growing up the entire time?

BRUCE METCALF: Born and raised in Amherst. My dad was an insurance—he was a special agent; he didn't touch "stuff." But my mom did, my mom did a lot of renovation in our house. I grew up in this 1830s clapboard farmhouse.

EDWARD COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: And she was always fixing things. She did a bathroom, she did the kitchen. So it wasn't foreign to me to see somebody working with tools. It was just that it was my mom that was doing it.

EDWARD COOKE: Did she enlist you to do any of it?

BRUCE METCALF: No.

EDWARD COOKE: No? So you were just an observer.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. We were little kids. I think we were largely mystified by this stuff going on. [They laugh.] But let's see. I had an older brother who was actually pretty skillful. In terms of just native ability, he's a better craftsman than I am.

And we did a lot of stuff together. We had modeling clay, and I was always making little jobbers with modeling clay. Then I went on to plastic models, styrene models of planes and tanks and all that stuff. So I had a pretty good idea of assembly, if not exactly making—

EDWARD COOKE: Did you follow the instructions, or did you customize?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, I followed the instructions, yes. Then as a teenager, I did some custom cars and went sort of off the deep end. I would do glove boxes that opened and doors with working handles and stuff like that.

EDWARD COOKE: In the plastic models?

BRUCE METCALF: In the plastic models—which is really hard to do [laughs] in anything.

EDWARD COOKE: In plastic, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So I already had a jeweler's sensibility.

EDWARD COOKE: And fine motor skills?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes. And that had to do with not having the major motor skills.

EDWARD COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: I think.

EDWARD COOKE: What do you mean?

BRUCE METCALF: I was a nerd, you know. I wasn't athletic. I wasn't socially successful. I think a lot of people who are like that sort of retreat into this private world.

EDWARD COOKE: And was it outside of school rather than in school?

BRUCE METCALF: Outside of school.

EDWARD COOKE: I mean, it didn't sort of manifest itself at all in school?

BRUCE METCALF: I never took an art course in high school, not one. Because I didn't think I'd be any good. And my parents certainly never gave me any encouragement.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: My father wanted me to be a businessman and play golf and do that sort of stuff with him.*No* sensitivity. [They laugh.] And my mom was neutral in the matter.

EDWARD COOKE: Whatever made you feel good and happy, in a sense?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Well, I think she deferred to my father. So I was supposed to go to an Ivy League school. My father wanted me to go to Harvard [University] B[usiness] School, and all this stuff, that I couldn't possibly do. So, yes, I had a sense of at least assembly and making, in this very sort of private fantasy world, that was typical of teenage kids at that time, I think.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: But I didn't think it had any meaning.

EDWARD COOKE: It was just escape in some ways, going into your own little world there.

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: It wasn't paralleled by any analytical side of math or physics or something like that?

BRUCE METCALF: No, I was terrible at that stuff.

EDWARD COOKE: But writing, was that something that—

BRUCE METCALF: I wasn't that good a writer, either, to tell you the truth. I got some major discouragement from one of my English teachers. So I certainly didn't think of myself as a literary character. And I wasn't as involved in reading as some of the kids I knew in high school. I was at a very high-powered—for a public school, there were pretty good students there.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, because of the college town, right?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, UMass [University of Massachusetts Amherst] and Amherst College were both there.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So there were a lot of professors' kids. And some of them were really smart [laughs]. Much smarter than me. So I didn't think of myself as having either an artistic talent or a great ability to write at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: I think at that time—I tend to sort of think back on my own high school experience; I'm a little bit younger, but still sort of that whole sensibility. To me, plastic models were also something—that was sort of something I understood, of assembly. And it was sort of a combination of history and making that I found very interesting. I've never heard it talked about in that same way. But it makes a lot of sense of people's exposure to making things that is not part of one's mindset now at all.

BRUCE METCALF: Apparently not.

EDWARD COOKE: I mean, my kids, I tried sort of introducing plastic World War II airplanes and stuff, and boats and naval vessels and stuff, and [they] sort of got into it a little bit. But not in the same way that—they became a wonderful escape and sort of a way of connecting with the past and with process.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, and with process. Now it's Warhammer, those kinds of games with the figures.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: That's how I hear about kids making things, these computer figurines.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So the impulse is the same, the form is different.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: Anyway, when I got to college, I thought I was going to be a sociology major.

EDWARD COOKE: Oh, really? Why sociology?

BRUCE METCALF: I heard a guy talk about it, and it sounded interesting, it seemed to be a kind of universalizing explanation of the world.

EDWARD COOKE: So it wasn't necessarily Studs Terkel or something like that.

BRUCE METCALF: No.

EDWARD COOKE: It was just sort of this broader sense of a sort of a trans-disciplinary way of seeing human interactions.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Which it didn't turn out to be, because I took an advanced placement course, and the course was all about the methodologies of sociology. You know, functionalism as opposed to—I don't know what some of the other debates were. The course didn't teach anything about sociology [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Not the way you wanted to practice.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. Nothing about real understanding of social process. So I got turned off by that pretty quickly. And then in my freshman year there was this architecture student who had—he was a bit of a show-off, and he would build his models out in the lobby of the dorm that I was in. I was just fascinated with those things. I'd seen an architectural model at Amherst College at the Mead Museum of Art much earlier, and I found it a really compelling object, this miniature that contained a world within it.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I'd never seen one before. So I actually made some miniature furniture for this guy to populate his models with.

EDWARD COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] This is at Syracuse [University]?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, Syracuse. Yes, right. So at the end of my freshman year I decided to transfer into architecture for no good reason other than I really dug those models that this guy was making.

EDWARD COOKE: So it wasn't the content of the course or anything. It was just sort of this object pulled you in.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. It was the object, yes. Which is, of course, a perfectly wrong reason to study architecture.

EDWARD COOKE: No, not necessarily. [They laugh.]

BRUCE METCALF: No, it is, believe me. So I went through a year and a half of architecture and really liked building the models. But I found that architecture, at least the way it was taught at the time—first of all, our teachers were very much modernists in the mode of Corbu which was coming out of Harvard University, in the program there.

EDWARD COOKE: So the GSD sort of monolithic approach?

BRUCE METCALF: It was about space, it was about the modulation of space. And the language was extremely mystical. They'd talk about the light. And as a sophomore at college, such terms are absolutely meaningless. The light of architecture. What the fuck is that?

EDWARD COOKE: Exactly.

BRUCE METCALF: They never were able to really bring it down to something more concrete, the way that I looked at it. It seemed to be more a kind of professorial abuse than real teaching. Because they would then line up all these studies, these assignments that we'd do and then grade them according to things like the light. It

made—

EDWARD COOKE: Right. Which, you know, for somebody who's trying to understand—

BRUCE METCALF: What's wrong with what I've done?

EDWARD COOKE: Right. And you can't grasp it.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And I frequently was at the bottom end of that little line of models because I had no clue what they were getting at. I think you have to go into a lived space, an actual space, and they'd have to point out why this entry works. Why this series of windows works. What the light really is. But they wouldn't be bothered with that. They were just basically intimidating students with a vocabulary that they didn't bother to clarify. It was a very—it was almost cruel. It was about making people drop out.

EDWARD COOKE: It's about conforming, too, because I know when I've been on crits [critiques] at GST back in the '80s, that I found the same thing was true; as they were critting [critiquing], the graduates' performance was oftentimes based on, you didn't conform to our semantic discussions. And the things that were closer to what they did themselves were better.

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: So it was all this acolyte system that was very strange.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And doing that to undergraduates is just mean-spirited, I think. Because they couldn't explain their terms, they didn't want to bother. And everybody was trying as hard as they possibly could to meet the expectations of the teachers.

EDWARD COOKE: So you were conscious even at that time of the frustration about terminology? Or you now can put a finger on it; at that point you were just frustrated?

BRUCE METCALF: Mostly just frustrated. By the end of my junior year, I began to realize that the modernist discourse that they were laying on us was somehow wrong for me. I was coming to a critique of that. It took the form of—I had an interest in decoration because it was immediately obvious to me that these spaces that these architecture teachers were trying to get us to design were, to me, dehumanized. Having lived in a dorm all those three years—

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: You know, I could see—

EDWARD COOKE: Some of those Syracuse dorms are pretty spare.

BRUCE METCALF: Ah, yes. Right. And it's obvious that students, you know, the people that have to live in these things, rebelled. They would fill up their rooms with stuff. They would put things on their doors. Inasmuch as they possibly could, they would personalize these spaces, which were highly resistant to personalization.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So to me, my critique at that time, was that modernism was basically dehumanizing because that was my experience of it.

EDWARD COOKE: Was there a particular exercise that sort of focused you on that particular kind of critique, that you can think of? Sort of that "aha" moment for yourself, of all of a sudden charting who you were? It's one thing to observe this. But was there something—

BRUCE METCALF: There was, yes. They gave us this assignment for a summer cottage. And I'd had a lot of experience with real summer cottages in northern Vermont because my family went up there and stayed in these summer cottages. So, again, they wanted the modulation of space and the light and some kind of sense of how light is received into the architectural space, which I had no understanding of. So I made this little model of a peaked-roof vacation house [laughs] that was rather like the ones I stayed up in.

EDWARD COOKE: Full of rustic—?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Well, it was just a cardboard model. But it was very much a *house*. It looked like a house. And the teacher just tore it apart. I said, "Well, you know, flat roofs leak."—which, again, was my experience with flat roofs. He said, "Oh, no, no, no. The technology handles flat roofs." And da da da. So it was clear that this vernacular that I was trying to approach the teacher with was unacceptable. And because I knew those buildings

very well from northern Vermont, there's something very humane, they're small, they're highly textured, there's an ad hoc quality about them because they're added on to over the years. They're filled with just antique junk.

EDWARD COOKE: They smell.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right. Right. And that's all part of the experience of the architecture. It's not just a built structure. It's an entire thing, it's an entire experience. I think it was that assignment that really divorced me from architecture as it was taught.

EDWARD COOKE: So was that junior year?

BRUCE METCALF: That was actually the end of my sophomore year.

EDWARD COOKE: Because you said something at one point about, in conversation or maybe in one of your writings, of sort of a summer between sophomore and junior year, where you just bailed out and went to the West Coast?

BRUCE METCALF: That was between my junior and senior years.

EDWARD COOKE: Okay.

BRUCE METCALF: So senior year I made a last stab—or junior year I made a last stab at architecture. And the teacher we had was a real fascist. Very unpleasant guy, who wouldn't be approached. We asked him if we could call him by his first name. It was, "No, you must call me Professor Reckmeyer." It was all about this authoritarian distance. Which, given my relationship with my father, which wasn't that good, was not going to work. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: Pushed all the wrong buttons.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, it pushed them all. So my second semester of junior year I basically dropped out of architecture and was preparing to drop out of school completely. And that summer—

EDWARD COOKE: So what year was that?

BRUCE METCALF: Summer of 1970.

EDWARD COOKE: Which was not an uncommon thing with a lot of the other social sort of disruptions at that time, a lot of schools, because of protests and occupations, are closing early.

BRUCE METCALF: And I was part of student rebellion in the school of architecture before the big Kent State, invasion of Cambodia demonstrations. I actually was an inadvertent leader of that. I was elected president of my class in absentia [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: But that was for university policies or for what was going on for architecture?

BRUCE METCALF: This was specifically architecture, yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: So I was involved in all that stuff. And I was very much a counterculture type. I did the reading, and I read [Theodore] Roszak , and I read some of Herbert Marcuse , and some of that stuff. I was aware of this sense of trying to build a new culture. I was very skeptical of it because the way it manifested in the world was a lot of self-righteous yelling. And I just couldn't get behind that. It seemed wholly inappropriate to yell about peace.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. [They laugh.] Forced peace, right.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. So I couldn't really fully participate in the movements of the time. I was always around the edges.

EDWARD COOKE: But it was the critique of the contemporary structures—that was the part that you liked.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. I liked the idealism.

EDWARD COOKE: It was about the means that were more of the question, perhaps.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. I was very much involved with the idealism there. There was a book called *The Dynamics of Change* [Don Fabun], which I actually found years later, which I found very interesting. The idea of

change almost as an end of itself, but also as a way of addressing larger social forces, of trying to come to something that was more truly democratic and more open to creativity—that actually insisted on creativity instead of tolerating it. Those were the kind of things I was interested in at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: How did you get exposed to those things? Is it in this kind of student group?

BRUCE METCALF: It was in the air. I mean it was everywhere at Syracuse. This was 1969 [laughs]. It was not too hard to find it. I knew hard-core Marxists, you know, people who talked about getting guns and learning how to shoot. I knew rock and roll musicians. I knew some pretty wild artists. A guy named Josh Nadel who was going to be the next [Robert] Arneson. I mean he was Syracuse's boy wonder.

EDWARD COOKE: In clay?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, in clay.

EDWARD COOKE: Sort of the Syracuse tradition?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: It's interesting that you—did you intersect with, you know, both the industrial design program as well as the ceramic culture of Syracuse?

BRUCE METCALF: At that time ID was, like, the sellouts. That was the good boys and girls. That was [Arthur J.] Pulos's program, and he was running it on the new Bauhaus model.

EDWARD COOKE: Okay.

BRUCE METCALF: They were doing some of the Moholy-Nagy exercises—still.

EDWARD COOKE: Still.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, in the late '60s. So the people in ID—and I knew some of them—were the sellouts.

EDWARD COOKE: They were the conformists.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. Although we thought of them as having, you know, sold out already. [They laugh.] This is when I was in art school after 1970. At any rate, in 1970 I basically pulled up stakes. I got a chance to drive a band, a blues band, to California. I was going—my father had threatened to disown me because my hair was too long and I wouldn't cut it. So I went out there. The musicians turned out to—they didn't have enough money to join the musicians' union. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: So, in San Francisco or Los Angeles?

BRUCE METCALF: In San Francisco. Yes, right. So I was stuck there. And that summer my father died—unexpectedly. He keeled over from a massive stroke on the floor of an insurance office and died later the same day when I was out in California. So I get a telegram from my brother saying, "Come home. Go to Dad's funeral." And I did. And that changed my life, actually. Because my father no longer stood as this sort of authoritative presence and disapproving master.

EDWARD COOKE: Looming over you.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: All of a sudden, constantly sort of doing unproductive energy towards a projection of that.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. So I quit architecture and lost my father the same time. And that's when I started jewelry. The reason I started jewelry was when I was in architecture, we'd be up there at one in the morning. And this guy [who] had dropped out of architecture the year before would come up with these little objects that he was making and show them to us. And to me the complexity and the scale of the object was absolutely compelling.

EDWARD COOKE: What kind of materials was he working with?

BRUCE METCALF: They were metal.

EDWARD COOKE: Metal?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Pierced and small constructed forms in metal. I had no idea how they were made or what they were, but they were compelling to me. So in the fall of 1970 I transferred into jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE: They had an actual jewelry major?

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: You could do that in terms of requirements or—

BRUCE METCALF: Well, it was a bit of a stretch. I had to—I mean, it was the beginning of my senior year.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, I know. I was going to say it's a dramatic time to switch majors.

BRUCE METCALF: [Laughs.] People don't normally do that. And I had apply to the school of art to a guy named actually Schmeckebier who was famous at the time—I think it was Laurence Schmeckebier—the chair of the school. And I had to submit a portfolio of things I'd done in architecture. And I was lucky enough to be accepted, and I was lucky enough to get most of my art history requirements waived. So I was able to complete the BFA in three semesters.

EDWARD COOKE: Wow.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Which was a bit of an accomplishment. I was taking—or maybe it was four semesters. But I was taking 18, 21 credits a semester. I was really pushing.

EDWARD COOKE: But losing yourself in the process.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes.

EDWARD COOKE: In some ways and just—

BRUCE METCALF: I'd never really felt in the academic environment that I'd found a place for myself. In the metal studio, which was in the basement of this dingy old building next to the stadium—it had been a maintenance shop. So there was this big old lathe sort of bolted to the floor of the jewelry studio. The teacher was Michael Jerry, who was—this was when teaching was just starting to shift; the guy who was there before, who was John Marshall, was very authoritarian.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And Marshall taught by the Cleveland [Institute of Art] model, which was the Frederick Miller model, which meant you had to draw your raised form, and you had to draw all the phases of the angle raising. You had to draw the final form. Marshall would check off your drawing and give you approval to buy silver at the student bookstore.

EDWARD COOKE: Wow.

BRUCE METCALF: Before you could even start.

EDWARD COOKE: Before you could start picking up any kind of tool.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And that model would not have worked for me [laughs]. Well, he left. He went to Seattle that summer, and Michael Jerry came in. And Michael was a very tolerant man.

EDWARD COOKE: Where was he from?

BRUCE METCALF: He had been teaching at [the University of Wisconsin-Stout in] Menomonie, Wisconsin. And his graduate experience had been at Cranbrook [Academy of Art] and RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology].

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: He'd done both. He had been a student of Hans Christensen's at RIT, so he was a superb technician.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. But not totally obsessed with it in the same way that Marshall had been.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. He wasn't interested in the controlling aspect of teaching. He just wasn't. So he was a perfect teacher for me at the perfect time. That was the second change of my life, to encounter that teacher at that time, when I was absolutely rebellious. I would not be told anything, under any circumstances [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: Michael's approach to teaching was just to show me things. He was like, have you seen this? So he had a really good idea of what would feed people like me at the time. I think there were a lot of people like me at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: So you felt you were part of a cohort that had similar interests.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. We were very close. The guy who'd dropped out of architecture the year before was there, and a bunch of other students. And we all worked really, really hard. We all hung out together. We all were sharing this kind of adventure of discovering the technology and also the culture of metalsmithing. So Michael was one of those guys that showed a lot of slides and brought in a lot of books. My first day of class I saw *Objects: USA* [Lee Nordness]. And it's, like, going through that thing, which was brand-new at the time—this is the fall of 1970. That was a revelation, just a total revelation. Also the work of J. Fred Woell, a total revelation. The work of Richard Mawdsley. [L.] Brent Kington was doing his toys at the time. Those were the kinds of things —

EDWARD COOKE: So those were the three people that you sort of gravitated to at that time?

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: It's amazing to think of architecture—I mean, so many people who sort of are interested in design and architecture and then get frustrated with sort of all the ancillary stuff that goes into architecture now, how further removed you get from things into abstractions and requirements and licenses and things like that. And how many people sort of go from architecture to something smaller as a way of satisfying some of those interests in human interaction and space and various things like that.

BRUCE METCALF: It was also about control. It became very clear to me that architecture is a corporate form. To be an architect you have to sell yourself. You have to work with teams of people whom you don't necessarily agree with. You're constrained by the budget and the brief. I just was no longer interested in that. I wanted to do something where I was actually in control from start to finish. And that's why jewelry making had such a powerful appeal to me. Because everything was under my view, under my purview, and under my control.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So jewelers tend to be control freaks. That's not unusual.

EDWARD COOKE: I think a lot of people—I mean, it depends on the material. If it's a softer material like glass or ceramic, there's less control freaks. But oftentimes with wood, with metal, with fiber, there tends to be a fair amount of control quality to it. So it seems being able to exert power from start to finish is really one of these compelling parts.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, and it was for me. I mean there's no kiln gods [laughs]. Nothing breaking. So, yes, it was the ability to determine what my activity was, along with this very open-minded culture.

EDWARD COOKE: It's a really interesting sort of educational model as well. Because the paradigm is not one of an acolyte system of replicating yourself in your students, like assigning dissertation topics or getting people to do work your way.

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: But it's a sort of the sense of Michael saying, okay, I'm an enabler—what do you want to do? And he had the technical sophistication to just sort of support and push you or guide you so that you'd really educate yourself. It sounds like that's what was going on with that group.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And he, like I said, was a great technician. He was also a very good teacher. So technically our education was very sound. But he wouldn't make us do one thing or another. So you're right. It was very much about finding one's own way.

EDWARD COOKE: Did he do demos and stuff like that?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes.

EDWARD COOKE: So it was a combination of demos and exercises. But then with the exercises, of giving you a lot of leeway.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Not really exercises, assignments. Now here's a technique—do something with it.

EDWARD COOKE: Oh, that's what it was.

BRUCE METCALF: Here's raising, here is stretching, here's casting.

EDWARD COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: He never stipulated what the form of these things should be. He let us make tons and tons of mistakes, which was great. It's the model of teaching to which I hold even now when I teach. It's like, okay, here's the structure. Go with it.

EDWARD COOKE: So there's a bunch of lapsed architects, if you will, in this. Where else did people come from, migrate into the metal shop at that point? If these people became your social group, your teaching group in essence, are some of them coming out of art?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, they were all—most of them were art students and had been for years. They weren't late transfers like me. But they were all people interested in adornment or the craft itself or the material itself. At the time the culture of art schools—this was the beginnings of conceptual art and minimalism was very heavy-duty. *Artforum* magazine was sort of a point of reference if you really wanted to be an artist and be super, super cool.

There was in the art school this ethos about—let's see, of advanced art being cooler than you [laughs]. So there was a kind of competitiveness to be as much like the art-magazine art as possible in the art school. Whereas the jewelry department was off in a building by itself in this basement. We were kind of refugees from that. I think all of us were.

EDWARD COOKE: And embraced it.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. None of us wanted to do "big" art. None of us wanted to do "important" art. None of us wanted to do conceptual art. We wanted to make things. We wanted to be intuitive and emotional, by and large.

EDWARD COOKE: Did you talk about these issues?

BRUCE METCALF: No.

EDWARD COOKE: Or did you just do it?

BRUCE METCALF: We just did it.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: There was no discourse about that. It's just that when I took painting classes or when I—I never did take sculpture classes—I found a lot of the discussion, even in the critiques, very pretentious. I had no use for the language that was being used in most of the art school, which was moving from formalism into a very early version of conceptualism.

I have to admit I didn't really understand formalism, and I certainly hadn't done the reading then. So I didn't know what it was from, and I didn't know what it was for. But I knew that I had no interest in big abstract expressionist canvases. And I didn't want to sit at a canvas and work it and rework it and rework it for weeks and weeks and weeks. Which was the kind of '50s model at that time. And kids did that. And I didn't want to wrap myself in cellophane and pretend that I was a conceptual artist, which, actually, a friend of mine did.

And I didn't want to get involved in hierarchy of form. And it was being repeated in the art school. The conceptual artists were at the top. The abstract sculptors and the abstract painters were below that. And then at the bottom were the craft students [laughs]. Just the same as in the real world.

I rejected that, you know. Having come from a somewhat politicized view of culture already, that—

EDWARD COOKE: I was going to say, there's a chip on your shoulder about sort of contesting authority and authoritative structures that's consistent right on through here.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Absolutely. Yes. Right. Which is weird, because now I'm very much an authority [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Age has a way of doing that. [They laugh.]

BRUCE METCALF: But anyway, it was a really great experience for me. Before the fact of [Howard] Gardner, I think I intuitively understood that idea of multiple intelligences and how I was perfectly equipped to function in that studio—and function very well at a very high level for where I was at that time.

EDWARD COOKE: But it's curious how, you know, you've said that there's not a lot of discourse so much as just

activity of making.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

EDWARD COOKE: There's a real sort of emphasis on making things and having these assignments and following them through. It's not necessarily critting in terms of according to an outside, imposed sort of aesthetic or hierarchy or something like that. It's a sort of—how did the crits go? Was it just more a case of explaining what you were trying to do?

BRUCE METCALF: You know, I can't remember a word Michael said in one of my crits.

EDWARD COOKE: See, that's interesting.

BRUCE METCALF: [Laughs.] Not a single word. I think it was about—this being the early '70s—I think it was about trying to locate some kind of truth to self. It was never stated as such. But he was just interested in leading us in directions we wanted to go. And because it was the time, most of us had a very clear idea—or a clear enough idea—of what we wanted to do. Some people wanted to go into production. Some people really were interested in jewelry. Some people were interested in raising. So Michael was capable of encouraging all these people simultaneously.

EDWARD COOKE: Pretty amazing—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: —to have that kind of flexibility.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And I was interested in these toy-like objects.

EDWARD COOKE: Because of Brent and Fred Woell and people like that?

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes, yes. And I had a book on Edwardian toys that really interested me. That's when I first painted metal. I did some woodcarvings, so there was multimedia that was allowed. I did everything: I forged iron, I raised, I electroformed, I cast. I did everything that was available in the studio. I was in a shoe store, a really fun shoe store, trying on all these shoes. And it was great.

EDWARD COOKE: Did you have to do a senior project or anything like that?

BRUCE METCALF: No, that was not a requirement at the time, which was a good thing, because I wasn't ready to focus.

EDWARD COOKE: It seems like you were just really laying a very broad foundation.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I was finding out who I was. And it was important to try out all these different things. I found that I'm actually a very good intuitive hammer man. I can hammer about as well as most people in this country.

EDWARD COOKE: For raising or something like that?

BRUCE METCALF: For raising, stretching, right.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And I love doing it, so I found that out. I found out I was good with the small stuff. I found out at the time I didn't want to make jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE: Really?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: What do you mean?

BRUCE METCALF: I don't think, at the time, I could imagine jewelry that was—that really got to what I wanted in terms of content. I didn't really know what I wanted in terms of content. But I wanted them to be toy-like. I wanted them to be imaginative. I wanted them to be in some way participatory—like toys.

EDWARD COOKE: But the vocabulary wasn't there in terms of the kind of work that was being done.

BRUCE METCALF: I couldn't figure out how to—

EDWARD COOKE: The beginning of narrative at that point really, but—

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. I mean, there was Fred's work that was political and narrative, so that was close. And there was Brent Kington's—

EDWARD COOKE: Which is playful and toy-like.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. So those—of those, Mawdsley was doing jewelry. But there was something about the complexity of Mawdsley's work that didn't work for me. There are too many tubes, too much decoration.

Fred's work is actually kind of collage, which I didn't want to do either. There was something about collage that wasn't—because I didn't want to be dependent on the found object to develop both my imagery and my content. So I think, actually, Brent was doing the closest thing to what I wanted with those cast-silver toys. And I actually made an imitation Brent Kington [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Homage to Brent.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right [laughs]. Michael looked at it and kind of raised his eyebrows, and said, this is a little bit like Brent's stuff, isn't it? I had to go, yeah.

EDWARD COOKE: So you were anti-jewelry in some ways. But you were sort of thinking of yourself as a toy maker or—

BRUCE METCALF: As a thing maker, a maker of objects.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: But yet this is also a point at which you could describe within the field of metalsmithing, in some respects, a shift away from hollowware into jewelry, that's really sort of taking place over the course of the '60s and early '70s.

BRUCE METCALF: You know, at the time it wasn't so much hollowware of jewelry as hollowware of objects.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: In the '70s and early '80s, people made a lot of objects.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And it wasn't really sculpture. I think it was, in retrospect—it's kind of problematic because they were sculpture-like without participating in the discourse of sculpture.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: We wanted to be recognized as artists. We wanted to make art. But we didn't address art questions and subjects and problems. So it was very intuitive.

EDWARD COOKE: Sometimes consciously and sometimes subconsciously.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. So we were making *stuff*. We wanted to make stuff, and we made lots of *stuff*. Most of which in hindsight is just not very good.

EDWARD COOKE: It's ephemeral. [They laugh.]

BRUCE METCALF: And I've seen some woodworking like John Cederquist's early work that reminds me a lot of what I was doing at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So it was in the air. What craft allowed for people like me at the time, it was a way to explore freely without being responsible to a discourse.

EDWARD COOKE: To me, that's always been one of these ongoing places for craft, is critique of hierarchies in some respects.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Oftentimes it's accompanied by a discourse. Sometimes the making itself is a discourse rather than the actual written, spoken words. Occasionally there's moments where people are grappling with the things as a way of addressing those very issues.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, and that's true. We really couldn't explain what we were doing. We weren't called upon to do that because there wasn't a tradition of discourse in the crafts at the time. Our teachers didn't demand it of us. And that opened up a space, I think, for 10, 15 years of very experimental work.

EDWARD COOKE: One could say it'd be part of postmodern without some of the ironic distance.

BRUCE METCALF: Before the fact.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. So we were looking at the technique, we were looking at the imagery, we were looking into content. I think for me if there was a movement that was a point of reference it was funk art. Arneson was one of my other heroes. Let's see.

EDWARD COOKE: So Brent and Arneson were really your—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: The people who were sort of getting closer to some of the things that you were interested in exploring.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I didn't like the sloppiness of Arneson. So Fred Bauer maybe more so. Or Richard Shaw. Those people really spoke to me at that time. I think that early funk work was tremendously influential, and I did —

EDWARD COOKE: How were you seeing on the East Coast?

BRUCE METCALF: In "Objects: USA" and the "Ceramics National" [exhibition, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY] which was still going on at the time. I think the last one, the one where [Peter] Voulkos rejected all the work, and said it all sucks, took place while I was there.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: So I could see it, and people were doing it in the ceramics department. There was some kind of funky stuff in the Everson's collection. So I knew about it.

EDWARD COOKE: But you had enough awareness of your own predilection that you didn't then convert into ceramics. You wanted to stay in metal and jewelry because of the material.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I took a ceramics course, and I couldn't throw for shit, and I didn't want to throw. I could handbuild, but there was something about the mud that just didn't work for me. The precision of metals was much more—

EDWARD COOKE: That's what it sounds like. It's part of that small-scale, analytical—but also building under control, in essence. That sort of additive quality rather than being at the mercy of the materials themselves.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. I can only work with materials that don't move by themselves.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So if I put it down, it can't do anything. It can't slump, you know. [They laugh.] So clay, glass, even fibers—I couldn't get fibers. It was just too floppy for me.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: But metal and wood—cardboard. I did a lot of work in cardboard at the time. That's the kind of thing that appealed to me. Sort of the combination of the technology, the ability to plan it out, as you say, control it. An element of engineering. And then this kind of whimsical, highly imaginative quality that had a prototype in funk art. All of that spoke to me.

EDWARD COOKE: This whole idea of thinking about metalworkers going from hollowware into object-making is a really important distinction of thinking about some of these transitions that are happening; you know, it's about things.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: And it's quickly sort of being able to make these things. It's almost like the raw emotional quality, is what it's sounding like—is coming out of the shop, is a series of individuals who are just looking deeply inside of themselves and it just happens to come out in object-making.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. I think that's true. In metalsmithing it's very interesting because there's a lot of sublimation going on. These objects take a long time to make, and they require a tremendous amount of discipline just to get them off. And it takes patience, a lot, a lot of patience. So it's an interesting meeting of a kind of wild, emotional, unconventional, free expression on the one hand; but on the other hand, of a fairly high degree of discipline for the times. And that's when I stopped smoking dope because I couldn't [concentrate when I was high –BM]—

[Audio break.]

EDWARD COOKE: Okay.

BRUCE METCALF: Anyway, this is when I stopped smoking dope. Because I found it intruded in the work, which was interesting.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. To sort of have the self-discipline at that point to realize—do you think that was true of a lot of people in the studio at that time?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, there was a lot less drug-doing in the metal studio than there was most of the art department.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, there's danger problems, for one.

BRUCE METCALF: Well, it would've been extremely stupid. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: It's like furniture making, being around a table saw, you don't want to sit and have altered senses, either.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: So it's interesting. I mean, you almost have this sort of personality type of somebody's who attracted to metalsmithing at this particular moment in time that is sort of rebellious; but at the same time not interested in anarchy.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes, or some kind of ordered anarchy.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: They're two very different impulses being expressed there.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And I think a lot of us were in the same boat. Somebody like Randy Long or Carol Kumata or Susan Kingsley. These are all people in the '80s who were working in the same vein of small objects, highly disciplined making, and yet interested in this kind of reach of imagination.

EDWARD COOKE: So how many people from Syracuse went on to stay in this field?

BRUCE METCALF: Let's see. Of who was there? Kari Lonning was in my studio. She became a basket maker. I still see her in the shows. My friend Tom Clark who was the architecture student, went back to his apple orchard and became an apple guy. Who else was there? Harriet Berman was the year after me. And she's obviously still around. So it was a pretty active place.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So it was a pretty active place. With some fairly serious people.

EDWARD COOKE: When did you start thinking about grad school? Was Michael encouraging you to go on? At what point did you realize, okay, I just can't sort of go out and make a living doing this? You wanted to go on for more?

BRUCE METCALF: I have no clue. I mean. I was not prepared for life [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: The draft wasn't an issue?

BRUCE METCALF: I got a high number when that came up. I think it was 315 in the first year of the draft lottery, which was probably a good thing, because my principles didn't have to be tested.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. [They laugh.] Don't have to play "what if."

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right. I think I would've resisted. I don't think I would've gone to Vietnam. I don't know if I was prepared to go to prison. The people I knew who resisted basically kind of sat around and waited for Uncle Sam to catch up with them, and he never did.

My friend Tom Clark, the guy who became an apple fellow, would do things like send a pumpkin to his draft board [laughs] because they were obligated to keep everything on file. People were doing things like a kind of humorous, passive resistance.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: But I didn't have to. I got a high number.

EDWARD COOKE: So did Michael suggest you go on for school?

BRUCE METCALF: Well, like a lot of kids, I think I looked to him as a role model. It didn't occur to me to make a living with the thing. I knew some people that went into production, and that kind of life didn't really appeal to me at the time. So a year after senior—it took me five years to get the BFA, I went off to graduate school at Montana State [University].

EDWARD COOKE: In—?

BRUCE METCALF: In Bozeman.

EDWARD COOKE: But in what subject?

BRUCE METCALF: In metals, in jewelry metals. And that was a total flop.

EDWARD COOKE: Why were you thinking Bozeman?

BRUCE METCALF: I got an assistantship there, and the other places I applied to didn't give me an assistantship.

EDWARD COOKE: So where else were you looking to apply?

BRUCE METCALF: I applied to Cranbrook. I applied God knows where. I don't even remember. I think Richard Thomas had no interest in the kinds of things I was making here; he was a metalsmith.

EDWARD COOKE: Not a good fit?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. No, I'm glad I didn't go there. So I got the assistantship. I went out there and found out that even with my undergraduate education, I knew more than Richard Helzer, who was teaching.

EDWARD COOKE: That's who was teaching?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And that was extremely discouraging to have a teacher who couldn't guide me technically or artistically.

EDWARD COOKE: So what did you do?

BRUCE METCALF: Well, I dropped out is what I did. I spent a year there. I made some interesting things, all objects. Some quite ambitious, quite sizable: a tramway that was probably eight feet from end to end. Mostly made out of cardboard and wood.

EDWARD COOKE: Really?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Huh.

BRUCE METCALF: Which turned out to be a really bad decision. Let's see. I made a display case with a galvanized metal zeppelin in it. The case is maybe eight feet tall. So I was trying to work with increasing the scale because that's what ambition was at the time. It was making things bigger.

EDWARD COOKE: Bigger is better.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And at the end of the year I just kind of threw up my hands and said this isn't working. That's not going to go. So I moved back East and moved in with my lady friend at the time, Miki Foley, who was going to graduate school at [the State University of New York,] New Paltz.

EDWARD COOKE: In jewelry?

BRUCE METCALF: In jewelry metals, yes. She had been a stained [glass artist –BM]—

EDWARD COOKE: How'd you know her—from Syracuse?

BRUCE METCALF: She was a friend of my brother's at Tufts University [Medford, MA]. And she had gotten involved in a parallel program that the Boston Museum School [School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA] had at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: With Tufts.

BRUCE METCALF: With Tufts. So she was a stained-glass major at the museum school when they had a big stained-glass studio. So I did some glass with her. But she kind of fell under my sway, probably unfortunately, and became a metals major, and went on to get an MFA at New Paltz. So I joined her there for her first year.

EDWARD COOKE: So who was teaching at New Paltz at that time?

BRUCE METCALF: Kurt [Matzdorf] was on sabbatical. So it was Bob Ebendorf and a bunch of grads. Jamie Bennett was a grad at the time. Tom Reardon, who's still working, was there. Claudia Kuehnl, I don't know what's happened to her. But it was a very competitive environment under Bob's teaching. He had a habit of picking personal favorites and kind of ignoring the rest of the people, which made it difficult. And my lady friend Miki was one of the people who weren't on Bob's good side. So I was on the fringes of that. Bob was actually very generous to me. He let me take night courses and work in the studio as much as I wanted to. He was very, very nice. Some of the students there didn't want me there. They thought I was exploiting the situation, which was true, I was. I was gaming the system, and Bob went along with that. He kind of protected me and made sure that the students didn't force me out of the studio. So I did that. Then the next year I actually worked for—well, I worked for Kurt Matzdorf for—a summer. Yes. Right. Which was a—

EDWARD COOKE: That was an interesting collision again, right? I mean, talk about the authority figure, and "you will do it this way."

BRUCE METCALF: In that case I didn't mind because Kurt was a really great human being. Did you ever meet him?

EDWARD COOKE: I never did. I just knew a bunch of students who—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. He was an interesting character. His parents moved him out of Nazi Germany in '38 or so as a 14-year-old, something like that. And they stayed and were exterminated. He was an orphan in England and went through some of the art school education there as a Jewish refugee. I think that experience informed him, because one of the things that he said to me was—he was not a moral relativist. For him morality was extremely clear, and it was extremely fixed. It came out of his experience of being—of having lived through Nazi Germany as a youth and then being a refugee.

His point was that extreme duress reveals what people truly are. He said that some people thought only of themselves. They were strictly survival. But the best people, in Kurt's mind, were the people who, under that duress, still had the ability to look out for others and take care of others. That kind of moral fixity had a very strong influence on me. I was very much a relativist at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. Coming out of that reading of Marcuse and stuff like that, that makes sense.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And to see Kurt, even though artistically I couldn't possibly agree with him, morally he had a great influence on me.

EDWARD COOKE: So he opened up to you—

BRUCE METCALF: Very much.

EDWARD COOKE:—or that you opened up to him.

BRUCE METCALF: He wanted me to join his business. He wanted me to become a worker-partner with him.

EDWARD COOKE: Is that because of what you were talking about, your skill as a hammersmith?

BRUCE METCALF: I was very skilled, yes. Right. I could do anything he asked of me.

EDWARD COOKE: Because that's one of the things that he really felt—that was the foundation of his work, right?

BRUCE METCALF: Well, Kurt—[laughs] he was largely self-taught as a silversmith. He actually wasn't that good compared to the Scandinavian smiths. He didn't really have a lot of skill. He thought he did, and he talked about, and he loved the idea of silversmithing. And he was enamored with this idea of a tradition that passes down through generations, and all this stuff. But it was more romantic than factual, because he didn't grow up in a shop.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: He didn't come up through the trade. He didn't know anything about that stuff.

EDWARD COOKE: So he hired you for the summer?

BRUCE METCALF: For the summer, yes.

EDWARD COOKE: What kind of stuff were you doing for him?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, let's see. I helped him make some Torah scrolls. I helped him make some cups. His business was Jewish ceremonial silverware. I saw him soldering 18-inch seams with three Prest-O-Lite torches [laughs]. It's amazing what he could do with a Prest-O-Lite.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: But he wasn't a great smith. He was a pretty good constructor. But the marks of skilled silversmithing would have been things like raised in spouts.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: Or an asymmetrical raised form. Those were the kind of things the Scandinavians could do, and Kurt couldn't touch that stuff.

EDWARD COOKE: Couldn't touch. I think I need to stop this one.

[END OF TRACK metcal09_1of5_sd_r.]

EDWARD COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bruce Metcalf at his home and studio in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, on June 10, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is card number two.

So, Bruce, you were talking about you working in the summer for Kurt Matzdorf and the kinds of tasks that he was doing with Torahs and cups and things like that. So you were just saying how you just got exposed to this sort of can-do quality within his work.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. He was very—he was self-taught. He invented all these sort of nutty tool storage devices. He had a Shopsmith.

EDWARD COOKE: Really!

BRUCE METCALF: His studio was in a garage, and he had a Shopsmith.

EDWARD COOKE: For a metalworker. [They laugh.]

BRUCE METCALF: Which is an insane tool. I mean, it's just such a goofy tool.

EDWARD COOKE: It is.

BRUCE METCALF: And he wanted to convert me. He worked as hard as he could to convert me to silversmithing and that whole idea. He knew I worked in cardboard. He knew I was sort of off the edge.

EDWARD COOKE: What do you suppose he saw?

BRUCE METCALF: The skill.

EDWARD COOKE: The skill, the hammering?

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And so he would tell me about the Elgin Marbles, and they were the paragon of Western civilization. And all this stuff. And the tradition. And yadda-yadda and all that. And I would listen politely. I mean, I liked Kurt. I liked Kurt a lot. But it was obviously not going to stay. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: That wasn't the path you were going down.

BRUCE METCALF: No, no. It was clear to me. So he offered me to stay, and I just said no. Thanks, but no. And then the next year I actually moved in with my mom in Leverett, Massachusetts. A series of unfortunate events sort of—I washed up on her house without any money and without any resources.

EDWARD COOKE: The girlfriend staying behind in New Paltz?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right. Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Former girlfriend. So therefore the New Paltz chapter, of being a hanger-on-er, and then a summer employee of Kurt's, was over.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, that was over. And that year I worked for a production silversmith—jewelry outfit.

EDWARD COOKE: Whereabouts?

BRUCE METCALF: In North Leverett, a guy named Steve Rogers and his wife Harriet. It was very—[laughs]. They had a studio in the basement of their barn. There was a horse upstairs. The first thing you did in the morning was clean the dried horse manure off the anvils [laughs]. And in the winter you started up a fire in the stove and waited 20 minutes for the [coughs] [studio to warm up –BM]—

EDWARD COOKE: This is an old apprenticeship.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right. He was an interesting guy. He was an Army fellow who learned a little bit about jewelry, I think, in one of the base recreation shops.

EDWARD COOKE: Richard Reinhardt, you know, instead of army silversmith.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. So he—I had never seen anybody like that up close. It was all about these techniques he figured out on his own. He would forge these Ron Pearson-like chokers out of, I don't know, six-gauge silver. And then file them. Then he would go right to the polishing wheel. [They laugh.] He'd go right to bobbing compound, which—you know, in my education, I mean, you filed it carefully, then you went to the two to the four, and then you sanded it, and then you started buffing out. The hell with that.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. Bypass a few of those steps.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. it was actually quite efficient because they would just buff the shit out of these things. And it would go really fast. I got so I could actually make these leather handguards that we used to smoke. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: What you did to make things fun.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. [Laughs.] You could get those things really, really hot because you're just basically grinding away material with a buffing wheel. I worked for them for a year. I did Rhinebeck [New York] [craft fair]; I helped them at Rhinebeck in the summer of 1975.

EDWARD COOKE: So their aesthetic was sort of Ron Pearson style?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, it was hammered looped chains, forged chokers, a lot of cabochons set on them. Harriet Rogers ran a crafts store called Skera, which was in Hadley [Massachusetts] at the time. Now it's I think still in Northampton.

EDWARD COOKE: So it sold finished goods?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: It wasn't selling materials.

BRUCE METCALF: It was a craft store.

EDWARD COOKE: Okay.

BRUCE METCALF: So I got to see that world intimately and up close for the first time.

EDWARD COOKE: What were your thoughts about it?

BRUCE METCALF: They wanted me to stay, too. They wanted to make me a partner.

EDWARD COOKE: It's nice to be wanted. [They laugh.]

BRUCE METCALF: But it was clear that that kind of repetitive work, you know, developing a design, and putting it into production, and then doing the marketing, just was not something I was interested in. I wanted to make the one-of-a-kind object that was maybe—I hate the word "expressive," but having something to do with an individual vision that wasn't going to be repeated, that was going to be just made once, and then move on to something else. More of an art model. I think I realized I just wasn't a businessman, and to do that, that kind of work, business has to be high on your list of priorities; otherwise—

EDWARD COOKE: If not *the* top priority in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. It's also very much about design, and I think at that point I realized that I wasn't a natural designer. I don't have the ability to think of an object that's either going to answer a brief or that is going to appeal to a buying public.

EDWARD COOKE: Anticipating that public—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right.

EDWARD COOKE: —and trying to satisfy.

BRUCE METCALF: Right, yes. Which is part of the deal. You design the object with a customer in mind. I found I just didn't think that way.

EDWARD COOKE: What about Rhinebeck? Did that reinforce some of this stuff? What was your impression of Rhinebeck? That would have been one of the earlier ones.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. It was in the fairgrounds. They were in one of the cow barn places. They cleaned it up nicely. It didn't smell or anything, but it was rough compared to how the fairs are run now. I think it puzzled me more than anything else. There was a glassblower named George Thiewes who was across the aisle, and he was doing this kind of little quasi-Tiffanys and selling these things for 75 bucks a pop, which at the time was just outrageous.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: It was, like, how does he do that? [They laugh.]

BRUCE METCALF: And there was a guy named Rix Jennings, who made these little jigsaw puzzles. I don't know if you remember him. I think his father was a famous artist. There was a quilter across the aisle. There was a lot of jewelry; it was all very Scando-mod for the most part. There was some plastic jewelry going on. A lot, a lot, a lot of pottery at Rhinebeck at the time. I just knew I didn't want to be part of that world.

EDWARD COOKE: So did you get a sense of being that commercial, overly commercialized part even at that point? Or was it just sort of whole different standard of work?

BRUCE METCALF: I think at that time I respected the craft enough to respect the people. And I sympathized with their predicament, to try to make a craft become a living.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: I didn't hold it in contempt at all. I liked Steve Rogers, I liked Harriet. I liked a lot of the people that came around. I talked to them, I understood what their process was.

EDWARD COOKE: It just wasn't your world.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. It wasn't. But I was shocked when I first started working for Steve how good he was at what he did. And how he invented all these technologies just from the whole cloth—that were totally unconventional. So I respected those.

EDWARD COOKE: Expedient—I mean that being this great source of invention in some respects.

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: Figuring out a system that you make work.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And a lot of these people were doing that. I mean who is it, Ed Levin, up in Brattleboro [VT]?

EDWARD COOKE: Was he the wood—

BRUCE METCALF: No, he's a jeweler. He's one of the first-generation guys. But he had been around a long while and ran a very good business.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So I saw him. I became familiar with Ron Pearson's system up there in Deer Isle. He had at the time, I think, eight or nine people working for him. But I respected that. I understood how difficult that was to do. It was the process of designing for an imagined clientele. Because I *couldn't* do it, I respected the people that could. The people who actually could make things really, really fast. Which is one of the requirements of being in that marketplace. I respected that because that is an aspect of craft. So I think what that taught me was to not dismiss the people in the production community out of hand. Which I think a lot of academics tend to do.

EDWARD COOKE: They do.

BRUCE METCALF: Because they look at it as being an aesthetic question.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: But craft has never been limited to just aesthetics. It's about the whole complex of conditions of production. I think it was that experience that made me open to that aspect of what craft is about, the thing besides the object itself. And that, in turn, I think made me sympathetic to conditions of reception. I couldn't have given you those terms at the time. But I learned a lot in that world. I didn't want to pursue that myself, but I had a great deal of respect for those people.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, it seems like what it did is it opened up the whole spectrum of priorities from the process to the making to the ultimate user, and trying to figure out how one bridges some of those different elements together.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And it also made me understand Morris very differently when I finally read him. And made me understand *The Stones of Venice* [John Ruskin] differently when I read it. Because they were not talking about aesthetics. At least Ruskin wasn't. He was talking about labor. And I got it when I read him. I understood exactly what he was talking about. I understood the idea of dignified labor, and I understood the idea of being in control and being in power. And I understood how that, as it's manifested in the real world, came with a number of real-world problems that demanded solutions. Even though I was not interested in business myself, I didn't have a head for it. I saw how those problems had an impact in the craft. And there was this back-and-forth between business and the techniques and the means of production that had some very important kind of repercussions in the world, I would say.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And I saw how people used this stuff. I saw the people in the marketplace, and I saw how their—people at that time in the early '70s were very loyal to those ideas. Even though I think in retrospect we find the work aesthetically kind of repulsive, I saw how it had a place in people's lives, in lives as lived rather than—

EDWARD COOKE: A rather central role.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. That registered on me as well. That had an enormous influence on my thinking once I started to work in jewelry—the place of craft in real life instead of in just this ideal sphere of gallery and museum and academic discourse.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, I was going to say, it's a whole other discourse because you get to hear how potential clients and a somewhat selective public—but still sort of a public—is talking about these sorts of things.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And they weren't necessarily talking about it; they were using it.

EDWARD COOKE: Right, right. I think you can talk with body language and various other things, too.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes. And so my mom got a set of tableware from a Vermont potter named George Scatchard. I don't know who he is. I didn't see him. She was a weaver herself at the time. She had taken up weaving as a pursuit. So I saw how she used the craft. And she would say, oh, I don't make wall hangings. [They

laugh.] These are—these placemats are hers.

EDWARD COOKE: Are hers.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Cool.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. So I saw that other aspect of craft and from a very intimate position.

EDWARD COOKE: From the frontlines, in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. Yes. And I saw how in this culture it is a kind of force of humanizing.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: I could compare that to art discourse. Because at that time I was starting to read more and more about art. I was sort of re-arming myself to go back to graduate school. I was studying logic and rhetoric. I'd read [*Zen and] The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and was very interested in this kind of split between you might call it apprehension and rationality.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, the classical knowledge and passive knowledge.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And I was starting to think about those kinds of issues. So the way people just intuitively reacted to the craft object held a great deal of interest for me. I was not willing to dismiss those objects on aesthetic grounds. So the next year I went back to graduate school at Tyler [School of Art, Philadelphia, PA].

EDWARD COOKE: Why Tyler?

BRUCE METCALF: Because I could learn technique. A friend of mine, Wayne Hammer, had gone there the previous two years. I'd met him in Montana. He went off to Tyler. He found it an extremely punishing experience because of Stan [Lechtzin's –BM] approach to teaching.

EDWARD COOKE: In a good sense.

BRUCE METCALF: No [laughs]. In a very bad sense.

EDWARD COOKE: Okay.

BRUCE METCALF: But at the same time I saw how he learned technology there. Everything that Tyler had to offer, which was plastics, casting, electroforming, spray etching.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. They were in the forefront of it all.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. That's what Stan does. So I had a pretty good grasp of the hand aspects of the craft. I'm just an intuitive metalsmith. I get it, I get the material, I could do that stuff without a lot of instruction. So I wanted to see the aspect of the technology that Stan was teaching at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: The complementary technology.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. So I learned it all. Stan didn't have two words to say to me about aesthetics in two years.

EDWARD COOKE: Which was okay, though.

BRUCE METCALF: It was because I knew what I was about by then. I knew I wanted to make objects. I knew I was involved in narrative symbolism. I could give it the name. I could explain it. I knew that it was in an oppositional stance to what was going on in fine art at the time. I was aware of that, and I was conscious of positioning myself and my work as a kind of contrarian voice. And I was contrarian both in the craft community and in the art world, simultaneously.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, because you weren't anti-aesthetics, to use a Hal Foster term. But rather you were transcending aesthetics in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF: Well, yes. I was not dealing with what were then aesthetic questions at all. Narrative symbolism was regarded as passé at the time. The people I was looking at were the Chicago Imagists. I was looking at French symbolism. I was looking at pre-Raphaelite painting. Those are the kind of movements that meant something to me. California funk, still. It was very clear that these movements were kind of art in spite of

modernism. That was very clear to me. And also that the kind of things that were making news in New York were completely other to what I was interested in. I mean, these are the years when what Linda Benglis did that ad in *Artforum*. This is when, oh, Robert Smithson was, like, the shit.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And I had no interest in that stuff. I don't want to be a conceptual artist. I didn't find the issues that were under discussion to be very compelling. It was very much art about art at the time. And I found that to be navel-gazing, even at the very high levels that it was being practiced at the time. Site art was understood as a Marxist rejoinder to the marketplace. And it was understood as a big expanded field of sculpture and the Rosalind Krauss thing. Those issues absolutely did not interest me. I was interested in—

EDWARD COOKE: You were aware of them but—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. I wanted to make art that communicated. And this went back to being a cartoonist at Syracuse University and being a poster artist.

EDWARD COOKE: So you were doing those while you were at Syracuse?

BRUCE METCALF: Right. I was the *Daily Orange* cartoonist for a year.

EDWARD COOKE: Huh.

BRUCE METCALF: So I was interested in communication. I was interested in a kind of populist stance, which makes sense, given my interest in funk. So at the time I wanted to make objects that spoke to a much broader audience than fine art did. I find fine art very exclusive. I found it conducting a conversation very much within its own limits. And I didn't want to do that; even though, again, there was a hierarchy in art schools at the time, and this woman I knew would come up to me and say, oh, I see you're doing whimsical things. You know, like—

EDWARD COOKE: Distaste.

BRUCE METCALF: Like, I see you kick your dog.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: You know. Those were the rules. It was very clear; one could not miss that in art school. And I rejected that.

EDWARD COOKE: So who did you turn to for an affinity group or for—

BRUCE METCALF: I was already pretty isolated at the time. The other students in the metals studio were all—almost all of them—interested in brown-nosing Stan. You know, doing some cutting-edge technology. I wanted to learn it, but I only wanted to use those things inasmuch as they helped me get at the imagery and content I was interested in.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: So I wasn't playing the game. I got in a lot of trouble with Stan at the time. He is a man who mostly responds to people who hold to his own interests. And he's still like that.

EDWARD COOKE: So he's the opposite of Michael, in essence.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. And for me he was a model of how not to teach. He was only interested in people that were as much like him as possible [laughs]. He tolerated me. I have to say that because he didn't have very much—he wasn't interested in art; he didn't know about art; he couldn't really talk about art in anything beyond formalist terms. And formalism couldn't really apply to what I was going at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: So you think there was a disconnect? You were—awareness of Krauss and various others writing at this same time. You talk about, with Stan, that there's a disconnect of him from what's the current kind of discourse; as if they they're still stuck in an earlier discourse that many of the people in the making world, even though they might be pushing—they might think they're pushing something—but they're still sort of a little bit anachronistic.

BRUCE METCALF: Well, people were trying. I mean Garth Clark's and Margie Hughto's show came out. And I saw that up in Syracuse, "A Hundred Years of American Ceramics." ["A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978"] And they had Jim Melchert's performance in the book. So people were trying to do that.

I think Neda Al-Halali was doing those big plaited things she'd drag around on a beach. But the effort was being made, and a number of graduate students at Tyler at the time in ceramics, in glass, were trying to do that, too. Robert Montgomery was a student there. There was another guy whose name I can't remember, who was trying very hard to do conceptual art or conceptual ceramics. Gene Koss was there, and he was pouring glass on railroad ties. All that was going on. I saw it, I understood what the effort was. I thought most of it was kind of a pale imitation—

EDWARD COOKE:—was dated [laughs].

BRUCE METCALF: —of what was going on in the art world.

EDWARD COOKE: But, so, who did you turn to for—one gets a sense that Philadelphia as this dynamic entity in the '70s—you know probably '70 right on through '76, '77—with what's going on at the PCA and Tyler. Did you feel like there was nobody else in the broader Philadelphia area that you could really sort of have a kindred spirit?

BRUCE METCALF: I got along with a grad student there at Tyler named Merle Greenburg. We kind of both wanted to do something intuitive and communicative. The summer of my first year there, the end of my first year, I made a connection with Helen Drutt and got to meet Mark Burns. So I—

EDWARD COOKE: I think Helen is sort of in the middle of a lot of this stuff that's going on.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. So I think of all the people that I saw, Mark Burns was the person closest to my own sensibility. He was a wild man. He was gay, he was doing these crazy things with ceramics, multimedia constructions with painted clay; he would do environments. I still have a piece he gave me that's a three-eyed Martian kewpie doll [laughs], made from a mold. Got it during the Howard Kottler thing.

So if there was anybody, it would've been Mark. But I think by that time I already had a pretty clear idea of who I was and what I was. I didn't really need a lot of critique at that time. It would've been nice if I could've gotten it. But I didn't really need it.

EDWARD COOKE: Or even people who are peers to talk to and—who do you hang with, or is this why you started to turn to writing at this point?

BRUCE METCALF: The reason I turned to writing was that about that time—I think it was '76—

EDWARD COOKE: Because I looked through, and your first article appears in '77.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: And I'm struck by sort of this sense of, okay, I'm still a bit of a misfit, as it were, in a positive sense. But if you're not engaged, you don't have this certain cohort that is a natural group that you're meeting with and talking about and working towards common goals.

BRUCE METCALF: There was nothing of that.

EDWARD COOKE: writing becomes a very logical means of sort of coming to grips with some of those things.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Well, the reason I started writing was I think it was '76, I was in this big show called "200 Years of American Metalsmithing," ["Forms in Metal: 275 Years of Metalsmithing in America, 1975] something like that, in the Museum of Contemporary Craft. A big show. There were two components: one a historical component at Hunter [College], and then the contemporary component at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts [New York, NY; now the Museum of Arts and Design].

EDWARD COOKE: For the American Craft Museum or whatever?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Whatever [name] it goes under at that point. I've forgotten all the different name iterations.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. So a review of that show appeared in *Craft Horizons* [now *American Craft]*, and it was written by a painter named Pat Passlof, who was one of their regular contributors. She must have known Rose Slivka. I think Rose likes the artist to write. I had two pieces in that show: One was a pewter peanut that had a motor in it.

EDWARD COOKE: And this is some of the first stuff you've had in exhibitions?

BRUCE METCALF: I'd been exhibiting pretty steadily already then. I was winning prizes. I was doing really well.

EDWARD COOKE: Local?

BRUCE METCALF: National.

EDWARD COOKE: Where was some of your work being shown?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, the Marietta National [Marietta, OH], which was a big show at the time. The Sterling Silversmiths' Guild [of America] show; I won a prize there. Where else? The Lake Superior Show. I got in that a couple of times. I was entering all these competitive shows.

EDWARD COOKE: So you were just entering.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And doing very well at the time. I mean, this is when students could actually still get noticed—

EDWARD COOKE: Get in, right.

BRUCE METCALF: —in these shows.

EDWARD COOKE: So anyway, so your peanut—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I did a pewter peanut in a cardboard box, and I did this thing called *Monty Vacuum Sells Art*, which was a life-size cutout of me holding this sort of ridiculous modernist vase in this sort of thought bubble about [laughs]—

EDWARD COOKE: So your cartoon communication?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. Yes. And Passlof's point was that these things were made for display. Made for display. And I thought that was an absolutely ridiculous thing to say. She would never make that comment about painting.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: But for her somehow it was meaningful—a meaningful comment to make about craft. Which offended me, because the implication was that, first of all, there was something of note that craft should be made for display. And this other, less obvious thing, that craft should be made for function.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And I'd never made things for function. Never. And I also knew enough about the field to realize that a great deal of craft was not made for function. In fact, there are these long traditions of craft objects made for display like table centerpieces, like the whimsical bells that glassblowers in West Virginia would make after work. You know, urns.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. The myth of function is one of these great—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. So, you know, [laughs] I departed from Howard Risatti in that. So I just felt betrayed by her reading of my work, and it occurred to me after that thing came out that I had to represent myself. I could not be subjected to these people who had their own understandings and misunderstandings of the craft project. If I was not going to be represented by these people, I had to do it myself. I had to do it myself.

It's not like I was a natural writer. I wasn't. I had studied rhetoric and logic, and I actually wrote a lot. I have these notebooks just filled with writing. Just writing and writing and writing. It was compulsive activity. I didn't know what I was doing it for, except that I had felt misrepresented. And I also felt that the discourse that was being forced upon us in seminar by Stan was deeply, deeply wrong for me.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: He was into artist technology. His point of view was that technology was going to save the world; it was going to be the only legitimate expression of artistic enterprise—and craft enterprise—moving forward. And I just knew he was wrong [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: So I privately tried to build my own response to that. Not in seminar. I wasn't up to combating

Stan at the time. He's a very formidable guy.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, yes. He had a lot of years on you, too.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: So it would be hard.

BRUCE METCALF: So I didn't confront him directly. But in my notebooks I did. And that's how I started writing. It was basically defending myself, but also understanding that in order to come to an accurate representation both of myself and of the larger craft project, it's something I had to do. I couldn't wait for someone else to do it.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. One of the things I was struck by, instead of just looking at connections over a CD, '77 is a time when you get your MFA. It's also your first publication.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

EDWARD COOKE: So you finish up, having been at Tyler, mastering some of the technical sorts of things. What's your identity coming out of Tyler? Is it going into academia as a teaching—how do you view yourself sort of coming out with that MFA now?

BRUCE METCALF: I actually never saw myself as a teacher, not at that point. I wanted to.

EDWARD COOKE: You just wanted to make things.

BRUCE METCALF: —be a studio artist, yes. Right. That's how I would've called it at the time. There was, of course, the problem of how to support myself. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: Details.

BRUCE METCALF: A big problem there.

EDWARD COOKE: And you decided to stay in the Philadelphia area.

BRUCE METCALF: No, just before graduation, I was offered a sabbatical replacement job for Nilda Getty at Colorado State [University]. And I took the job.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: I didn't really think about it very carefully. This was in 1977, and that was the year when the teaching jobs dried up. They just all disappeared. There was, I think, three or four other tenure-track jobs that year. So I was extremely fortunate to get the job offer. I think I was also lucky to get a sabbatical replacement job at that time.

I was very successful. I had a reputation. I had a body of work that had gotten out there. It was these very detailed narrative sort of engines [laughs], you could say. I had Robert Pfannebecker buy a piece out of my graduate show. He did that at the time. But other pieces sold to local collectors as well.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And that's not the usual course of events. I had I think 40 exhibitions on my résumé, which was quite exceptional.

EDWARD COOKE: Pretty significant, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, as an MFA—brand-new MFA. So I already had a professional presence. I'd already been doing lectures on my work here and there. I did one at Mass. [sic] College of Art [and Design, Boston], another down at Delaware. So I was already doing those things.

EDWARD COOKE: In the system in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Kind of getting introduced to that academic [system –BM].

EDWARD COOKE: Was SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths] at all important to you at that point?

BRUCE METCALF: No. No, I barely knew what it was. I'd contributed those articles to what was it called? *Goldsmith's Journal*.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: The first one was on safety.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, I saw that.

BRUCE METCALF: And I think it was the first article on safety they ever published. It was pretty primitive [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: So your whole reputation and visibility came about through entering exhibitions primarily.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And then through publications.

EDWARD COOKE: Stan wasn't necessarily promoting you.

BRUCE METCALF: No.

EDWARD COOKE: The way that, sort of, advisors would be—you know, you've got to take my student.

BRUCE METCALF: No, I didn't have that kind of agent—mentor/agent.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Bob Ebendorf would occasionally send things my way. Stan and I didn't get along. He gave me at the end as a kind of gesture—he was on an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] jury at the time, and I got an NEA [grant] right out of graduate school, which was a nice thing to do. But he wouldn't throw me the favors that he would throw other students. It was very clear. It was absolutely clear in the system who was the favored and who was not. And I was not.

Eh! You know [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: So you went out to Colorado and were there for—?

BRUCE METCALF: A year.

EDWARD COOKE: Did they have a tradition of innovative metalworking or—

BRUCE METCALF: It was a Nilda's program.

EDWARD COOKE: Who were you replacing for the—

BRUCE METCALF: Nilda Getty, who had done that enormous show of metalsmithing—or craft—in the Americas just a couple of years before and kind of exhausted herself. So she took off. I poured myself into that job for a year, and, you know, I was only a couple of years older than the students. So I hung out with them; went and drank beers and ate pizza and did that sort of fresh-out-of-graduate-school thing.

And I found that I actually was a pretty good teacher. What I could do was—my model is Michael Jerry—and what I could do was draw people out. I had a gift for that, to try and figure out who they were and how that could be manifested.

EDWARD COOKE: Helped them find their voice.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: In essence.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And I think that that awakened me to the possibility that I could actually teach and do a pretty decent job of it. So I did that job, but I wasn't really ready to commit to teaching, so the year after that I moved to Boston. My brother had bone cancer, and he needed somebody to help him through that. So I moved in with my brother in Wayland, Massachusetts, and set up a studio in an unfinished attic. It was really cold in the winter and really hot in the summer. [They laugh.] Sweat would drip off my nose and land on the work. Then after a year of that, I moved to East Boston, and I did a lot of collaboration with Jill Slossberg at the time. We did a flatware set together, silver flatware.

EDWARD COOKE: I didn't realize that.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And I had a studio in South Boston in a kind of artists' building. Did that for a year and a half.

EDWARD COOKE: Was Jill teaching at—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, she was at Mass. College of Art at the time. And she was starting to move toward sculpture. So we had some really interesting discussions. Her model artist was Robert Ryman, and some of those guys. Sort of painterly minimalism was what she responded to and I would look at and go: What!? [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: But both of you were interested in what you might call the sculptural.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: From different points of view.

BRUCE METCALF: Hers was much more— Yes, very different point of view. She was interested in installations. She did a garden out at the deCordova [Sculpture Park and Museum], these kinds of things. That didn't work for me because I was an object guy.

EDWARD COOKE: Hey, you want something that's sort of hand-held.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I was trying to hold it together as a practicing studio artist. And I maintained a studio for those two and a half years. I think I lived on—one of those years I actually lived on about three thousand five hundred bucks.

EDWARD COOKE: Wow!

BRUCE METCALF: [Laughs] You know. I was driving a rat-bag old van around. I'd replace the clutch on the street. I did that a couple of times.

EDWARD COOKE: But were you still submitting for exhibitions?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Or did you have clients wanting to buy stuff?

BRUCE METCALF: I was showing with Helen [Drutt] at the time. I was involved in craft culture. It was very clear to me that the art world at the time was not sympathetic to my work.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: They were cartoony. They were very graphic. They were clearly crafted, the craft was significant in these objects, the way they were made. I would involve a lot of metal in these things. I started to make jewelry about that time, in that transition period, simply because they were the kind of objects that started making sense to me. It was becoming clear that those quasi-sculptures that I was making didn't have a place in the world.

EDWARD COOKE: How do you distinguish quasi-sculpture from jewelry? Does it have to do with scale?

BRUCE METCALF: Couldn't be worn [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Base scale.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And there wasn't a pinback on the back.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: At that time I made a lot of reliefs. They were small objects you could hang on the wall. Still narrative. Not figurative. I was using these little—they would be like pliers or pancakes or forks, knives. I was using these objects as narrative stand-ins for the human presence. I would set them up in little structures where there was clearly some kind of emotional tension going on.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: I was very interested in states of mind and the way—as I think of a further development of my thinking as a young hippie, I was thinking about the nature of the political. And the Marxist position being that everything is political. My response to that was, well, actually everything is personal. In that I think—and this came out of my experience in dealing with bureaucracies—is that every decision is actually made by a person.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And those decisions always have consequences that sort of move out into the world. So, yes, the political component is there. But it is not—everything social is also personal. Everything boils down to a decision an individual makes. Their filter on the world, then, has a tremendous impact on how those decisions are made. I became very, very interested in that—the filter on the world.

EDWARD COOKE: Was it right at that time that you sort of—you would go from sort of a political Marxist to the idea of sympathy and personal—?

BRUCE METCALF: I think so.

EDWARD COOKE: Sort of right in this point when you're really sort of becoming a jeweler in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. I began to think that our emotions color the way we react to the world and respond to the world, and what we actually do in the world.

EDWARD COOKE: Have anything to do with your brother's sickness?

BRUCE METCALF: No, I don't think so. I think it had to do with just my analysis of the political and how I thought that some of those insights were in some ways deeply misguided.

EDWARD COOKE: But as you said earlier, some of that was there earlier in hindsight, looking back and thinking about people yelling and shouting for peace.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. So I was very interested in the personal. I was very interested in the emotional. I think the jewelry became more and more an attractive vehicle for that kind of content because they get put on the body. So it was a story about emotion on the body. Which is so fraught with emotion.

EDWARD COOKE: And communications with others in terms of how someone picks up on it and allows you on scale to sort of see something from start to finish.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. I think somebody—I think it was Carol Kumata at the time—said that guys tend to treat jewelry as wearable billboards, portable billboards, which was perfect [laughs] because that's what I was making at the time.

EDWARD COOKE: Portable billboards?

BRUCE METCALF: Portable billboards, yes. Right. They were communicative. They were narrative. They were very much about trying to get a point across. But doing so in the intimate scale of the body and in lived social space. I didn't think so much about that aspect of it. I was just making these statements, and they went on the body, and that's as far as I thought.

It was only later when I started talking with Sharon Church that I started thinking about the social aspect of jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: So about that time was when objects started making less sense and jewelry started making more sense. But it really took me until the late '80s—no, they were the late '90s—to kind of give up on sculpture.

EDWARD COOKE: So you had them sort of parallel for a while.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I would do both. Yes. Then I got a job— John Gill called me up in the middle of the night in late December 1980—yes. And told me I was going to apply for the teaching job, the metals job, at Kent State University because George Van Duinwyck had left suddenly, and they needed someone to fill in for the spring semester—spring 1981. And I said, oh? I am applying? And he said, yes.

I'd met John out in Colorado, so this personal connection was being made. I applied, and I got the job. They were desperate. [Laughs.] Between the initial contact and me showing up at Kent State University was a period of less than three weeks.

EDWARD COOKE: Good God. That's great. [They laugh.] When it's hot, it's hot.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right. I could make the move. I wasn't really committed to Boston at the time. So I thought, okay.

EDWARD COOKE: And Kent State had a tradition of metalworking, right?

BRUCE METCALF: They did. It was Mary Ann Scherr's program. She did an interesting thing there. She had sort of hung them on—she was in, God, I don't know if she was doing a New School [New York, NY] thing then. Or if she was in Carolina. I don't know what her story was. But she was kind of keeping them hanging on, and they were hiring temporary replacements. So David LaPlantz was there for a year. I think a guy named Steve Seracino was a graduate student. Then George Van Duinwyk came in, and he was just not a good fit.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: So he left in the middle of the night, after he stole a bunch of the tools from the studio. He stripped it.

EDWARD COOKE: Wow.

BRUCE METCALF: He stripped the place. So I walk into this studio.

EDWARD COOKE: No tools.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, barely functional. And I had to kind of put it back together with no budget, which is a very interesting process [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: This is in the middle of that recession.

EDWARD COOKE: The early '80s.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. It was a rough, rough time in Ohio. In a factory, if there openings for 40 people, 1,200 people would show up.

EDWARD COOKE: That was the steel—

BRUCE METCALF: The steel industry was caving.

EDWARD COOKE: It was barely going at that point.

BRUCE METCALF: The tire industry had caved in Akron. There was a machine tool industry that was going south. It was just a mess there in Ohio. And there I was with this teaching job [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: And no tools.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And no budget, because of course the state was cutting back big time. And Kent State University was a target. Jim Rhodes was still governor, and he was still punishing Kent for the shootings.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Which was actually orchestrated. It was by design; it was not by accident. It was going to teach a lesson. Jim Rhodes had these people killed. Oh, man. Learning how fascism works. That was still very much there at Kent State. Teachers had been there, some students of mine had been there for the shootings.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: It was an interesting place to be. But at the same time it was an active craft department. There were I think seven faculty. There were three in fibers. There was John Gill in ceramics. There was a woman there in—let's see what else. Oh, Mel Somerowski in enameling. Me in metals. Oh, I guess there were—that would make six. Oh, and Henry Halem in glass. So seven.

EDWARD COOKE: Huh. That's fairly vibrant.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes. Janice Lessman-Moss came in shortly after I arrived, and she was very active. The rest of the faculty was quite divided in their attitude toward craft. The painters were still in that "queen of the arts" mode.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: One of the sculptors was very sympathetic, a guy named Brinsley Terrell. Another of them was not [laughs]. And his replacement was not—big-time not. The graphic designers were basically fighting the entire school of art. There was a guy named Charlie—oh, I've forgotten this name. He had an empire, graphic design empire. So he was basically punishing everybody for not supporting graphic design back when he was

nobody, building an empire.

But we all got along. The craftspeople all got along. It was very active. Some of us did a good job of getting graduates in to this nowhere place. No one wanted to come to Kent because it was Kent. But between Henry and Janice Lessman-Moss and John and then Kurt Mangus, it was a happening place for crafts.

And I had really good students. It was a working-class school. It was basically—it wasn't Cleveland Art Institute [Cleveland Institute of Art]. It wasn't Ohio State University. It was a third-rank school, definitely. But the kids were generally middle-class or working-class families. They knew how to work. They had a fairly sure sense of themselves—or at least the good ones did. And the best students were a delight to teach.

EDWARD COOKE: Did they have a fair amount of dexterity?

BRUCE METCALF: They did. Yes. I had some very skilled students. I think more so than you normally encounter now.

And I set about being a superior faculty member. I was combatting that painting attitude, so I was going to be the model faculty member. I exhibited a lot [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: I could do up to [13 –BM] shows a year.

EDWARD COOKE: It wasn't motivated by tenure or something like that? It was motivated by proving craft as—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I wanted to show those guys. I wanted to make it absolutely clear that they could not deny that craft had a major—had a place in the academy, and that I could play the game better than they did. I did; I did a lot of service. I sat on committees. And I did the whole nine yards. I ran conferences. You know, I did the whole thing.

And at the same time I was also interested in being—I think SNAG became more important to me as a kind of vehicle, both for furthering my own career, but also to get my ideas out. So it's in the first issue of *Metalsmith* that "[Crafts:] Second-Class Citizens?" was published. And that was in 1981.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. Was part of that also being out in Kent and sort of feeling isolated from the experience at Philadelphia, where there's a lot of stuff going on?

BRUCE METCALF: No.

EDWARD COOKE: No?

BRUCE METCALF: No, Tyler was an island [laughs]. Tyler was—

EDWARD COOKE: I was just thinking about Helen Drutt—maybe it's my own romantic view of sort of the pulse in Philadelphia at that time.

BRUCE METCALF: No, I wasn't plugged in at Tyler, it was up there in Elkins Park. Stan did not encourage people to go down to Center City.

EDWARD COOKE: You couldn't fraternize [laughs]?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, no. If you did that, you were on your own.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: I had no idea what was going on at the University of the Arts. I had no idea what was going on at Moore [College of Art & Design]. I only got connected with Helen because I was extremely ambitious.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. So that's the SNAG thing. In many ways it's ambition.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. I became—what do they call it?—a pro member when I was, even before I got the job at Kent. Only a couple of years out of graduate school. It was a way to be ambitious and to work through that club. And it also then became a vehicle for my writing, like I said. And I think that that particular article was both—it was influential to the discourse that appeared in *Metalsmith* because it kind of set a bar fairly high, fairly early. It also, having that article published made it clear to me that I had a voice in the craft community, not just in *Metalsmith* but in the larger community as well. It was a while before I was published in *American Craft*. But it was clear to me that then I could be a spokesperson for—not just issues involving metalsmithing but in issues of

craft.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, and that's something actually you've been feeling about but not necessarily finding the right vehicle for it.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. Many of my interests were trying to take a position between the—craftspeople were not expected to be articulate at the time. And they were not expected to do readings in the arts. There was a body of ceramics literature—[Philip] Rawson and [Bernard] Leach and those characters, that I did read through that period. But there wasn't a body of literature that really could explain ourselves to ourselves. And certainly not to the wider world.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: You know, Octavio Paz? I mean, that poetry didn't cut the mustard.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: I realized that craft could not be adequately represented without an understanding of the process. The process is intimately involved in those objects. So the language that was coming out of the art world was completely incapable of representing the craft project.

And questions of not physical function but social utility became important to me because with my students we started talking about what jewelry was. And what we came up with one summer in a Blossom program [Kent/Blossom summer program] there was social utility, which was—I think that had a huge influence on my later thinking because the only things we could think of was the way that jewelry was used in the world. And this was quite counter to the reductive argument coming out of Europe, which was jewelry was defined by the fact that it was attached to the body.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: That was the defining—the framework that applied to new jewelry in '83 and '84, which came through the jewelry world by storm. But that was basically a functional point—a physical function.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. Turning inward to the wearer as opposed to sending out.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, it was about attaching it to the body.

EDWARD COOKE: Oops. I think I've got to stop here.

[END OF TRACK metcal09_2of5_sd_r.]

EDWARD COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bruce Metcalf at his home and studio in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, on June 10, 2009, for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number three.

Bruce, we were talking a bit about the discovery, the sort of terminology that you were working with, with your grad students out at Kent State.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

EDWARD COOKE: Sort of a shift from a European formalism—functional formalism—of jewelry.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, reductivism. That's the word: reductivist process similar to minimalism, just applied to jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. To something that you said you developed a term of "social utility."

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: You know what went into your development of a term like that?

BRUCE METCALF: There were a couple of things going on at the time. One, I was getting increasingly frustrated with the ways that people were writing and speaking about craft of any kind. In *Metalsmith* and *American Craft* magazine—

EDWARD COOKE: The typical venues for writing.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes. I found it increasingly peculiar that people would, say, write a major article in

*American Craft* and analyze—like Warren Seelig would do an article about weaving from a formalist point of view. And while that might apply to the woven structure rather effectively, it makes no sense at all for ceramics.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: You know, the structure, you can talk about it in certain formalist terms very effectively. But when you have a material mimicking another material, which ceramics can do, then allow this stuff sort of goes out the window. At the same time, being in an art school, there's always a cadre of—they're usually painters and sculptors and performance artists—who are up on the latest lingo. And then in the '80s it was deconstruction. So there was a guy there who was reading Derrida and Foucault and Jameson and those guys. And I am convinced he had no idea what he was reading [laughs]. I don't think he got it.

EDWARD COOKE: He got a couple of words and phrases and then would just sprinkle in his conversation.

BRUCE METCALF: And then he would use them as clubs to beat up other forms with, particularly craft. That was the pattern. And it's still the same these days; these guys who think of themselves as intellectuals who read these texts, and then beat up their students with this language that the students can't possibly respond to. So I became very interested in trying to figure out what on earth this guy was talking about. So I didn't read—I tried Derrida. I couldn't make heads or tails of it, which I don't think you're supposed to.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I read a little of Foucault. I read a little of Lyotard, and I read a lot of the stuff coming out of architecture, which is how deconstruction entered the art world in the first place. So I read Charles Jencks. I read one of the Omnibus volumes. I got enough of a handle on deconstruction to realize that it was a literary theory that was being applied in some fairly inappropriate ways to visual culture.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: So there were two simultaneous critiques going on: the one of the way that literary theory was being applied to art on the one hand; and on the other, the inadequacy of craft discourse to represent itself.

I was looking in both directions and being dissatisfied with both of these discourses. So in the teaching studio I would have conversations with my students and particularly with the grads about what jewelry is and what jewelry does. And it became increasingly clear to me—although I don't think I could articulate it the time—that there is a craft project, a series of native subjects is the way I'm thinking of it now, that properly belong to craft itself. That don't really belong to design because craft is about making, it's about the dignified labor thing, it's about its own history, it's about those processes and materials.

And for exactly the same reason they don't really belong to the fine arts either. The arts come and appropriate them as they find them useful. But in the fine arts those subjects are disposable. Whereas as I began to look at craft culture as, it's kind of grown up in this country, those subjects are not disposable.

So it's interesting to me to look, say, at the trajectory of Voulkos' career and the way he left craft and then came back to it. That he couldn't get away from the clay, and he couldn't get away from the firing, and he couldn't get away from the vessel. And that there is something in him that drew—after making those big minimalist sculptures—there's something that drew him back to the craft.

EDWARD COOKE: From bronze back to ceramics.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. Or somebody like Ken Little, who actually did leave.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: And made those sculptures out of shoes.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So I look at myself, and I find that I actually am a craftsman. Not so much that I am a jeweler or that I am a metalsmith. But I am a craftsman.

EDWARD COOKE: So that development occurred in the '80s while teaching at Kent State, do you think?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I think so. I think I became more and more aware of this stuff.

EDWARD COOKE: As you wrote, became more self-conscious about a position.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And as a craftsman, thinking about Frank [R.] Wilson's book, *The Hand [How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*] and the analogy or—the analysis he uses is about musicians and how they're just devastated when they're injured. I get that. I know what that's about because there's something about the way I am built that makes me a maker. I am a maker. I work small. That's my scale. I understand these materials that don't move. I understand wood, I understand metal. I have this—my brain works with those materials. That is actually who I am.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And as I began to realize that my identity, who I am as a person, inescapably and unavoidably and *naturally*, which is not a term that's often used—I wanted to find some kind of a way of representing this in the world. And I became more and more interested in how that identity as a maker is manifested in the world, what we do as makers.

Talking with some of these people, especially with potters, with Kurt Mangus and Eva Kwong, who came to Kent, it became very clear that the maker's imagination is wrapped up in these objects as they get used in all these different ways. The pot: I used to go to Kurt's parents' house out in western Pennsylvania, and the house is just full of these pots. And they would sort of bring them down. And Kurt would sort of ring their rims. You know, that's the test of the fit between the glaze and the body. And you look at the bottom of the pot and how it was taken off the wheel. And, you know, where the fingerprints are. And all of these craftsman-like points.

But then also how food goes in it, you know? And they would use all these pots, which was just great.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And then the kind of the dynamics of the use of the thing, getting broken and repaired. And the way the glaze pattern is revealed as the foot is removed from the plate. Those are kind of the first inklings that I had about this kind of performative aspect and the social aspect of the use of the craft. It goes far beyond utility from my point of view.

That's particularly true in jewelry. So when Risatti wrote his book, he actually tried to exclude jewelry from craft. And the first draft was actually critiqued on that basis because he couldn't understand it as something you use physically. He just couldn't wrap his head around the social uses of these things. So I became more and more interested in the social application of the craft.

EDWARD COOKE: See, I find it interesting, because a lot of the work that you write [about] now, subsequently 2000 onward, oftentimes has a lot to do with jewelry and ceramics.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

EDWARD COOKE: Those are the two fields you feel most comfortable with—it seems just from reading your material. And so the genesis of some of these ideas sort of goes back to the '80s, of working with these potters and having that kind of exchange, of developing a language of craft—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: —more than anything else.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And at that time I was getting a lot of Kurt and Eva's pots. I have some of John Gill's. There's a John Gill piece right there.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And an Andrea Gill piece there.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So I could understand these objects both as symbolic objects for display and useful objects that entered into this sphere of a very, very complex arrangement of use that went far beyond just holding cereal.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: It became absolutely crystal-clear to me that there wasn't a discourse out there in the world that readily explained that stuff. I think there's this kind of mirror arrangement between one's identity as a craftsmen and the social applications of craft. To me somehow there's a symmetry there. Because all the craftspeople that I really respect—Sharon Church, Kurt Mangus, Eva, these people I know quite well—are

actually quite interested in the process of how the object moves on into social space.

EDWARD COOKE:  [Arjun] Appadurai would talk about the social life of things in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. Right. So, yes, ceramics did become a kind of exemplar of that for me because of the people I was talking to.

EDWARD COOKE:  One of the things I find really intriguing about, if you were to put this into sort of a chronological sort of element, that I always think of the 1980s as a point when medium specificity is at its height, as if somehow people who are doing jewelry don't talk as much to people who are doing ceramics, and people are sort of in their own internal system. But it's also this time period of increased professionalization of medium identity and politics. You know, that you go to SNAG, and you hang out only with the metal people. And there are galleries and things like that that show only in metal. So rather than thinking about a pan-crafts statement of practice, there are these turf wars in some respects.

BRUCE METCALF:  They weren't wars.

EDWARD COOKE:  Well, then I'd say turf "identities."

BRUCE METCALF:  They were ghettoes.

EDWARD COOKE:  Yes.

BRUCE METCALF:  Self-imposed ghettoes. And, you know, through the '80s, I think I was one of the few writers on the scene, and into the '90s, who would talk about craft issues in general. I don't know who else was doing that. Mostly other people would write about the mediums.

Even though the issues might cross those boundaries, there were very few people. Certainly Rose Slivka would. But she was caught up in that historical moment of expression and abstraction.

EDWARD COOKE:  The 1950s mindset, yes.

BRUCE METCALF:  Right. The poetic apprehension of the object. And I think Rose sort of ceased to be useful. I know Lois, and I think she had a very kind of odd approach to the kind of things that she would publish.

For instance, I know she collects pots. Functional ware. But the writing that appeared in the magazine tended to ignore those utilitarian and social issues completely. And she also ignored the conditions of labor issues. It was about the object. I think that the magazine was pushed in this direction to be responsive to collecting.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right. It's all about color and sort of the fetishization of the object.

BRUCE METCALF:  Right. Yes. Which I became increasingly dissatisfied with. So by the time I wrote "Replacing the Myth of Modernism" [*American Craft*, February/March 1993] in the early '90s, those models no longer made any sense to me:  the formalist analysis, the modernist approach to the autonomous object, which was the way a lot of these people believe that.

EDWARD COOKE:  Still believe, yes.

BRUCE METCALF:  And while I was basically selling a kind of postmodernist approach that was commonly understood in the art world, it was still news in the craft world.

EDWARD COOKE:  And resisted to some—you weren't making friends in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF:  Oh, no! No. Because the targets I would choose, like William Carlson—I mean, those very much are autonomous objects on pedestals, completely divorced from conditions of reception and conditions of production. It's this aesthetic object. And I used them as a bad example. And I think that was quite shocking in craft culture to not be nice.

But I think I decided that politeness wasn't going to be effective in the polemic. I think that may have been a mistake. But I certainly went against the cult of politeness in the craft world. I told the truth as I saw it.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  And I was quite blunt about it from time to time. A lot of people hated me. I mean, that's not actually too strong a word.

EDWARD COOKE:  Who's your model for writer? Did you actually have somebody in mind? Because of being a

polemicist, it ends up being quite novel in some respects, of really being willing to say it as you believe and sort of documenting. Do you have any models when you write?

BRUCE METCALF: No, I didn't. And that made it much more difficult. I mean the model in art writing at that time was drawn from German philosophy or Hegel or deconstruction. And that stuff is very difficult, and I actually don't think many of those guys—I don't think they are careful thinkers. I think the French philosophers are more poets than thinkers. Baudrillard is not a very careful thinker.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So, no, I didn't have a model. I did want to be very clear. I think I knew that. Because I was trying to put out a discourse that was a minority position at the time, and I realized that the argument had to be as rational as I could make it and as clearly structured as I could make it. I worked very hard at doing that because I'm not a natural writer. It took me, actually, years to write some of those articles. They would typically start as speeches and gradually over repeated speaking engagements, they would get boiled down and reorganized.

EDWARD COOKE: To me I always get a sense that they are distillated [sic] kinds of concepts. That there's a lot of reworking of them.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, there is. Yes. So I work very, very hard to make them clear and fairly rational, which is not something that our writing is usually about. Obfuscation has a certain value, particularly in the academic environment. You know, you have the buzz words. You know, you have [Theodor] Adorno and you have a couple words that point in that direction. And you add a couple of words that point to Hannah Arendt, whoever it is.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. So buzzwords are common.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And while that's useful in the academic sphere because people understand that literature, I'm trying to speak to a world that's beyond just academics.

EDWARD COOKE: So did you consciously think of *Metalsmith* as your first sort of target and then *American Craft*?

BRUCE METCALF: No, no. It was where I could get the stuff published by and large. I think Sarah Bodine was very kind to me. She was a good deal more sophisticated when I started writing. She was more sophisticated than me, certainly. They had written for *Metropolis* and some of those other lifestyle and design magazines, so she didn't have to tolerate my ignorance, but she did. She was very kind, and Lois was very kind.

I was just looking to publish anywhere. I think that in the end, the way it sorted out was the articles that had the more general address to craft at large would show up in *American Craft* and the more focused articles would show up in *Metalsmith*, but that wasn't necessarily the case. The article about craft as empathy was in *Metalsmith*. And I actually think that was my most creative, most interesting article, to set up a counter to [Arthur C.] Danto.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: A craft thesis that actually was pretty interesting. And the argument ran parallel to Danto's argument. But unfortunately because it appeared in *Metalsmith*, no one ever read it.

EDWARD COOKE: So if you had a *Metcalf Reader*, that comes up in—you're asked by the Penn Press to do a *Metcalf Reader*, what would your—would that be one of the key readings in that?

BRUCE METCALF: It would, yes. I think I would—I'm actually thinking now about my own book after the history book. It would be sort of *Craft According to Metcalf from A to Z*, starting with a definition. Then working through a lot of those different implications about what it means to have an identity of a craftsperson. And that whole thing about imaginative empathy, which seems to be so much part of the country; enlarging and expanding on all those issues. Probably revisiting evolutionary biology and looking at—I haven't read that stuff in years now. Go back to that literature and see where that's gone.

EDWARD COOKE: Especially with Darwinian celebrations right now. It's a hot topic.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. Right. So I would—and as far as I know, I'm one of the first writers to think about evolutionary biology and its application to the visual arts. I don't know if I did it well, but I was ahead of my time.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. So going back—so Kent State, you're primarily teaching studio classes.

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: Covering all metal or just jewelry?

BRUCE METCALF: All metal, yes. It's the typical studio of the field, which there's a raising room with the stakes. You try to get a couple of students to get interested in hammering, but most of them make jewelry. There was a lot of object making, particularly by the grads. Most of my grads did installations. It's that, I'm in art school, I'm an artist, I'll make art.

EDWARD COOKE: I can do whatever I want.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And I didn't discourage them. Because of my experience with Michael, I didn't feel it incumbent on me to tell them, No, you can't do that. That seemed an inappropriate response. So they were making installations, some of which were [laughs] pretty interesting. I don't know if they were good. But they were interesting.

EDWARD COOKE: They were pushing it.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I had a student—his name was Ted Giles; he came out of Carnegie-Mellon [University, Pittsburgh, PA]. So he already came to me with this kind of art orientation. He first started making these objects, and they got bigger and bigger and bigger. In the end he was making these shrines with old furniture and hot glue [laughs]. A lot of hot glue.

EDWARD COOKE: Pounds of it.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And he got involved with this sort of Christ complex. He built this crucifixion of himself in shattered wood. Then in his thesis show, one of the shrines was not finished at the morning of the show that was supposed to be done. So he actually went at it with an axe [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: That was the metal component. [They laugh.]

BRUCE METCALF: It probably was. So it was an installation. You started off with these objects. You come into this room with this crucifixion, bright red—bathed in red light. Then the last thing was this shrine furniture, objects, destroyed, with the axe still in it. I mean, it was really powerful. Kind of by accident. I don't think he had the faintest clue of what he was doing, but it was still powerful. And it irritated the hell out of the graphic designers, which was just fine with me, because he made all this noise while they're trying to teach their classes.

EDWARD COOKE: So that the aural component of it is also important.

BRUCE METCALF: So they weren't doing craft, not by any stretch of the imagination. And I wasn't going to tell them no.

EDWARD COOKE: Earlier we talked a little bit about object-making versus jewelry. Do you think that there was a move towards jewelry at this point, dealing with commodity culture for the undergraduates, of making things? Is there a shift from sort of the open-ended object-making, which might still continue on with the grad students, but where's the pushback from people who are trying to stay within jewelry? I'm thinking this is also the time in which—some people will make a case that jewelry becomes a dominant means of metal expression because of cost and, you know, some of the limited sorts of technology that can go into it, that it becomes sort of an easy, accessible craft for some people.

BRUCE METCALF: I don't think that's actually what happened. I was in there making these small sculptures, too. And I was expanding my scale again up to six and seven feet. And it became obvious—two things became obvious to me: First of all, they were failures as sculptures.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: They just weren't that good. And they also didn't work as sculptures because they didn't engage in the discourse of sculpture.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I mean, I didn't care about that stuff. I was making—I was still a narrative symbolist. So as sculptures, they just weren't that great. I also tried making furniture, and my furniture wasn't that great either. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: Check it off.

BRUCE METCALF: We found collectively that there wasn't a place for these sculpture-like objects. We showed

them. We tried to get in galleries, and art galleries just weren't interested. This is the moment of deconstruction and neo-expressionism. These little well-made things, you know [laughs]—whooo. Nobody got them.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And nobody wanted to buy them either because there wasn't a collector community that was actually interested in purchasing these objects. So we were all kind of spitting into the wind making these things. I think actually some of them were very interesting objects.

The people I admired then—Gary Griffin made some interesting stuff; Susan Kingsley; Carol Kumata made some great, wonderful small objects that she gave up on because she was later required to be a sculptor there at Carnegie; they folded her program into the sculpture program. So she just said, okay, I'm going to do sculpture. But I actually liked her small metalsmithing objects much better than her sculpture because there was a kind of distinctiveness to them. They weren't engaged in the discourse of sculpture. And they were isolated. The left-field, quirky stuff interests me far more than mainstream things.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: The artists that I've been interested in since then are people like Jess, [Burgess Franklin Collins] who are *way* out of the mainstream, who just don't register with the discourses of their fields. To me, Jess is a hero. Because he was able to consistently do that stuff throughout an entire career, and he never sort of diverted from his own vision, which was entirely his own. Or Lee Bontecou going off in rural Pennsylvania and making those amazing things that don't connect to the mainstream at all.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: Or to some degree Martin Puryear. These are the people I admire. People making objects, people who function outside of the dominant discourse and that empower structure and the critical sort of game.

EDWARD COOKE: But I was curious in terms of your relationship just to the field of jewelry making, which, to me in the '80s, that's the rise of a certain type of academic jewelry that is being sold and gets marketed. You know, some of the RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] stuff and some of these other schools are really producing jewelers who are almost production jewelers, who are developing different sort of restrictions of techniques. Not to necessarily go with narrative and symbolic narrative—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, early in the '80s, jewelry was anything but narrative. I was alone in that, virtually. I mean, me and Fred Woell. That was it. And when I started doing the figure, that was foreign territory at the time, about 1983. The fashion then was a kind of [pseudo-Russian –BM] constructivism.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: In the jewelry metalsmith community.

EDWARD COOKE: Brushed surfaces and things like that.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right. And these juxtapositions of geometric form, that was huge then. All of it's been forgotten. I think what happened was as we became aware that the object-making thing was a failed strategy, both conceptually and in terms of the marketplace, many of us turned back to jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: Not all of us, but many of us did. Many just continued on into something more like real sculpture [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Your fork in the road, right?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Or installations, whatever it was. I went back to jewelry. By the mid-'80s I have these two—actually I had three simultaneous practices. I made sculpture, I did drawings, and I did jewelry, all at the same time. And they could be very different from each other. Eventually—first it became clear that the large-scale stuff just failed, so I kind of shrank the scale. The last body of sculptural objects I did was for a show at Perimeter [Gallery, Chicago, IL] in I think 1993 or so.

By that time I was—I'd already started teaching the history of craft course, so I was very interested in the intersection between craft and art and the kind of tension there. So I did a series of objects that were furniture-like. There were some lamps, there were some tables. There were a couple of chests. But intentionally they all failed as functional objects: that would be, the chest was the wrong shape; it was, like, three inches wide and 10 inches tall, and maybe 24 inches long. You could put a baseball bat in it, maybe, if it was small. The drawers

were four or five inches in size. And I carved them and put them in this pocket. And eventually they all stuck [laughs].

Which was perfect, you know.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I made a pair of tables.

EDWARD COOKE: The dysfunctional chest, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: I made side tables that [had] this carved surface that you couldn't put anything down on. It would all roll off. And at the same time they were intended to be failures as sculpture because they were glued onto these functional objects in fairly unconvincing ways. So I was trying to make things that failed, intentionally failed, both as sculpture and as functional objects, and therefore would be interesting because of that.

EDWARD COOKE: Would be a commentary on that, too.

BRUCE METCALF: At the same time there was an extended discourse about modernism. I took Eliot's *Waste Land* as a point of reference and combined that with early modern design: Corbu and Gropius and Bauhaus furniture and design. And was talking about the pervasive attitude in modernism about the wider culture being a failure—vulgar and distasteful. Which was very much Eliot's attitude toward the larger culture. And I found something, in being a craftsperson and empathy being part of what I did, I just found something intellectually distasteful about that. To hold the larger population in revulsion.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I can't do that. I think that's extremely problematic. I was trying to address that at the same time. So there are these narratives about the failed modernism and the wasteland and writing and all this stuff simultaneously. And nobody got them [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Not ready for it.

BRUCE METCALF: Nobody understood, yes. The craft community just hadn't done the reading. And, you know, to talk about the *The Waste Land* as a central metaphor for modernism is a—nobody understood. I think the art community, if they saw the show at all, there was just—it couldn't compute.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: To put those things in a craft object and a craft discourse, to make them craft-*ed*, you know, it's just the wrong language [laughs]. So, in fact, they did fail on all counts.

EDWARD COOKE: You did, yes. Case in point.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Go back and revisit this.

BRUCE METCALF: It failed miserably by design.

EDWARD COOKE: So when did you leave Kent? You left there in—

BRUCE METCALF: Ninety-one.

EDWARD COOKE: Ninety-one. So what brought that gig to an end?

BRUCE METCALF: There were two things: I was involved with a Korean woman, and we were talking about trying to make some kind of life together, half in America and half in Korea. The deal I made was that we would both quit our teaching jobs, and we would both buy houses, and I'd buy a house here in Philly, and she would buy a house in Korea, and we'd try to survive as professional artists moving back and forth. She didn't keep up her end of the bargain, but I just decided I would follow through. I bought a house in East Falls [neighborhood, Philadelphia, PA] in '87, preparing for that.

But at the same time I was also becoming very bitter. I saw how, first of all, the art department was seen as a cash cow in Kent State University. It threw off a couple million dollars a year that was absorbed into the general fund for no good reason, while the school itself was terribly underfunded. And the administration just was not going to change things because that's the way they always did things.

It made me incredibly angry. In my studio, I loved the students. I loved teaching them. I hated everything else. I hated doing the committee meetings, I hated arguing with the faculty, who had this attitude that craft was some kind of stupid activity and beneath anyone's dignity.

EDWARD COOKE: So your total immersion in being the best faculty member, you just got exhausted.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I did a pretty good job there. I did all the right things. I, for many years, got the number one merit award. So I was actually fairly well paid. The first year I was there, I was paid something like fifteen-two [$15,2000]. In 1981.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And I walked out being fairly [well-]paid, tenured associate professor. But I was getting colitis at the end of every semester. I had major surgery, but it didn't fix the problem. It was clear that I was stressing myself out. And I was literally killing myself.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I don't think I would have survived, because I took the job way too seriously. You know, being a jeweler, you internalize all these things.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: It just became clear to me that the teaching thing wasn't going to work. I didn't want to be a bitter tenured faculty. Those people are poisonous and they damage a lot of people, and I was heading in that direction. I didn't want to continue in this environment that I hated. I just hated that stuff. I hated the bureaucracy. I hated the personalities, the deans who were dishonest and self-serving and absolutely not interested in the place of the visual arts or the crafts in the wider culture. They didn't give a shit. I hated that stuff.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And like I said, I took it very personally.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, you beat your head against the wall enough and—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. So I inherited enough money from my father that I could take a chance. I saved a lot of money. I bought a house here in Philadelphia. And I figured I could last 10 years.

EDWARD COOKE: Why Philadelphia?

BRUCE METCALF: I had visited here in the late '80s. I saw Sharon Church's house in the northern liberties. It was just a nice urban life. Affordable real estate.

EDWARD COOKE: Did you get to know her when you were at Tyler then?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. She would come through. She wrote the first review of my work, of a show at Helen Drutt's. So I knew of her. She invited me here, and we're very simpatico. I like what she has to say. So I saw—okay, here's an East Coast city I could afford, I could live in. I basically turned my life over to being a studio artist again and living *that* life and taking *that* chance. And trying to find a market for my work, while simultaneously trying to push the discourse forward. Doing both at the same time.

EDWARD COOKE: So making work and writing became the—

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: And dropping off the teaching.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. I think even now—it's been 18 years—people still regard me as an academic, but I'm not [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Well, but how did you get involved with the University of the Arts? Because you started teaching a course on the history of craft there.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Well, actually I taught that first at Kent.

EDWARD COOKE: You did?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. They had a person who taught a history of craft course there named Sheila Tabakoff. She ran the gallery and taught that one course. But she didn't complete her Ph.D., and they basically refused to tenure her. So she left, and this history of craft course stayed on the books for years. And every year I'd approach one of the art historians and say, can you teach a history of craft course again? Can you actually do this course?

Tenured art historians don't want to have to a lot of homework. You probably know that phenomenon. They wouldn't be bothered. They wouldn't do it. I asked and I asked and I asked, and they wouldn't do it. Because it required them taking up an expertise that they didn't have; they would have to go do the research.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. They felt uncomfortable.

BRUCE METCALF: And get outside of their comfort. And since they were all tenured, they weren't going to do that. So I finally decided, screw this; I'm just going to do it myself. So I had been acquiring a library. I had become interested in actually the idea of writing a history of craft.

EDWARD COOKE: So this is the mid-'80s?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. More and more on my mind because it was absolutely clear that the document did not exist in the field, and there was this dire need for this thing for people to see what their own histories were, because it only occurred piecemeal. So I thought, okay. I'll do it. I'll actually teach this course. So I did the reading, I took several thousand slides. I actually taught the course first in Korea.

EDWARD COOKE: Did you really?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, on a Fulbright [scholarship] there at Hanyang University [Seoul, South Korea] with a translator. And then I came back. And my last semester there at Kent, I taught it for the first time.

EDWARD COOKE: And then you left.

BRUCE METCALF: And then I left.

EDWARD COOKE: [Laughs.] Your parting shot.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I taught it I think twice at the University of the Arts. I convinced—they had the course on the books, too. It was a course that was originated by Helen Drutt.

EDWARD COOKE: That's right.

BRUCE METCALF: And for a while Sarah Bodine and Michael Dunas taught it as a team, but— Did you ever meet them?

EDWARD COOKE: No. I talked to them on the phone, but that was it.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. She was the editor of *Metalsmith*, and Michael was kind of driving the agenda of intellectualizing craft. I think he was a very valuable guy, but I actually don't think he was a careful thinker. He would get involved in these big themes, and he would think of craft as, say, a way to revise Western philosophy. To return it to the body—or whatever it was.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And every time I'd see him, he'd have some new big idea, without having to do the serious spade work to make these things stick. So he was this kind of enthusiast and he held craft in rather low esteem because he thought we were all stupid. Because we were not as articulate as him. He was a very verbal fellow. Sarah would kind of get dragged along in his wake. So they taught this History of Craft course as a Socratic dialog [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Between the two of them?

BRUCE METCALF: Between the two of them, yes, very theatrical and kind of entertaining. Interesting from their point of view.

EDWARD COOKE: On opposite sides of the room and go at it.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. I think the students would mostly sit there and go, "What!?" [They laugh.] And then they were also involved in that team-teaching concept that they invented down there at the University of the Arts as a way to—they didn't have enough students to justify all the faculty in the separate majors. So they

started a projects class that was team-taught. A pretty interesting experiment that I think has worked out very well there.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. So it continues?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. So Sarah and Michael were involved with that. But I think what happened is they kept trying to claim more and more power in the structure and after a while they were all—they were only adjuncts—and after a while the full-time faculty would just rebel.

The same thing happened up at New Paltz where they were also teaching the same course. So they did themselves out of a job, and I volunteered to teach the course. I actually ran into a lot of trouble there.

EDWARD COOKE: In what way?

BRUCE METCALF: My model for teaching was a studio class where you actually get to know the students, and you can say some fairly intimate things to them. You can't write those things on papers [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I discovered the hard way. [They laugh.] It has to be spoken to a student face to face, person to person.

EDWARD COOKE: With no written document.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, right. So I got in trouble for that. I got in trouble because I would actually ask the students to deliver. And a couple of the faculty there thought that the academic class intruded on these kids'—

EDWARD COOKE: —studio time

BRUCE METCALF: —studio practice, yes. And I failed a ceramist, which is probably not the best thing to do. I mean, I was eroding my political support.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And then I made the mistake of writing a very unfortunate article in *Metalsmith* when I accused Bill Daley of doing something he didn't do, of gay-bashing. That was, I think, one of the worst things I ever did. I know it hurt Bill deeply.

EDWARD COOKE: Regrettable.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, very regrettable. And I'm still so sorry for having done that. So Bill was hurt. I actually—there actually was a faculty [member] on the UArts who did gay-bash. I'm not going to say who it was. I know who it was. I know it occurred. And because of that Mark Burns was bounced out of there. And he was deeply hurt and humiliated.

Or partly because of that. So this occurred; and because I had not made a lot of friends there at the University of the Arts, they basically fired me. Refused to rehire me, which in academic terms is firing.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: So, you know—okay [laughs]. I did apologize, and I printed a public retraction. But that was not enough for them. I think part of the agenda there was that Warren Seelig hates what I write. And he was one of the no votes.

EDWARD COOKE: And you were in the crosshairs.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: How many years did you teach the history of craft then?

BRUCE METCALF: Two.

EDWARD COOKE: Two?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, just twice.

EDWARD COOKE: How was it different than it was at Kent State? I'm just curious how you went about constructing the syllabus in each place.

BRUCE METCALF:  The syllabus was the same. I tried some experiments of actually making it so the kids could do something visual as assignments. But I did it as drawing, which was a big mistake. I should have given them a project in their own medium.

I had them write papers. I didn't cut them any slack. I made some kids rewrite them. I would actually read the papers and correct them word for word, which no one else would do up there.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  I mean, I found it kind of shocking that a craft faculty was the one to tell the kids how to write.

Anyway. The syllabus was actually patterned after Martin Eidelberg's syllabus when he taught a history of craft course at Tyler.

EDWARD COOKE:  Hmm. So did it start with the Arts and Crafts movement? Or where did you—?

BRUCE METCALF:  Uh-huh. He started with the Great Exhibition [of 1851 –BM], you know.

EDWARD COOKE:  The Crystal Palace, '[18]51.

BRUCE METCALF:  Right. Yes. And so did I. He used [Nikolaus] Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design[:From William Morris to Walter Gropius*], and so did I. Because there wasn't anything even approaching adequacy at the time.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  So, yes, it was patterned after Eidelberg. He was my model.

EDWARD COOKE:  Had you taken his class when you were at Tyler?

BRUCE METCALF:  I did. And I was entranced. I had never taken an art history course that made the least bit of sense to me. He's very articulate. He has a good command of the material. He's a 19th-century guy, and he kind of gets flustered with late 20th century [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE:  Well, it's the nature of the beast.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. But it was the first time that I'd seen this stuff framed as an academic subject, and I was very taken with that. Much to my surprise and astonishment.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  So in many ways he's been my model for the academic voice, historical voice, as applied to craft.

EDWARD COOKE:  Yes, because it seems like that's another one of your strong pushes, is not only is there a medium specificity, sort of the clayness that one has, the affinity for clay that one might have, but also this whole idea of that the history has to be one of the history of objects rather than other sorts of histories that you're really connected into.

BRUCE METCALF; Right. And also a discourse.

EDWARD COOKE:  Well, language and discourse, yes.

BRUCE METCALF:  Coming from Ruskin and Morris. Having finally read those people in preparing for those courses, I began to read—the crafts had long been framed as basically dumb, devoid of its own discourse. I learned in teaching that course that that is absolutely not the case.

I think what has happened is once craft was reinvented in the postwar era, the language that was applied to it was the language of art schools at the time. So expression and then statement, those kinds of ideas. Where people were trying to live up to some kind of critique that it did apply in the art school environment. But those larger frames were lost in that. I don't know any of my generation who read Ruskin and Morris, when we were young. Not a single one.

So in many ways that whole thing about labor was lost. That whole thing about the social relevance of handwork was lost to my generation. And also about art into life.

Then that began, I think, to come back with those major exhibitions, the arts and crafts exhibitions. Suddenly

those ideas became visible again. I got those catalogs, and I kind of perused through them and started thinking about it in those terms. And then went back to the source and realized how, for me at any rate, Ruskin's description of the gothic in *The Stones of Venice* actually still bears fruit. Because he's talking about labor with self-determination—in the end. His context was carving architectural ornament. But he did bring in Venetian glass. So that discourse actually still makes sense.

Some people reject it, but, you know, I lived that experience and I understand exactly what he was talking about. So, yes, my project then became to historicize all of that to give it some kind of background that was there to study all of that. Nowadays when I do critiques, I talk about history.

EDWARD COOKE: Do you think—are other schools paying attention to the history at all?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Who do you think is doing interesting work amongst the history of craft?

BRUCE METCALF: Well, they're teaching it. Jennifer Zwilling is teaching at Tyler. There's a faculty who's teaching it at the University of the Arts. They're teaching—there's a lot of studio teachers who have taken it upon themselves to teach a medium history.

EDWARD COOKE: That's medium-specific, right..

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. In ceramics and weaving—or fibers—in particular. Mary Lee Hu taught a history of ornament out at the University of Washington. A lot of people have taken this project on in different ways. But they don't talk to each other. Most of them are not academicians, so they don't function in the art history world. They don't speak at College Art [Association], and they don't bring their research in a scholarly form to the forum.

EDWARD COOKE: To a bigger audience, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: But they're doing it. There's a lot of people kind of working in the vineyards these days. Hopefully a craft history book will further that process.

EDWARD COOKE: Giving some more benchmarks and guidelines for synthesizing some of that material together.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. That's the whole—

EDWARD COOKE: So do you think, of your interest in writing the volume, is based really on the Kent State experiences?

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Did you ever think you'd have a chance to write something?

BRUCE METCALF: I actually started discussions with a potter here named Marian Pritchard about team-writing the book, and it never came to anything. But I was building my own library, and I was doing some reading, and I was thinking about how that book would be framed. When the thing at the Center for Craft Creativity and Design [Hendersonville, NC] took place, Janet [Koplos] invited me down to that same meeting you were at.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: When they finished by inviting requests for proposals.

EDWARD COOKE: And you decided, the time has come.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes. I know that Janet wanted to submit a proposal, and she had invited me there [laughs]. So I thought it would have been extraordinarily ungracious to submit my own proposal. So at the end of that meeting, I went up to her and said, do you want to do it as a team? And she thought about it for, like, an hour before dinner, and came back to me just before the last dinner that night and said yes. So that was the genesis.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And I was shocked that you and Glenn [Adamson] didn't submit your own proposal.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, we had stuff to do.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I know. Yes, I know. But I've said many times I don't think I was the best candidate to be the author of that book. I think I was a good candidate because I'd been thinking about it. I brought a perspective to it that a pure scholar would not.

EDWARD COOKE: We can talk about this later, but just the idea of at least getting something down first. And in some way having a maker's voice, I thought, was valid, was important.

BRUCE METCALF: And I think it did show up to some degree. Janet and I did have some discussions about that because from my point of view, making does have meaning. From her point of view, her context is doing reviews of shows where, in the art world making is almost meaningless except when it's foregrounded.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. When it's an end unto itself.

BRUCE METCALF. Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: Ironically.

BRUCE METCALF: It's been interesting.

EDWARD COOKE: Okay. That's—

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EDWARD COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bruce Metcalf at his home in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, on June 10th, 2009, for the Archives of American Art. This is disc number four.

Bruce, we talked a little bit at the end of the last disc about *The History of Craft* publication. But maybe we want to go back and revisit some of your own work encompassing the Kent State years and then those years afterwards, as you were moving through issues of symbolic narrative, and try to evoke a sense of the issues, your use of different media to explore some of these. Take us through some of that work.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. As for media,—the thing I do best is work hard media, wood, metal, and that. I've never really thought that I had to be limited to anything particular. I think in my early years, I was doing as much or more in medium mix in jewelry as almost anybody else on the scene, other than maybe Fred Woell. I think that a lot of people were impressed with that back in the day, when there is still a strong influence from Scandinavian modern in the kind of pure objects, pure metal and a stone or two.

EDWARD COOKE: That real emphasis on materiality of one medium in particular.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. When I was a student, people still talked about truth to materials, which never made any sense to me. [They laugh.] Silver doesn't come in that form in its natural state. So to say that silver is "true" when it's actually synthetic material seemed to me to make no sense at all. Or even wood; wood in its natural form has bark on it, or it's rotting. You don't normally cut—see it lying on the ground with its grain exposed. So I never bought that truth in materials thing. To me it was always the material subsumed to an image. That's the way I've always approached it. So I had no hesitation to paint either metal or wood.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. [They laugh.] Figure? No.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I really don't care. Although I do use that kind of lustrous material from time to time when it works for me. I have a great affection for gold, and I wish I could use more of it because it's just a gorgeous, gorgeous material, and I wouldn't bother painting it if I could. But I can't afford much of it. So I just use it as a focal point now.

As for the work itself, I think I was thinking about narrative and symbolism. At first they didn't have any figures, and then it just made sense to use figures, and the figures that I used were all derived from cartooning, which also, for me, made sense because I had been doing cartooning as a student. And also that's just the way I draw.

EDWARD COOKE: I was going to say, was your drawing continued in sort of cartoonish mode all through this time?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. So at faculty meetings or watching late-night TV, if I were just to draw something, they would work out that way. I don't draw from life—

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: —by inclination. And I'm not interested in any of the academic histories of drawing. I'm also not interested in abstraction, which is, I think, a major factor in my work in general. I've never found most

abstractions speak to me. And for a long time that induced a kind of guilt, because it was clear we were supposed to stand before a [Willem] de Kooning or a [Jackson] Pollock and be transported by these things and have that transcendent experience and all the rest of it. And I never did. I mean, to me it was just paint on the surface.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And I was not all that interested in the brushy application of paint or the way an abstract composition is constructed. It just seemed kind of obvious to me. So the whole direction in 20th-century art has been largely toward abstractions of one kind or another. And I think that process still continues. But in contrast, I think I'm kind of a literalist.

EDWARD COOKE: But not a neoclassical figurative person either.

BRUCE METCALF: No, no. Something else. So for me the cartoon worked out really well because it's highly visceral. It's both a compilation and a distillation of gesture. And gesture has incredible power to communicate emotion with facial expression and with bodily disportment, let's say—deportment.

I found I could communicate a tremendous amount of both content and emotion with these little cartoon-like figures. So I started using them. At first they were constructed and built up out of pieces sheet and wire, whatever it was. Later they were cast, became more fully in the round and a lot more textured, a lot more, kind of, action on the surface that you can get with wax working. Then I started putting them in these architectural settings like you see in the catalog here. That came out of an impulse to see that the jewelry object had a life off the body. Because a lot of times the jewelry object is simply put away when it's not worn. And being an egotist, I wanted to make sure that it had some kind of—it was out, it was seen when they're not worn.

EDWARD COOKE: This is the idea that architectural setting would be storage.

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: Instead of having just an ordinary stand or something like that, it had its own home.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Exactly. I didn't invent that. There was a guy named Francis Stephens that did some interesting things in that direction in I think, the '60s. He's unknown now. And Claus Bury did a whole series in the late '70s that would have this—the jewelry object with a record of its development both visually and technically. They were pretty interesting.

So those were precedents that were already in place when I started to do that. I think what I did is that I used this structure as a way to extend the content. So that there was a story with the pin itself, but the story was extended when the pins are put in the setting, this little piece of architecture, mutually. Although I did a few that were on landscapes or drawings as well.

EDWARD COOKE: Did you ever follow up with people, how they responded, if they were purchasing a piece and having these in their own home?

BRUCE METCALF: No, I never really found out how that worked out. I know a few people that own them, and I don't think they wore them very much.

EDWARD COOKE: So they just kept them in their homes, in their houses, architectural elements.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And I think because of that, people started speaking of them as sculpture, which I would always deny immediately [laughs]. I'd say, no, it's jewelry. It's not sculpture.

And it isn't sculpture because it doesn't, like I said before, it doesn't address the discourse of the field. It's rather independent of that. Plus, it's flat. If there were to be a name applied to them, it would be a relief with a wearable object on them. They're definitely not 360-degree objects you can walk around and find equally satisfying from every point of view. There are backs and there are sides that are clearly backs and sides.

So I am quite adamant in saying they are not sculpture. And I guess people think I'm being difficult or something. [They laugh.] I don't know. But then I try to make that quite clear.

In time they became increasingly complex. I used them to address some ideas I had about the way that we filter our experience through emotions. Later that turned into an extended contemplation of nurturing, basically. Anxiety on the one hand, of being sort of rootless and fraught and upset, and helping and nurturing on the other side, as a way of actually dealing with these highly agitated states of mind or of emotion. A lot of that came from teaching. Because at the undergraduate level, you see a lot of upset people [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: A lot of anxious people.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And at Kent there were a lot of anxious teachers, too. And then teaching, certainly in the studio, was very much involved with a kind of fathering or mothering or nurturing, of bringing these people along into adulthood and into some kind of stature of being a thinker and an artist; a creative person who has at least the potential to navigate through life in that role. Although it's terribly inefficient.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: But in seeing all this emotional heat, and seeing how important it is to have people around to do some hand-holding and do some guiding and basically garden in the precincts of academia made me very interested in that as a subject. So I actually did a number of pieces that used gardening as a metaphor. I did a number of pieces that were about helping of different kinds; guiding people from one stage of life to another. So that the Icarus piece here on the cover of the catalog is actually two parallel pieces: one in which the little Icarus figure is being released from a cage; a second one is the same two figures except the parent figure is holding a net, and the Icarus figure is descending out of control. So it's called *Catcher for a Young Icarus* [1994]. [They laugh.] I mean, you do find yourself in that position as a teacher; I'm sure you're familiar with that.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Somebody's just totally lost and in crisis and calls upon you. Or even not call upon you. But you—

EDWARD COOKE: Have you recognize the signs?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: How do you step in to minister?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And how do you do it gracefully, and when do you not? Those are all very complicated questions. So I think because of my experience in teaching, that the business of nurturing and helping became an important part of my work and an important subject. And I think in time that idea, then, instead of symbolizing it, I think I became more interested in actualizing it. That took place, I think, in conversations with Sharon Church here in Philadelphia after I moved here.

EDWARD COOKE: After you moved here?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Sharon is really interested in how it feels to wear jewelry because she is a woman, and she wears her own jewelry. And most of her clients are people that she knows, who talk to her about the psychic experience of wearing jewelry. She has some really, really interesting ideas about that. She speaks of psychic armoring.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: And jewelry as preparation. For women who would ordinarily feel kind of exposed and vulnerable, and then jewelry objects sort of going on them and preparing them to be powerful and to be confident. I suppose that could be debated, but there are certainly a great deal of stories about how people feel differently when wearing jewelry—especially large, dramatic jewelry. Just recently there was this SNAG performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and I recruited Jennifer Zwilling, a curatorial assistant there, to wear one of my large necklaces. Because she had only worn these little things before. So I thought, well, okay, here's a chance to get some exposure, but also a way to show her by the experience what this stuff can do. And her report was that she felt empowered.

EDWARD COOKE: Huh.

BRUCE METCALF: Which I thought was pretty interesting. That's exactly how I wanted her to feel. So it works.

EDWARD COOKE: So you hadn't told her that's what you were looking for?

BRUCE METCALF: We'd had a discussion about that, and I don't know if she was exactly using my wording. But I have to trust that she actually felt that way. Because when you have those things on, and you're in the middle of a crowd, you do stand out, and people do look at you, and people come up and talk to you, and you have this—you become a magnet. I think carrying that stuff around is also a factor of intimidation, which is sort of interesting. People assume you're a certain kind of person, very forward and—

EDWARD COOKE: Comfortable in doing this.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. Right. So it actually changes the way people perceive the wearer as well. So it's not just an internal change; it's an external change as well. Those things, in those conversations with Sharon and my own kind of experiments with those things, become much more interesting to me. Instead of just symbolizing the process, actualizing it as these objects go on the body.

That also seems to me to conform to what I'm thinking about craft ideas and craft theory these days. Because I'm very much an advocate that craft is not the same as art, and craft is not the same as design. Which means that there are certain native subjects that properly belong to craft.

EDWARD COOKE:  Or certain practices, yes.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. And the wearing of jewelry is one of those. The subject is not just the making of it, and it's not just the design of the object but it's what it actually does out there in the real world. Jewelry can be very, very complicated. It does a lot of different things. It's used in some fairly narrow ways now since we've lost the language of jewelry of the Victorian era. It doesn't express mourning very well anymore. It still expresses love, but only indirectly. But all that language has been lost. It still expresses wealth and status, particularly conventional jewelry, the kind of thing that Helen calls "social jewelry." It expresses rank as in military insignia. Jewelry does all that. It still functions as a bank account, a portable bank account, which is one of the time-honored roles of this stuff.

EDWARD COOKE:  Precious metals in general.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. Right. I always thought the modernist discourse that was applied to jewelry in the postwar era was impoverished. Just to speak of those things as designs, which was the—

EDWARD COOKE:  Or forms.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. Forms, designs, you know, it's "wearable" design. That never made a lot of sense to me. Particularly after those conversations with my students in the mid-'80s at Kent. And even more so after talking with Sharon.

So that's kind of what I'm thinking now, both as being objects that intrigue me in, you know, what they are and what they look like and the kind of symbols I put in them; but also in how they get used out there in the real world. And it turns out most of my jewelry actually is worn. For better or worse, it's largely treated as very expensive costume jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE:  Hmmm. As opposed to—?

BRUCE METCALF:  As opposed to objects for which the owner is a—what's the word?—a custodian for the future. These things take an incredible amount of time and energy, and they are, in fact, invested with a fair amount of thought. And I would like people to treat them respectfully, but they often don't. They beat the crap out of them in some cases. Even some fairly knowledgeable people do that. Which just amazes me. [They laugh.] That they should—

EDWARD COOKE:  They feel too comfortable, right?

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. Right. Some of my pieces are virtually being destroyed, people love them so much. They wear them all the time; they're not designed to be worn all the time. They can't take that kind of wear.

They almost universally are what I call special-occasion jewelry, which is the way I use them. But not everyone does. And so I've had to do a lot of repairs over the years. And some of my dealers have been rather upset because it's not good to have clients bringing pieces that are falling apart on them. But that's part of the deal. I'm not here to make jewelry that is—I call it "real jewelry," you know, the kind of thing that Pat Flynn does, if you're familiar with him. That's real jewelry. He's a great jeweler, but he is a jeweler. I don't think he's an artist per se.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  His work is made to be worn, it's made to stay on the body, it's made to be worn every day. And the way he puts it, it's made to be worn out.

EDWARD COOKE:  It's a durable sort of thing.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. Right. And mine is not. I would wish that people recognize that a little bit more than they do. But in a way maybe that's okay, because they're getting out there, they're getting used. People really love some of those things, I mean, really, really love them. It was actually hard to get some loans for my show because people didn't want to part with the jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. Which is unusual for a small thing because oftentimes people would say it's the large—it's a piece of furniture, they're not going to loan to an exhibition. But a piece of jewelry, this means I can wear something else.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. That's great because it means that people have developed these emotional attachments to these objects, which is great.

EDWARD COOKE: So do you think it's a possibility to open up the language of jewelry again?

BRUCE METCALF: You know, I'm not really sure about that. What's going on in Europe is actually kind of about that project. And it's tending toward bad craft and weird art supplies, with a kind of expressive or poetic agenda, that strikes me as coming from [Arte Povera –BM]. So that's very much the fashion at the moment these days. That's where people think the jewelry avant-garde is. Or somebody like Ted Noten, who's very much a conceptual artist, who's applied those strategies to the notion of the wearable object as his subject.

But I think I and Sharon Church and a number of other Americans are—to us, the jewelry object is not completed until it's worn and until it's worn regularly. It's not about imposing an artistic statement on the person. It's about having them somehow collaborate with this object, and having it stand for themselves in some really intimate way, that makes sense to me anymore. I don't want to do objects that are just so difficult to wear that they can be worn once. Which a lot, a lot of people are doing, and a lot of students are doing. They're really show pieces. They're a kind of a discourse about jewelry rather than being jewelry itself.

And to me, that's easy. I don't think there's a great deal of difficulty in taking a bunch of wood chips and putting them on a string and making it too big to wear and then you're done.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I don't think there's any real challenge. And there also isn't any effect on people's ordinary lives.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, then, how about the flipside? What do you think about museums that buy jewelry direct from the artist that's never been on the body and goes on to exhibition in clean, depersonalized space.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And that's happening to me, too.

EDWARD COOKE: Does that sort of get—is that kind of uncomfortable?

BRUCE METCALF: I'm glad when it happens; I'm glad that the piece is preserved that way. And I'm glad to get the check. But it is actually a violation of the intent.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. Or is it another form of social interaction?

BRUCE METCALF: No, I don't think so.

EDWARD COOKE: You couldn't even sort of justify it that way.

BRUCE METCALF: No, I don't think that's a social interaction in a museum; it's a display. But I don't think it's an interaction, really. Not the way jewelry actually works in a social space at a party; not even close. As I say, if the subject of jewelry is how the object is applied in those situations, to immediately take it out of that possibility is —

EDWARD COOKE: To me, it's one of these really interesting questions for a lot of crafts, is what happens if you bypass the person and it goes from maker to display format?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. I think it's unfortunate; maybe it's necessary. There's a story about a Native American in Wisconsin—I think he made canoes, I think birch canoes. I think a museum commissioned him to make one of these things. So his last involvement with his canoe was to actually put it in a lake and paddle it around for a while because, he said, this thing has to be used.

EDWARD COOKE: Has to touch water, right.

BRUCE METCALF: It has to have this stature and this status and this use to complete it. Otherwise it's a waste. [They laugh.] And I understand what he meant.

To have a piece of jewelry never be worn is a waste, particularly if the intention is there. And some of the more discursive jewelry, I don't think that's really a problem because they're not meant to be worn. But I am interested in that; both because I like that process, but because it's, I think, intellectually necessary at this time

to examine those subjects in a real way.

One of the things I'm thinking about, and I can't articulate it very well, unfortunately, is one of the differences between art as we know it and craft as we know it, is that craft *is* whereas art is *about*. That there's always this kind of removal from things, a degree of abstraction in the art project, which seems to be embedded in the project itself. So the contrast that I think about a lot, there's a famous piece of jewelry by Otto Kunzli where he got a number of wedding rings and then soldered them together in a chain. The idea being that these wedding rings all have stories. And you have to question how he got a hold of them. Did the people die? Did the marriages fail? And then it's made into this object which is largely for display.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: Whereas in comparison to that, I think about an actual wedding ring. When I was married, I made my own wedding ring, and I wore it for the duration of the marriage. It's a very different status in the world, in that my wedding ring actually stood for a specific relationship, a specific marriage. And then it failed, at the end of the marriage, it stood for a very specific failure. It was freighted with these deeply personal meanings of mine that could not be escaped but could not be replicated by anything else. I mean, it *was* a wedding ring; it was not *about* wedding rings.

It seems to me that that distinction is a kind of—I don't know if it's a semiotic class or if it's a philosophical difference. I haven't really sorted that out. I haven't noticed that semiotics is capable of making that distinction. It's really about belief.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. William Bailey paintings.

BRUCE METCALF: And treating something as a living, breathing, usable tool of life, let's say. Or having a discourse about a living, breathing tool of life. And art tends to go for the discursive side, the somewhat abstracted side. To me, the best or worst example of that are those William Bailey paintings of pots on a shelf. Using those overtones without participating in them. So, just philosophically, as I'm trying to think through craft, the objects that are not entirely discursive but actually get stuck in life and actually are pots or are wedding rings or are garments, I find that much more interesting now than most of the discursive projects. Again, because they embody and represent something that I think is more true to the craft project.

EDWARD COOKE: And do you see that in your own work, some of that changing?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, very much.

EDWARD COOKE: So give me an example.

BRUCE METCALF: I'm trying much harder to make my necklaces actually wearable. [They laugh.] I got a mannequin, and I'm much more concerned with how they drape on the body. Because there are real problems with necklaces; because it has to turn around the shoulders, and then it has to drop down the back and then come around again. So the thing is actually a three-dimensional object that for display has to flatten out, which is not an easy thing to do unless you're just stringing things on a wire. There are some technical problems there that are actually pretty difficult. You can see in this one on the table how it arcs off the table where it goes around the back of the neck.

EDWARD COOKE: Goes around the neck.

BRUCE METCALF: So there are certain problems there that are not so easy to solve, to make these things actually drape properly on the body. I've been wrestling with that for a few years, with mixed results.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: [Laughs.] That's one of the things. So, yes, it does manifest. I think my jewelry, the brooches, are going to get smaller. A lot of women—and it's usually women who are my clients—are rather too challenged by the large brooches that I make. I would be more sympathetic to them if I made the things smaller. And simply because it fits more into their—the way these things actually do get used.

EDWARD COOKE: I was going to ask you—you brought up gender and whether it's a female clientele for the most part.

BRUCE METCALF: Generally. Yes, I have a few male collectors.

EDWARD COOKE: So what kind of jewelry do they buy?

BRUCE METCALF: The same stuff. Generally they're gay.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes?

BRUCE METCALF: Interestingly. The only two—I can think of one male client who's not gay. Most of the rest are. And most of the women are self-made business women.

EDWARD COOKE: Hmmm.

BRUCE METCALF: I have a stockbroker. I have a businesswoman in Taiwan—or Singapore. I have a couple of independent businesswomen like Donna Schneier who is in the import-export business. And these are very assertive, confident—

EDWARD COOKE: I was going to say, confident and powerful with this jewelry.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And they're the ones who feel comfortable with these very dramatic visual statements hanging on their bodies. Other women less so. But what I find is that women who are maybe not as confident and assertive, actually feel differently with these things on. Quite different. That's where Sharon's idea of psychic armor comes in. It works, it actually does work.

EDWARD COOKE: Do these people—are they consistent across the board in terms of buying, you know, a William Harper brooch or something else that's huge and dominating?

BRUCE METCALF: Ah! I've only seen one collection. This is Marion Fulk in Little Rock. She was basically teaching herself about the ins and outs of art jewelry, as it's called—unfortunately. She had big jewelry to begin with. She would buy big pieces of costume jewelry. But she would also buy some fairly small things. I think finally the jewelry collecting community has gotten to the point where they will buy all kinds of things, but they'll also buy things that aren't designed to be worn, which to me is a sign of the maturity in the collecting community. It took them a long time [laughs] to get there.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And now a few of them do. Susan Beech gets it. Donna Schneier gets it. A few others do.

EDWARD COOKE: Do you find that—are there some people who are buying jewelry not so much to wear but as a commodity? Sort of as a collector—they wanted one of these, one of those?

BRUCE METCALF: Daphne Farago did that. Helen Drutt up to a point, but only from people who she represented. And she did that largely because she bought at dealer price. So she built her collection at a discount.

EDWARD COOKE: The one that's going to [the Museum of Fine Arts,] Houston now?

BRUCE METCALF: Right. That is there. Other than that, no. I haven't seen that, that phenomenon that seems to take place in glass, of the "one of each" thing.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. That postage stamp sort of purchasing.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. In some ways that's good, but in some ways it's kind of unfortunate, because people like me don't get supported in depth. A lot of my clients stopped buying my work once I gave up the figurative work. So I've had to develop almost an entirely new client base. So they're not buying Metcalfs. They're—

EDWARD COOKE: So when you went to figurative to something like that.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. A number of my traditional clients just stopped. [They laugh.]

EDWARD COOKE: Was it something I said?

BRUCE METCALF: No. Well, they had me pegged for a certain thing.

EDWARD COOKE: A certain style.

BRUCE METCALF: And they liked it, and they were responding to the humor and their content. And the newer work is—it's not content-free, but it deals with content in a very different way. And it superficially appears to be decorative.

EDWARD COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: I think that a lot of those collectors are trying to look for something that's not decorative. They're trying to look for jewelry that's a little more demanding than that. I think that they maybe don't realize some of the subtexts that are going on with these things.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: I don't know.

EDWARD COOKE: I'm just curious. In thinking about—particularly as you talk about the importance of the relationships, the communication with an audience, with people.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I think—for me it's actually been kind of an intellectual journey. To embrace the decorative was a conscious choice, it was not reflexive. And I think a lot of craft, a lot of jewelry is just done reflexively. So these days I'm beginning to think that in the current era, that decorative aspect of craft is emerging from the compulsion that a lot of people have with technique. So it's about, how do you display technique?

EDWARD COOKE: The authentic technique or whatever.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. How do you show that you're just a whiz-bang glassblower. You do it not by making pure forms, but by sort of jazzing things up and ultimately they become kind of decorative.

And I think that's also true in jewelry. How do you prove your chops? How do you show you have that control? You make this complex object that is ultimately kind of decorative.

So there's this reflexive aspect to decoration that is about kind of showing off skill or that is about trying to make something that looks good on the body and doesn't go any further. But I'm coming at it from a very, very different point of view, from thinking about the subjects of craft.

In the end, though, the two look rather similar [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: They can, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And I don't think most of the community that's out there buying and supporting jewelry is making that distinction just yet.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I think that's kind of a conundrum for me. I mean, how do I make it clear that this is actually a discourse about decoration? I don't want to make it too abstract because I want these things to stay used, and I want them to stay on the body. But on the other hand there is a discursive element to it. So that's something that I'm working on now is, how to make that a little clearer.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, in addition to your own work becoming clearer, is SNAG or *Metalsmith* doing a job also about educating at all?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, they're trying, sure. *Metalsmith* has been doing that for years, of trying to make un-wearable jewelry a credible option. Both as a practice and as something people might want to preserve and collect; people still are struggling with that. But also jewelry as performance, jewelry as installation. *Metalsmith* has done, I think, a pretty good job of exposing and supporting that kind of work.

EDWARD COOKE: The ecumenical side of thing.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Do you feel as if it sort of had its heyday with Sarah and Michael sort of in charge? Has it gone through changes?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, yes, yes. I think the writers are better now actually. She had a couple of good writers: Akiko Busch was actually pretty interesting. They had somebody that wrote anonymously as A. Stiletto who had some pretty interesting commentaries. And they did some pretty interesting interviews themselves. But now there's some better writers. There's Glen Brown and Tacey Rosolowski , who are reasonably thoughtful and are not shocked an object isn't made to be worn but is addressing the context of jewelry. That's usually an enormous stumbling block for writers coming from outside the field. They keep rediscovering the wheel there because they didn't bother to do their homework.

EDWARD COOKE: Do you think that's going to change, with the craft history textbook or various other things to sort of—?

BRUCE METCALF: I don't know. People have accepted that in ceramics and glass, the nonfunctional object having an important stature in the development of the field. But jewelry is still very much stuck on this idea that

the things have to be worn.

EDWARD COOKE: The myth of function, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And it's very difficult to get collectors to support these non-wearable objects. It's been a problem.

Hopefully that will change. But again, the collecting community is just tiny, minuscule. And until you get a lot of people supporting this stuff, you can't really develop a vibrant field.

EDWARD COOKE: So do people distinguish between collectors and purchasers?

BRUCE METCALF: No; anyone who writes a check is a collector.

I think the collectors do. I know a lot of people who've been very reluctant to call themselves collectors. Because from their point of view, collection has to do with a kind of encyclopedic record of a field, and they don't feel that they're up to that or even interested in that.

EDWARD COOKE: Is there a collectors' group of jewelry?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, the Art Jewelry Forum.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. How long has that been around?

BRUCE METCALF: Eight or nine years now? A little longer, maybe? Susan Cummins started that.

EDWARD COOKE: I always think about the way in which these medium-based groups are established first for the makers. And then the more recent phenomena over the last 10 years has been the collectors' groups for those media as well.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

EDWARD COOKE: And how they're serving sort of a similar point of view. But it's really to stimulate purchasing and awareness and cultivation of collections.

BRUCE METCALF: True. Yes. I think certainly the makers are all for that because they look at that as creating the marketplace.

I was most interested in it as a way to—I know in some circles "connoisseurship" is a dirty word. [They laugh.] I talked to art historian who wouldn't use the word because of Bernard Berenson and how corrupt he actually was. But it's a term that Helen uses a lot, and she uses it not only as a synonym for education, but about sophistication, about coming to an understanding of a field and what the values of the field are and what the subjects of the field are. Which is, hopefully, quite apart from just buying and shopping.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: So, at least in the Art Jewelry Forum, there hasn't been so much of that competitive shopping thing, and there hasn't been so much of that name-dropping thing. I think Susan Cummins and Susan Beech have led that organization in the direction of that more sophisticated kind of connoisseurship, for lack of a better word. And I'm very grateful for that. Because then these women can lead other people to a similar sophistication.

And then there's a few people like Ron Porter who buys jewelry, but he only buys things because he loves them, and he and his boyfriend wear them. But he's actually quite sophisticated. He's an interesting character.

EDWARD COOKE: Does he go buy small or large?

BRUCE METCALF: Generally he's smallish. Yes, not huge. But, you know, our relationship to the glass field is fraught [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, one obviously uses that. But even just someone—there are so many different models of the marketplace, because glass is the most "postage stamp" collecting base in terms of by the individuals and stuff like that.

BRUCE METCALF: But I'll tell you, if I had been one of those people making those postage stamps, I would've been so happy.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Well, I don't know if I would. It is obviously a trap because I know a number of people that got caught in the thing where they had to—they created a formula for their own production, and then they were trapped in it because that was where their sales were.

EDWARD COOKE: What people expected.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. And that's been just a terrible trap for glass. I don't know if anyone inside the field particularly protests. But it's obvious that it's a corrupting influence on how experimental these people allow themselves to be. I always thought that somebody like Harvey Littleton, after a while he was just sort of imitating himself.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. Or perpetuating the myth.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. As opposed to in his early years he was actually quite an explorer in doing the glass prints and making those assembled glass sculptures. And he gave that all up, whereas he was in a position where he had the wealth and the leverage to actually move the field somewhere where it wasn't. And he didn't.

I don't know if that was selfishness or cowardice or just cynicism. But I understand he was a fairly cynical guy. There's a story about him giving a demo to students, some of Henry Halem's, in his studio there in North Carolina, and he finishes one of those loops or droopy forms, and he says, oh, there's another 10,000 bucks.

EDWARD COOKE: Kind of cynical.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I think that's extremely cynical. And I think that that attitude pervades glass. So somebody like Therman Statom, who at one point was right in tune with expressionism in that moment in painting in the mid-'80s, has kind of become—he makes imitations of his own work now [laughs]. Instead of treating it as if—I think an artist is just somebody who pays attention. And if you pay attention, you change. It's inevitable. There's always something either in the process or in the thought that suggests an alternative. And if you're making work that doesn't develop, you are not paying attention.

EDWARD COOKE: So once you stopped teaching—because it seems to me a lot of your teaching is where you developed some ideas and sort of articulate your voice or your interest in symbolic narrative and the writings when you were at Kent State. Once you no longer are teaching, where do you draw your sense of development? Is it just now conversation with peers like Sharon Church?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. With a very few people that I—

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, there's choice now.

BRUCE METCALF: —who can actually challenge me. There's not too many of them. Then also, I think, from writing the history has had—and is having—a considerable influence on me.

EDWARD COOKE: Give me an example of how that affects your work.

BRUCE METCALF: It's the idea of the proper subjects of craft. Having written the history, a lot of that came much more into focus to me, and how especially in the postwar era many of the leading practitioners were seduced by ideas that came from the art world. So Wendell Castle really wanted to make sculpture, furniture as sculpture. Certainly in glass, the temptation was to take these blown forms or these constructed forms or cast forms and make sculpture out of them. To me, that's looking more and more like—missing the point because I don't think there's an intellectual support for that. I don't think that there's—that you can develop a logic for working in a craft material but in an art format.

There is an internal—people like to hybridize, and there's a tremendous amount of interest in that. But until recently, I don't think people have examined the questions behind hybridization very carefully. So I don't think, for instance, despite whatever he might say, I don't think Wendell actually questions sculpture very closely.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. That's right.

BRUCE METCALF: So the model that he cites now is Leonard Baskin, you know, these objects on pedestals. That were forms in space. So he never moved beyond the form in space, the Henry Moore idea.

EDWARD COOKE: The older art vehicles—older paradigm, we might say.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Whereas in his own time, sculpture transformed itself into something else entirely—into minimalism, into site-specific sculpture, into performance.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF:  All these different things. And most recently into installation. He didn't follow that journey. He wasn't engaged in that journey. He gives no evidence of really caring about that. Whereas if he were a sculptor, he would have to address those developments. He would have to! He would be obligated.

EDWARD COOKE:  Yes. Keep moving ahead.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes, as a professional. Otherwise he would be regarded as an antique. And there's places for antiques. But the art world is interested in some kind of new examinations of the subjects of sculpture—either reviving older ideas or inventing new ones:  increasing the scale or engaging nature in different ways or whatever it is.

So there is a discourse in the field that craftspeople tend to ignore. So they *claim* they're making sculptures. But, you know, if you look at the field of sculpture itself:  Uh-uh [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE:  One could always talk about a lag time, you know, the way *Craft Horizons* wrote and Rose Slivka, that she was using criteria from the early '50s to talk about work in the '60s.

BRUCE METCALF:  Right.

EDWARD COOKE:  And there's always sort of this disjunction between where artistic discourse is versus what's being addressed within the craft world.

BRUCE METCALF:  Right. And the trend now, there's a certain craft avant-garde of making craft-y installations. Installations have been around for 30 years now. They are not new. They certainly get a lot of press in the international art expo scene. But I actually don't think craftspeople with those technologies and materials can really compete with a guy who does fireworks on the scale of an entire harbor.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  [Laughs] You know? You can't do that.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  So there's still these problems, it seems to me. So for me, having written the history and having looked at some of those trends of what Garth Clark is calling "art envy,"—and I have, too, many years ago—I don't think the art envy route is the way to go.

EDWARD COOKE:  So where do you suppose things will go?

BRUCE METCALF:  Oh, art envy's going to be the—it's going to continue—

EDWARD COOKE:  It's always there.

BRUCE METCALF:  Always there, always will be. I have no doubt about that. And there'll always be that time lag. I mean the things I'm seeing at the New Museum now, the show "Unmonumental" [2007-08] and the more recent one "[The Generational:] Younger Than Jesus" [2008-09]. They're pretty interesting in the way they handle material and the way they handle subject matter. They're very much post-conceptual. They're very smart. They are using the whole history of modern art as an image bank basically.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  So it's the postmodern attitude, but much less historical than the architects do it.

EDWARD COOKE:  Well, but one would say is it even sort of a digital sort of version of it? Not just simply working off the image, but some would say there's a digital component to it.

BRUCE METCALF:  In the way that it's very easy for them to process information and manipulate information, I would say that's true. Yes. The way the youngest generation deals with information just amazes me. They can go through it so fast. And they make these composite structures that are just so packed with information. To someone like me it often appears incoherent, but to them it's much more decodable.

EDWARD COOKE:  Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF:  And that is just beginning to come to craft. There's just a few people who are dealing with that. And I think that's partly connected with Anne Wilson's idea of "sloppy craft." It's in part a way to deal with making differently. But I think it's also a way of getting a lot of information into these things without sweating the small stuff [laughs], so to speak.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: I see that in a lot of German jewelry, and I've seen that in some fibers installations, so it's going to happen. But for me, because I've been much more involved with I'm interested in the centers rather than in the hybrids. I'm interested in the edges. But the way it looks to me is this interest in hybridization, of hybridization between art and craft largely, is where the action is in the art schools. That takes attention away from the centers. My view of craft now is that it's a field of multiple centers.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: Not a single one. It's not a monistic phenomenon. It has these kinds of multiplicity built into the thing that actually makes it pretty interesting. And postmodern by nature.

So I'm much more interested these days in the objects that operate at the center of craft; which for better or worse tends to look fairly conservative to people who are interested in exploring the edges. But I find the centers interesting because I think the proper subjects of craft are located there. And those are the people who are dealing with it in the most honest way. They're rarely intellectual about it. They can rarely articulate—

EDWARD COOKE: I was going to say, rarely actually do articulate. It's somebody else who has to articulate it.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And I think that's maybe what I do as a writer, is I'm bringing back these reports from not so much my own practice but from these practices more closely allied to the center of craft, where people tend to speak in stories. So that there are all these stories that they tell, and the stories are about what these things are and what they do and how they arrive at these places. One of my jobs then, that I've taken on, is to represent some of these unarticulated or less articulated views that are coming from the center of craft, not from the periphery.

EDWARD COOKE: But your own work, you're trying to also do a different sort of center.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. I still want to push the envelope in some way. I mean, it would be kind of dull if I didn't. [They laugh.] But then it's a real challenge to figure out how to make jewelry that really is wearable but can still challenge something.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. Let's see. I'm going to stop.

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EDWARD COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bruce Metcalf at his home in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, on June 10, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, and this is disc number five.

One of the things I was thinking about when you mentioned something about German jewelry—is American jewelry, of the type that you're talking about or maybe any sort of this range of purchased jewelry, is it different than what's going on in Germany, England, or various other—is there something that's sort of American about a jewelry movement?

BRUCE METCALF: It's hard for me to tell what the American voice is anymore. It used to be much more distinctive, very intuitive and emotional. A lot of narrative. Not very systematic. Of course the European jewelry—much of it did come from the academy, reflected the system of education, which was very systematic. It was about coming up with X number of design solutions and executing them in a series. You used to see that a lot. And I think that mentality continues to exist.

What I'm seeing now is, particularly in German jewelry, in order to get to the graduate level, the kunstakademie, you have to have gone through generally some kind of trade education. So they come to these schools very skilled, which Americans don't. But they also come to these schools ready to reject the craft base that was imposed on them in some fairly unimaginative and forceful ways in those trades. So somebody like Karl Fritsch, who's, like, gluing stones on rings and doing these castings, big globs of wax with the stones just mashed into them, it appears to be sloppy craft. But it is also a conscious rejection of trade craft.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. It's a commentary on trade craft.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. That he had to go through.

Americans don't. So there's been a long history of really truly trashy craft in American jewelry going back to Madeline Yale Wynne.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: Who was no craftswoman [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Right. She was a metal banger.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes. Or Janet Payne Bowles. Or Alexander Calder even, was not a brilliant jeweler in terms of trade craft, although he was brilliant. So those points don't have the same kind of cogency here. And yet they're still being kind of imported. There's a lot of kids who are looking at this recent book called *The Fat Booty of Madness* [Florian Hufnagl] which is a record of all these Munich graduates. And you see a lot of it is kind of anti-craft in them. And now you're starting to see it in American student work. There's a lot of—

EDWARD COOKE: But it's a different—it's a knowing anti-craft as opposed to the '60s.

BRUCE METCALF: It's anti-craft as a style. Instead of a reaction.

EDWARD COOKE: It's that self-consciousness, or one that's not based on knowledge. The knowledge is there, they just choose to ignore it.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Whereas in the '60s there was some of that messiness that was due to

sheer ignorance in some instances.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. This is not ignorance. Yes. But it's not the German way either because they didn't go through the trade. The reaction against the trade craft can't take place here except with a very, very few exceptions. So I don't know if that makes it dishonest, but it certainly makes it different than in Germany.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And then there's this whole thing about play of the signifiers of jewelry. There are a lot of people now who are kind of making images of gems I don't know who invented it, but certainly Lola Brooks did a lot to popularize it. She would make these faceted pieces of stainless steel and set them as gems. And there are a lot of kids doing something like that now, in all kinds of mediums. We had one in the student show at SNAG where a guy was making gem forms out of old McDonald's boxes.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: Which I actually thought was pretty okay. But it was a lot less reflexive than the run of the mill. There's a lot of people who are critiquing the value of jewelry, which just bores the hell out of me. You know, making another piece of jewelry out of paper money, and I don't need to see it.

Some of the most ambitious jewelers were working with installations. I think that the way that ambition is taking form now is jewelers who are doing a series of parallel projects. So somebody like Arthur Hash—do you know about him?

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: Interesting guy. He's now teaching at New Paltz. He always has four or five projects going on, and they aren't necessarily visually related. But they're all subject related. So for a while he was doing vinyl cutouts that you'd just stick on a wall with jewelry as or not as a subject. He's been doing CAD/CAM. He's doing other stuff as well. And I think—is it [Anya] Kivarkis—is kind of like that, too. She has a number of ongoing but parallel projects that aren't necessarily connected. There's a kid named Gabriel Craig, who's a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth [University, Richmond, VA] right now, who's kind of functioning the same way. He's done a series that he calls his Narcissist jewelry. So he makes the piece of jewelry, and it has a little enamel that's an image of itself. And then he takes a picture of these things, and he Scotch-tapes them into a picture book of jewelry [laughs] on somebody else's page. Or next to his own page because he's already been published. Which I think is a really interesting idea of these parallel ways of kind of looking at narcissism.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: And he's a kind of self-involved kid.

EDWARD COOKE: Whose gaze—yes.

BRUCE METCALF: So it's in one way sort of honest. You know, he kind of is a narcissist. So those things, I think, where ambition is now starting to be expressed. I think that the model of the multiple and ongoing projects is coming from Ted Noten, the Dutch jeweler. I think a lot of people are looking at him.

EDWARD COOKE: That's something I was thinking about, too, the influence that [Design Academy] Eindhoven [Netherlands] and various other places have had on the general world of collisions of design and craft.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: That seems to be pretty critical.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Now that Iris Eichenberg is teaching at Cranbrook, her students are actually doing some pretty interesting work now, too. So she will have an influence as well. Yes, Eindhoven is sort of creeping all across the United States.

EDWARD COOKE: It seems like it's—yes. It's spreading.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. And I don't think that the United States has a parallel approach that can be—is in response to that. I don't see it.

EDWARD COOKE: I'm curious in terms of talking about some of these grad students. Because you were saying earlier one of the things that you've really found to your advantage was, as a student, of being able to submit and get into exhibitions and things like that. Are there opportunities for emerging grad students? It sounds like SNAG has a student exhibition.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, they do. And they sometimes do support the experimental stuff and sometimes don't. This year I was at jury, and we had a couple of—juried in a couple of kids doing installations, actually. Small ones, but installations. I don't think that's been normally the pattern because it really depends on the jury, and sometimes the jury is quite conservative. But, boy, you know, I don't see venues for craft installations. Especially for people working at the student level.

EDWARD COOKE: And galleries aren't necessarily supporting students.

BRUCE METCALF: No.

EDWARD COOKE: And then the regional exhibitions, it seems like they've disappeared.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I know that in jewelry Sienna [Gallery, Lenox, MA] has been quite responsive to the idea of installation. But the people who get in the door and she lets do that are fairly well established. I don't think—that's Sienna Patti. I don't think Ornamentum [gallery, Hudson, NY] has enough space to do that, although they just recently enlarged. So, no, the gallery system has not been capable of supporting jewelry as installation. And I don't think the competitive shows are, either.

So the work is there, but it's only been disseminated through photographs by and large. And again, *Metalsmith* has actually done a pretty good job at getting that stuff out.

EDWARD COOKE: So what's your advice to younger jewelers now?

BRUCE METCALF: Oh, boy, how to get known?

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: I think that there's a serious problem with jewelry installations because I don't think those installations have the kind of reach and address that galleries in New York, say, or the urban centers are going to support. I think they want to see an installation that is about something much broader than jewelry itself. And from what I've seen, the jewelry installations tend to be about jewelry, not about larger subjects. So it looks to me like it could be another failed strategy.

EDWARD COOKE: Another one bites the dust.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. Only time will tell, but that would be my suspicion. I mean, who cares [about] jewelry as a subject unless it's jewelry itself. At that point people might start to care. But as installation divorced from the wearable object, I don't think it's a broad enough address. We'll see, but I'm not optimistic.

EDWARD COOKE: One other thing I was thinking about: people who have been influential. So Michael, Sharon have been influential. Other people along the way who have played a role in terms of helping you articulate what you're doing?

BRUCE METCALF: Well, Martin Eidelberg in that course.

EDWARD COOKE: In that craft history.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, yes. He had a dramatic influence on me, and I did my dedication in the craft history book to Michael Jerry and Martin Eidelberg. I said they were the two men who lit my lamp.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And they were. They were. They both changed the course of my life. Great teachers are hard to find. I think one of the lonely aspects about my position now is I find relatively few people I can talk to productively. Because there just aren't that many people who are thinking about issues at this level, and in my way. I find Glenn Adamson really provocative. But I agree with him on very, very little [laughs] these days. The book I thought was in some ways unusually odd because at the end he talked about Art [Espenet] Carpenter [chair] being a favorite object of his, but he couldn't talk about it.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: So I'm trying to talk about those things that Glenn finds inarticulate in the Art Carpenter chair. I don't find the ways that he's approaching craft and the language that he uses and the concepts that he uses particularly useful. I mean, we can bounce off each other. But right now it looks like we're talking different languages.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. Being—it seems like, what you're really talking about is the whole connection of the object to the maker, you know, the personality of the maker being embedded in the object.

BRUCE METCALF: That. And the other end of it, to the user.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, that kind of connectivity. So you're almost starting with the maker, and he's starting from the other end and working back and looking for something different which is not about connection.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. He's also deeply skeptical of some of the things that I value. He dismisses the moral component of craft utterly; whereas I actually see it and, for better or worse, I tend to be a believer. I mean, one of the things about the '60s is we were all moralists.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: We were taking a moral stance relative to the larger culture, and I haven't given that up.

EDWARD COOKE: Well, that's been very clear in this interview.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Sort of the ways in which the '60s continues to inform what you're doing.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And in that sense I actually kind of agree with Morris, that there are ways in which craft can be good for you. Glenn says that the position is craft *is* good for you. And I don't know. Craft *can be* good for you. I'm convinced that the practice of the thing alters one's character. Because you have to be patient. You have to be disciplined. In your imagination, as you think about the destination of these objects, ultimately you have to stand in somebody's shoes which is an act of empathy, highly imaginative empathy. Which, as far as I'm concerned, is in terribly short supply in the United States today. Those kinds of qualities and those ways of thinking are extremely important, both in the small picture and the big picture, and these are moral issues to me. So I'm not all on the same page as Glenn on that. I'm very much Morrisian, I guess, you could say.

EDWARD COOKE: Morrisian, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: I don't think that it's a response to industrialization. I don't think that craft is going to take over the world, and everybody's going to work for free. No. It's going to be on a much smaller scale than that. It's going to be individuals in small communities. And that's something that the DIY community has figured out.

They talk about micro effects. They talk about micro communities. They talk about the politics of the small and how that, if replicated a sufficient number of times, can have a legitimate social impact. But they don't expect it, it seems to me. They understand that those effects take place on very small scales.

EDWARD COOKE: Possible implications if strung together.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. Yes. And that's about the symbolic gesture, which I take from Danto about acting as if the world was a certain way, rather than—so that you do certain things as if you were free. You act as if you were free. You act as if crafts mattered. You act as if one person's actions could make a difference.

EDWARD COOKE: Thinking about sort of being a self-avowed Morrisian. Because I've been enjoying teaching

courses on Morris now, and I'm going to be teaching again this summer.

What piece of writing do you look at above all else of his?

BRUCE METCALF: Not any one. I mean I have to kind of chop [laughs] right through Morris.

EDWARD COOKE: To me, it's kind of interesting because I always find that people who write about the arts and crafts, will pick up three. They'll look at the arts and crafts today. They'll do the art of life [Wendy Kaplan. '*The Art That is Life*': *The Arts and Crafts Movements in America, 1875 to 1920*]. And then there might be one other. And yet I find that actually looking at a whole range of them, including *News From Nowhere* [William Morris], which is one of those powerful sorts of books.

BRUCE METCALF: Right.

EDWARD COOKE: It really gets at these issues of I would call "term of artisanal socialism," which is just that same sort of small steps that you were talking about with the DIY people. But it's striking to me that some people just don't read Morris widely.

BRUCE METCALF: Well, you have to wade through it, and I think you have to just throw away a lot of it.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. A lot of it is repetitive and formulaic.

BRUCE METCALF: And the thing about craft being a tool of international socialism. I mean, geez. But he also talks about the pleasure of labor, and he was the first one that I know of who actually—I don't think Ruskin talked about pleasure and labor in the same sentence. But because Morris actually did the crafts, he understood and he could articulate the pleasure in labor. And that, I think, is another one of those themes that run through all of 20th- and 21st-century craft.

EDWARD COOKE: And not only that, but also sometimes one person can see pleasure, and the other person cannot because it's repetitive boredom because here he dabbles in it. He doesn't necessarily go in it full tilt, and he still relies on certain weavers and dye people even though he's read on a couple of methods and he's tried a little bit of dyeing.

BRUCE METCALF: Well, he did it all. He did weave one tapestry.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, I know. Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And developing the dyes, and he had his arms right in it.

EDWARD COOKE: But he also had Henry Dearle and everybody else doing all the work for him.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right.

EDWARD COOKE: So it's a wonderful sort of way of making it complex, which is really what the story is about.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. He never followed through. He learned it enough to transfer the information to his workers.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: And he did that with illumination.

EDWARD COOKE: To guide them because he would read texts—stained glass, anything, and then—

BRUCE METCALF: Yes.

EDWARD COOKE: Thinking about that, one of the things I was struck by there was in the whatever, 50th anniversary of *American Craft*—right around then they had a sort of series of books that people thought were influential, people who were in the crafts field. It was [Soetsu] Yanagi, it was [Bernard] Leach, it was M.C. Richards. I got to thinking, just hearing you talk about different sorts of texts, what is your take on sort of—from somebody who's taught the history of craft, somebody who's very learned in terms of reading widely, what kind of books would you have people read to think about craft?

BRUCE METCALF: That *Art of Life*—is it *Art Into Life*? Is that the name of the catalog, the big arts and crafts catalog?

EDWARD COOKE: *The Art That Is Life*.

BRUCE METCALF: *The Art That Is Life*, yes. I think that's a very valuable book. I guess you have to read David Pye. I don't really know what the workmanship of risk and the workmanship of certainty really means [laughs].

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: But people find it stimulating.

EDWARD COOKE: Actually, I like the discussion of Ruskin in there to be very interesting.

BRUCE METCALF: Hmmm. I think people have to read Glenn's book now. Simply because it's so provocative. And even in disagreeing with those positions can be really productive. So I think that's a hugely important text. I think it's the first work of theory that— I haven't gotten to Howard Risatti's book yet. But he was all about categories, and that's an old way of looking at things, and I don't think that that is going to be influential. That's a model that's in the past.

EDWARD COOKE: Dated, yes.

BRUCE METCALF: What else? I think Garth Clark is immensely provocative. So I think his anthology—

EDWARD COOKE: *Shards[: Garth Clark on Ceramic Art*.].

BRUCE METCALF: —yes, is a useful text. You know, I would like to think that the things I've written are useful.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: I think a lot of people have looked at "Second-Class Citizens" and "Replacing the Myth of Modernism" as kind of seminal works of at least clarifying the stature of craft in this world and in relation to the art world in particular, which is what I was writing about. And my article, "On the hand" and "on empathy," I think are also interesting.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: "The hand," I was largely replicating Frank Wilson's book with some additional addenda. So it wasn't really a great original piece.

EDWARD COOKE: No, but it was talking about the application of the idea of one book into another domain.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. And I would assume that in the future some of the work in evolutionary psychology and evolutionary biology will come into play. But I don't know how useful my writing will be on that stuff because that information has changed so much.

EDWARD COOKE: Right.

BRUCE METCALF: In such a short time. Who else? Well, Ruskin and Morris. I would still have people read them. I would have people read *The Stones of Venice*. I think the section on savageness is really interesting. And it applies today. And Morris on pleasure and labor. Because no one comes to crafts in this world involuntarily anymore. It's all voluntary. It's all about where the labor leads people.

EDWARD COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRUCE METCALF: So the pleasure is one of the motivating forces. To see that articulated for the first time I think is useful, yes.

I like some of your scholarship; the work you've done on furniture, I think, is pretty good because you bring— your scholarship has always been about broader issues than just objects: so education, hobbies. I think you were the first person to really start talking about hobbies and how that has had an influence on the more professional practices. I think that there's some very interesting thinkers in the indie craft scene now, although they haven't really found venues to publish.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes, it's been more online, some of that stuff.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, it's on their websites, which is ephemeral, unfortunately. Some of it just vanishes. I haven't seen any scholarship coming out of those doctoral programs that I would strongly recommend [laughs] anybody to read. It's kind of training, for thinkers in training. And I'll be curious to see where that leads. And then bits and pieces. I find certain—I find Eileen Boris's—what is it—*Art and Labor[: Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America*]?

EDWARD COOKE: Yes.

BRUCE METCALF: Still to be quite provocative, with that Marxist sort of lens on craft. It can be infuriating, and she can be quite dismissive.

EDWARD COOKE: And insensitive to objects or whatever.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. But it's still an interesting text, and it still can provoke. You know, I've never been a Marxist, so I was reading that thing sort of fuming. But that's good, and that's, I think, productive.

EDWARD COOKE: Right. So what hat do you wear now? You said you came of age in the '60s with some friends who were Marxists. And you were sort of quick to point out that you weren't, necessarily. You were more interested in sort of a progressive sort of tack.

BRUCE METCALF: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

EDWARD COOKE: Is that where you are still?

BRUCE METCALF: Yes, I would describe myself as a progressive. I'm sympathetic to the anarchist project, but it's just so unrealistic. That's not how you can organize a massive industrialized society. You can't. Anarchy would not work. So I'm [a Barack] Obama guy, I guess. Activist government, regulated capitalism. And in the craft world it's about small-scale capitalism—and always has been.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. The small shop has always been its foundation.

BRUCE METCALF: Right. And that's, I think, a good model of economic activity, where works do have some measure of power.

EDWARD COOKE: And there's flexibility and—

BRUCE METCALF: Flexibility, locality, low carbon footprint. Craft has usually had all these green kind of components, whether it's been articulated or not. Just making an object that's intended to last for generations instead of years is in itself a pretty interesting gesture at this point. Craft has always been about—well, not always, but until fairly recently has avoided the ephemeral and avoided waste.

EDWARD COOKE: That's true.

BRUCE METCALF: So, yes, I'm a progressive. I'm not a radical.

EDWARD COOKE: Some of you seems to be comfortable working in relative isolation, too.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. I could have—I could wish I would have these kinds of conversations on a more regular basis. But I get used to a slim diet. I have actually started up a reading group here in Philly that's been pretty interesting. It's me, Sharon Church for her very emotional, deeply felt and very female approach to jewelry, which she thinks about quite carefully. But she's not a reader, not an intellectual. And then Judith Schaecter, who's just a wild woman [laughs], truly a nutball, but quite wonderful. Her frame of reference is in the visual arts and in literature and in psychology. So she brings some interesting things to the table. And Doug Bucci, who's one of Stan's CAD/CAM acolytes, who is now kind of shading into industrial design. But also he's very comfortable in the digital world on websites and blogs and all of that. So he brings something interesting to the table. And now we have Sarah Burgess, who's a recent grad from Cranbrook doing paper jewelry.

EDWARD COOKE: So what have you read so far for this club?

BRUCE METCALF: Well, we read Glenn's book. We read—I had everybody read "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [Walter Benjamin, 1936] because I thought his stance on the aura might have had something useful to say about craft.

EDWARD COOKE: You decided it didn't?

BRUCE METCALF: No. Because I thought he was sympathetic to aura, but not having read the whole thing where he gets into the cinema, I didn't understand what his position really was. I thought maybe the aura might have some—his views on the aura—might have some useful applications, because most makers do believe that the handmade has an aura.

EDWARD COOKE: Yes. Exactly. It sort of emits handmade-ness.

BRUCE METCALF: Yes. Right. It's like these little rays of authenticity. [They laugh.] Yes. And all of us want to

believe it's true.

EDWARD COOKE:  But he sees it as a negative in some ways.

BRUCE METCALF:  Right. Because it impedes revolution.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right.

BRUCE METCALF:  So I thought it was just interesting to read that. We read an article about hobby photography by some Marxist photography critic. We read a book by a designer from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA]. I can't remember his name; he's pretty well-known in the field. But it looked just like cheerleading to me.

EDWARD COOKE:  There's a lot of that out there.

BRUCE METCALF:  Like recipes for how to be creative—or whatever it meant.

EDWARD COOKE:  It's in the self-help section of the bookshop.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes. The next thing I'm going to do will be an experiment. I'm going to get everybody to think about the body, because it's very clear that there is a relationship between craft and body, but it is not the way artists approach it. It's more about sublimation and it's more about—particularly for a maker. Because, as you know, your body gets involved in the making directly. These things do, in some way, speak about the body in some fairly interesting and unique ways. So I'm going to get everybody to think about the body and then come to the dinner with a proposition in the form of a—the way a proposition is framed in a debate—resolved that: something about the body. So I'll see how that works. It won't be a reading, but it will be this kind of format.

EDWARD COOKE:  It's a body reading.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes, yes. And because somebody like Sharon, who's borne a child has an interesting point of view about the body that I know nothing about. And me, I'm very WASPY. I'm sort of disassociated from my own body. [Laughs.] It's a whole different—

EDWARD COOKE:  An out-of-body experience.

BRUCE METCALF:  And most of the ways I actually deal with the world through my body is working at the bench. That's as much as I inhabit my own body as I actually do. I'm not an athlete. I'm not out there being all vigorous and all that stuff.

So I have to think about that. Then I'll probably attach that to some of the things I'm thinking about sublimation.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right. What's interesting is it gets into a couple of different issues:  One is sublimation; the other is performativity. Because there's a certain notion about how your body actually puts something into the object as you're making it, as you're making—particularly as you work efficiently with your body.

BRUCE METCALF:  Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes, and then how there's a trace of that. Glass and ceramics show that more clearly. Weaving, less. Jewelry, even less because we tend to craft the piss out of these things.

EDWARD COOKE:  Right. Exactly. You overdo it.

BRUCE METCALF:  Yes.

EDWARD COOKE:  Yes. I can't think of anything else, so maybe—thank you for taking this time.

BRUCE METCALF:  It's been my pleasure. It's a real honor to both be in the project and have you do the interview.

EDWARD COOKE:  It's fun. [They laugh.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]