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Oral history interview with Robert Irwin, 2013 February 9- May 11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Irwin on 2013 February 9-May 11. The interview was conducted San Diego, California by Matthew Simms for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Matthew Simms has reveiwed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

MATTHEW SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Robert Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on February 9, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is card number one.

Bob, we were just talking about your first forays into the art world, and we were talking about your early chronology. One of the things I was asking about was some of your first opportunities to exhibit paintings in the L.A. and vicinity juried exhibitions at the L.A. County Museum of Art and Science, at that time. And you were about to tell me a story about that.

ROBERT IRWIN: Well, that was something that people did at that time. Not too much later, they stopped doing it. It ceased to be. At that time, the idea of entering a juried show-and there were some very famous ones around the country. The only two that I entered were here in Los Angeles. The first painting I ever did while I was still in school, I entered into it, and I got in, which had to do with having a magic wrist but not more than that.

MR. SIMMS: And do we have a sense of what year this might be, roughly?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, boy. That's a tough one. I'd say probably '50, 1950.

MR. SIMMS: Fifty. Okay.

MR. IRWIN: That would be a couple of years after I got out of the Army.

MR. SIMMS: So you were at Otis.

MR. IRWIN: I was in art school at that time. I was at Otis. And at the time, of course, I thought that was something. Then later on, I juried a show one time in my life with a couple of other people that were-a very young guy from San Diego area named John Baldessari and another, older but really very, very, very accomplished artist, Pete Voulkos.

Anyway, and Pete Voulkos and-the three of us. So we came down to San Diego, which was where Baldessari lived, and we were asked to do a juried show. And it was very interesting. There were like a-God, almost a couple of thousand entries. Everybody paid money to enter in this thing. I don't remember having to pay at the L.A. County. But it was supposed to be the best, the best, the best, the best of California.

So we decided there were so many that we'd never get through it all by ourselves. So we made a very simple thing. Each of us goes around-we have a little colored tag-and just very quickly cut the thing down to size, because, you see, there was a lot of stuff in there that was not really worthy of jurying. So we went around, spent about four hours in the morning and went all around not talking with each other at all, and we at lunchtime sat down to have lunch.

And an alarm had gone off in each of our heads. John Baldessari, who was a local and younger, had maybe 10 total out of a thousand, and Pete Voulkos had four or five, and I had one. And the one was an Ed Ruscha, who was a student of mine. I happened to know it was the only piece that he did not put in his own show. So you realize that it's over with. The whole idea of jurying-that the people of any weight or merit were not doing that, and a whole social change had taken place. Everyone used to do it, even the best. And I don't know whether it was a kind of social-into-activist kind of thing that artists were into at that time, which I guess just no longer existed.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

I think this was pretty early '60s when this happened, and there was a lot of backlash against it.

MR. IRWIN: Oh, there was a lot of-enough backlash that the director got fired.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And I, of course, got out of town and came back to L.A., and Pete Voulkos went back to San Francisco; at that time he was teaching at Cal. And poor old John Baldessari, he got all the heat. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMMS: Well, this was once you'd become part of the Ferus Gallery, and you were exhibiting there. I seem to remember reading an article that was published at this time where Irving Blum was asked to, in a sense, answer for your actions. "How come Robert Irwin is this intense?" And I think his response was something like, "Well, the only problem is, if you're inviting Robert Irwin, you're going to get that kind of intensity. So your mistake was to invite Robert Irwin." [Laughs.] Not-it was not your fault; it was their misunderstanding.

But if we might, just for the sake of capturing some of that time in between, you, as we were saying, enrolled at Otis from-it looks like 1948 to around 1950. This was right after you'd gotten out of the Army and had returned to L.A. with the benefits of the GI Bill. You were then like many of your generation. John Altoon, I believe, had done something similar-

MR. IRWIN: I'm sure.

MR. SIMMS: Entered art school. You're called up for Reserve service, which you do at Camp Roberts up near San Luis Obispo.

MR. IRWIN: Well, I actually was called up to go during the Korean War, as a veteran of World War II. I mean, 1946, the GI Bill and all that stuff was still in play, and that's the reason I joined, because that's the only way I could go to school. It really was the only way I could think of at that time. But they called up all the veterans.

When I got out of the Army the first time, I joined something called the Inactive Reserve. A lot of people who'd been in combat, who'd spent three, four years, five years, six, whatever, in war, had done the same thing. I guess they'd just been doing it that long, and they had a rank of sergeant or something. So in a way, they just naively signed up in the Inactive Reserve-which actually didn't do anything; you didn't have to do anything, be anybody, be anywhere.

But at the time of the Yula River, when the Chinese came in, and suddenly the whole front-we had protruded too far, and there was a collapse, a complete collapse. The Chinese just had overwhelmed them, and they were flying all these veterans back-without even a chance-sometimes in a boat, but not even being able to zero in their rifle or-just throwing them into combat, like cannon fodder, really. And those guys did not deserve that. There was a big uproar about that, and Congress very immediately stopped it. So I was actually called up, and I was on my way to Korea-

MR. SIMMS: Really?

MR. IRWIN: -yeah, when this thing went through, and that's-that was the end of it. And so then it kept me in the Army for, I don't know, a couple of years. Six months, and then six months more and then six months more, which was alarming, because I thought maybe I'll never get out of here. But I got very lucky. I missed the first war, combat, by one year, and I missed the Korean thing by an Act of Congress. And I, as I said, put in my time, but-so I am actually a veteran of two wars, even though I saw no combat, fortunately.

MR. SIMMS: Fortunately, yes.

Then, of course, we know that you went to Jepson and then Chouinard.

MR. IRWIN: Jepson was a big mistake. Jepson was a blip in the cultural scene of California. Rico Lebrun and Howard Warshaw and probably-oh, what's his name? He taught at UCLA and was not really-some of these were nice people but very kind of social activist sort of thing, but a kind of classic drawing.

And the great line on that is the-Rico Lebrun finally, he was the dominant figure, and he finally went and had a show in New York. And Ad Reinhardt noted that was the day when the West Coast renaissance came east and died. And when I got there, I realized I was in the wrong place. So I went through the one semester there, and then left.

MR. SIMMS: You didn't stay a long time, I don't think so.

MR. IRWIN: No, I went off to Chouinard.

MR. SIMMS: And at Chouinard, you found a more hospitable environment?

MR. IRWIN: Chouinard was a step above Otis at the time and 10 steps above Jepson. But I have to say that while I went there for that-for, I don't know, a couple of years, whatever that period of time-my lament always was, when I got out of school, that I had not learned anything and that the whole idea of an art education was in big trouble.

I didn't know all that at the moment, but I just knew that-I finally got my real education on the street when I met the other Ferus artists. They were smarter than I was. They were younger, and they were ahead of me. And I sucked it up and became their student, in a way; we didn't act in a formal sense, but I knew that they knew something that I didn't know, and they were more tuned in to what was going on in New York, in Abstract Expressionism and all that sort of thing.

And so that also very much colored my-when I got an opportunity to teach for a short period of time, I was very aware that I had a bad or-nobody ever asked me a good question. They didn't seem to be aware, themselves, that there was a good question. It was still craft of sorts, which is what most art education is, even now.

MR. SIMMS: And this did not prevent you from going on to teach, which is interesting because you clearly felt as though you might be able to--

MR. IRWIN: Just the opposite, actually. The intensity you said before-I was very intense. And I got a Mickey Mouse water class, a watercolor class at night. But I was taking it very seriously, and I had a kind of potpourri of people that came-a couple-two, three people who were sent there from the mental hospital for therapy. And there were a few young people with some abilities.

And there were just, as the story goes, four older ladies. I saw them spending time together, and so I started talking, went over to see what was going on with these four ladies. And it turned out that each one of them had exactly the same problem, and that is that their husbands were busy-they're 50 years old, their husbands are busy, their children moved away, and they're having to do the most complicated thing possible, which is to redefine their life. I mean, I'm, like, 20-I don't know, 21, 22, so I am stunned by that. I'd realized that that's way over my head. There is nothing I can really tell them. I was empathetic and spent time with them and still did what I did. But it was the best education I got.

But really the stunner of it was that I went into a bar that we used to hang out in called Barney's Beanery. I was having a beer at the bar with Barney, and I hear a voice say, “Mr. Irwin, Mr. Irwin.” I look over, and it's one of those ladies, and she's calling me back. I go back, and there she is at a table with five Hell's Angels. And she says, “Guys, I want you to know, everything I am today, I owe it to Mr. Irwin.” And that's shocking. Think of it. And you realize what the responsibility is, how intense the responsibility of teaching is. For an example, I would talk to people at UC Irvine when I was teaching there. And they would come once a week or something. And they said, “Well, I'm really only doing this because I want to support my art” and-well, you can't do that. That's absolutely unacceptable. You've got young minds which you have the possibility, an amazing-beyond, in a sense, sometimes even your control.

MR. SIMMS: The responsibility of teaching.

MR. IRWIN: Oh, a big one. I mean, a mind that's opened, they've come and they've opened themselves up. And you can corrupt that thing so bad.

I would go to visit schools, for example, and I would look at the work going on there, and there would be maybe six kids that were doing hard-edge painting. And then I would meet a hard-edge instructor-a guy who was a painter. And then you'd look at the work, and for example, they'd be on a canvas; it was slightly bowed. Not possible. It had nothing to do with it. They were learning something that ultimately was more of a problem than an education. And so I made a complete shift on how one approaches the idea of educating anybody or working with anybody, which is really working with them; you don't teach.

MR. SIMMS: Say more about that. I think that's very interesting.

MR. IRWIN: Well, it's very simple. What I said in my mind at the time was that the thing that makes each one of these people a possibility, a potential in the world, is a unique sensibility. Each person has a sensibility. So rather than learning this or learning that or copying this or copying that, what you're really doing is to try and draw out and develop that-the potential of that sensibility.

When you look at some of the people I had, say, from Ed Ruscha on one hand to Larry Bell to Chris Burden, it's obvious I didn't teach them, because they all did things ultimately that-I don't know; I can't teach it to them, but I spent the time with them as individuals; I spent the time with them asking questions and supplying them with-if they needed some history, they needed some technical, you know, how to do this, you know, hand-to-eye

coordination-also developing their sensibility and the sense of really attending that and making everything live up to what it was they were feeling about it.

And so I end up with a crosscut of students, and it's very clear, I couldn't have taught them. I couldn't have taught Chris Burden to do what he did. Or Ed Ruscha. It's completely different from anything I ever thought. So I didn't burden them with my idea of what an art should be. I essentially tried to, in a sense, massage their potential.

MR. SIMMS: A lot of one-on-one attention is what this comes down to.

MR. IRWIN: Totally. There were people that were averse to going to school. And I used to go to their house, go to their space. And by the way, I also had everyone out of school in two years. All of these people were in their own studio within two years. And I would visit them, spend a little time with them, see what they're on to. But I feel very good about what I-and also what I learned from it.

MR. SIMMS: You taught three times-Chouinard, UCLA for a brief period, and I think '62-Chouinard was, I think, around '54, '56.

MR. IRWIN: They were all together, one right after the other, all within a maybe five-year period.

MR. SIMMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And then, of course, UCI, where I believe you start in '68 and where you teach through maybe '70.

MR. IRWIN: Two years. Couple years. I set up the graduate department there.

MR. SIMMS: Can you say some things about that? How did that work?

MR. IRWIN: Well, first of all, at Chouinard they had maybe 60 people come as students, and they divided them up in groups of 20, 20, and 20. So I was just going along. And somebody would come and say, can I come into the class? And I'd say, “Let â��em in.” I didn't care. And I ended up at the end of the second year with something like 56 of the 60 students. And so they fired me. [They laugh.]

MR. SIMMS: Because you were too popular, or you're just letting too many people in?

MR. IRWIN: Well, I think I-obviously, I had messed up their organization.

That was Ed Ruscha and Larry Bell and -

MR. SIMMS: Joe Goode

MR. IRWIN: Joe Goode, yeah. And what's his-did these big rooms-Doug Wheeler?

MR. SIMMS: Doug Wheeler, yes.

MR. IRWIN: Now, these were all in that one group. I'd say there were 10 people. I don't remember names very well, but the ones I'm talking about, Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, Ed Bereal, they've had major-and you look at what they do, there's no way I could have taught them. There's no way I knew anything about that.

MR. SIMMS: One thing Joe Goode has said is that they were very keen on receiving the magazine *It Is*. When it would be published, they would all wait for it, because it had great reproductions in it of these paintings that they weren't seeing, and these were de Kooning paintings and things like that. And I know you've mentioned that that was an important idea, “It Is.”

MR. IRWIN: Even today, it answers all the questions that need to be answered. Everybody's talking about this: it's this, it's that, it's that, it's tied to one meaning, structure, one concept or something and another, and they keep saying, “no; it is.”

In the simplest sense, the complexity of that is that painting, in a sense, represented major themes, major concepts for hundreds and hundreds of years, so it was never an antithesis. But modern art essentially completely broke with any of that kind of rhyme and reason and has become-hasn't completely, because, of course, there's an incredible market out there for-I always say, you show me a legitimate figurative painter, and I'll show you a superstar, because people still want pictures and content and that they have not come to the idea that it's about sensibility; it's about awareness, about-people say the word “perception” -and that cognitive language.

But it was interesting to be around these people. The energy was high. Once they got the feel for it, they really did, obviously, very well.

Like I say, I got fired and then went to UCLA. Vija Celmins was my star student there, if you can call her a student. She was extremely bright. The only thing I really did with her is that I would pose a question to her once a week. I'd have her think all week. I'd pose that question to her, and she would go through the whole thing and pick out all the problems and issues, and then discard it every time, which was so her. Her only issue, really, was that she was so smart that she could work herself right to the end, so you had to kind of deal with why and how one transforms all that into action.

Then I got fired there again for being too uncomplimentary to the kinds of things the university was doing. I pointed all these out; in some cases, I took the opportunity. They loved the guy who did exhibitions there at the time; everybody loved him, and he did the most horrendously overwrought, self-aggrandizing shows. I pointed that out, and that was a heretic thing for me to do. So they got rid of me.

But I went right to Irvine and inherited 12 students. They were not recruited. It was that first graduate class there. And it was a tremendously good class. That's where Chris Burden was and Alexis Smith and Barbara Smith. People who have done well.

But the one thing was very difficult is that when you had 12 people, it literally was a full-time job. You had to become aware of and tuned in and spend time with each one of them personally, individually. It was all a big job, and I couldn't go on doing that and doing what I'm doing. I loved it, but-that particular one was very rewarding for me.

By the way, the one thing that a student has to do at the very end of that, as open as you are, as undemanding-in other words, you're not teaching them in that sense-even then the last act they had to do was to kill you. It was humorous but also sometimes very complicated. You've essentially really licensed their independence, and of course, since you licensed it, they had to get rid of you. You were the last enemy, as it were.

MR. SIMMS: And that's your success, in the end.

MR. IRWIN: Twenty years later they come back and it's okay, you're friends again. You had to understand that. But it's humorous and painful at the same time.

MR. SIMMS: You went through a period in which you were making abstract expressionist paintings. This was actually the work that you first showed at the Ferus Gallery. You moved into a studio on Sawtelle Boulevard, and I think that's where you started to make a lot of these paintings.

MR. IRWIN: Started in a studio on Santa Monica Boulevard first, for a very short period of time, and I shared it with Billy Al Bengston, at that time. And then I went to Sawtelle.

MR. SIMMS: Right. And Craig Kauffman had a studio there as well?

MR. IRWIN: Well, one time I shared a studio with him. And one thing-and this is not being coy or anything-I'd never been asked a good question. I'd never in a sense been presented with anything really interesting, issues about why to be an artist. In other words, I had a good, let's say, magical wrist, so I was sort of acting like one, but I was not one at all. When I met that younger group of artists, they were all way far ahead of me. I was unaware of Abstract Expressionism. For me, to become an artist at that period of time was like-I'd realized I wasn't even in the ballpark; I wasn't even in the game; I was just a performer of sorts.

And so I had to suck up my ego and keep my mouth shut-which has never been easy for me-to learn. And through osmosis, through participation in a group of really interesting artists-and in that period of time, they made me aware of what was going on in the world, other people and key historical figures, like a Duchamp or like a Cézanne. It was the people that really carried a big load and were important, and I was unaware of all that.

So I shared a studio with Craig Kauffman and got a good lesson there. He was working in one part of the place; I was working in another part. And I would be heroically making big, abstract expressionist paintings, full of piss and vinegar and signifying nothing, as they say. But I'd be there, just doing these things, large canvasses.

Craig Kauffman would be over there at the other end, and he'd have a little medical table that he laid his paints out on, and he put a little dab of yellow, a little dab of blue, a little dab of green. And he wore a smock. And he would go across the studio, sit in a chair, and look at that for -the surface, the painting-for a good period. Then he'd walk over and he'd do a little of this and a little of that and this sort of thing. And I'm sitting looking over at this guy, while I'm doing all this heavy lifting, and he was such a better artist than I was. And so suddenly I have to question what I'm doing.

And that's when I had a large painting, and the only thing I did is, I looked at it and said, well, there is so much in there that's unresolved and that didn't necessarily have to be there. I asked myself my first question and that

was, everything in a painting either has to work for you, or it works against you. And I was out of control. So I did the simplest thing, which was to take a painting down to a one-foot-by-one-foot-square canvas, where it was clear. You can see every place and every part at every moment, and so-discipline. And I did what I call the handhelds. And the handhelds were also influenced by-there was another student-not a student; there was an artist there. Can't think of his name right now. He hung around with his-

MR. SIMMS: You're thinking of Alan Lynch

MR. IRWIN: Poor Alan Lynch had no talent. He had less than I did. He was a troubled man. Life was complicated for him. But he'd developed during the war-he was a little older-he'd put together a half a dozen, a nice little collection of raku ware-Japanese pottery. And every now and then he would-I'm making these paintings, small paintings, where everything, hopefully, counts. And he'd say, “Okay, your karma's right.” He'd invite me over to his house. We'd share a can of beans.

And then he would set a box on the table. And the box would be beautifully tied in a-beautiful little box the way the Japanese can do things like that. And then you untie it, and you take the lid off, and there's a soft sack in there. And you take it out, and it has a string bow. You open it, and you take out a small cup. The genius of that is, at that point, you're at the level where a thumb mark counts. I'm at that point where I'm trying to-by going down in size-it taught me something about scale, which people don't pay enough attention to.

In Abstract Expressionism, when you didn't have a figure to establish scale, scale became a free agent. So paintings got large for a while because it was able to take on a real problem about space and about scale. And so for a while, somebody like Kenny Price was sort of drummed out of the issue because he was doing these small things, which were not of importance enough. But you'd look at that bowl, and everything was finished. The sides, the bottom, everything was considered. And that was a good education at that moment.

MR. SIMMS: Are you saying Ken Price had learned that lesson too?

MR. IRWIN: He knew that. The point is, those guys already-somebody like Ken already knew that. I didn't know it. That's when I learned it. But at that moment I'm doing a small painting, so essentially, this is also a strategy there. How do you bring that down to that focus, step by step by step?

So I did these-they were called handhelds, the small paintings. I ended up putting them inside of a wood frame, framed the back of it, finished. Literally, I actually oiled this wood with the oil on the sides of my nose; I happen to have a very oily nose. And so that's how I finished them. And they really were meant to be held.

MR. SIMMS: You made those frames?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: I finished the whole thing. And it's a very good exercise. But moving into abstract expressionism, it was something I needed to learn, which was a necessary, a key element in the dialogue at that point in time.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

In terms of the handhelds, when you exhibited them, did you make it so that the people who came to the gallery could pick them up, or was it that-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, I did. It was highly unsuccessful-and just didn't work very well. But I attempted it, and-

MR. SIMMS: Because it's very unorthodox, the idea that someone can pick a painting up.

MR. IRWIN: Well, but it was also misleading and became a fetish kind of thing for them. It wasn't successful. It worked for me. I like them. I still think they're one of the first good paintings I ever did.

MR. SIMMS: You got much larger after that.

MR. IRWIN: Well, there have been a series of questions that sort of happened. When I finished those, I took a little break. I went to Europe again, and kind of wandered around. Europe was still very inexpensive then. I had very little money, but I went to Spain at the time the border was opening then. People were incredibly generous, and it was very kind of heady for me there.

And I went off to a little island called Ibiza; at that time you could only go by boat once a week, called the *Ciudad de Mahon*. I remember taking it. I went the cheapest way, which was deck class, and you just laid up on the deck. Well, of course, it went overnight. And I arrived in Ibiza, and sitting there in the dock area having a beer.

And some guy comes up to me and says, “We're having a little party tonight.” And he gave me the address.

So I went to the little party. And everybody there was, like, just stoned out of their head. It was the only place in Europe where you could buy absinthe still. And there were only a few foreigners, and most of them were in jail. They were there for a debtors'prison-the only place I think that had a debtors'prison. If you got in debt, they put you in prison, you know. So they're on this little island. And mostly a few Englishmen and a few Danish people, but no Americanos at that time. And then I tried absinthe for the first time. I get totally crazy. And at that point there was a guy who ran across the room and jumped out a window. And I thought, “Oh, God, wow.” So I went over. Nobody else seemed to pay any attention. I went over and looked out the window, and it's a hundred feet or something to the rocks below.

MR. SIMMS: Are you kidding?

MR. IRWIN: No, I'm not kidding. And so I decided to get out of that place, right away. I took a bus the next morning, went across to a place called Sant Antoni Bay, which is on the other side of a deserted island. And everybody there actually still only ate what they fished or only ate what they farmed. And I got a little house for 45 cents a day-wine included.

And I fell into this thing of walking every day all day. After a while I got into a kind of rhythm with it. And I found for me how much is true and how much I imagine. I carried on no word of conversation with anybody for eight months. And in that eight-month period, because I didn't speak the language and I'm not really good at that sort of thing anyway, and-but I had to go buy wine, which I could point at or whatever and my staples, you know. But I walked all day and started thinking about all this stuff, about what I'm doing, why am I doing this, all that sort of thing.

In the beginning you start out with just those kinds of questions, but after a while, when you do it that long, you actually become aware of your own process, of your own thinking process. And you pull out all the plugs. In the beginning, normally, you're bored or you need something or want something or-you plug yourself into the world; you call somebody up; you pick up a book and read; anyway, any kind of contact. When you pull all the plugs out, you don't do that, because there is a very unnerving moment when you are unconnected in the world; you have absolutely no outside, only inside. At first it's alarming, but then suddenly it's incredibly peaceful. And I took about a month or two to get to there. But then it was like having your own mind in your hand there. Why do I think, why do I feel, why do I-it was the ground from which I now spring or have, from that moment on.

I can't say I did it by deciding to do it intellectually or any of that sort of thing. I sort of fell into it backwards because, while I was traveling, I didn't speak the languages in the different areas, and rather than being gregarious-in Paris I would just put a couple of bottles of beer in my pocket and walk all night. And it was so beautiful; it was so moving, I would come to tears. But if somebody asked me afterwards what I knew, where was Notre Dame, I didn't even know; it was never about names, never about streets. I couldn't even convince somebody I was in Paris, because I didn't have that kind of-but I knew what everything felt like, a tactile awareness.

MR. SIMMS: And you went to Tangiers, I think, at this point as well.

MR. IRWIN: Well, I used to go to Tangiers because if you were in Paris, for example, you could go to exchange your money, and it would be five francs for one dollar, but if you went out in the street, you could get seven. But if you went to Vatican Bank, you could get nine. They were the biggest dealers in Europe. But if you went to Tangiers, you could get 15. Or if you went to Switzerland, you could get 15. So you take a dollar, and a dollar became 15, in a way, in spending money. And so every time I moved somewhere, I either went through Switzerland or through Tangiers. It was worth the side trip. You take what little money you had, suddenly you multiplied it 15-to-one; that's a hell of a multiplication.

So I did; I went to Tangiers. And I went to the bar-what was his name? There was a very famous author there. Paul Bowles. He had a bar.

And so I sat there and had a dialogue with the kind of existentialist leftovers of the world. That was very interesting, very educating. I've never been into drugs, but I've run into it once and-because to me “The Doors of Perception,” that whole thing, that's manufactured. It's not seated in you. But the process of becoming aware, there were things that-let's say, for a drug person who would take it and they'd talk about how the world was animated. Actually, the world already was animated for me by that time, by doing what I do.

Part of being an artist was learning that. When I did the experiments in the anechoic chamber, I would spend seven hours in there, alone in the dark with absolutely no sound, no light, no-and I would come out, and we would not have a conversation-strictly went off, you know, home. And when I would walk down the street, everything was changed, everything. I mean, seriously.

And the reason is very simple. Your sense threshold has been sharpened in some areas and totally muted in others. So you have a shift in your sense dependence that-right now we depend much more on our eyes and ears than we do on our tactile and smell. But when you come out, the other senses are now much more in play. And the world-the trees are still trees and buildings are still buildings; everything's still-but they're not. First of all, they are totally animated. It is not static as our day-to-day-maybe for good reason, but-

MR. SIMMS: And this is part of Art and Technology [LACMA program, 1967-71], so we're talking about '68, '69, around that time period.

MR. IRWIN: Right.

MR. SIMMS: But there's one little detail about the earlier moment that is very interesting that you haven't talked, as far as I know, a lot about in other contexts, and that's how some of this dovetailed with jazz, things that were happening in Los Angeles. And I know that you were certainly interested in music. What was your connection to that kind of West Coast scene?

MR. IRWIN: Well, I had a connection since it was a really good West Coast scene. There was a record company here called Pacific Jazz. I knew the people there. I did a couple of album covers for them just as a friendship kind of thing-partied a few times with Chet Baker and Gerry Mulligan and Art Pepper. And these were good, serious musicians.

But there was, for me, something more a part of that period in my education, and that is when I was really young, in high school, I wanted to learn to dance. What we did was a swing dance, what we called the Lindy out here around the West Coast, which was a very high-style period of dancing. I'd dance for a year with a doorknob before I'd go outside. But then I started dancing. And I danced seven nights a week. Later on I would go all over L.A., and I'd go to this place. They had a contest on one night, and then another one would have one. And so that's how I made a living for a little while. It was not a lot of money, but it was what I had. I'd win $50 here, $25 there, going third or first or whatever.

But dancing was-you've all the steps, and you have different partners, and you're going. And you're dancing, and you're doing pretty good, and you might even be in a contest-and feel you're good. But every now and then you would really swing, when suddenly you and the music-because the thing about that kind of dancing is basically you're inventing all the time, inventing in relationship to the music. And as you would dance, only every now then you'd really be-I mean, you would be swinging, and you'd say to yourself, man, it's happening right now. And you're coming up with moves and things that are right-tuned to the-anyway, so that was a very central education for me.

MR. SIMMS: But the music you listened to for that was more big band.

MR. IRWIN: Definitely big band. My car is still a big band capsule. I have all that music, even after all these years. Other things, of course, too-and lots happened between. But I'm still, in a way, a swing dancer.

MR. SIMMS: Right. Well, that whole interconnection between jazz and the visual arts in Los Angeles -

MR. IRWIN: Take walking every day, for months, being aware of your own thoughts and why and wondering about and questioning and all that-dancing becomes then another one. Playing the horses, actually, becomes another one, another discipline.

So when people talk about the education of an artist-I go back to my teaching-it's the education of an individual sensibility-things that you are good at, things that you're not good at, things that you have a feel for. And as you slowly develop those, they coalesce, and that ultimately becomes the kind of artist you are.

For me, that period of playing horses, I treated it like a three-dimensional chess game. It was a beautiful game, unbelievably complex. Took full-time; you had to really-there are so many facets of it that require the most sensitive kind of analysis. And then the most important thing-when people think a lot of gambling-is discipline; you have to be absolutely disciplined, because ultimately, at the end of that analysis, as you go, there is just a small percentage of advantage that you might have. So you had to act it out, how you make the bet, have the win, make the loss. Like I said, it was not a chess game, but a three-dimensional chess game. It's that complex. Everything counted. Everything counted. So that's-those are what form a person. And I'm not an intellectual, but I am persistent.

MR. SIMMS: I'm just thinking that there is this break between the abstract expressionist work and then what you've called the line paintings, the early lines, the late lines. And I think as you're talking about the way you're educating yourself, you're also educating yourself as you're stepping through-

MR. IRWIN: As an artist-

MR. SIMMS: -issues in your art. And it strikes me that-and I've heard you say this before-that when you hit on the idea of the line in the line paintings, that there was a new kind of door open-

MR. IRWIN: Well, there's a couple things happening there. I went to New York at one point in that period of time with the idea I was going to have a dialogue. I now was, I think, a fairly good painter, and I thought that it was time for me to meet and listen and to talk with people like that. And what I met, really, was confrontation, not conversation at all. They were so good at kicking my ass. They had it all laid out, much more than I do. It was a very powerful experience to go there, and I realized, boy, I am really lacking here.

MR. SIMMS: Who were some of the characters that you met when you went?

MR. IRWIN: Gosh. What's it-those big steel things.

MR. SIMMS: Are you talking about Donald Judd, or are you talking about-

MR. IRWIN: No, Donald Judd was the only one who was kind to me. Everybody else kicked my ass, but-

MR. SIMMS: Robert Smithson-

MR. IRWIN: Smithson, yeah-but he had a mean streak. He just was really mean-really tough to me.

MR. SIMMS: What about Robert Morris?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, he was tough too, but not as mean. Morris was one.

MR. SIMMS: Serra.

MR. IRWIN: And Richard Serra, who was-he was one of the meanest people in the world.

And so, wow, because I'm completely open; I'm there to learn something. And what I learned is how narrow they made themselves by having a structure like that. So I thought about it-well, basically, all these arguments are arguments that have been going on, in that sense, massaged in philosophy for a very long time. And I was completely unaware and didn't even read a book. So I put myself on a really hard course. I read every day for three or four years, every day. And just sat down, took notes and educated myself.

MR. SIMMS: This is the '60s we're talking about.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: What kind of things were you reading?

MR. IRWIN: Well, I-again, a little naïve. In the beginning I started out-the Pre-Socratics, and then Plato and Aristotle and people of that sort, and then moved up to people like Husserl, from whom I took a very strong thing-his idea of the necessity for phenomenological reduction was a guiding principle for me for a long time.

It's a long story, but it is the key act of the whole 19th century. I won't go into the whole thing-at least not right now-and then moved myself up through and then finding the lineage for phenomenology, all the way up to Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz and people like that, who I was seeing as in the same course I was in-that's where we are now. They're the ones wrestling with that whole phenomenology-which is the only legitimate philosophy. Existentialism is not a legitimate philosophy, and it's the more popular one. And the dialogue between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty is a very interesting one. Ponty just kicks his ass, continually. The guy was a great thinker; what he did was of great value; but at that moment in time Merleau-Ponty was on a much better focus.

MR. SIMMS: How so?

MR. IRWIN: Well, why existentialism is not true philosophy is that-and starting all the way back with Kierkegaard, people like that-when they entertained the kind of phenomenological position as such, and all the way up to Sartre, at some point, it starts with the idea of the loss of God-and I'm trying to rationalize, to make sense of the loss of God.

So you go through that whole process, but you're seeking an answer, an answer you can live with. And so what you finally do in existentialism-all of them-because there is not an answer per se. And so every major existentialist always made a leap of faith at some point. Kierkegaard leaped back to religion. Sartre leaped towards a communist manifesto sort of thing, social action sort of thing.

But see, philosophy is not about an answer. Philosophy is about the process of thinking about the nature of

things, not needing and not expecting an answer but an understanding. A crucial but radical difference: the idea that it's always an open-ended process rather than looking for a conclusion of some kind, two different ways of moving through the world and revealing two different-they're both true; they have a kind of understanding-but philosophy is-in my mind, it's always been an inquiry about the nature of being in the world and not about having an answer for being.

MR. SIMMS: And in retrospect, if I understand the chronology here, when you were reading a lot of the phenomenology, this was more into the 1970s and in part in dialogue with Lawrence Weschler and that moment-or was that earlier?

MR. IRWIN: No, it started before Lawrence Weschler.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: What happened before Lawrence Weschler-in other words, the reason I'm telling these things is that I'm not really an artist yet. I'm playing at it, and I'm getting better, but I'm not really an artist yet. I don't really quite understand what it means to be-what the import of being an artist at this moment in time was, what the task was, in a way. So I was doing this in my naï ve way, which-you know, self-help.

And one day I met Lawrence Weschler. And he had read the thing, that Frederick Wight thing.

MR. SIMMS: The oral history interview you did with UCLA in '75, '76.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Right. He now tells this story very different, that he came to my door one day and put Merleau-Ponty on the doorstep. But actually, what happened was I was going to UCLA-I lived right next to there. I would go up there to read every day, sit under a tree, have a Coke and read, and also taking the notes, which you know about, taking the notes, copious notes, and arguing, debating, and what have you. And so I met him up there, you see. I don't know who introduced who to who, but I think it must have been him, because I never sought anybody out.

But anyway, we started having a dialogue. And he basically was a philosophy student, and a good one. He's very, very smart. And so I'm stumbling through this thing on my own. He'd say, “Well, you'd better read that chapter again. I think you missed the point.” So in a way, he became my tutor. I would be there every day, and he'd come over, because he knew where I would be-I would sit in the same place. And so he became my tutor. He'd ask me questions and he'd say, “You're going to have to read this part again; you're not getting it.” So anyway, that went on, and he became very valuable. And after a certain period of time, I said to him- he was there; he was transcribing-he had transcribed the Wight-

MR. SIMMS: Right, the oral history-

MR. IRWIN: Oral history by Wight. He'd transcribed it. And how we really met was that he said that he had enjoyed that, just doing it, and could we talk. And then I asked him, I said, “You're doing this job; it's a really shit job, transcribing all day. I don't imagine it pays that much. If you had your druthers, if you could do whatever you wanted to do, what would you do?” He said, “I'd write for the *New Yorker*. ” I said, “Why?” I'd never read a *New Yorker*. I'd never looked at one. And he said, “Well, because they're the only magazine that's out there that publishes at length and publishes stuff that is intriguing and serious.” Now, he meant “serious” in a much more-he's like a social activist out of the '60s. Went to Santa Cruz, which is that kind of an atmosphere. Very good, very good thing.

And so I said, “Well, wow, why don't you do something-do that, submit something to them?” And he said, “Oh, God.” He said, “You can't-you-they have so much writing."

The guy-I forget his name now, who was the editor at that time. This guy loved writing, and he collected writing, and he had enough he could have published the magazine for the next six years or whatever, with just what he already had. But he would keep on. And it was the only magazine which actually supported writers. All the other magazines, the amount of money you got paid for doing an article was not sufficient. But at that time he says if you did a fair amount of work with him, you can live on it. It was a real haven for writers, the magazine. I thought that was brilliant. I said, “Well, why don't you do that?” He said, “Are you kidding? It's not possible.”

And then I forget exactly what happened, but he sent it to the *New Yorker*, and they published it, out of nowhere. But the nice kind of connection in the world. They thought it was interesting, and they published it. And that was the first thing he published there. And from that day, for the next 10 years or whatever it was, he was the most-published author in the *New Yorker*.

MR. SIMMS: Amazing. Well, he's a great writer, so-

MR. IRWIN: Well, he's a hell of a writer.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah.

MR. IRWIN: He can make something that's kind of opaque and complicated and that, understandable, which is a real talent. And so that's how we got to there.

MR. SIMMS: And we jumped ahead a little bit there because we were taking about when you went to New York and you'd met some people and you suddenly felt this sense of confrontation. It was right around the time that you were doing the line paintings. And I think there was quite a bit of-

MR. IRWIN: I think it was a little bit before the lines. Maybe-the thing about the lines is, there was a set of questions. I looked at my paintings, and there were too many things in there that didn't really merit being there. I mean, nice gesture, this and that. But it was cluttered with a lot of stuff. So I started-without knowing anything about phenomenology and phenomenological reduction and all that, although that came in very quickly when I discovered Husserl, but I began to reduce. And if it wasn't there, I took it out, I took it out, I took it out.

So it was very simple. Except at some point, I get down to only a few elements and-which is a little shocking, because all that other stuff's very entertaining, and it gives the illusion of complexity and richness-I'm starting to realize that I'm getting more. In other words, energy was always-the idea it had a vibrancy and energy to it-suddenly with eight gestures, I could do it in six gestures and just as well, better, because I didn't have the two wasted gestures.

So at one point I hit upon the idea of-the one mark you could make-and that's very key to the whole thing-the one mark you can make that's unloaded or can't be Rorschached or psychoanalyzed. People look at abstract expressionist painting, and they tend to Rorschach them or psychoanalyze them, and they're still looking for content in there. That's what the word “it is” meant. That's where it was critical. They're still trying. And they're saying, no, it is. Don't read all that stuff into it. None of that stuff is important.

So finally I say, a straight line is probably the least loaded kind of mark you can make. So I literally made-it was pick-up sticks paintings, which had a lot of lines. But they were straight lines, and they were quite rich. So you had that thing where you've just got four lines on there and-but they're just-it's more powerful and much more energetic and alive than anything I'd done before. The point is, everything counts.

And we can go back to the raku ware. Everything counts. Scale: I painted a shape on the wall and spent months contemplating that shape from the kind of general distance that one views something. Just a gray square on the wall, and I changed the shape until I got what I felt was like the perfect distance, which was 78 1/8 inch. You almost have to laugh, in a way, because I'm saying it makes a difference, that eighth of an inch. That it really is crucial here because you're now down to just-you're having less and less means, so each one of them has to really be on the money. So I would spend days just doing that, making that, change it, change it. I don't remember how many months I did just that, finding this format.

MR. SIMMS: And would you make your stretcher bars; how did that work? Where did you go?

MR. IRWIN: Very much. I made my own stretcher bars. I essentially changed the way people make stretcher bars. I made the bar, let's see, three inches thick, but on the front edge-it was beveled, so that when the canvas was finally stretched, and with great care, that canvas was-if you flick your finger on it, it would be, “bong, bong.” It was responsive. So the surface was totally responsive. And that also made the bar in the back-the ones that make the thing rigid-the canvas never touched the bars. It just floated from the edge.

MR. SIMMS: Right. And did you have a special kind of texture of canvas?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, well, I did. Everybody was using cotton duck, in those days, so it was cotton duck. But it was a really good weave of cotton duck. It was a more expensive-weave cotton duck. And I would put on a coat of rabbit skin glue, and then I would put over that not a gesso, but it was a surface of white paint that I now have a white canvas.

Also during that period of time, I very carefully culled out the colors that-if you go to a store and you buy yellow, there's good yellows and not so good yellows. A lot of it has to do with money, how much pigment's in them and that. But there were certain brands. Like all the earth brands were-I was using a brand called Old Holland, which I guess is still around but made in the Netherlands, and it's really incredible colors and all in the earth, and others, too, but I found that the reds were Roberson. And I found that most of the other colors were from a place, I think, which you couldn't hardly buy in this country. It was called Lafitte Fournier, which is who made

the paint for all the famous artists in France.

MR. SIMMS: Where would you go in L.A. to get these kinds of paints?

MR. IRWIN: There was one place that was-MacArthur Park; you know where that is, out on Wilshire? It was on Sixth Street, which is just the street on the one side of the park. I forgot his name. I think he had worked at Lafitte Fournier. He had some of these brands. So you had to seek them out. So I had, I think, one of the richest palettes you could get because of that stuff.

And then I would put the surface on those things, the background. I would build a big mound of it because when you put it on, it was like you developed a kind of a rhythm to do it. But you couldn't stop. If you stopped, there would be a spot. You couldn't come back-

MR. SIMMS: A break in the rhythm.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, in the rhythm. So I'd have to pee and not to have any water because it would take me something like 10, 12 hours to put that on a canvas, just nonstop.

MR. SIMMS: Sitting, standing? Because I imagine that would be-

MR. IRWIN: Standing. I couldn't do it sitting.

MR. SIMMS: This is in your Pier Avenue studio.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, exactly. In the Pier Avenue, exactly.

And so then I had the four lines on there, and have reduced it all the way down to that. I go back to the Husserl thing, and basically for the same rhyme and reason that Husserl made, which was that at some point we are trapped by what we know. We are in a sense encapsulated by what we know. And the only way, finally, when you start realizing that essentially does not address the question, what you know, you in a sense have to somehow break with that. And he proposed the idea of a phenomenological reduction, which is taking that all the way back to zero so that you can reconsider, and that's essentially the whole 19th century. And he goes through a great, almost a laborious, explanation that this is not an antithesis. You're not throwing anything away, that this stuff is still of great value; all the things there are still relatively true, et cetera, but you're stuck. And ultimately now what people call what happened in physics is a new paradigm.

MR. SIMMS: You're talking about Thomas Kuhn, the idea of the-

MR. IRWIN: You come back so that you can look at it without all these already built-in assumptions, and that's essentially what happened to physics. And that's why it's a good model for the same thing that was going on.

Actually, if it's going on in one place, it's probably going on someplace else. I was on the simple assumption, if I'm thinking, it it's because it's thinkable; therefore somebody else is probably thinking it. And whoever those people are, even though I don't meet them, I'm having a dialogue with them.

MR. SIMMS: Four lines to three lines, then to two lines.

MR. IRWIN: Never to three. There might have been one, as you go along. But first of all, you have the four lines. And the question really starts becoming, how do you decide where to put the four lines, and so you kind of approach the thing intellectually, conceptually. The line finally told me where it was in terms of my sense of weight and relationship and all that. So you just do it. I'd spend days and days and days and days and days putting four lines up there.

But at four lines, they still are paintings; that is, you still read them compositionally. All right? So there's still the same act of kind of organizing it. There's an ordering of it. The thing about the two lines is that you can't do that. Your eye sees one and then the other-but it becomes suspended in space. The lines are two moments, so suddenly it's not a painting anymore. There's no thingness to it at all. You can't even read it. Your eye becomes suspended, in a way. It all becomes now a tactile feel. And so that shift is-in other words, that's the new paradigm for me.

MR. SIMMS: A tactile read that's nevertheless still coming through your eyes, but it's a different awareness, and you're not reading an image-

MR. IRWIN: Well, see, one of the things about energy is resonance. So that's not just limited to your eyes. That's something in your whole body. Your body can read and feel resonance. And your other senses do come into play. Sound comes into play. Tactileness becomes obviously very, very crucial to it-much more than the eye. So now you have, for me, an endpoint to the phenomenological reduction, because your eye no longer is functioning the same way. Your mind is no longer functioning the same way. You're kind of at a point zero, in a sense. And that's not a negative thing. It suddenly opens up this idea of resonance, this idea of other senses. No longer do you read the painting. You participate in it.

MR. SIMMS: Was there any feedback between, say, your thinking and what they call Op art? I was just wondering how, at the time, you positioned yourself.

MR. IRWIN: Op art was a bad joke.

MR. SIMMS: Tell me about that.

MR. IRWIN: Well, Op art was very entertaining. It did do some of the things we're talking about, but still acted in the old context. You still read the thing; you still played with it; you still, in a sense, tried to give it elements of significance and concepts of order and meaning and such. It was very entertaining. And the fact that all that happened, I think, was by kind of osmosis, what I'm talking about. It had become available as a way of making a painting. Some of them did it very nicely. But at that point, your eye is suspended, and then the question becomes-well, we won't go into it right now.

But basically, this is also an assault on language, because you could make marks as meaningful in themselves, or you make marks as meaningful within a structure, within how language is structured. Also, we don't have an alternative at that point. I'm only now beginning to feel that I know what that alternative is. But you can't-people are trying to talk about something which is not about language at all, and for which language is actually difficult and clumsy.

Going back to Husserl, there's nothing wrong with language. It does what it does, and it is, and what have you. But something which is now purely phenomenal, once you start to put it into language, all you do is confuse the issue, because it's contradictory. So when you get down to one line or one mark, it's a very interesting challenge, the idea that one can communicate-which we all know we do-but that this communication has some overall cohesiveness, that one can deal with them-as I say, it's another language, other than words and meanings. So when you take that mark and reduce it down to zero, at least for a moment, you challenge that: “Okay, at what level does it exist?”

MR. SIMMS: That's very interesting because it's right around that time that you actually did publish a first statement, and then you have done a certain amount of writing yourself. Do you see kind of separate spheres? In other words, the work that you're doing and then the writing that you've done over time-

MR. IRWIN: It doesn't come full-blown. It isn't all resolved. It's gotten more and more and more resolved for me. For example, think about Joey, who's very tuned into what I'm doing; he still wrastles with the-he can't let language out of it. He still wants to talk about it, you know?

MR. SIMMS: Right. This is Joey Huppert, your assistant.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. And I'm saying, “That's fine. I understand, but that argument's already been settled for me.” It's not an issue anymore.

MR. SIMMS: I wonder if we should start a new one of these or not.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, we're about at all I can handle.

[END CD1.]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Robert Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on February 9, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is card number two.

We were just talking about language and reducing your lines in the line paintings down to two -

MR. IRWIN: Well, it raises some real good questions. There is a phenomena in terms of how I experience this thing, which is different than anything before. I'm not reading the painting anymore. I can see all the pieces and parts, and I have no need to attach meaning to it.

MR. SIMMS: And this becomes something that, parallel to the phenomenological reduction, does not disqualify the idea of meaning or-because that's obviously a part of another dimension of-

MR. IRWIN: We go back to Husserl. He busted his ass to answer that question, that it is not an antithesis, so-

MR. SIMMS: It's a both/and

MR. IRWIN: It's a both/and.

MR. SIMMS: -not an either/or.

MR. IRWIN: Just that certain things reveal themselves by looking at it from one direction; other things reveal themselves if you look at the other direction. Once you've built up a very tight-knit, very strong structure, then you essentially become captive of the structure. So he felt that there was a reason now. There was something beyond what we knew, and that it applies just in general. That's essentially what happened in science too. In other words, you only go so far, and then there comes a point when you are immersed in it. And you start talking about the rustic, somebody from one discipline who goes to another discipline because he's not burdened by what is known about something but has a fresh way of looking at it. So in the simplest sense of the word, this is like a fresh way of looking at things, all right?

But a big question was raised for me: can I paint a painting without a mark? There's a couple of very critical questions happening now, dynamite questions. One, for me at that point, was, can I paint a painting without a mark? That becomes the question, how do I do that?

So I essentially did again the shape on the wall, get the perfect shape as such, because now I'm making a big commitment in time and money. And that was to make a frame that is that perfect shape, but also to cove it-to bend it very slightly in all directions. And so the structure is almost like an airplane wing. You have a core, which is what holds the whole thing together. You have struts that go out, and you have a stringer on the outside, because to bend something softly, it has to be done at every point, if you want to bend it in more than one direction. And so everything has to be held into place, and the whole thing is covered with a thin veneer, and then a canvas is stretched over that.

I've got the thing moved out from the wall slightly, and the back is finished. It's curved in the opposite direction so that the thing actually comes to a point, almost, at the edge. It's about like that.

MR. SIMMS: About an inch or half-inch?

MR. IRWIN: It's maybe three-quarters of an inch. And the canvas is then stretched over this and around to the back like you do, and stapled on there, and then the back is put on, so that the canvas just really disappears. There's just a point on the edge.

MR. SIMMS: You built a box around the back so it would stick out from the wall about four inches, five inches?

MR. IRWIN: A little more than that. It sticks about that much-what is that?-sticks out about six inches. But at the time, since I was a painter and had arrived from that way, my solution was a painting solution, obviously. But I look back, and I think I could have almost left them-because the whole thing was already in motion.

But what I did was I put small dots on the surface, starting in the middle with full color, using the best paint you can get so that it has as much tooth as it can-as you can have, and it's not going to disappear for the lack of pigment in five years or 20 years or something. And I put the dot-real simple, I put a red dot on. And then I put a green dot-optically corrected green dot-between every one of red so that they were perfectly on spectrum; they canceled each other out. All right, so they do just that, they cancel each other out. But that's an action that goes on with the eye. So your eye is working all the time dealing with these opposites. But also, if I put them on too formally, let's say I work them out mathematically and I put them on so that they're absolutely-or if I put them on so that they're too irregular; both of them start creating patterns. And the patterns then become the subject, so that it was this funny kind of in-between place. I did it by using those kinds of things you find in a drugstore, or they used to have them, with little rubber tips sticking out.

MR. SIMMS: Change mat.

MR. IRWIN: The change mat, right. I'd cut a small section out of it. I put the color red on a glass palette and touch this thing down into it and then put it on. And you had to be very, very careful not to create little boxes-you have to get it just right-and you put them on, and then you'd have to clean it up, almost every little dot, some being strong and some being less, et cetera. It was very tedious. And my question to myself at the time-this is it? I'm making these little dots every day, all day long? And they were optically really-your eye was just being killed.

MR. SIMMS: I think I remember hearing you say you had special glasses or something.

MR. IRWIN: Well, I tried everything. I tried doing it in a dark room. I tried doing it in a light room. I tried to do it

with glasses. I tried to do it-none of that worked. Also, the tediousness-your attention span goes downhill rather quickly, and you start messing up. You start making mistakes. Finally, I did them pretty much in a dark room. And I made a bet on-I was not a baseball fan, but I made bet on baseball, on a team to win the World Series and then listened to baseball on the radio, because it just goes on and on and on in a very low key, and you have an interest because you've got an investment. So it kind of helps.

MR. SIMMS: Had you moved studios at this point to Venice?

MR. IRWIN: I was in Mildred.

MR. SIMMS: Mildred Avenue. So you'd moved to Venice, and you were in the Mildred studio-

MR. IRWIN: I had moved to Venice first. I mean, no, from-

MR. SIMMS: From Pier.

MR. IRWIN: -from Pier to Mildred to Market.

Anyway, then this raised a lot of questions. But the primary one is that these things have a real energy about them. But while you're standing there looking at this thing-even for me, it takes about, I don't know, 15 seconds, 10 seconds, whatever, depending on how acute you are, for the thing to manifest itself. And in that few seconds, since I'm doing it every day while I'm there, I suddenly, for the first time, see two things. One is a frame, and the second is a shadow. So now, the frame and the shadow-so you ask-you think about that. The first question is if I think that art, which I'm moving towards, is to do with our sensibility and that it has a quality of its own-it's not about the pictures and all this sort of thing-there it is. I look around the world, and I ask myself a very simple question: is that how we see the world? And the answer is absolutely not; we don't see it that way.

So if art has anything to do about aesthetics-and that's kind of the key word here-about aesthetics, then we can't-I mean, the idea of a frame is a highly stylized, learned logic, because when I'm in the world, I'm in an envelope in which all my senses are coming into play, and the world is formed by all that interaction. I can organize it the same way I can with language or the idea of meaningful structures. And so you quickly sort it out, that this information is important for me to get from here to there; this information is not, so that information just drops out and allows us to focus on what is important. So you can't possibly throw that out as a way of organizing or moving through the world. But at the same time, perceptually, the wind's blowing on my face; the smells are-et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So it's like two realms. And we are both, but the idea of a painting is no longer valid. I don't know how to deal with that. That's a big break. That's a big step. What do I do? How do I act? What way can I deal with or express or whatever this way that I am as a sentient being in the world.

MR. SIMMS: One of the things you began to experiment with was how to light that object on the wall.

MR. IRWIN: Well, the thing is that you were experimenting with light. Light is becoming more and more and more critical. It's always a player in that-you can't see without it.

The second question, which also now starts to reveal the answer, is that I see the shadow all the way around it. And the thing that's interesting about the shadow is that, quantitatively speaking, it doesn't have any-it doesn't exist, in a way. You can't weigh it. You can't measure it. If I move the light, it can disappear completely. In the quantitative realm, shadows have no real significance. But in the qualitative realm, we couldn't live without them. They are crucial to the whole seeing process. Big switch there; there's absolutely no-or it's minimal-quantitative existence or value, and on the other hand, something qualitatively which is very important and very crucial. So then that becomes the obvious thing: how do I break the frame?

So this whole thing is just a series of, in the beginning, instincts-or a little bit of sensing and a little bit with Husserl-and then slowly you actually start to act it out and say, well, okay, wow. You get a clear breakthrough by what you've done, but it also immediately asks you questions, which now become the rhyme and the reason for why you do the next thing.

[End audio track.]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Robert Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on February 16, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two.

So we were talking about your dot paintings

MR. IRWIN: Yes. Just a quick little summary-maybe I've said it, because it's been a couple weeks or a week or

whatever, and I think the point being here is that I don't know when I read it, but Merleau-Ponty made a statement one time in which he thought artists had some advantages over philosophers, in that they could think both in language and tactilely, so that they had-especially when you talk about phenomenology, in which we really introduce the tactile world-he thought that was an advantage.

And the point I want to make is that I, in a naï ve way, as we've already talked about, had become interested in philosophy and had become enamored with the methodology that they have, the kind of intensity, but what I actually did-I didn't know this at the time, but I was doing a phenomenological reduction, right out of Husserl, but I was doing it totally tactilely.

And the way that goes, which is, I think, really quite interesting, is that once you get at some point, like what I got from early line to late line, is I get a question. And I don't know where that's going to go or even the legitimacy of the painting per se. But I have a compass, and the compass is that every time I was not sure-and there were periods where I was not sure at all; especially when I leave the studio, pretty soon I am not sure at all. But I check the question. If the question holds water, if the question is genuinely legitimate, you're stuck with it. I can't go back. It already took me outside of what I knew and made all the sense in the world to me, and therefore the whole thing is just a series of questions.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: The idea that the paintings were filled with too much stuff that didn't count was correct. And I kept taking it all out. And some consequences started happening. I got so that I could, with a dozen lines, have much more strength, power, presence with the things than the ones with all the extra stuff. So it proved itself out.

But I crossed over, which I didn't know when I started doing the lines, the line being as-you couldn't Rorschach it, psychoanalyze it, it being a fairly clean element.

But it also got me down where I'm now dealing with just a mark. And now the question starts, as I get from four to two, and your eye becomes suspended-a whole different kind of understanding and a different kind of seeing enters in. And it seems quite legitimate, but there are times when I wasn't sure of that either.

But what I was also doing, which I didn't know until much later, is that I was actually challenging the whole idea of language, because language is essentially a set of marks which have organized meaning. They have a structure to them. And when you start taking all the meaning out of the mark-in fact, maybe even finally when we go to the dots-you eliminate-kind of eliminate the mark altogether.

MR. SIMMS: Right. Yeah.

MR. IRWIN: And that was at-we already explained how the dot works and how-

MR. SIMMS: Right. You talked about how you made them and the studio where you made them.

MR. IRWIN: Right. The fact that I had to actually wait, if only a few seconds, before it manifested itself, there was a moment when I suddenly saw the frame. I'd never seen the frame.

MR. SIMMS: By the frame, you mean the edge of the canvas going around?

MR. IRWIN: Just the frame, yeah, the fact that-

MR. SIMMS: Yeah.

MR. IRWIN: -what it is, the content or whatever you want to call this stuff, is framed.

MR. SIMMS: Ah.

MR. IRWIN: And you think about when a student-they buy a drawing board. They have a piece of paper that they pin on that thing. They have a piece of charcoal or a pencil or so on, so forth. They come to the room. There's a series of seats in a semicircle.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And they sit down. And you realize how many things they have completely accepted without even once ever considering it.

MR. SIMMS: So it's taken for granted, sort of habitual stuff-

MR. IRWIN: Taken totally, totally-so it's totally invisible.

MR. SIMMS: So this is the frame you're talking about, a broader kind of thing-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: -not just the literal frame but a kind of extended bunch of habitual-

MR. IRWIN: Right. But all of sudden I asked myself the simplest question, which is dynamite-perception, i.e.: seeing and experiencing, has something to do with what art is-how can I hold my inquiry to be within a frame?

Because when I look around, that's not how I see the world at all. I don't see the world in frames. I don't see it in any kind of singular sensory-I get a feel for it. I hear it and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. That's a hell of a question. How do you deal with that? And at first I'm stunned by that. But I'm also thrilled. There's a real contradiction there-real, major contradiction. And if you think the history of modern art, I'd say that I think, well, it looks pretty legitimate to me, that whole reduction that it went through.

And then the second thing I see-it was now pronounced because the thing was set out from the wall a bit-is the shadow, which is now emphasized, which I, of course, had never paid any attention to. You stop and think. It had never been there. It's meaningless. It doesn't draw any attention.

A real breakthrough for me was that the shadow, from a quantitative point of view, has no real existence. In other words, it can't be weighed. It can't be measured. And if I move the light a little bit, it's gone. So it's totally ephemeral. Quantitatively, it has very little substance in any way that one can quantitatively hold on to it. But qualitatively, you realize, we couldn't move if we didn't have shadows. They're absolutely crucial. On our everyday seeing-your face, the contours, the whole thing-shadows play a very big part in that. So now I have something that is absolutely meaningless in the realm that things are most thought about before one assigns meaning, structure, so on, so forth, and something which is absolutely crucial to what I'm doing.

Now for me, that was genuinely-that's why I ended up having to leave the studio. I had to play with it, because it was-that's a big commitment.

But the question is very good. It still holds water for me completely.

MR. SIMMS: And was pursuing that line of inquiry what then led you to wanting to change some of the givens of the canvas to begin with? So for instance, the way in which you made the dot paintings convex-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, that comes from the line paintings. Everything in that kind of thing counts, and when you're down to two lines-everything counts. There's no non-thing in that situation. And so the energy and the power of the two marks was really good.

I, obviously, thought a lot about the proportion. Remember, I told you I painted on the walls, spent a good deal of time in which-and literally I came out with seven foot 1 ¾ inches by-some odd things--it was almost like a joke. But I was at a point where I could tell the difference, and it was a crucial difference. If it's too much square, it kind of loses its-or it's too exaggerated in directions, or one side pulls or pushes against the other, one proportion against the other, when it gets too much, it becomes a kind of cliché. But there's a moment where you get them just right-

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: If you take that idea, simply, about enhancing that thing by making it slightly curved-in other words, remember, I told you I put on the surface, but very, very, very-it took hours and hours and hours and hours to do it. And by shaping the thing slightly, I increase the presence of that thing. Now if I bend it too much, it becomes a shaped canvas.

And oddly enough, at that time, in a totally different way, people were doing shaped canvases-totally wrong, in other words, from my point of view. Yes, it does give you something more interesting and so on, so forth, if you shape it, but at the same time it's also self-identifiable. It doesn't give back enough for what it demands in terms of you looking at the thing.

A subtle curve of that thing, not too curved so that you become aware of it, per se, but yet at the same time-now that was a very big struggle at the time, in which I probably failed in the sense that I probably could have-I wanted to-maybe even thought about going back to do one, just to see. I probably could have left them, period.

MR. SIMMS: Just blank.

MR. IRWIN: Right. Right. Not-

MR. SIMMS: I mean, you did paint the surface white, but-

MR. IRWIN: Right, yeah.

MR. SIMMS: -just leaving it-

MR. IRWIN: And then it had a little bit of texture to it. But I couldn't do it, because I was still-I had come from being a painter, so I was-

MR. SIMMS: Right. Right.

MR. IRWIN: -I'm looking for a painting solution, which ultimately I needed, so therefore I spent the time with it, and the dots are a really good solution, because they really do make a kind of next step in what you're-what you're looking at is just pure energy-which would be what you're looking at when you see the canvas, when it's been just slightly curved. So I painted it, yeah.

MR. SIMMS: And you kept with that idea of a kind of convex shape when you made your next step, which was into the discs.

MR. IRWIN: Well, yeah, because the question becomes, real simply, can I paint a painting that doesn't begin and end at the edge? I've got this question, right in my face, that this idea of framing something is a highly stylized, learned logic; doesn't mean that it's necessarily bad. And there's some reason why it became what it was and why it became passed on in the way that it was passed on.

There's an issue that comes up with the Abstract Expressionists at that point, in which people would say-well, one of the criticisms of them is that-“My God, that stuff is” -“the paint they're using is not quality; it's all going to fall off someday.” And they said they didn't care.

Now one of the key reasons why art was bronze and-what do they call it where you had to build up the paint-egg tempera. It was all about transcending, and all the subject matter and all that thing was about transcending our life and our life going beyond, transcending our death as such.

MR. SIMMS: A work of art that would live for-

MR. IRWIN: Exactly, and I make the joke all the time, which just got proved to me, that when you see the price of art go up, really go up radically, people are not buying art anymore; they're buying history. And history-collecting cards, collecting everything-well, history's a big item, so it's a way of going in the world in which the idea of transcending your death, of doing something of value to go on beyond you, a whole philosophic-a life structure that-to me, if you look at it from my philosophical point of view, the history of modern art has become a deconstruction of that way of viewing your life in the world.

And so when the Abstract Expressionists-that's a big thing to say, “I don't care.” So I give you a simple proposition. You can make a really great painting and it can last forever, or you can do a brilliant painting and it lasts for 10 years or something.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: If you commit one way or another, that's a complete change in the whole of the ground of all philosophic arguments, of all art. And so in a way I'm saying that art has become at this point in time, what we're going through, it's become as much of a philosophic discourse as it has to do with making objects or making things.

At this point, just to explain, these steps were methodical, each step, and they were all based on that the previous step set up a proposition for me, a question that, as far as I could tell, was legitimate. Now I could have been wrong, but basically the whole method of moving forward was always that I recognized something that triggered a question that-and so when you move along-I'm sure this is for every inquiring person-as you move along, since you don't know where you're going, and, of course, at times you're not sure, and you have to kind of check your coordinates as such, what you have is always the legitimacy of the question.

And so as these things start running into dead ends, you are obviously very concerned, naturally, and so you go back to the question. And they challenge the question-why it didn't work or why it's not that-and so it challenges the question-so you go back. But if the question still holds in face of the failure, you're stuck with it.

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: You have to go back and try again.

MR. SIMMS: Right. Sort of parallels the scientific method, you know, sort of-

MR. IRWIN: Well, in a sense it is. And a lot of times I do what I call a mapping of mathematical-I forget the term right now, but a mathematical check, which is to find the answer one way, and you take another method, too, and you get the same answer.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: So in math, that's one of the things mathematicians oftentimes do, is to check themselves by redoing the problem from another point of view. And I would do that also. But I didn't have any sense, nor was that really my strength per se. What I'm trying to say is that the method was not happenstance or style or what have you-and it was continuous. The only way I can describe it is like a philosophic inquiry as to why or the importance of, the rhyme or the reason, for each of the things that we had previously committed to without having ever examined-

MR. SIMMS: It sounds like intuition was the way that you were stepping through it, rather than some kind of projected "I need to get from Point A to Point B; how am I going to do it?" It's that you're intuiting these questions as they're coming up.

MR. IRWIN: Yes, as long as we don't take that word as being a not-serious way to proceed in the work-and people all want more proof, most of the time. Intuition-you could be jacking yourself off, all the way.

MR. SIMMS: Right. Well, for Henri Bergson, intuition was a philosophic method-so there is a-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. No, no. The history of philosophy in the last couple of hundred years has very much in a sense reformed all those terms because the terms-when you get into language, these things get really hard to do because words build up structures and prejudices and meanings that are sometimes hard to-if you apply them in any way other than it was originally applied, they don't work very well. So you're trying to invent words-of course, that hasn't really worked too well, either-or you begin to try and create a subtle collection of words. There are certain questions, especially now, that language is not good at.

A classic one for me right now is quantum mechanics-you absolutely cannot explain quantum mechanics. You can go up to a certain point, and then language fails. And now they have another language, which is math. It becomes a dialogue in which, if you're not a sophisticated mathematician, you are never going to understand what they mean by, or what it means by, quantum mechanics. Same thing has become true about art right now. That's why people try to Rorschach them, and psychoanalyze them. They're trying to pull them back into some construction that they can-

MR. SIMMS: And that reminds me of the Thomas Kuhn book, the one that I know is in your library and that you read early on, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*-

MR. IRWIN: Right.

MR. SIMMS: -and the idea that when certain kinds of evidence begin no longer to fit into the existing methodology, suddenly there becomes this question of, well, we need a new method and -

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. It's a simple thing, in one sense. To oversimplify it, to make-to get out of something like art, which is somewhat complicated-I'm a person. I just live in the world. And I'm really simplifying now, but I want to go from where I am and out to the door, and it takes me-do I go this way? Do I go that way? It's over there, but let's say it's blocked, so I have to go through a trial-and-error thing, and as I do it, I start developing some kind of a method. I make this move and that move, and I-bang, I hurt my leg and bang, this, that, and I'm set back and went the wrong way, like a maze or something, but I finally make it to the door.

Let's say it takes me 85 moves to make it to the door, and I do that daily, every day, and you just round off all the corners, and that 85 moves now becomes 67 moves. I sophisticate it. I'm getting better at it and through just trial and error, back and forth, back-so finally, see, by the end of my life-I can get to that efficiently by 42 moves. And being a man in the world with a son, I teach that son the 42 moves, so as to save him all the time of what I went through to be able to get to know what I know or do what I do, so my son, in a sense, takes these 42 moves, and in his lifetime he sophisticates this down to 26 moves.

It goes from process, which is what I've done, I go through a process-it starts to now have the potential to be a system. And if I get it down to 23 moves-now I could teach it to a whole generation. I could actually have a college, and one of the staples of it would be this system that works. And it works, and it's good. So I get the system and you, coming as a third, fourth, fifth generation, learn the system. So when suddenly the system gets to 16 moves and you find out that-they begin to question the rhyme and the reason of it or why I'm doing this all of a sudden, you have no way of getting at it, because you-see, you're out of being process. You're now

already embodied by the system.

And as long as it works, it's perfect. It saves you time, it's efficient, et cetera. But there's then a time when you cannot break the system because it's a piece and a part of you. So what you have is a phenomenological reduction. That's why-being human-what you do is you have to unlearn all that, get outside of it, see the problem again in its original sense and understand that there is now, through process, a better solution-I was looking at the problem altogether wrong.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: So I find myself a new paradigm. And in the new paradigm we're not talking about the original 17 moves or 16 moves-I have an entirely different way of approaching it. And that's what Kuhn means by-in the simplest explanation-what he means by a new paradigm or what Husserl meant, why you had to get a phenomenological reduction: i.e., you go back to the beginning so that you can see the thing fresh.

And we get moments of that when we have what we call a rustic. Someone who is from a discipline other than, say, physics, who can look at a problem sometimes and solve it-that happens quite often in the higher echelons of science, where someone from one discipline can see through the problems in another discipline because they're not trapped by all the education and all the assumptions that are built in, and sees it fresh and the nuances, says, “Oh, you just do that.”

But this is a full-time thing, and that, to me, is the history of modern art. And that's really what's happened to some disciplines-mostly physics. At the time when I met Richard Feynman and those people, and Ed Wortz and them, their so-called discipline was more of a philosophic discussion. They were not at a point where they were dealing with practicality at all. They were dealing with an entirely different way of looking at things. And like I say, you come up with-what I was just talking about-a way of going in the world which is completely-not antithetical, but completely outside of anything we'd known before. So you start having these new paradigms and new ways of-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: Anyway, so in a naï ve way and being an artist, that's kind of what I did. For good or for bad, these moves were all based on sets of questions which I think have historical grounds. I make the case very simply. If you have something like an incredibly beautiful painting by [Jacques-Louis] David-I always use as a precedent-if you have something that good, why in the world would we take this whole thing apart? Step by step, the whole 19th century is just dismantling everything that made that David a perfect, perfect painting in a way-there has to be a reason. Too many people from too many backgrounds with too many rhymes and reasons have participated in that hundred years for it to be either accidental or incidental. There has to be a reason for it.

I'm trying to say that the reason was a new kind of paradigm, i.e., a new way of going, a new set of values, et cetera, et cetera, and that the history of modern art, to me, then is very significant, because it also parallels the just incredible changes that have taken place in other disciplines.

MR. SIMMS: What role do other people play in this in terms of a dialogue? In other words, I know that people like Ed Wortz, who you mentioned, but also people like Jack Brogan and others who you've worked with-in other words, as you're going through this process, as you're working through, bouncing ideas off other people and entering into a dialogue with other people, how important is that as part of the process?

MR. IRWIN: Well, as it turned out, for me, Ed Wortz was-the thing that I like about him-we got in the Art and Technology thing-and I told him I wasn't going to be able to make something, that I thought that the real issue was that, having gotten to the point where I no longer have a studio and no longer make anything, the bottom had completely fallen out of my world.

I sensed the same thing in physics, again, that the bottom had fallen out of their world. Now, that didn't mean that Newtonian physics didn't work. It still works. But it was no longer a worldview. It at one point constituted a worldview. Everything still works, so it was well-grounded. He did what he did, really brilliantly. So they were essentially, I felt, in the same place I was, which I still think. They were really being philosophers, as much as anything, for a good long period of time, still are to a great degree.

And so I felt, well, I'd be interested to see-[laughs]-how it's working out for them. I'd be interested-because as far as I'm concerned, those are the people who maybe have the same problem I have, the same dilemma. Suddenly everything that I was doing no longer worked, or it was legitimate, but I felt that I'd come to a place where I was beginning to recognize an alternative paradigm.

And so I said, “Look, I would love the opportunity to meet some of those people, but I doubt if I'm going to be able to make anything. It's way too soon. All this is going to be an open inquiry.”

So he allowed me to do that. That's why I say I think that the Art and Technology thing was a red herring, was not about putting artists with industry and making bigger things of what they already know and do. It was really more for artists to try and figure out what had happened to the whole enterprise as such, and whether it was legitimate at all anymore; what kind of role could it play or does it play?

And the product was, I think, a major one. I radically changed his life, and he radically changed my life. And we had a dialogue for the next 30 or 40 years. I don't remember how long, but a fruitful one for both of us. But now I think that's much better than having produced a bubbling up, lighting, wiggling sort of thing, which is what most of them did. I think that was a pretty good reason for it. So to me, the thing was successful. You had to wait 50 years, let's say, or 20 years, or something for any evidence of that.

MR. SIMMS: Yes. And Maurice Tuchman-it was his idea, I guess, originally, to do this, Art and Technology, but you were one of the early people he was talking to.

MR. IRWIN: I actually don't know the chronology of his-who he was or was. I know that he tells me-I don't know if it's true or not true, but he tells me that he was one of the secret nominators to get the MacArthur award. So-now that may not be true, but nobody knows who those people are, or maybe they do now.

MR. SIMMS: It's all secret balloting.

MR. IRWIN: It's all-yeah. And so he says it, and I wouldn't doubt it. He could have very easily been it.

And so I think he thought that was interesting, what we did.

MR. SIMMS: And it strikes me that this is around the time when you're starting to think about what you ultimately will term “conditional art” : that one way to respond to this bottom dropping out-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: -is to rethink what it means to be an artist, and part of that is adopting the stance of a conditional-

MR. IRWIN: Well, you go, let's say, all the way down to Malevich, white square on a white ground. You've unloaded a lot of stuff, for good or for bad. You've unloaded almost all pictorial rationales, all subject matter. Pretty much you're about down to the facts.

And so how does one come to that? Well, basically you've taken everything out of it, but you've put it into a museum, so when you walk in that museum, you are immediately in an art thing. Everything in there is art. You may not like it, may not agree, this and that, but it's already-so you've taken everything out, but now you're still held within a frame of looking at things as art in that traditional sense, because museums are, even now, very traditional. That's what they're about.

I had to experiment a little bit at one point with the show that I did at the Museum of Modern Art.

MR. SIMMS: Right. You were invited by Jennifer Licht. Is that right?

MR. IRWIN: Jennifer Licht. Right.

MR. SIMMS: This is in 1970.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Maybe we should go in order. I don't know.

MR. SIMMS: We had touched on the discs, and I think already there we're seeing the beginning of the conditional idea.

MR. IRWIN: The reason they're a disc is very simple: to take the four corners out of it, which are the most dramatic element that makes the frame as such, but the circle still becomes a frame, of course. So that doesn't accomplish it, but it takes some of the physical elements out of it. It narrows down the field of vision, I thought.

The problem was that-and being not religious at all-a lot of people see them as mandalas and-

MR. SIMMS: This is once you get the shadows.

MR. IRWIN: -right-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -and as religious objects-

MR. SIMMS: Yeah.

MR. IRWIN: -which is painful for me because I have no interest in that, zero.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: So that was not good. But from my point of view, when you get just that circle, then if you can get the edge of it to marry to the space, it breaks its frame. And when you see them lit from above, just daylight and a simple skylight or something, they're pretty good.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And they would-

MR. SIMMS: Those are the acrylic discs, because you did two.

MR. IRWIN: Well-

MR. SIMMS: You did the aluminum and then you did the acrylic.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, well, the lighting on them worked better each time if they're done with daylight from a skylight or something.

MR. SIMMS: But that's a progress in your thinking.

MR. IRWIN: But at the same time, you seldom ever see them that way. And so I had to manufacture with-unsatisfactorily, to some degree-the idea of getting them lost in the shadows.

MR. SIMMS: By projecting from four corners the-

MR. IRWIN: From four corners, right. And generally right at this 45-degree angle, top and bottom, is where it happens. The one you saw down here obviously works way better and-

MR. SIMMS: Right. And this is the acrylic one, which is under a skylight that you designed, and the whole space is-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, exactly.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah.

MR. IRWIN: So the others-I always say, as a matter of defense, the first thing you do is identify what kids would probably call it. In this particular case, they were like Mickey Mouse ears.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] Okay.

MR. IRWIN: On the downside, the lowest thing-if I could get it to really work, those-it wasn't that obvious, but since there wasn't much else there, that got -

MR. SIMMS: And you sprayed them-I think once you told me you put them on a Lazy Susan-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: -and you turned them and you sprayed them with-wearing a mask and-

MR. IRWIN: Well, just like spraying an automobile, it was acrylic lacquer, which was highly toxic, and when I was spraying them, it was so subtle that I could not see what I-I just did it very, exactly the same each-and rotated the thing. Then I'd have it stop, have to take it out, put it on the wall and look at it and say, “It needs a little more in this place and little more-there it doesn't,” what have you. Then I'd take it back and do it again.

So what happened also is that I started spraying from about a foot and a half, 18 inches away. Rather than like with the automotive, where you essentially flood the surface evenly, liquid, and then it dries, I was shooting far enough away that the paint was hitting the surface-it was semi-dry already or almost dry. And so it built up a tactile-a very beaded kind of surface, which was also much prettier-from my end. The early ones were a little wetter, and the later ones got more and more tactile as I went along.

And then I did the-I wanted to do the plastics in the very beginning, could not get them to hold their shape. They'd be floppy, had no structural integrity to it.

In the beginning I didn't know how to solve that, and no one else seemed to know how to solve it. So I went to the metal and had a metal shaper that does exotic race cars in downtown L.A. called California Metal Shaping. And these guys-it was amazing. They'd do it-all they do is just stamp it-[clapping hands]-to a slightly curved metal just-I don't know what you call it-a shape, and then you hold the metal on that and you pound it slowly into shape. It's rather complex because, as you move and shape something like that, you have to continually relieve it, or it starts getting kinks in it; it starts kinking. And so anyway, these guys made those things for me, and I painted them. And then one day it came to me how to make the plastic hold its shape, which is to-the same thing that the people did with the Deux Chevaux.

MR. SIMMS: Right. I know what you're talking about, the CitroÃ�n Deux Chevaux.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, the little cars right after the war, the little cheap-they had thin, real thin metal. So to get the metal to hold its shape, they'd compound curves in it, curve it this way and then curve it that way, and that stiffens the metal, makes it stronger. So I did the same thing. I crowned it like that and then made it-as it came down and then made, I think, a slight reverse, so it's actually a double crown. And it's subtle enough that you really don't know that, but it made it stiff. Just enough to make the thing hold its shape.

MR. SIMMS: And was Jack Brogan part of your process at this point?

MR. IRWIN: Okay, to bring Jack Brogan in-let's bring him in. At the time I wanted to do the-I don't know how I ever decided on how to build these curved canvases-

MR. SIMMS: For the dot paintings.

MR. IRWIN: I found a shop that was willing to work with me. They did furniture, things like that, rather sophisticated woodworking. And there was a guy named-God, what was his name? I'm having trouble with names these days, but-Freddy. Anyway, Freddy was there, and Freddy helped me. We worked together on it. Freddy was a horseplayer, and I was a horseplayer at the time, so we had a kind of area of interest together. And the way they were actually built is, we made a rather stout frame in the middle, which was basically the structural-

MR. SIMMS: Inside, hidden from view?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, totally. Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: There's a structure. I'll get it for you so you can get a picture of it. Anyway, so there's this frame-[sketches]-like that.

MR. SIMMS: So this is a square frame.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, square frame. Thick.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah.

MR. IRWIN: Thick enough to-because this was the strength of it.

Then from that, you put a runner out, like this. Okay?

Then you put several of these.

Now this part becomes really like an old airplane wing. And these are shaped so they're-from this thing being like this, they're doing this. And then you put a big piece in the corner here, which is the most critical one, in terms of this thing being subtly curved.

So all this thing has to be shaped. I used a wood called jelutong for this part because it has no grain. And that way I could shape it in each direction.

MR. SIMMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] These are the corner pieces coming out.

MR. IRWIN: Right. These are the corner pieces. Then you put a stringer around it, like that.

MR. SIMMS: What is a stringer?

MR. IRWIN: Well, that's just a thin piece of wood that's shaped. They've got all these things attached to it. Everything here is attaching from here, and now you attach the ends of all those.

MR. SIMMS: So there's a central wooden-wood box with-

MR. IRWIN: Right.

MR. SIMMS: -radiating out from it these-

MR. IRWIN: Exactly.

MR. SIMMS: -these-like flanges, like wooden flanges that-

MR. IRWIN: Right. So when you looked at it from the side, I'd done basically this. [Sketching.]

MR. SIMMS: Right. So gradual-

MR. IRWIN: With-yeah. And then, just to sophisticate it a little bit, I did this.

MR. SIMMS: So you reversed the whole thing-

MR. IRWIN: Right.

MR. SIMMS: -and attached the two, which made almost clam-shaped type-

MR. IRWIN: Right. Exactly. And then you attach a very thin veneer to the whole face of it.

MR. SIMMS: A wood veneer.

MR. IRWIN: And I did it on the back also.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: By the way, this frame stuck through like that.

MR. SIMMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] That-wood veneer-

MR. IRWIN: That's when they floated off the wall, whatever distance I wanted them to be.

MR. SIMMS: Yes. So that carried through, then.

MR. IRWIN: Right. So this veneer on here has to be held at every point, because it's so subtle that it just would flip up. Now it was the same thing with anything. If you can make a compound curve out of it, then it'll hold its shape. This won't hold its shape, so it has to be held. All right. So this whole thing is shaped, and there's a veneer on it.

MR. SIMMS: So we were talking about a very thin wood as a veneer here.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. That's very thin wood.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: And up to the corner, using the corners, in a sense, as the holding point, and they are, as I told you, jelutong, which is curved.

MR. SIMMS: What is it called again?

MR. IRWIN: Jelutong. Anyway, so you do that, and then I would stretch a cotton duck over that, a quality one, and bring it all the way down and around and attach it the same way you would any kind of painting frame. And then the back was put on afterwards, so that the edge of this thing looked like this. [Sketching.] And the canvas would go in there, and there's this white-so it had a really pristine look.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: That, of course, I learned from raku ware. That everything counts. And since it's going to sit off the wall, I wanted the back of this to be highly reflective, white-painted, real high white-

MR. SIMMS: You wanted a reflective white on the back of the dot painting.

MR. IRWIN: Right, so that the shadow was not overpowering.

MR. SIMMS: So you'd be sending reflected light back into the shadow to soften and-

MR. IRWIN: To soften the shadow, right.

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: And also, as I say, when you walked up to it, it had a refinement that you could appreciate. And then I put a skin glue on there-which is the best way to seal a surface like that.

And then on that I put titanium white, a particular one that was made by Lafitte Fournier in Paris. It's called silver white or was called silver white. I don't think they're in business anymore. And the reason I did that was because this surface that's going to have paint of some kind with-I don't know how much I knew about the dots yet, but I knew it was going to be something subtle like that. If you put on any-at that time, certainly; maybe that's not true now, but any white paint you put on it is going to turn yellow over time. So in this case, of course, if you had those little dots and you had to restore this thing, you'd have to paint around every little-you know what I mean. So I don't even know if you could do it without ruining it.

But the thing about this titanium, I was told that it was actually mixed by a sort of canon, because you shoot out the different elements of a titanium white, and they mix actually in the air, not mixed in the ground. And at the very end of that was the purest, and that was the silver white.

So it was the purest titanium that people could make at the time. And it was a beautiful color. It was really a great white. It would turn yellow, but all you have to do is put it under ultraviolet light for a few hours and it turns white again.

MR. SIMMS: Oh, so you could actually restore it to its crisp white-

MR. IRWIN: Yes. You can actually restore it by-you could put out in the sun, which would work, and it would restore it to being white again-may be a little bit harder on it, so I would recommend that they do it under ultraviolet light. And so anyway, that's how those things were made.

Now in that process of making those, there was Freddy, who was helping me. Nice guy, horseplayer-but he wasn't the most sophisticated guy, really. One of the evidences of that and one of the first things I saw about Jack-because Jack worked there in that place. He did a lot of things, but he was their finisher, which is one of the more sophisticated jobs in that kind of a shop. And he had his all fingers-

MR. SIMMS: Jack had all his fingers.

MR. IRWIN: Jack had all his fingers. And Freddy had already lost three-

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: -which tells you how each one proceeded to do their work. Jack has always-never been rushed, takes his time, puts everything-does everything right. And so I really very quickly gravitated to Jack. Jack didn't have any idea about art or any of that stuff at all. He'd been in 20 different worlds. He started out in Tennessee, where he was an orphan. And he was raised like a mountain man, kind of Tennessee, and his first business was to make concrete blocks and sell them. And he made this, and he made that, and made this and made that.

And Jack has a-the classic example of an inquiring mind. Any time there's a new material comes on-graphite, say, comes on as a material-he immediately gets interested, and he buys whatever it is, and he experiments with it. So very quickly he becomes sort of resident expert in graphite or anything made with graphite, any material.

He makes all his own paints. He mixes them all and brings-he knows where to buy the pigments for them. He knows what the binders are. He has more sophisticated binders and the best kind of pigments and methods as such. He made gaming things for Las Vegas. He made stuff for NASA. When we did those columns, he made our own compounds, and they were so sophisticated that the Air Force wanted them.

MR. SIMMS: You're talking about the acrylic columns that you were-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Right. Anyway, I had a nice affinity for Jack right from the very beginning. And I don't know exactly how we slowly got together, but from that day on, almost everything-at least a good deal of what I did-anything technical, he did it.

And I think the columns were probably-they were part of our real getting together; also, the cardboard furniture-

MR. SIMMS: Right. I don't know if you feel like we've talked enough about the discs, because the next thing is the columns, if you wanted to jump to them.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Well, the next thing is not the columns; there's one element in between, which nobody's ever seen.

So having done the disc, basically I was no longer a painter. And I had come to an end there. And so in my naïve way I thought that maybe the best way to break the frame was the idea of adding a third dimension to it. In other words, I was already adding a third dimension, but to push that, that the third dimension would essentially break the mystique of the two-dimensional frame.

And so I came up with a glass. That was, again, that thing of a compound curve. [Sketches.] That's the shape of it.

So it was just a sheet of glass-it's simply a curving plane, but since it's out of glass, and it's curved enough that it can free-stand, just stands on the ground. And they're about six foot tall, and they would almost quiver when you stand them. And so-yeah, and they're just drape-formed. You build an iron form that has that shape in it, and you drape it over it. It's a little more complicated than that, but you drape it over, and it just takes the shape of a form. Then you let it cool out, and you've got this freestanding thing, which is really-it was quite pretty. It was beautiful. Okay. Jack is involved with the glass. He actually makes the mold and finds the company, which was down in the San Pedro area. They shaped the first-that one for me.

MR. SIMMS: And any specific kind of glass?

MR. IRWIN: Well, at that time I was just using a regular sheet of glass. I didn't have the money to have it annealed afterwards, to make it so if it broke, it would fracture in a lot of pieces. It was an unsafe piece of glass.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And I tried different things. I tried painting it in here and fuzzing it out, as it went. Nothing seemed to really improve it just as a pure shape. But also, again, I had no money at that time at all. I wasn't selling anything. And I didn't have the money to push it further; plus this thing scared the hell out of me, because to move it, you had to get a couple of people, and we'd take hold of the ends and-like Jack and I would move the thing. But I figured if I sent it out in the world, somebody was going to lose an arm. Didn't know how to handle it and didn't know what they were doing. And so it was dangerous.

And so I finally broke it. From the halfway across the room, I threw hammers at it until it finally-

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: -it cracked and it broke it.

MR. SIMMS: And so you made one. You just had one of these.

MR. IRWIN: I think so, just one.

MR. SIMMS: All right.

MR. IRWIN: I've thought about making it again, now. But I'd have to go over it-so-but it was very interesting. So that preceded the acrylic columns. And maybe it was just as good as they are. By the way, I got a good lesson-well, maybe we shouldn't go to that now. Wait, we won't go to that.

MR. SIMMS: Okay. But-

MR. IRWIN: There's a thing about history.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: Jack and I redid the columns recently. And he came to me and said that the material has improved so much that we can make these things twice as good. Clearer, more stable; also if they had any cast, if you look down the end on plastic, or you see older plastic, it yellows. This has very, very, very slight blue color, which is much better for transparency than yellow. Yellow was not a good color-a lot of yellow.

But the thing that I thought was interesting is that we made them, and I showed them, and people-I think some people really liked them, of course, but everybody wanted to buy an old one.

MR. SIMMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] This is just last year-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: -when you exhibited them-

MR. IRWIN: Right.

MR. SIMMS: -that people liked the new ones, but they only wanted the old ones from 1970?

MR. IRWIN: The history. [They laugh.]

MR. SIMMS: Right. They're buying history.

MR. IRWIN: They wanted the history. They wanted the history of them. That gave it meaning for them. But the new ones were just gorgeous, just brilliant, beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Also, I didn't sell one, which is-it goes back a little bit, a few years where I never sold anything. And so the way I felt about it is, I got my mojo back.

MR. SIMMS: Right. [They laugh.] The columns have a chevron kind of shape.

MR. IRWIN: Well, they're basically-you have something that's transparent like that, but they're made on the simple principle of a prism. But it's kind of a wing shape to it-which is much more elegant, and the nose is flattened slightly and just does 10 times more things-more effervescent, more-for catching light, much better, being completely just a plane that you think might be there, like a vapor in the air. So it does all that kind of stuff in the newer-

MR. SIMMS: If someone walks behind it also, they get sort of fragmented and-

MR. IRWIN: It does-it's enough of a prism in that all the things that happen in a prism happen, but they happen in a much more elegant way. Anyway, so this came after the dots, was not successful.

MR. SIMMS: The drape-form glass sheet.

MR. IRWIN: Right. Also at that time I started experimenting. I took the room next door to my studio and I coved all the corners and painted the whole thing white-floor, everything, as-

MR. SIMMS: At Mildred Avenue-

MR. IRWIN: Mildred Avenue.

And somewhere in that period of time I found the scrim material. So I started experimenting with it, stretching it in this room. I also made the simple observation that if I'm going to make something that's not a frame and not an object as such, I'm still thinking in frame and object terms. The idea of it being ephemeral was certainly a possibility, how to break that-

[Audio break.]

MR. IRWIN: [In progress] -the glass, the column are the two sort of sculptural things I did, but they are still, finally, sculptures. So the third dimension, obviously, was not the answer to my concerns. Certainly it was an element which is still in free play, but it's not crucial to it. So I borrowed and rented or whatever every light source made and put it in that room, and I was just-I was still working on these things-

MR. SIMMS: With coved corners in the room-

MR. IRWIN: The room was coved enough. It's not a ganzfeld, but it's the same principle as the ganzfeld. It's just not a completely round-

MR. SIMMS: So when you look at an edge, you don't see-

MR. IRWIN: Exactly. You're not drawn to the edges or the corners. I'd just set the light in there for days and go look at it every day, all day, and work on stuff, go look at it, stretch some pieces of scrim in there.

I didn't know what I was doing, but I was obviously building a little bit of a vocabulary-on the simple observation that the thing about a bronze-just as a concept, the idea of bronze, which is made to transcend, to last as long as possible, to be immune to decay. And then also the whole energy of the ganzfeld. I really felt that possibly, whatever I would work with would be about energy as opposed to matter. That it could be effervescent, only to last for a short period of time, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So light, obviously, was the most obvious pure energy. At the time, I could not separate the object from that property of being-

MR. SIMMS: You mean to say the light source from the light.

MR. IRWIN: The light source. Also, you're going up against the grain of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people looking-hundreds of years of people looking at the thing. So as long as there's a thing there, and people are still-they were interesting. Each one of them gave something interesting.

The one thing I took away from that was-one possibility at least. At the time, the very beginning, I did not act directly on it, although I've used it all the way back, was fluorescent, and the reason is that fluorescent-first of all, it's on the wall, but the plug is gone. I don't see it, or you can make the plug be gone; you can make the plug be gone on other things, but it always has to come from the object, the source to where you plug it in the wall.

The fluorescent also was, in a way, the least sophisticated, or the dumbest thing, which allowed you to get more involved with an ambiance than with a source.

MR. SIMMS: I see.

MR. IRWIN: Everybody tends to want to make real sophisticated sources. To me, the other way around is what worked, just to deal with the least sophisticated source so that it becomes less and less and less of an element in the dialogue.

MR. SIMMS: Well, I look forward to, eventually, when we get to the work you're doing today, because this is where all of this stuff really is so-

MR. IRWIN: I did it really well at Berkley. The triangulation.

MR. SIMMS: Right, in the "Space as Support" exhibition.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. And that triangulation thing. I made my own fixtures there.

MR. SIMMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] This was '79, I think.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, the fixtures instead of this kind, which is how they are now basically, are structurally not-

MR. SIMMS: So these are the rectangular fixtures.

MR. IRWIN: Right. So what I did is I made a fixture that was made like this-[sketching].

MR. SIMMS: So, rounded-

MR. IRWIN: A wire would come down with a bead on it, which is slipped in this slot so I could hang it from that with just-and here's the fixture. [Sketching.]

MR. SIMMS: So it's still a rectangle, but it's turned now vertical rather than horizontal-

MR. IRWIN: Right.

MR. SIMMS: -and it's rounded on the edges.

MR. IRWIN: And they were made so they could lock together. So you could make a long line of them, and they would not be wiggly or warpy. They would have structural integrity. So I used it extensively early on.

MR. SIMMS: And you chose your fluorescent hues because they're more pink, and they're more bluish ones, if I understand correctly.

MR. IRWIN: Well, 65 kelvin is daylight, and so that's for us the most neutral. Interesting enough, nobody in the industry-not all the big ones-none can make 65 kelvin because some guy, some very eccentric guy, I'm told in Chicago, holds the patent on it. So they make 66 or 64 or what have you, except maybe he'll give the patent every now and then to somebody. Like, the most recent one was-I can't think of the name-Joey would remember it-they're actually in Indonesia or someplace that actually makes the only pure daylight.

They then also made some colors. You have warm white, cool white, daylight-what they called daylight-and all kinds of mixtures in between based on what they think is compatible color to live with. The tendency is to lean towards warm colors. In other words, the sources of light, as we identify them, are like fire in the sky and other elements in between, where it bounces off surfaces or what have you. And most light in houses is on the warm side. Everybody's more comfortable. Now that's becoming less and less true because the origin of it is becoming less and less-we're not aware of it.

And I did some other small projects with lights like that. I was never really satisfied with any of them

completely; that's why I didn't focus on it or stay there. But that was the closest to just pure energy for me.

Now, the scrim enters into it, which also has a tendency to take the focus out of it and make it spatial. So you take the two together-

MR. SIMMS: At the Walker, you did the wedge, where you combined the two elements.

MR. IRWIN: The building was like this, one of those kind of buildings with beams that crossed it, so I took the scrim and put it from there down to the floor-[sketching]-diagonally down, and then the fluorescent ones were right there, tucked behind the beam-the other side of the beam. So you didn't see the light source. Again, a good one because it's very spread out; it's not pointed. It doesn't have hot spots or what have you. It was very important that it didn't have any hot spots. A sort of even light, which is also one of the downsides of it, in terms of it has little-very little drama in it. And so it doesn't make a good object per se, unless you start wanting for it not to be a focal point.

So now we go-well, a little bit of a period of time goes by while all this experimenting is going on, and I don't remember exactly what order, but at some point, I move out of Mildred. I gave up the studio. I had a space on Market Street.

MR. SIMMS: Seventy-two Market Street.

MR. IRWIN: And I never really worked in there, never made anything in there. I made the cardboard-I'd also met Ed Wortz at that time-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: I don't have this idea of conditional art yet in my mind. I'm still perfectly in between. I meet Ed Wortz; I do the Market Street program with-

MR. SIMMS: Josh Young.

MR. IRWIN: -Josh Young. We used it as the gallery space for exhibiting the Market Street program; that's why it's on Market Street. That's why we call it Market Street.

MR. SIMMS: And right before that was the Habitability symposium also.

MR. IRWIN: Somewhere-well, yeah. I'm not quite sure of the order there. We'll have to get into it a little bit because once I did the Habitability-which by the way, for a young artist in the middle of nowhere, who I was in that, for me to actually house the first international symposium on long-term space travel-and people came from all over the world, because NASA, of course, had the pull. So from 15 different disciplines, came from all over-from India, from France, from England, from Japan. They all came because, naturally, everybody wanted to be involved with NASA. And so we did that, and in housing that, I came up with the use of sonotubes to make the front door.

The sonotubes were used architecturally by Frank Gehry, and doing a refit for the Hollywood Bowl-and the furniture became the furniture, which is a strange-Frank Gehry now says, in a moment of inspiration he suddenly thought of it, and he rushed out and had some made, which is-I mean, the photographs clearly say that that stuff already existed. And the really big inventive thing that made that material work-because I liked them too; they had a nice quality and I played with it this-

MR. SIMMS: You're talking about cardboard, just corrugated cardboard.

MR. IRWIN: No, the logs.

MR. SIMMS: Oh, right. Glued together.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, yeah. Glued together with-they made great acoustical material. They had a nice surface to them. It turned out that when Jack band-sawed that, that was the breakthrough. He band-sawed the thing, and we found that it actually-in other words, we made a shape that was like this, an S shape-[sketching]-and it's like so thick is all. But it sprung, had spring to it; it didn't break, didn't come apart. It's like he invented a whole new material in the world that had not really existed. It didn't have the strength that this thing had, the durability the thing had, a surface quality which was quite nice and pleasant.

MR. SIMMS: So this was the flooring for the symposium. I think you told me before, Jack's idea was to have something that was sound-absorbing, but als-

MR. IRWIN: Well, what I needed was, I'm going to house this thing, and basically, what I'm going to do is I'm

going to take them through three steps of being totally enclosed, i.e., in a capsule. Hermetic in a way. No outside sound, no outside-nothing. You're trapped.

MR. SIMMS: So that's the first day of the symposium, is like that.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Second-the second day of the symposium, I let light into the thing. And on the third day, it's like wide open. And what I'm really having them do is experience what it is they're dealing with, but experience as if they were in a capsule, with all the plusses and minuses that I can-mostly minuses. And then what happens when you let some element into it and then when you break it. So it was putting them through the experience of and having to deal with the things they're talking about.

MR. SIMMS: Right, but also being people crammed into a space where they have to spend-that also is the crucial part of the experience in the space capsule.

MR. IRWIN: It turns out it wasn't pleasant. [They laugh.] They didn't like it. They didn't quite know-and afterwards, they couldn't tell you what had happened. But what I find really funny is they're talking about habitability, and I'm making them experience habitability, and in the afternoon making all the rooms askew in one way or another. So they were too sound-dampened and too reverberant. Too big, too small for them.

MR. SIMMS: These are the additional rooms used for breakout sessions in the afternoons.

MR. IRWIN: Those are the secondary rooms-

MR. SIMMS: In other peoples'studios-

MR. IRWIN: So it was in a period where I didn't know where to go yet. I'm still trying this and trying that, and then doing all the stuff with Ed Wortz, the anechoic chamber stuff and the whole idea of electroencephalogram, measuring all my brainwaves and what I'm doing and having discussions with him about that-so all that was gathering wool, was gathering information because I really didn't know where to go.

I had found the scrim and-this has a lot of potential-found the fluorescents. And it was interesting. I knew that energy was really a key thing there, but also we're talking about how one looks, how one perceives, how one experiences it, what do you do, what things are in a sense, like the fluorescent lights that are not too about themselves.

I'm finding stuff that has energy and effervescence and doesn't become objectlike, doesn't fall back into the old-because I'm having not just to do them; I'm having to break old habits. I'm having to break, I mean, God, centuries of habits of looking a certain way and seeing things in a certain order. And the whole idea of a museum, where you take everything away and then all of a sudden, you put it in a museum, and it's right back into the old context. So I know I've got to break the walls of it. I've got to engage you in a way which is not traditional-a lot of stuff and a lot of experimenting.

So that didn't produce any traditional things, but I think the Market Street program is a very interesting program. I think the symposium thing was a very interesting situation. And I'm working with Jack on this, so now Jack has become-for whatever reason, because I wasn't, we weren't making any money. I always paid him, though, something, because Jack-the Jacks in the world, surely at that point-it's like my big argument with Frank Gehry when he just destroyed the thing-as a moneymaking thing.

MR. SIMMS: The chairs?

MR. IRWIN: Right. The Easy Edges furniture. Yeah, I put time in it, but I was learning from it. He put time in it and was learning from it-we were getting certain stuff from, and potentially, possibly, it could have been a moneymaker. But guys like Jack, that's not their thing. Jack, he's a craftsperson; he makes things, but he also has to make a living from it. I have free time, as an artist.

So when-basically, when he [Gehry] pulled the rug out, the one person who really got hurt was Jack. He went bankrupt.

MR. SIMMS: Because he had put money into-

MR. IRWIN: He's the only one that actually put money into it, besides time. He put money into setting up to build this stuff, to make it. To produce the Easy Edges. And I just-you can't do that. That's just not ethical, you know. He and I lost something-he said, “Well, I lost this, I've lost that.” He didn't lose anything that was crucial to him. I didn't lose anything that was crucial to me. I learned more than I lost. Paid for a good education. He probably got just as good an education from it.

Jack turns out to be a real aesthetician in his own way, but he's a maker of things, and that's where his-so he

can't do that. So basically, I always appreciated Frank, and we're okay; we're kind of friends now. But I just-he was out of my life. To me, you just can't do that. You can't go around killing friends and people that you're working with, I don't care what your excuse is. So I did not really talk to Frank for a long, long time.

I appreciate Frank now. I think he was a part of what was going on in Venice. I think he's really changed the world of architecture. I think whether you like his buildings or don't like his buildings-I remember going to Australia and seeing the Opera House. Very famous. There it is. That was a competition in which a guy won, and he was just-he was like a woodworker, a craftsperson. And so when they went to build the thing, it took them three times, four times as long, four times as much money. They had a lot of start-and-stops on it. They played hell doing it.

Forgetting everything else, Frank, when he did Bilbao, which I've never seen, but the thing about Bilbao is that all the parts, this eccentric shape-all the parts of it were essentially made separately and put together. It was all done with a computer, a whole new idea about the use of materials and tensions and structure that change. He changed architecture. He changed the nature of architecture.

All of a sudden, all that eccentricity has now become available, and he's married architecture to the computer. And even if you hate every one of his buildings, that's a pretty big contribution right there all by itself. You can just stand on that one.

In terms of Bilbao, I give Bilbao a pass also in the sense of my main objection to architecture in relationship to museums is that basically they're all unethical. One of the responsibilities for an architect is to provide a space that is useable and enhances the possibilities for what you do.

But mostly, museums are just the opposite; they're horrible spaces, anti-art; they can't be used. They can't function; they overwhelm it. So in a way, they become objects in themselves many times, almost sculptures, and they get a lot of aggrandizement out of it. It's a blue-sky project. All understandable as to why they do it, but unethical.

MR. SIMMS: Right. People are coming to see the architecture-

MR. IRWIN: They should be taken out and shot, okay? [They laugh.] In terms of Bilbao, the one difference there is that they did not really want a museum; they wanted a monument. They wanted a thing that would bring people to Bilbao, which was kind of in the middle of nowhere at that point in time. So in a way, it was successful, because they didn't ask for a real art museum. It partially functions like all the others, all the other unethical buildings. But it's a real question of ethics.

That's the big, critical difference between artists and architects. I don't have responsibilities in that way; I have another set of responsibilities. I march to a different drum than they do. One of the things about being an architect, which must be painful when you start thinking of yourself as an artist, is all the codes and all the limitations of physicality and having a responsibility to attend to immediate social uses, functions, what have you.

MR. SIMMS: You had an opportunity at Dia:Beacon, which we can talk about another time, to intervene in-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. We'll get to that-it's going to take a while. I mean, we're talking 50, 60 years here, and every one of them's got-all these things were very necessary.

I didn't know where to go, but I had a lot of room to learn. But basically, it was all still on the same track, whether I was doing this and doing this and doing this. And we had-we can talk about the Market Street program at some point.

[END AUDIO TRACK.]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Robert Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on February 16, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is card number three. And we're finishing today's discussion.

MR. IRWIN: We're moving to the end of the studio.

MR. SIMMS: Right. So you did the Market Street program with Joshua Young, who was a student of yours at UC Irvine-

MR. IRWIN: Well, I did several things, not the Art and Technology thing, but I went through the process of meeting some very distinguished scientists and-

MR. SIMMS: Through the Habitability symposium.

MR. IRWIN: Habitability-well, even before that. For the Art and Technology, that's when I met Richard Feynman, spent some time with him, which was very exhilarating. And then with Ed Wortz, of course, all that time, in a real intense kind of dialogue. Like we used to get together I think, I don't know, every 10 days or something, and we spent time together in the beginning and then doing all that experimenting.

MR. SIMMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The anechoic chamber, the EEG-

MR. IRWIN: Ganzfeld, the EEG, the-just the whole idea of how does one cross-discipline, which we were getting into at the time, but cross-disciplining is a very desirable thing. People talk about it all the time and it almost never works. At universities they love the idea of having a cross-discipline, but there are some real problems. And they have to be resolved before you can even start the dialogue. And so that's how we started. How do people from two different disciplines find a way of communicating or working together, spending time together? There was that whole ongoing dialogue.

I was making the glass plane, finding the scrim-the process of finding that, the process of experimenting with that. In the beginning, of course, you're a maker of things. And so you're looking for materials that would lend themselves to-in this case, being vapor. And there aren't very many. You use simple things, such as string, a lot-just string and shadows that existed in spaces. And as I did that, I started to sow the seeds for a conditional art, using these conditions.

Now, through that process I think I was an early installation artist, in a sense. I did those kind of things. I was an early art-in-public-places artist. And the whole dialogue about the difference between art in public places and public art.

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: Art in public places, of course, has been popularized now. And during the-I hate to use the word "installations," because that's become insane. It's like people just take everything in the studio down and dump it in the-

MR. SIMMS: Well, that's one of Duchamp's legacies. Duchamp, by the way, a wonderful artist who opened a lot of doors, and I know you've referred to him very positively as a kind of-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah.

MR. SIMMS: But there's a very reductive understanding of what he was doing-let me take the clock off the wall and the few things you have in the studio and stick them together, and that's-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: There, I've made my thing. But you haven't asked any questions. You've imitated a style.

MR. IRWIN: But, see nobody's struggling with all this stuff. You have to deal with the philosophic shifts here.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: They're not. They're still basically operating from the same paradigm. Unfortunately. And so that's what I was doing in the beginning, was trying to gather pieces and bits-i.e., of information, of experiences, of experiments and materials-just finding materials that lent themselves-and then experimenting with them, very low-key in the beginning-to deal with this idea which I think I'm now naming a conditional art.

MR. SIMMS: Conditional art, which-the reason I mention the Market Street program is because it's a different kind of thing. You didn't produce work for that.

MR. IRWIN: The way to understand it is step by step. You take phenomenology as a philosophy. You take the dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, that whole dialogue. Then you have Alfred Schutz, the first attempt to try and-let's take this as a way of thinking, or, what do we know? What can we learn? How can we-you know. He started trying to figure out how action would work in the world. So the Market Street program is Alfred Schutz, you know. And having then come all the way up through Merleau-Ponty, I was, obviously, fascinated by that thing. So for me, he was the, what do you want to call it, the technician on the thing. It was his thing and I was learning. I learned a lot from him.

MR. SIMMS: Josh Young was the technician?

MR. IRWIN: Josh Young, absolutely. And I never claimed it as my program.

MR. SIMMS: No, right, although you were listed as a co-vice president with Walter Hopps, but that was, I think,

because you were helping him raise money.

MR. IRWIN: Yes, exactly.

MR. SIMMS: For the-

MR. IRWIN: And I'm just-I lent the space for-

MR. SIMMS: And you lent the space for it.

MR. IRWIN: And I'm also the one who could explain it better than he could, because I had a whole background for it. And he did not. He had a very complicated philosophic, technical explanation that was like trying to explain quantum physics to somebody.

MR. SIMMS: Sure.

MR. IRWIN: But it works. I mean, it worked. It was very interesting. No one has ever really taken up on it.

MR. SIMMS: Right. And it was using questionnaires to poll the L.A. art community, is that true?

MR. IRWIN: We used the L.A. art community as the guinea pig. And it was basically a very simple methodology in which there were a couple of questions that were very answerable, that anybody could answer. They were not, I don't think, prejudiced in any way or elicited a particular kind of response. And then over a period of time, coalescing the information and finding out how a community actually becomes a community in the world, which has very little judgments involved in it. The key is to get the community to define itself.

And the problem with sociology is that sociology was corrupting what it looked at. No matter how well-meaning they were, they corrupted what they looked at. And so this was a way in which you did not enter in or make any decisions or judgments or any rules for the thing.

MR. SIMMS: Because sociology was predetermining the results by the kinds of questions and methods that it was using?

MR. IRWIN: Yes.

MR. SIMMS: And so this was an attempt to allow patterns to emerge spontaneously out of the community.

MR. IRWIN: Exactly. To help them happen spontaneously. And the big argument in the middle of that was with the, at that time, strong feminist movement whose first observation was, “You guys-you're both males; you're both guys. And so we're not going to play with you because it's going to be a guy thing, and you're going to fit us into a corner somewhere.”

That was the perfect question to be asked. In other words, if that was true, then everything we were doing was-we might as well stop, because it was all about the idea that judgments were not made externally or by someone else. And rules were not made, and organizational patterns were not made, and influences were not made-by some point of view.

MR. SIMMS: That was Judy Chicago who asked you that question, right?

MR. IRWIN: Judy-well, two of them, Miriam Schapiro, too. They're two very tough ladies. And so we said to them, very simple, “God, you hit the nail right on the head. If you show us now or later that in any way we've done that, then we might as well quit and go home, because that's exactly what we're trying to do, to find out whether or not there's a way, essentially, to observe the patterns that a community makes in terms of its own rhymes and reasons without any input into that.”

MR. SIMMS: And was that in response to the way that the critics and the museums and the galleries were creating their own-

MR. IRWIN: No, our interest was totally whether Schutz was full of shit or not.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] So it was really testing out his-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, absolutely. He presented us with something which looked very, very beautiful and very interesting. I think the fact that it happened at that time-one could say, well, it happened at this moment in time. How does that intersect with all these other questions you're just asking? To us, that's a very interesting dialogue. It would take place in lieu of all this, but we were just trying to find out, in principle, does it work, or is it possible, or does it have to be tweaked a little bit, or whatever?

MR. SIMMS: And that was sort of the last thing in the studio before you moved out, sold it.

MR. IRWIN: Right. So that whole little area there is more like me going to school, taking a number of different classes, in a way.

MR. SIMMS: And you owned that studio?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, it was the first building I ever owned.

MR. SIMMS: And then you sold it, in part because I think you said that when you removed the wall during the symposium, the city had objected to-

MR. IRWIN: Well, the city has a permit process. And I didn't go through any process. I didn't follow the rules. I just did it in the enthusiasm of the moment. And they said, "You broke all the rules. You can't do this. And so therefore, we're not going to play with you anymore. You want to come back and draw permits and all that-we're not interested." So basically they froze my assets, as it were. [They laugh.]

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: So, I had to sell it. Cheaply. I didn't have a lot of options. I mean, the amount of money was insignificant. You know, I think it was $12,000.

MR. SIMMS: That you sold it for?

MR. IRWIN: I think so, yeah.

MR. SIMMS: And you sold it to-

MR. IRWIN: To Doug Chrismas.

MR. SIMMS: And it became another one of his Ace Gallery locations.

MR. IRWIN: It was an Ace Gallery for a while. He never paid me a cent. I finally had to foreclose on him at the end of three years.

MR. SIMMS: Oh.

MR. IRWIN: And we had to go through a whole long, drawn-out foreclosure thing, which we can go through if you need to.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] No, it's okay.

END AUDIO TRACK]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on February 23, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is card number three.

And as we started talking, we were talking about your relationship with Pace Gallery and how that got started. I think that's a nice starting point.

MR. IRWIN: All that sort of thing is of no great importance, as far as I'm concerned. It didn't change my life in any way, at least at that time.

I think my association with the artists that made up Ferus Gallery, that was important. As I said earlier, we were a little gang of six or eight or whatever it was we were, and we supported each other, so that we did not have to in any way pander to anybody else in the city. At that time there was no critical interest; there was no financial interest; nobody was buying anything; nobody was coming to the openings. It was a small world of people who really liked what they were doing and thought-we all thought each other were good artists. And so that was a support mechanism. It was that simple. It wasn't a financial mechanism. It wasn't social, political, nothing. It was strictly a support thing for us to sort of do what we were doing, as they say, in the wilderness.

MR. SIMMS: And at some point, then-

MR. IRWIN: At some point Arnie Glimcher came. I don't even remember his first visit. But he came and he was interested, and I started doing a series of shows and projects with him somewhere about this time.

MR. SIMMS: Sort of '66, around that time.

MR. IRWIN: But for me the interesting thing at this point where we've come up to, my having a series of questions which I advanced along and came to the point of, essentially, when I observed that we don't perceive the world in a frame, that that's a highly stylized, learned logic, and that that was a question that I couldn't walk away from, which is perception is entirely different, and I think right at the core.

People talk about aesthetics and perception and that sort of thing-and they talk about beauty and what have you, but the whole definition of that has radically changed, obviously, over the years. It has gone through a back-and-forth kind of process. The history of modern art, as I-and what I had just done-was a phenomenological reduction, which is reexamining all the rhyme and reason for all these things.

And as I say, I did it for myself with the work, and I arrived at a place where none of the practices that I was involved in or had any expertise at any longer were really valid. What I had was a methodology, a way of working, that had become the heart and soul of what I'm doing.

And so at this point what was important suddenly is that I have a question which, essentially, if I stay in the studio, I'm not going to be able to address it, but didn't have any idea whatsoever-because the magnitude of that was such that the only thing I knew that I could do was to get rid of my tools and all the stuff I'd learned and put myself out of the studio, get rid of the studio.

Now, first of all, I just kind of went out to the Four Corners area and spent some time with myself. Now, I had visited that once before, very naively-I pretty much walk into all these things somewhat naï vely.

When I was very young, going back [to] right after the war-I had been there [Europe] in the Army when I was 17 and 18, and I went back because I thought it was-I was enchanted by it, and I went back and just spent some time here, there, and everywhere. I say here, there, and everywhere. I don't know if I mentioned before, but every time you had to exchange your money, there was a way to capitalize on it by going to other places. So I moved around some.

And I ended up on an island, called Ibiza. And maybe I mentioned this before, but it's at the base of this. I spent eight months without carrying on a word of conversation, really, with anybody. It wasn't a withdrawal. I fell into it. It wasn't an intellectual thing. I sort of fell into it backwards. I spent all my time looking, spending time walking and looking and looking. And after I-say I'd been in Paris for a while; if somebody asked me where I was, I couldn't have told them, really. I didn't know the names of anything. I didn't know the locations of anything. But I could tell you what it felt like and what I was enamored with. And it was really, really a very moving experience for me.

And that period of not carrying on a word of conversation at first is very alarming, because normally when we start to isolate ourself like that, which is what you're doing, we reach out and educate ourselves or start a conversation or read a book or do a drawing or some kind of-all these things are connecting yourself to the world as such. I used to liken it sort of like going on a telephone exchange board: you're pulling each of these plugs out, and at some point you are alarmed by that. Suddenly it's actually frightening, for a moment.

And then it turns into this really very, very peaceful and satisfying time of where you actually have time to examine why you think the things you think-starting with simply, let's say, you have 20 friends, and you realize that half of those friends are not friends; they're colleagues, A quarter of those people are people you do business with. Good people, and you're interested and so on, but they're not the people you really have empathy for or real attachment to. And so you slowly have a chance to examine all the rhyme and reasons of why you do the things you do and where and in what way you participate in that. So that essentially spread to everything, about why I do what I do, exactly.

And when I went out on the desert, it was kind of the same thing. Listen, there's nothing mystical here.

MR. SIMMS: Right. We're not talking about meditation.

MR. IRWIN: No, we're not talking about any kind of practice, or any real, clear idea. It's just a place to sort things out. And it's simple things you find out; like, for example, I'll be out there, and since I was used to doing things or making things or acting on my aesthetic-on my interests or what have you, I would make gestures out there, very simple gesture-a line, a sight line, a place, a kind of power spot, what the Indians would call-but it was not, again, not mystical, even in the sense they are.

But I would do those things, and it became very clear that all those things had absolutely no cachet or no-there was nothing real there with regards to the art world; not things you necessarily could write about, or certainly anything you could show. I couldn't carry them to New York. Suddenly, there, right away is a complete contradiction, the whole idea of making things that are in some way a part of a dialogue and a support mechanism and what have you. Yeah, I understand them. They make perfect sense in their way, but they have nothing to do with what I was interested in.

And so that was eye-opening. So the idea of that whole period now becomes a series of-it's what I'm sort of setting up-a series of-not experiments, but it's trying this, trying that. And so in that period of time I did the Market Street program; I did the work with Ed Wortz, which, as I've already told you, radically changed my life. I spent the time in the desert.

I also said at the time I would go anywhere for anybody, for instance. I didn't have any connections to the world. I just made myself available. I said, I'll go anywhere for anybody, for anything. At that time I would get a small invitation-this was in the â��60s, so everybody questioned right away your motives. Why are you coming? Are you getting paid? Are you proselytizing? Are you a preacher? Are you an advocate or what have you? So that was a very interesting thing.

Students at the time were leery. But I would get these little invitations, a little junior college or a little arts center or something like that, and I would go there, and basically I would do what I'm doing right now. I would ask myself a question, which I didn't necessarily know the answer to. I would work on that thing for an hour or whatever the length of time was, and possibly the next day I would also be there in a more intimate situation. And let's say I would fail to answer the question, so then the next four or five days I'd be driving to somewhere else or something, and I would think about what went wrong and why it went wrong and ask myself a new question.

So it was an interesting adventure. Sometimes I gave a rather reasonable explanation of what my question was about, and the next time I would not; I'd have to say at the end, well, that didn't really work. It was a very freeing kind of thing to be able to say that, to get up there to do a talk and then say, well, that didn't work, that was a failure.

MR. SIMMS: Did this include conversation with the students as well?

MR. IRWIN: The second part. I always think that to stand up in an auditorium and ask a question after somebody's been talking for half an hour, an hour or something is a really complex and difficult thing to do, so I would give everybody an open invitation that I would just be sitting on a corner here some-tomorrow, 2:00 till whenever. And then you have a really fun kind of exchange, and you go back and forth, and everybody gets involved.

So I've now been invited and lectured-or talked, spent time, whatever; usually it starts out with a lecture because that's the way they want to do it-in every state in the union but two, every single campus of the University of California; I've been to Harvard three times, Yale two or three times, Princeton. You name it. This has been quite an odyssey now and has been very interesting. It has turned out to be very interesting.

MR. SIMMS: What are the two states, just out of curiosity, that you have not been to?

MR. IRWIN: In a way it's kind of obvious when you think about it, because I don't lobby for any of this. In other words, somebody has to just ask me. North Dakota, which is a kind of not a place with-I've spent time there; I mean driving through it, but-

MR. SIMMS: Maybe the invitation's in the mail.

MR. IRWIN: And no invitation from West Virginia either.

MR. SIMMS: Oh, West Virginia.

MR. IRWIN: Appalachia. I've also spent time there, but not in that formal sense.

So that's been going on now for all-that started then. I still do it. I haven't been doing as much of it lately. It's gotten a little harder for me to do.

I also at that period of time did my first teaching, which I only did for-I think it was five years altogether. And I developed, I think, a whole way of going about that. I had a lot of good students. Only they were not students. I mean I had a lot of people I worked with, because I didn't teach art. Essentially I dealt with every individual as a unique sensibility. For example, I would go to an art school and there would be 10 students doing hard-edge painting, and then within a few hours you'd meet a hard-edge instructor. But then you would look at the work, say, for example, let me just look here, hard-edge painting, and when they stretched the canvas, it had a slight bow in it. Not possible. That's not possible. You look at, say, a Brancusi studio, or you look at a Mondrian studio, there's a sensibility there that underwrites that kind of work, and, well, you couldn't let an edge be bowed. That's just not possible. It's not possible.

MR. SIMMS: You're saying it's not a style that you imitate.

MR. IRWIN: No.

MR. SIMMS: It's a commitment that runs through-

MR. IRWIN: It's a state of mind. It's a way of looking at things. It's a way of organizing. Each of these people have that unique potential to them. And that's why if I named all the students that became well known-none of them worked like me. And I obviously didn't teach these people that sort of thing. I worked with them, underwrote their sensibility, talked about [what] they're doing, played-went, visited them, spent time with them, not just in the school or in the studio, which was a great education for myself.

MR. SIMMS: I think that it's important that this is all part of this moment, after you've left the studio.

MR. IRWIN: First of all, the idea I became very aware of-and I won't go through examples of how I became aware, but I became very aware of how big a responsibility it was. You hear guys teaching all the time, teaching, some say, well, I'm only doing this to support my work. I say, bullshit; you can't do that. That's also why I only did it for five years, because it's a full-time job. You have to completely immerse yourself into what's going on there and who these people are, and essentially not direct their thought or-these minds are very open and very vulnerable at that point in life. You can screw them up just as easy, if not easier, than teaching, as it were. So anyway-I'm just brushing through that-that was another activity I was doing. I was spending the time alone. I was spending the time-that period of teaching was a great education for me.

Also, experimentally, I was trying out new materials. I now knew Jack Brogan. I'd spend time with him. We'd really go over what was going on. I would make these visits. I'd go around and look at all these, like, shops-or these parks, you know, where everybody rents a space?

MR. SIMMS: Oh, you mean industrial-type areas?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, industrial park, and see what people were doing. You'd meet people and they had different people doing different stuff, new materials. Especially then there were all the plastics that were going on. It was the earliest part of fiber optics and the early period of time for -what's the one now that-I can't remember the names of things. But anyway, I spent time doing that. I would take about every three months that I'd tour around and see what was going on.

MR. SIMMS: And this is in L.A. still, or this-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, basically it's in L.A. Basically it's in L.A. and surrounding environments. So I had that all. So it's really, in a sense, a whole period of time of educating myself, of trying to find out what were some alternatives, both physically, intellectually.

And then also at the end of that, then was when I actually had to start teaching myself philosophy, which turned out to be a very important thing to do, which is not something I would have even considered before. I'm not somebody who is intellectual in any shape or form. It was all visceral and tactile, what have you. But there were certain arguments that were base arguments, going through the whole history of philosophy, that were crucial that you had to know. You had to understand them, and you had to have some sense of how they'd been formed and what they'd been formed of and what conclusions were being drawn. And so it was not about reading secondary things or articles so much; it was about going to the source.

And at the end of that, I squeeze out-I find myself that in terms of the running history, essentially the one I'm the closest to would be Merleau-Ponty, and then after that, Alfred Schutz, who very few people know about, which was Alfred Schutz being the basis of the Market Street program. I just underwrote it because I really thought any kind of experimentation with what Schutz was trying to do was very needed at the time, still is needed. How does one take the position of Merleau-Ponty and how does one practice in the world? What import does it have? What way does it change and alter the conditions of our lives?

So Josh Young had a really interesting plan, and I simply worked for him. I could explain it better than he could, but he was actually the mind, the genius behind it. It was a great program. I could have spent the next 20, 50 years working with that material, that activity.

MR. SIMMS: Is one way to describe what you're doing at this point trying to really think about what it means to be an artist and how an artist operates?

MR. IRWIN: In one sense, once I buy an idea with the magnitude of what I did, buy into a whole way of thinking about things, my whole practice fell apart, and the whole idea of being an artist, a gallery artist and that sort of thing, just simply was no longer valid. That's the rhyme and reason of a phenomenological reduction.

I donâ��t know how to briefly explain the whole thing, but it's-the history of modern art is a radical history. Almost all of our histories are homogeneous, one idea, a good idea, and when we build on it, we sophisticate it and so on and so forth, and we practice from it. And in a sense really it works, and it's been very, very

successful. There's a point where that position comes to a limitation; what you know and what you understand and what you're practicing come to a limitation, and you're trapped by your knowledge. So what you have to do-the only thing you can do is what Husserl suggested. He took great pains to say that this is not an antithesis; this is not against anything; it's just simply the only way to go back to the beginning.

It's a very simple thing, but to explain it, let's say I take a simple idea-have I ever done this with you? I want to go to the door.

MR. SIMMS: We talked about the idea of the difference between process and a system.

MR. IRWIN: Okay, so that's where it is. Basically, our thinking, to be functional and operative and to rise as far as it has, it's become a system on which a system is extended and built and built and built. And then we hit a point where the system, based on the original rationale, has reached a limitation, and you're in no position to ask that question. You've become essentially a part of the system. You are the system, in a way.

So he suggests the idea of a phenomenological reduction, which means to take the whole thing apart, i.e., not throwing it away, but to take it apart and go back to the beginning so you're at the point of asking a pure question, if there is such a thing as a pure question, but to ask a question. That's what Kuhn is talking about when he talks about a new paradigm, and the new paradigm now is active. It's one of the reasons why physics became almost philosophy, or purely philosophy, to some degree still is philosophic rather than practical. Because the questions they're asking now have such magnitude, it's going to be a long time before they essentially organize that into a way of going.

MR. SIMMS: Does this tie into this idea of the individual perspective or that sort of-when you're paring back, is it about paring back to-

MR. IRWIN: Paring back to being the individual.

And acting on what it is you know and understand immediately right now, and examining questions, like, for example, to break the frame, to break the object, to get outside of that, in a way is to end up in the middle of nowhere, because that's essentially what everybody else is still doing, by degrees, more and more, historically. But once you're outside of that, you realize that that, as I pointed out the other day, all of that has levels of falsehood that are limitations that are no longer acceptable. So you, in a sense, actually say for a while, “I'm in the middle of nowhere.”

But I'm out now in this whole period trying a little of this, trying a little of that, testing things that I thought had relevance for me, educations that I needed, understandings that I had to work on, to massage them. So I took up the writing at that point because-and I'm not a writer and don't think of myself as one. And my writing, as Ren Weschler said, is pretty dense. You could die from a lack of air in there. But it wasn't done for that. It was done for me. It became another way to think through what I'm doing. The period of time when I didn't carry on a word of conversation, what I got to do during that period was to examine my own mind, how I think about things, how I organize things, what my limitations are, so on and so forth. Literally, you have a chance to examine why you do and how you do and what your strengths and weaknesses and so on are with regards to just how you think about and organize the world for yourself. It's a very enlightening thing to get to do.

Now, I was not smart enough to know to do something like that. I fell into it backwards. You know, I started walking at night in Europe and-

MR. SIMMS: Sure

MR. IRWIN: -just a great pleasure and just beautiful and wonderful sort of thing. But then over a while I began to play with what I felt and how I felt and so on and so forth, without any destination, without any conclusion whatsoever, and no practice, and not owing anybody anything and not being involved in any discipline or any cult or position in the world. So I started to have a better intimacy with what my strengths and weaknesses were.

And I told you at the beginning, and I mean it, I was totally naï ve. I had absolutely no clue. I got out of art school, I got out of my education, without anybody ever asking me a good question. From that, I had a very strong need to re-examine the whole education thing for five years. But also it was a learning process for me. So this whole period is like a learning thing.

MR. SIMMS: And in this period, you're also doing some temporary pieces, in Riko Mizuno's gallery, for instance.

MR. IRWIN: Not right in the beginning. In the beginning, no. But tried to act on this thing a little bit. It was nice that nobody was looking.

MR. SIMMS: What do you mean, no one was looking?

MR. IRWIN: Nobody was looking. So I didn't have any pressure.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: If the thing worked, it worked. It was interesting. If it failed, no problem. People get themselves trapped in this thing of good, bad, and right and wrong, and you can't-it's hard to fail. Then it's hard to experiment.

MR. SIMMS: Are you thinking mainly about the Museum of Modern Art room, where you were actually taking away the label, and it was about trying to not make a visible-

MR. IRWIN: That would really be-I mean, it snapped into place. At the end of this sort of thing, I'd say the Museum of Modern Art is a very good example of suddenly being thrust back into the world. I was doing a little of this here, a little of that, but they're in obscurity. They're in the middle of nowhere. There are hardly any records of that anywhere. Nothing exists. So I was footloose and fancy free, in a way. When they asked me-when the lady-

MR. SIMMS: Jennifer Licht.

MR. IRWIN: -Jennifer Licht asked me to come to the Modern, which came out of the middle of nowhere. I don't even know why or how, other than the fact that she was a very interesting lady, and out of that came what they called projects, which she did, they did, and the Modern may even still be doing; they may have changed the name of it, but one space or room or whatever where somebody in a very experimental mode would come in and work.

When they made the decision to underwrite the collection, which was a good decision for them and it was a great collection to go see and what have you, but at that point they ceased being the Modern. In the beginning they were much more hand-in-fist with the artists. And that one little program, the-

MR. SIMMS: The projects.

MR. IRWIN: -the projects-essentially were the only thing left of a kind of real experimental quality. Issues. People doing things that maybe worked, didn't work, what have you. I mean risky stuff. So anyway, she asked me-

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: All right. She asked me to come, which was, like I say, a bolt out of the blue. In one sense, mentally, I didn't know if I was prepared at all. It was an auspicious occasion. She said, we don't have any money, so we can't pay your way here- but the opportunity, obviously, was too great for me to say no-but I have this empty space; it's empty from this particular date, and if you come, you can do whatever you want to do in there.

So I brought Jack Brogan along. He was my henchman, as it were. He could do just about anything I might imagine to do. And so we came. And we arrived and talked with Jenny Licht and her office, and said, I'm ready to go. She said, well, we got a couple little problems.

The reason why this opportunity was there was the space was unprogrammed, so the room wasn't being used, so therefore it was free. But also, it was not supported. In other words, there was no program, no money allotted to it. So it was kind of sitting in-between, midair. And she said, well, we can take you to the space, but you can't start working. And I probably asked why, and she said, because of the unions here-which she, by the way, had organized, to a great degree. She was a real organizer.

But the painters wouldn't let me paint and the electricians wouldn't let me do-because they're all-that one, obviously, more seriously. But the point is that they get paid to do that, and so therefore I can't do it. They do it, but there's no money to pay them. So therefore, we can't count on that. But also, we can't do it in their face. So what we have to do is we have to do it at night.

So she would let me in at night, and we'd go in there and work-eight, 10 hours or so, and then we'd go, and then we'd come back the next night. So I spent some time in there.

A couple of things that I never will forget. The humor in it, the sort of almost hilarious quality of the fact that each night the room that I had, which was not a very interesting room in itself, was a kind of an odd-man-out room, but the room right next to it was filled with brilliant Brancusis. So I'd have to walk by these Brancusis every night to go in, and walk out by them, and here these things are, absolutely immaculately conceived and

executed, and I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know what I'm going to do.

MR. SIMMS: This was before security cameras, right? So you're sort of sneaking in. But she knows you're there, and she's-[laughs].

MR. IRWIN: I have no idea about security cameras. I never even thought about that.

But the space actually shared something in common with the Brancusi room. It had a slot skylight all the way along the whole back side of the museum there, a slot meaning it was, I don't know, about, say, four foot, five foot wide and about five feet deep, skylight on the top of it, fluorescent-I think eight or nine rows of fluorescents running the length of it, and the old-fashioned kind of egg crate filter at the bottom of that, old-fashioned meaning they had just louvered-it was about two and a half, three inches thick, as opposed to what they do now, which are oftentimes much more refined. Basically, that was the room. And I loved the fact the Brancusis-it's a joke, to do something like that next to something that's so beautifully resolved. You have to have a sense of humor about it.

I think the first thing I did, really, was just to look at the conditions of the room. And since there weren't very many elements-four walls, an entrance, and a skylight-I look up at the skylight, and the first thing I observe is that the skylight is so dirty you can't even see out of it, or almost no light is going through it, which is, I guess, part of why they put fluorescents in, but also to operate at night. So the first thing I did was to go over and clean the skylight.

MR. SIMMS: How did you get up there?

MR. IRWIN: Well, just got up on the roof. Yeah, up on the roof and-

MR. SIMMS: Did you have to get outside?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, I had go get out, and washed it.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] Okay.

MR. IRWIN: And it probably hadn't been washed in 10 years. It was just grimy. In fact, almost, you had to actually almost scrape the stuff off of it. But there was no light, basically, going through that at all. And in the process of that, of course, I'm looking at the skylight, and I look at the lights-

MR. SIMMS: Sorry to interrupt. Did you just do your part, or did you do the part all the way to the Brancusis?

MR. IRWIN: No, no, I just did-

MR. SIMMS: Just your part. Okay.

MR. IRWIN: No, I wasn't volunteering.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: No, it was not a volunteer job to clean up the place.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] Okay.

MR IRWIN: So I cleaned the skylight, which, of course, during the daytime changed a lot of the character of the room, radically changed the character of the room, not necessarily for the good or for bad, but there it was. And then looking at the skylight and the fluorescents in there, I noticed something that was very slight, but over the years, when one light went out, they put another one in, and, you know, in fluorescents, they have cool white, warm white, daylight, et cetera. These are all whites, but one's pinkish and one's bluish and one's greenish and what have you,

So I noticed that they were actually-with the added amount of light in there, I could see the presence of this tube and that tube-being fractured by the grate, it would actually be fractured so that there would be a bit of a green band here or a pink band there. So I went up and actually played with the skylights in terms of fixtures, and I put them-juxtaposed warm, cool, warm, cool, warm, cool, basically, but also green, pink, et cetera, blue, yellow, et cetera. There was a palette there, and there were about eight of them. So actually I had a chance to flip it about four times. And it really, very subtly, put a rainbow in the room, because things were fracturing, so there would be a soft line of green, a soft line of pink, a soft line of blue, so on and so forth. And they were noticeable. I mean, they were not glaring. They were not something most people would see, necessarily, without being told or focused.

So that was essentially the content of this room, this light-which, by the way, maybe I said it before, I'll say it again, one of my observations before I left the studio is that when I finally went three-dimensional, that the rhyme and reason of what made a painting a painting was the same structure that made an object an object, a sculpture. That didn't resolve my question of breaking the frame. So I had to step out, and it had to do with a completely different way of dealing with all these materials.

So I did that. And I used the scrim I had experimented with in that original room for the first time, horizontal, creating half the room with the scrim, half the room without, so there was a real kind of visual and light division in the center of the room, light and shadow. And then I put a piece of wire, which Jack Brogan figured out-we threaded it through a screw at the end so I could tighten it up and tighten it up, put a wire in tension from wall to wall, in which the wire just went into the wall and disappeared.

MR. SIMMS: It was sunk in.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, sunk in, and then the wall was refinished around it. Then the wire was painted slightly a little short distance so that it wasn't anchored. And the rhyme and reason of the wire was that as you looked at these empty walls with this very subtle coloration on them, your eye would be grabbed by the wire, and you could focus on it for a second, but you couldn't hold it. So your eye would slip back to the wall, and it would be at the wall, and then it would be-so it actually suspended your eye in this. If you stood there for a little while, you were in a kind of visual suspension in which there's a room full of rainbows.

MR. SIMMS: And when you say you painted that wire, you mean you painted it white?

MR. IRWIN: Just a little bit of white.

MR. SIMMS: Just out a little bit from-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, took the onus off of it.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: But it was just a wire. So you couldn't concentrate on the wire. Your eye would slip off. But once it slipped off, you couldn't concentrate completely on the wall, because the wire would grab you again at some point. So you find yourself suspended in this space. So in that sense, it was a pretty good piece.

MR. SIMMS: I seem to remember that it had a very tall door so that you actually-

MR. IRWIN: Right, it had no door, really, in a way.

MR. SIMMS: Sort of a tall opening.

MR. IRWIN: Opening, right-floor to ceiling.

MR. SIMMS: So as you approached the room, you actually could see the profile of that scrim coming along it.

MR. IRWIN: Yes, you could. So the door was divided, above and below. More light above, less light below. So that was my first step back into the world.

The little anecdote that makes the whole thing-that kind of completes the story-is that we finished it at night, and my friends Arne Glimcher, who has a good eye, and Jennifer Licht, they come to take a look. There's a little kind of accordion thing in front of the door. The place is open at night, the Modern. And so they come and they're-they're my friends. And in a way they're saying, “Hmm, interesting.” “Well-seasoned.” “Provocative.” And I can see they're having a hard time with it, which is always an uncomfortable moment. But they're being very nice. And then a kid, a black kid, maybe 15, 16 years old, something like that, he looks around the edge of that accordion thing and says, “Hey, what's going on in here?” I said, "I'm just finishing what I'm doing." He said, “Well, is it all right if I come in?” So I said, “Yeah.”

And I could tell immediately-which has always been a clue, and it's still a key clue-is watching him use his body; you can't see it without your body-and how he moves and how he moved through the space. I just did a thing at Pace over the windows, one of the best things I've ever done, with the black panels, okay, opposite. And I can watch people come in; almost nobody saw it. Some people had it pointed out to them, but they still didn't know how to move through it or position their body; I could tell they couldn't see it.

MR. SIMMS: That was just your recent *Dotting the i's & Crossing the t's*, I think.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. So it's-but anyway, I could tell, he just flowed with it. He says, “Wow, man, this is great. Wow, shit.” You know, “Man, okay! All right!” He said, “Thank you” and left. It was really great-but also, I'd

never been that aware of how you can't see without your body. Your body sees-you see as a complete person, complete, whatever you want to call it. Your whole physical thing participates in it.

And so you watch people. The obvious one is orientation, not facing the right way, not knowing how to move through the space, not how to let the different things in the space happen for you or attend them. You don't attend them; you don't see them; they're not there. You then try and Rorschach them or psychoanalyze it to try and find some meaning-structure to hang your perception on. And if it's not there, then obviously you got a problem for those people.

But at the end of that, since it had been done the way it was done, it was a great opportunity to examine this whole thing of is-it-art-because-it's-in-an-art-museum sort of thing. That's part of the structure. Oh, okay, well, it's in a museum; it must be art, so I'll have to work harder at it or what have you.

So they insisted on putting a label on it. Even though they had not authorized it, had not paid for it, and had not acknowledged it, really, but they still, just by habit, couldn't leave the thing without a label on it. So it took away, in a sense, the issue of someone arriving having to decide, is this intended, is it finished? Is it art? In which there are no concrete clues, in the old sense of the word, of the structure, museum structure. So they would take it off. So I went back-

MR. SIMMS: Who would take it off?

MR. IRWIN: I don't know. Somebody at the museum.

MR. SIMMS: I thought you said at some point you had a student who came.

MR. IRWIN: I'm sorry, the other way around. No, I'm sorry. They had the label on there. I took it off.

MR. SIMMS: Oh, you took it off. All right.

MR. IRWIN: Because I visited a few times, and the label would be back there again. So I would take the label off. So then I was going to leave town, so I hired a kid to go by every day and take the label off.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: And they never announced it; they never acknowledged it; I never heard-there may have been a word, but it was never, none of that. So in a great way, it really connected to my time on the desert, all this experimenting around, my education. But it immediately stated the next set of questions, which I then later on stated at the Whitney.

MR. SIMMS: Can I bring you back to one thing there-

MR. IRWIN: Yes.

MR. SIMMS: -which is-

MR. IRWIN: You have to, because I get lost.

MR. SIMMS: This raises an interesting issue, and it's about where the person who is seeing your art comes in here. Because I have heard you say in the past that you have no ambitions for your viewers.

MR. IRWIN: Absolutely.

MR. SIMMS: At the same time, it strikes me that there are-as you said about this young boy who came in and you could see he was keying into something that was there-I'm just wondering if there is any expectation on your part that someone will approach the situation as an individual, setting aside all of their-

MR. IRWIN: I go one step farther, past-I'm sure there are people who do, who can and who will.

MR. SIMMS: I guess the question's about, what about the viewer, for you?

MR. IRWIN: You can't be limited by the day-to-day viewer. We're having a dialogue now which is-during this period of time-kind of dancing in an area of obscurity, obscurity in a sense of the why, what. It doesn't satisfy any of those questions as they have been presently posited, and answered.

I think the funny one was a cartoon that Ad Reinhardt did of someone looking at a painting, and he's saying, “What does it mean?” And the painting says, “Well, what do YOU mean?” And that history is-I'm tacked on to the end of that, in a way, pushing it one step further, at least And maybe one step further is one step too far,

and from which you have to come back. And if communication is your rhyme and reason, then you'd have to, because you have an audience, and what you just asked about the observer.

But communication is not the reason for art. Most people think that it's about a communication, that somebody is communicating something, some point of view, some position, some mystique or whatever, and that there's a purpose behind all that. But let me ask you a couple of questions: of what, why, and to whom? If I ask myself what or why, we start talking about purpose and all these kinds of things, but in each case you are giving away the rhyme and the reason of what you're doing to this outside entity, this other person. In other words, they're now controlling the decision-making.

If you want this person to see it, whoever that person is, and if we start generalizing that person, you get a pretty wide thing. Your life, now, is in a sense committed to that person's critique of the thing: “I don't see it,” “I do see it,” “It doesn't make any sense,” “I don't like it,” “I like it,” “It's wonderful; I'm in love with it; will you marry me?” sort of thing. But you've lost control of the decision-making process. It's now in their hands.

A lot of times when I was teaching students-because sometimes what I was talking about would seem very vague-they'd say, “Well, you got to make a living.” And I'd say, yeah, that's a very good question, except it's not complex enough, not hard enough. Let's talk about the economics of identity, about wanting to keep doing this thing because you want to be loved, or that you want to project love. The minute you put that-you're no longer in control of this thing. The person you're courting loves red; you put a red in your painting. Nothing wrong with that, but that's a whole different kind of rhyme and reason.

If you're going to follow, at any time the why of what you do, you can't let-it's not about selling it. Everybody knows that's crass. But how about being loved? How about having an identity in the world? Doing something just to-hey, I'm here; I exist. Those are really strong, very fundamental motives. But the minute you do that, then you're no longer in control of the decision-making of this thing.

MR. SIMMS: Right. You're giving away the farm.

MR. IRWIN: That may sound a little stringent, but-

MR. SIMMS: Well, this is just why this one thing does interest me a lot, because here I am, someone who obviously enjoys your art, and where I've come down is, and tell me if I'm wrong, is that it's not about communication, as you've said; that's clear, that your art is not communicating, but there's a kind of-

MR. IRWIN: There's no program there.

MR. SIMMS: There's no program, but there's a way to participate. When you go into a situation and you make a work of art, you've suspended, or you've tried to be aware of conditions and things and not bring presuppositions about what you're going to find and so on. Shouldn't the person coming to see your art be in a similar state? In other words, that's a way of maybe participating in a more general suspending of presumptions.

MR. IRWIN: Well, in this case, to see the rainbow, for example, you had to suspend looking for something concrete-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -or something object-like or what have you. When you go out afterwards, let's say, and you walk down the street, there are sometimes more interesting or more beautiful things accidentally happening-the way the sun hits a building or the way the shadow bounces or the way the reflection bounces off onto the ground. We see those things all the time. They constitute one of the richnesses of our lives.

Like Ren Weschler, he was doing these symposiums, and he did one on ecology. He had a great title for it: "Cassandra Was Right." Pretty good. Very good. So he asked me to participate. And I was pretty busy at the time. I said, “I don't have time. I can't do it,
Ren.” And he said, "Are you not interested in ecology?" And I said, “My God, Ren, we've been friends for a long time. Are you kidding? You're asking me that question?”

The concept of ecology is ultimately based on whether or not we place value on things. If we really place a value on the world, on saving the green space, or the icebergs melting, or all that kind of stuff, if those have value, they will then be underwritten. Values come from the kind of dialogue we're talking about. That's the thing; if you want to look for some active quotient, it's that values are settled in this perceptual process. We place a value on something by acknowledging it; we increase that value by, essentially, attending it; the more we attend it, the more we make it a part of or, in a sense, it operates with regard to our lives and what have you, then the more it becomes economically feasible.

Like, for example, I learned that very simply in Europe. I go to Germany; I'm in Kassell; Germany, the place is just rubble.

MR. SIMMS: This is in the immediate postwar-

MR. IRWIN: Right after, 1946 or something. It's totally rubble. I go back 10 years later; it's totally built up. The whole thing. Or Berlin may be a better example. There it is. So people say, but if I said to you we'd have to tear this section down to rebuild it, you'd say, not feasible, economically-it's all bricks and mortar. No, it's about perception; it's about values; it's about if we want to, we rebuild the thing back up. In other words, Germany rebuilt itself. It was smashed completely. So why could-how? Because they had a desire, and it was important.

So I'm making a case that if you want to place the role of art in anything, it's essentially making us aware of possibilities and potentials to which we give value, which eventually, in a sense, underwrite our lives or our view of the world as such, right from the ground up.

Before, when it was pictorial, it was illustration of existing values already in place. That is the history of art. We're talking now about art as an activity going on and on and on, in a way. And this is a radical change in terms of-the minute you see that, you really have to start questioning it.

MR. SIMMS: So the room in the Museum of Modern Art brought a lot of this out in the open, and then subsequently-

MR. IRWIN: Well, first of all, it's the first inkling I had of what I call a conditional art. The idea of-in classic art, in a way, cast in bronze-what do you call it-egg tempera, all these efforts made for something that lasts for a long time; the materials that are transcendent. But if you look at the art, it's also about transcendence, about something lasting beyond our death, meaning which transcends us. It's a very beautiful idea, the idea we don't just die; we have children, et cetera. These things transcend my life. They last, a very beautiful idea.

The whole thing of contemporary art, in a sense, has completely dismantled that idea of transcendence. It's about now. Now, that can be taken to its lowest common denominator as a me, me, me, me or that sort of thing. But on the other hand, what kind of world would it build? What kind of reality would we have if we started putting real emphasis on this moment in time? So when the critics look at a Jackson Pollock, they say, oh, he's using that shit paint; it will all fall off-as opposed to bronze, which lasts. They don't realize that's a very big question. They can agree or disagree, whatever you want to have.

I would give you a simple proposition. You can paint a painting which will last for a hundred years or a thousand years, a good painting, all right? Or you can do something which is absolutely brilliant, absolutely stunning, and it lasts for six months. You get a choice. It's a different set of values. So you have this universal concept of conditions. But actually, in terms of the world, there is an infinite number of conditions which are actually ones you live in, and so you start considering the possibility that every single place and area has a unique character, a unique quality, and that if I can maximize that, if I can, in a sense, maximize THAT point-not what I did, but this existing place-I think there's some value in that.

MR. SIMMS: And this helps us understand the installations-that's maybe not the right word for them, but the interventions you make in architectural spaces, in some of the galleries.

MR. IRWIN: Or out on the desert or on a corner or-well, now that runs against the grain of the practice of art.

MR. SIMMS: When you talk about conditional art, it's interesting, because part of what I get from what you're saying is that there's this necessity to suspend presumptions and givens, in a way, that-

MR. IRWIN: No. There's a presumption that you're going to pay attention.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: And when you pay attention, then the nature of the space you are in becomes maximized. We'll just make the silly argument of ecology. If you maximize the quality of the space-i.e., if you maximize the quality of the Earth you live in, and the relationship of human beings to the Earth, and so on and so forth-I'm not making statements like that, but if you want to argue, you can argue that that's its meaning.

MR. SIMMS: Right. So then how does this translate into a kind of a-

MR. IRWIN: I tried everywhere. I've been trying from the first time I went on the desert and did deeply obscure things that were in no way a part of any dialogue at that point, in the beginning.

[Audio break.]

But also, I was not very good at it. I had to practice out there. It was like having a new-going back to school, only-I had gone to school in terms of that whole thing that I just talked about, but now I'm out there trying to make sense out of it.

MR. SIMMS: Feeding that back into the art world, though, or to the existing institutions there-

MR. IRWIN: Not so much the art world, because I can't count on the art world. But if I do it, let's say, in Casper, Wyoming, and I make Casper my-a whole place that makes more sense; it's a nicer place to live in and a more interesting and more enriching place to spend your time, et cetera, et cetera-and nobody knows I did it. Okay? Very different set of propositions there.

Now you have to consider, who are you and what do you do and can you do it? What are your rewards, what are your needs and desires and what have you? Economic, socially, love-it's just a different way of going in the world. And you can't say it's any better or any worse, necessarily, at this point, because now we're making judgments that are, in a sense, best left up to the people that are going to have to live there, spend time there.

MR. SIMMS: Right. Well, then, how does Fort Worth come about, then?

MR. IRWIN: The reason I went to Fort Worth is because I got my friend Richard Koshalek a job there, and Richard Koshalek is-was-is a riverboat gambler. That's his strength.

All different directors are well-schooled, well-grounded intellectually, philosophically, sharp; you have an edge, et cetera, et cetera. But most of them, to play these kind of risky games, which is what a contemporary museum-talking about contemporary museums now-doing that room that I did, that was the Museum of Modern Art acting as the Museum of Modern Art. When they stopped doing that and essentially turned the whole thing over to the collection-which is not a bad decision. I mean a really good one-great collection, has value; we all enjoy it; I enjoy it; I go back all the time, what have you. But when they did that, at that point, they ceased being the Museum of Modern Art, and they stopped doing anything that was immediately involved in the dialogue of “Why art?” at this moment in time.

Richard Koshalek, he was capable of doing a show that was a failure. He was quite capable of doing a show that was obscure. People would rain down the consequences on him. You know-“What are you doing? You're wasting-" and whatever. Richard was stung by all that, but he was a riverboat gambler. He'd go out and he'd try it again. He'd go again. Richard was somebody who was capable of that kind of openness and that kind of experimentation. Not very many people are. They're rare as hens'teeth. That's what I liked about Richard. I don't know if he's still capable of it, what he's doing in Washington; I'm not aware of his whole thing. But at that time, and it's a long, complex story, but when he took over LAMOCA, it was a new, fledgling experiment and he made it a hell of a museum. For a while, its program was as rich as any museum anywhere, any time.

And so when he-this was him before-Fort Worth was before L.A. And so he gave me a playpen and I played in it for a couple of years.

Played around, doing things in the city, most of which never got done. So I'm still in that period where I don't have a concrete idea about anything. I'm still looking and trying to find, just scratching around-and scratching my own ass. [They laugh.] And doing the writing, which had one value, because one thing about writing is it requires a certain-or has the potential for a certain kind of accuracy-that word next to that word-you know. You would have to invent a word to actually touch on what I do, or can I find one historically-like the word “aesthetics,” the word “aesthesis.” Aesthetics is what everybody talks about; aesthesis is what I'm interested in. It was before Baumgarten started fucking the whole thing up with the Germanic idea about aesthetics and trying to make it an organized and-yeah.

MR. SIMMS: A system.

MR. IRWIN: System, right. So for me, that's worth doing. To have a career or to sell paintings, the way they're sold now and the levels of popularity and what have you, I just don't think those are very interesting ambitions. I have the most interesting ambition-in a way.

MR. SIMMS: Marcia Tucker then comes into this also, because she also is doing a contemporary program at the Whitney-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, that's true.

MR. SIMMS: A little bit like Jennifer Licht and Richard; these are people who are trying to-

MR. IRWIN: She gave me an opportunity on the scale that Jennifer Licht did-forget now, timewise, from one to

the other, but there's a pretty big gap in between there, and I was a little more, I think, prepared and a little more sophisticated about what I did, although what I did was almost the same. Not the same results, but same materials, really just playing with space and light and very-as little something as I could do.

And in her way, she was like Richard; she was a risk-taker. Richard did it in a more kind of playful way. She was tough. She stuck her nose out there, and she'd do it, and stick it out there again. And unfortunately, when I did the show with her, she got fired halfway through it. Not because of me, but what-I don't know what was going on.

MR. SIMMS: Well, I think she'd done a Richard Tuttle show before yours, and there was this general sense of-[laughs]-the administration, I think-

MR. IRWIN: Everybody-by the way, they're redoing that.

MR. SIMMS: You mean they're redoing your piece for that 1977-

MR. IRWIN: Which is the first time anybody's done that.

MR. SIMMS: Right. How do you feel about redoing a piece? Because I know that, as you were saying earlier, there's this idea of the temporary-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, I'm actually not doing it, because they're going to do it exactly as it was. So I've provided them with the information and the person who can do it for them mechanically, get it done. I probably won't even be there.

How do I feel about it? Well, I don't know. [They laugh.] It hasn't happened yet.

MR. SIMMS: Well, because at Dia:Beacon, you are also in discussions with them about doing differently, but revisiting, the *Excursus: Homage to the Square3*.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. That's true. Well, this whole idea of a history or a trace or a means-how does information-let's assume that I say something is really of importance, but I say to you, well, you can't photograph it and the object won't exist and et cetera, et cetera. Then how does information get passed on to the next generation?

To me, say photography: when I said-and it's true; I'm right-that photographs are attached to imagery, imagery is attached to a particular way of seeing and knowing, and is no longer really valid. It's obsolete. It's actually part of the argument of eliminating it, per se, as a crutch or as a way. But then you say to me, well, what's the alternative? Ooh, that's a tough one. What is the alternative?

Now, the alternative may get slowly formed, after I'm dead, or-because right now I recognize something which is at least worth thinking about, and that is that photography was essentially, you saw it on a page. Or a wall. It's printed on something. But now, photography and light are one and the same thing.

MR. SIMMS: You mean digital imagery.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, now, the whole idea that-well, one discussion I had with myself at the beginning is that I'm moving from the quantitative to the qualitative, or I'm moving from the material to something that's energy-light being one. So now all of a sudden, I have to rethink the whole thing in a way, because maybe this digital, that's the one thing that this digital thing may do; it may become the new communicative form to replace all the arguments now. And what-gain and loss. I'm not an expert in that world.

In fact, it's really interesting, having projected 30 years or 40 years ago that energy was the name of the game for me, and now all of a sudden a lot of those elements are in fact, good and bad, operative. And it's like the world's going by me right now. At my age, I'm in an airport and I see a little kid, two years old or three years old, a computer in their hands and they're working at it. They're working at it. And I got a car now that is full of those kinds of gadgets and such. Like an iPhone. Joey has one, and he just goes-click, click, click-and I touch it and it doesn't move. [They laugh.] And Joey says, touch it lighter. Okay, I touch it lighter, and it doesn't move. I don't even know how to goddamn touch the thing. Obviously, I work it out and I get it. But it's interesting. He just goes-just fast as lightning. These little kids are doing the same thing. They're three years old; they're going-and I'm touching the thing-touching, touching again, you know what I mean?

MR. SIMMS: Right, right.

MR. IRWIN: [Laughs.] It's a joke. I mean, it's hilarious. I'm like, what?

MR. SIMMS: Well, coming from someone who's very interested in the tactile read of things, this is very interesting.

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah, that too. People talk about it, but it's like the world has just rushed past me. I don't know if that's even true, but at moments I feel like that. This car I've got is just-I have to watch myself in there. [Laughs.] There are things happening; it's like, whoa, what happened? What just happened? And something's actually happened. So I have to go back and talk to the guy that sold it to me, and he says, well, this-you've touched that. I said, what do you mean I-he said, you must have touched that. [They laugh.] It didn't just do it on its own. I say, well, yeah, you're probably right, but goddamn, I don't remember touching it. Pretty interesting. Pretty interesting to be the village idiot at this stage of the game.

[END AUDIO TRACK]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at his home in San Diego, California, on March 17, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is card number four.

Bob, today, I was hoping we could talk about your involvement with art in public places and that moment when you began to think about art in a site-determined or site-generated context. Were there any first projects that opened that up?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, sure. First of all, we've got to start with the idea that art in public places is a red herring. What I call it is conditional art.

The idea sort of spins out of-it starts really with the idea of articulating existing spaces, galleries in the beginning. And which has now turned into installation art, which is really a bastardization of the thing. It's just bringing everything in the studio out and dumping it in. The really big difference is that you have the frame as a kind of container, and what they've done basically by going into this conditional art is simply make the gallery the container, which doesn't address the most important issue there, which is the breaking of the frame, and then finally, the idea of breaking the container.

But taking each space as a unique space, you can only do so many white spaces and then you run out of it. But I did a few larger ones, like say, the Whitney. And I raised that question at the Whitney. I basically-I forget what I said, but roughly, what I was saying is if we take all the content out of art and then you finally break the frame, what would be the condition for recognizing that something is art?

And the first thing you had to challenge is this-the idea of once it's in a museum, it's art automatically. It may not be good, bad, right or wrong, but it's already been certified as art. I did the thing at the Modern a few years earlier; I tested that a little bit by taking the label off; they kept wanting me to put a label on it. I kept taking the label off so that when the viewer came, basically, you had to wrestle with whether it was finished, whether it's intended, whether it's-whatever it is. And so you had to take on the responsibility for the whole thing.

So I question this idea of art in public places. It speaks to an ambition, essentially, of trying to do this for the public. And actually, in terms of how it was acted out, that was a real downside in which it began to-you wanted horses, they would paint horses for you; you wanted to honor Caesar Chavez, they would do Mexican murals and revolutionary and this and that.

But the idea, fundamentally, is that as I got into this thing of breaking the frame and all that, that it had become obscure to the public; the general public just didn't understand what the hell was going on. It's just such a big change that it was-it pandered-it brought back and did all the same things, put meaning back into it, neighborhood concerns and this and that, what have you.

So I coined the term conditional art, the idea that, now, we're not within a frame in the old sense of the word, but we're within a set of conditions, those conditions being sometimes very complex, very elaborate-all the elements that had to be taken into consideration. I would start, essentially, in the center and spend time on the site that had been designated.

And once I got a kind of good sense of that place, I'd make a larger circle around it-and begin to look at where you came from, because you don't come from nowhere. The Whitney is a good example. Leaving that black plane empty was the major gesture within it.

MR. SIMMS: Leaving the fourth floor-

MR. IRWIN: Right, the fourth floor black-a nice black slate floor. Nothing, absolutely nothing there. And that, I think, had, of course, a lot of impact in New York, because you come from a cloistered place with lots of stuff and things, and to leave something that big empty in that world, that busy world, it had a power to it. If you did it in Wyoming, it wouldn't mean anything. vBecause the relationship to space-in other words, you come from this compacted space to this-to the black floor; but in Wyoming, you come from a huge space, and this thing is now

not a particularly strong gesture at all. I think that sort of explains a difference in terms of the approach to the thing.

So you start this larger circle, sort of examining where do you come from, what it feels like, what kind of materials, what kind of architecture, et cetera, things and elements that make that place unique to itself, and you try and examine that in terms of how you come and what kind of baggage you come with when you pass through this space. And so then you're trying to force some kind of response to all this information, and do something then which has a bearing on it, and in a way of making it uniquely what it is.

MR. SIMMS: Right, you spoke also about bringing a kind of individual intentionality to that process of making those decisions. When you say bringing baggage to it, are you referring to that?

MR. IRWIN: You're going to come with all of this. Most people talk about light, for example, as being a powerful thing, but then basically, we have a very, very hard time defining what we mean by that anymore. But in a practical sense-say, I stayed in New York, up on the river, on the Hudson River, which is a beautiful area; it's been romanced in many, many ways. All of the great Roosevelt mansions-and Rockefeller and-that are up there for the summer. And I was there and I was working, really busy, so I was burrowed in and not paying as much attention as I would normally to my circumstances.

And after a certain period of time, my wife and I sat down to talk about what it was like being there, and I realized that it's beautiful, but that light and the sort of quality of the place is so melancholy and, for me, depressing. I said, I feel like I got to get out of here. And we literally packed up-in fact, we didn't pack up; we paid somebody to pack us up; we left the next day and came back to California. So people talking about, what's the light in California? Does it have an effect on your life-yeah, it has a big effect on your life. First of all, it makes you very-or me-very optimistic and very positive. And that other place is so old and, like I said, melancholy, that it's all-every now and then, I have almost like a little nightmare about it, you know?

MR. SIMMS: This was when you were working on Dia:Beacon.

MR. IRWIN: Right, I spent a year up there. And so that idea that these places are all kind of similar, the same-no, each is unique. That's the idea of a condition; every place has a set of conditions. And so what you try and do, instead of responding to some abstract concept of meaning or what have you, is you have to try and make sense out of that, and maybe raise it up in a way to make it more cognitive.

So the first thing is right there, like with doing the things in galleries, the installation art, as a new kind of venue. It's irritating that you find something, a set of possibilities, which are wide open, and they rather quickly get bastardized, so they're not even a good forum any longer to carry out a dialogue about these things.

MR. SIMMS: So the question, then, at the Whitney was, when you remove the frames, what becomes the limiting-

MR. IRWIN: Well, suddenly, I'm aware that there's only one thing really defining this thing-or a couple of things defining this thing as art still, and one is that it's in an art museum; it's in an art place, as it were. And then it's also that you're making something, and that making something becomes an element of focus.

So I'm wondering if I could just address that. And what I did was to take the black plane and the grid of the ceiling and the line of the black line that went around the room, and it's just simple elements-i.e., something made-and go out, or step outside, the museum and exercise them, which I did. I actually took a cable and stretched it from the roof level of the two buildings leading up to the World Trade towers, so you had the black line existing as a kind of focusing or framing device.

I painted the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, the spaces and the crosswalks on both sides, and painted the space in the middle, which had become gray, painted it black again, just to make it a thing. And then I proposed a laser grid at the second-floor level from 57th Street to the Pan Am-that's what it was-Pan Am building. Now, these all came on top of what their original invitation was, and we didn't have the money to do that. So each one of those things has something tangible, in terms of-

MR. SIMMS: Can you say more about the laser grid?

MR. IRWIN: Basically, you'd probably be able to do it with two lasers, and then just a number of strategically placed mirrors that make the line bounce-make a right angle here and a right angle there and a right angle here. It would actually be a red-line grid in the air for-it's about seven or eight blocks there.

Like I said, the museum had offered me an invitation, and they thought of it all as being within the building, and so to extend that invitation, went way beyond their budget. Because originally, they thought it was going to be kind of a retrospective show.

MR. SIMMS: Right, and there was a little bit of that; you did have some rooms where-

MR. IRWIN: There was, right-I had to feed the tiger, you know? So yeah, there was a little stuffed in the back there, but basically, it was the big piece-in fact, it was the big piece, period.

And then I pointed out some really spectacular phenomena. In the case of the line, I noted that just at that time, they had made a mercury vapor that changed the lights just around Central Park. So they drew a line, a mercury vapor line, around this green plane that was in the middle, so it was quite spectacular, I thought. So that became, in a sense, just something you see, something you pick out that's in your existing environment, and make note of it, as it were. But there's no making, where we are, now; we've eliminated the making, because there was still some making-painting the corner and what have you.

And then for the black plane, I got this extraordinary aerial photograph of all the way up Manhattan on Park Avenue. Right in the center of it-there's-at a certain time of day, of course-the light would be coming from one side or the other, and where the street was, the light would pass through, and where it wasn't, there would be a black plane. And that black plane goes the entire length of Manhattan.

MR. SIMMS: The alternation between light and black plane.

MR. IRWIN: Alternation-light-exactly, on a black plane, very simple.

And then I pointed out that in terms of the grid, the elaboration of the grid throughout New York, in the sense that when New York started, it started in the lower part of it, where the streets got laid out in a more topographical way following what the land form was, and they would dead-end-they would be irregular, et cetera, et cetera. As the automobile and the efficiency of it, I think, basically took over-as you come up, it becomes more and more uniform. So they started out with these streets that went off at angles, which keeps it a little bit lively, but finally, it becomes just a grid, okay, so that then becomes the grid.

And now the question is, if you think that these issues are at the heart of the matter, then can we hold the dialogue for art to be the equal of making? And the answer is no. So now we're really in the phenomenological world. It's about seeing, feeling, sentient being in a way.

MR. SIMMS: There's one piece of that Whitney project that you didn't mention, and that's the catalogue. You were personally involved in every step of it. You had “Notes toward a Model,” published in there so-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, that was the first time we published anything. The catalogue was very minimal to start with, and it just seemed appropriate that I finally take some of the writing I'd been doing, speculation I'd been doing, really-because there was a thesis there in that show-and underwrite it with some philosophic, whatever you want to call it, meanderings of mine. And that catalogue really was-there was no retrospective stuff in it at all. It was particularly about the piece on the fourth floor. Exercising and addressing and breaking all the last existing frames for how we come to think as a structured, orderly kind of scene.

MR. SIMMS: Now at the same time, you were invited to participate in a competition for the Ohio State University campus, where it was not about starting in a museum and projecting outwards; it was starting outside as the beginning and ending.

MR. IRWIN: Well, before that-let's say one of the very first ones that I remember that didn't get built-Ohio State didn't get built either-in San Francisco, they had started a freeway and it was to go around the Embarcadero, a continuation connecting the Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge, which is a very reasonable idea, considering traffic.

But it would have cut the city itself off from its own harbor-I mean, its bay-Seattle has that problem. They did complete a freeway all along the waterfront there. And they're still struggling with it-they can't economically or logistically eliminate it, and yet it's a major eyesore. It's a very long, narrow strip, the city is itself. And it cut itself off from its own rhyme and reason originally, with the bay being what it sits on and why it's there, and so today you can't see it. So San Francisco, this was starting to happen; San Francisco, being a very active city politically, had stopped it. They stopped it-the first little section was built, and it stopped right there. So what I basically proposed was this funny structure-the freeway just stopping in midair. I proposed that you turn the ends of it up so that the whole thing is like-just like a giant hand, which is the public opinion, had stopped the thing.

So it became kind of an illustration of the event that had taken place. I rather liked the idea. It was pretty good. It was good-looking. It was psychologically very good-because the idea of, you're driving on this freeway, and then suddenly it just turns up into the air-

MR. SIMMS: I've always found that piece a little-I have questions about it, because it seems so strongly

symbolic, and yet your work is not about symbolism.

MR. IRWIN: Well, at that time, what I was trying to do was take on the conditions in all these situations, addressing directly. And if some of that was-the rhyme and the reason or how it was understood-that's still the right solution. That speaks to the fact that that was the right thing for the right place at the right time. I was taking the condition thing straight forward as a serious invitation.

MR. SIMMS: And then the radical difference between that and Ohio, where you're dealing with other existing conditions-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Completely different set of conditions. You have the Oval Mall. The famous one, of course, is the University of Virginia. And this is not. It's a real Midwest mall. The scale is much greater; it has a much more kind of physical quality about it. It's not as idyllic in a way, but more straightforward Midwestern sort of a thing to it.

They laid the thing out and had all the cross-paths-there were buildings all the way around it-all the cross-paths on it. Every day, all the classes would let out at a certain moment or a couple of times a day-two or three times, or four times a day or something. And students would just come pouring out of all the buildings as a kind of an existential landscape. They come out from all the buildings, going all in opposite directions, and they would go like this or whatever, and then it would go back to being quiet again while the classes were on. So it had this really interesting kind of existential-because you had no idea-they all seemed to be going in random directions. There was an underlying pattern to it, but watching it, it just seemed chaos. So I liked that. That was a very nice thing.

What they had done is, they had acknowledged it and put in secondary paths Like there was a formal set of paths, a grid of sorts, and then there was a secondary set of paths, a kind of an ad hoc-conditions, right-just following where they were going, because they were cutting grooves on that lawn and what have you. The Oval Mall was very, very slightly concave, slightly going up on each end. So I took those paths-because it broke this thing into like a jigsaw puzzle of shapes-and simply exaggerated them or made them-I made them flat. In other words-

MR. SIMMS: How did you plan to do that?

MR. IRWIN: Well, I just was going to raise the earth up and put Cor-Ten along the wall along the edge of it. So the middle of it becomes now a kind of sculptural maze in the center in which all of these things-the paths slightly sunken, the grass even. Which was an issue that they had given me to address, to sort of separate activities, where people sat on the lawn and where other people played Frisbee, you know? And they would be running over-or the people sitting trying to study in that.

So we sort of separated them out, because these things being raised, you couldn't just race willy-nilly in any direction without falling off of one. So it was very, very simple, just almost like a jigsaw puzzle kind of thing, with all the pieces being delineated clearly, which is what they already were, just emphasizing it.

Certain people on campus-the art department and people like that-really liked it. And I won-it was a competition. And the other people were Bob Morris and Richard Serra, and I think that guy who did the *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson. So I won the thing, and of course, never got past the administration.

MR. SIMMS: Why was that?

MR. IRWIN: Because in their practical mindset, they asked: “What the hell is this? Where's the art?” They were looking for a piece of art, and this thing was totally integrated into their existing space.

So those were a couple of early examples of-and in the beginning, in other words, there was the sort of philosophic issues and the conceptual issues, which I addressed when I was on the desert and I wasn't working for anybody or didn't have to ask anybody. I spent my whole time just trying to make sense out of that.

But now, all of a sudden I'm looking for opportunities to practice, to try some of these things out. And so I had to now take into consideration the conditions of the thing politically, economically, historically, practically. So all those-most of the things during that period had some attachments to them, a political one, an economic one, physical restraints-the airport being the kind of conclusion of all those-

MR. SIMMS: Right, the airport starting around 1985 or after. Before you did the airport, you were invited into another competition that you also won, for Duncan Plaza in New Orleans, which involved you in a collaboration.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, I did. Well, okay, yeah, let's take that one on. That's a nice, nice mixture. Yeah, I got invited there to enter a competition, again, which I won, by the way. I was in about 24 competitions, and I only lost

one. I won them all. Never got any of them done, which was an interesting exercise in futility of sorts. But I was looking at them as opportunities.

Now, just to show you how I approached the thing, I spent some time in New Orleans looking around, paying attention-interesting city; lot of stuff going on. An old history sort of cut into the thing, where there were divisions between one part of the city and another-Charles Street and the tram and that. But one of the things that struck me most with regards to the project was that they did a little plaza there. I'm trying to think-an architect named Charles Moore, I think it is-the Plaza d'Italia-Plaza d'Italia, and he did a nice-it was a sort of playful, whimsical little plaza for no rhyme and reason whatsoever. I'm not quite sure how it got built or why it got built, but it was-it only had been built for about a year. It was in complete disarray. The paint was peeling off; the fountains weren't working; the lights were half out. It was just a disaster. And so I started looking around and investigating. There was a thing called Louis Armstrong Park, which had the same fate, just in disarray. So I realized this thing was not going to exist without having some kind of integrated support.

So I started making further inquiries, and I found out that basically every agency in the city was broke, except one. And that was the Audubon Zoo, which had just been renovated. So I went out and visited the zoo, which is a nice zoo-updated in the sense that no cages and no bars and so-the way that they're doing it now. It was a nice zoo. So I talked to them, and they were doing fine, except that they really felt that they were isolated in the sense that they're quite a ways out. You have to go way out, really out of town. You have to make a trip for that-to the edge of town, out past-what is the name of the university there?

MR. SIMMS: Tulane.

MR. IRWIN: Tulane, right. And so, talking with them, the one thing they really desired was, they needed a place in the city that announced that they were there. Make people aware that it was there and that it was worth going out to see and all of that. So we got talking, and I started slowly coming up with the idea of doing an aviary. It's the Audubon Zoo, and that was one of the specialties of the place. And so we do this showcase right in front of City Hall-right in the middle of the city-which would be greatly to their benefit. They could benefit the city by essentially underwriting all the ornithology and the plants-and taking care of the plants and service the place, which now solves a lot of problems in the sense of the logistics of it. Then it's going to have maintenance and it's going to have to be taken care of.

Now also, it was one of the charges in the invitation that the city was wanting to enlarge their audience. Right now, you're getting guys with their secretaries and drinking and cavorting on Bourbon Street, you know? And they wanted to have a more family kind of venue, so it fit that. It really was a good place to take kids and for families to go. It was really a family kind of thing. So I thought it was a hell of an idea, having served basically all the rhymes and reasons and then to some degree financed itself. And I won the competition hands down.

MR. SIMMS: And was there a walkway of some kind?

MR. IRWIN: Well, that was part of the proposal, that there would be access from City Hall, because City Hall-it's on the back side of City Hall. This is an unused piece of land in front of City Hall. It's basically a lawn now, and there were several other city buildings, so it would be tied into that whole little civic center thing. And then behind it is the-what do you call it? The Superdome or whatever it is in New Orleans. And so this was a passage to take you from that, which is one place people would go to look at it. At that time, I think it was the biggest covered dome in the country. And then to come through City Hall into this plaza in the middle-it was one of the ways to get there.

And Ace Torre was the guy-the landscape architect-who essentially had laid out most of the new zoo and was, as I say, a landscape architect. So we collaborated and worked on it together, and I won the competition, and there was a big party. There were about 250 people there having dinner, and so I won the thing, and then I'm packing up after everybody's left, putting the model back into boxes and that sort of thing, and I never heard from them again.

MR. SIMMS: Oh. [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: Which is really hilarious. In other words, they made this whole thing-and what I found out afterwards is that the very next day, the *Picayune*-whatever it is-the newspaper had headlines-“City Hall Goes to the Birds” -and so it became a political kind of football which the mayor-I forgot his name now; he was a funny guy, real New Orleans, real Louisiana politics kind of guy. I think he was the mayor for quite a while, and then his son was the mayor. But anyway, it became a political football for him-a waste of money, this and that, better things could be done. “What the hell is this? What has it got,” you know-at any rate. So I never heard from him again, basically. They just abandoned me. I won the thing, and I had won nothing.

MR. SIMMS: I see how, in the process of thinking through what would work both for the city and for that space and for the zoo-

MR. IRWIN: And the economics of the whole thing and the maintenance of the whole thing long-term.

MR. SIMMS: And then what about the aesthetics? Because that's obviously something that would have been top priority for you.

MR. IRWIN: That's essentially what I would bring to the thing. First of all, it was a really rather lacy-like enclosure. Almost like a greenhouse. In fact, it had to be pretty much like a greenhouse to be sustainable all year long. And it was a triangular shape. I thought it was a rather beautiful shape. It fit the site exactly. The site was triangular shaped. And inside of it was a magic garden with birds flying about. The way they're now making bird cages, where you walk through them-you don't look into them; you walk through them. And birds fly around. And you can get up close to them sometimes if you're near the feeders and that sort of thing.

And then, of course, all the landscaping, there were water and waterfalls. It was exactly what you would think of-and hopefully done interestingly and beautifully. That was my first landscape involvement before the Getty.

MR. SIMMS: Right. And Miami, which was another-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, right. That was later.

MR. SIMMS: In Dallas, there was another opportunity which did come to pass, the Carpenter-

MR. IRWIN: Which they just tore down.

MR. SIMMS: They just tore it down?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. It no longer exists. They're revising the area and doing a new-it has been an entrance to the city, which was the occasion for what I did there. And for the so-called project-actually, it was a good Texas-style land swap.

Nice people, actually, named the Carpenters who own a-oh, what is that called, those little convenience stores, the most famous one? It's everywhere. They own 7-Eleven, the Carpenters. And it was a guy and his uncle. They wanted to make a strategic land swap. They owned the piece of land where the freeway was now exiting. And they wanted a space alongside of that, but a much better place, for laying out their building and all that. So that was a part of the land swap, and to sell it to the city was that it was going to be a park and it was going to be an entrance to the freeway and that it was going to be an art project.

So essentially I came up with a plan where people are driving through a park. I got them aimed in a way which cut right through the middle of this thing, and it was going to be seen by people going probably 15 miles an hour at minimum. And so it was just a portal There were two hills, grass, and a large Cor-Ten wall which disappeared into the top of those things and came out the other side and crossed the street so that you're-instantly, there's, like, a gate-an entry. It was a simple entry configuration.

MR. SIMMS: Right. And you had to make certain compromises. You wanted the wall to come a bit closer to the road, but it was-

MR. IRWIN: Well, you always have those restrictions. In fact, they became picayunish.

I just sat with the architect in the office of the chief justice of the new federal court here in San Diego, and he dressed us down for this inconvenience or that little mistake or that the people aren't going to like this or-he critiqued the whole thing for us.

And the guy is sitting in an incredible, probably one of the most beautiful offices, with an entire view of the bay, a building which is probably the best building in San Diego-beautiful building, actually. It's probably the prettiest building in downtown San Diego. In the way the courthouses are laid out, the judge's chambers-it's going to change their behavior. It's light and airy and positive and not one of those holes you go in where you're a hundred people going for jury duty, and you're pressing and you want to get out of there. This is really-it really is. It's going to change law in San Diego-federal law, anyway, I think.

But if you listen to his complaints, little nickel-and-dime complaints, most of which were not legitimate, you'd never build it. That's one of the reasons most buildings don't get built. People are-they pick it apart from all these positions, not because it's bad or not needed, it's because it's thrust upon them in a way. So they are fighting and resisting, kicking and clawing and all that.

I remember-this is a good time to throw it out. I was in the Venice Biennale once. And I was asked to go there. I did a piece at the University of Massachusetts. It was an installation in what was basically a painting show. They didn't have any money that year, whoever does that sort of thing for the government. So they just took a canned show and put it in there instead of a special exhibit by an artist.

MR. SIMMS: You're saying that they took the U Mass show and they just used it for the American Pavilion-

MR. IRWIN: Right-for that year.

MR. SIMMS: -Venice. And that was '76.

MR. IRWIN: There were maybe 20 artists in it, in a little teeny space there; it's a very small space. Hugh Davies was the guy who was the curator there. And he was young and this whole thing was being run from Washington, D.C., but he was elected to do it.

So I went to do something, and the first idea I came up with-he had to send everything back to Washington to be approved. And they said, "Oh, well, most of it looks very good, but the Irwin thing is way too commanding. It's going to overwhelm everything. So can you ask him to do something more modest or take a more modest space?"

So Hugh came back to me and he said, "Look." So I said, oh, my God. I mean, that's what I do. So I really looked at it, came up with something that was actually up in the rafters so that it wasn't in the space at all. It didn't interfere with anything directly. And they said, "It's way too overpowering still."

MR. SIMMS: And these are scrim installations that you were proposing?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah, probably. I don't remember exactly. So then Hugh comes back and says, well, "They asked if you could look outdoors." Well, outdoors at the Venice Biennale is chaos. It's the middle of nowhere. So anyway, I say, "Yeah, sure." And so I went outdoors, and I'm sitting on a bench watching-actually watching-I'm trying to figure out what to do. I'm watching these leaves falling down from a tree on a space in the middle-four trees, four beautiful trees.

Then a guy came over from the Israeli pavilion and asked what I was doing. And I told him. And he said, "Oh, my God." He says, "I've been here six months and I have a million and a half as my-amount of money to spend on doing this Israeli pavilion." I said, "Oh, wow." So while we were sitting there talking, Hugh comes out and says: I hate to tell you, we have no money for anything you want to do.

So I'm now outdoors with no money, and in what is a very competitive situation. And the outdoors is the outdoors. Everything is an indoor thing, or at least was at that time; I haven't been back. But the point of the story was that I was sitting there and watching these leaves fall, and I thought, that's very beautiful. So I went to the hardware store and I bought myself a length of rope or string or something and some big, huge nails, and came back and made a frame-just a rope frame in the middle there, and so that the middle became like a canvas with the leaves falling on it.

I enjoyed it, chuckled, and went home. Never heard another thing about it, until about five years later, I'm interviewing in a competition thing in St. Louis. So I'm waiting there. There's about four artists there waiting. And one guy goes in. And while he's coming out-he's a friend of mine. So I'm next so I go up to the door and we're standing there talking for a few minutes, chitchatting.

And I hear a guy inside, one of the judges say, "Oh, this guy? This guy? Are you kidding? This guy is a thief. He'll just put a piece of string down and take our money and run.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: And so actually somebody had seen it, you know? [Laughs.] But those kind of people, for any kind of reason, everything has to go through that kind of filter. A lot of the originality, all the things special and the rhymes and the reasons and that get all filtered out. It's one of the reason you have all this bad building. Some of them are well-meaning, but they don't know what they're doing and they run amok with their responsibility and-

MR. SIMMS: What's kind of shocking in what you're saying is that your-the project that you're doing now at the federal courthouse down here in San Diego is the exact same issues that you experienced back in-

MR. IRWIN: But he's saying-fortunately, he wasn't there in the beginning. So therefore all that didn't get put in there; all that resistance didn't-

MR. SIMMS: Is he specifically objecting to the column-the acrylic column?

MR. IRWIN: No, not the column. That's a waste of money. There's nothing there.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] It's what you've done outside in the lead-in-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. The lead-in has a couple of paths through it. So the one he was objecting to the most was there because they'd run out of money and couldn't do an elevator, which, by the way, was a very dangerous-nobody wanted to use it at night. You could get mugged there in a minute.

But I had to come up with a path to get you from here to there. And he thought the path was too narrow. It was larger than the required walk, but it was too narrow for him. Also, it was indirect because it meandered a little bit. Rather than just a straight line from A to Z. "You should have just a straight line, a highway," you know? From one building to another one. The old federal building is next door to it. But anyway-

MR. SIMMS: Well, thinking of the projects that seem to be somewhat definitive in your exploration of more public kinds of places, in Seattle the *Nine Spaces, Nine Trees* was a very successful one.

MR. IRWIN: It got done. That's the first, most successful part of it. I got a city building in the middle of Seattle which is-despite all the incredible greenery that Washington is, the middle of the town has almost none of it in there, not like L.A., which has palm trees and stuff sticking around. But-so it was a plaza. It was also the city jail. But it was the sort of place that nobody went through; nobody walked through this thing. It was an approach to one of the front doors. If you were going to go visit a prisoner. And so these were the considerations. I thought about doing something that would green up the place a bit. So I came up with a plan that spread about-would have been a pleasant place to spend time. And they approved the whole thing. And I got all of the as-builts. I'd been working from the plans, essentially, but the as-built wasn't built that way.

I'd made this whole plan, it was spread out and what have you. And we realized this plaza would carry weight in only nine spots, where there were nine poles in the police garage below that would support something. So I had to revise the whole thing, and came up with this idea of these nine spaces with a tree in each one of them-a Vesuvius plum tree, very colorful, rich, dark leaves, red, and fit the place very well.

Then I met the police chief. And he said, oh, we can't have anything down there. What happens if there's a jail break? People could hide behind this and could hide behind that, which was suddenly a problem I had to deal with. I ended up drawing the spaces with a metal fence that has only five-eighths aperture. You can get it any color you want. This was a very nice blue, fit the area. But you couldn't hide behind it. There was no place to go. It's a material I've used several times. It's kind of like scrim for outdoors. The company that built it that I was buying from was Kolorgaard. They'll make any color you want, and they coat the fence with a-like, a plastic coating. And that's been around for 20 years now. And it still looks good. The color's still the same. It hasn't disintegrated at all, so it's really an economically-

MR. SIMMS: Didn't they dismantle that piece, and you installed a new one at the University of Washington?

MR. IRWIN: Well, it's the only time I've tried to re-site a piece that-made perfect sense in one-the question is, will it make perfect sense in-in that one, *Nine Spaces, Nine Trees*? I put it on the campus of the University of Washington. We modified it in terms of plant material and in terms of the color. And it turns out it's very successful. The students really do use it. They sit in there and eat their lunches. It's kind of outdoor-atrium-like-so that one got done and it was successful.

[Audio break.]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin on March 23, 2013, at his home in San Diego, California, for the Archives of American Art oral history program. And this is memory card four.

We were just starting to talk about your Melinda Wyatt Gallery exhibition in 1980 and how that related to questions around the founding of a new contemporary art museum in Los Angeles.

MR. IRWIN: Basically there was not really a venue here for artists. This was, I think, the second-largest community of artists in the United States, behind New York. And yet at the same time, it had no structure behind it. There was no real museum here working with them, and there was no critical community, and there was no academic community. There was none of the support mechanisms that propagated New York. And it was, obviously, a disadvantage in a way, but also probably in some ways allowed it to be what it was left alone, as it were.

So people banded together a little bit to make a couple of experimental galleries that they could work with. Ferus was the most famous one, and then along came this opportunity. In downtown Los Angeles there was an area called Bunker Hill, which had always been just right in the middle of the city, but unpopulated. And so the city did a developmental project-developed this Bunker Hill area. It was a large one-millions-I don't know how many millions of dollars, but at the time, a very, very big project that attracted five different large architectural firms-large financial firms who each competed to invest in this thing.

And the city made it a kind of rule that one of things they had to do was to give back to the city something with

civic value, a museum, a dance theater, a school of dance or theater or what have you. And a woman named Marcia Weisman convinced the mayor, who was Bradley, the black mayor we had a for a very, very long time, a very good mayor, and convinced him that it could be an art museum. And so they started this sort of movement.

She had, herself, two backers. These are nickel-dime amounts; I think each of them put in one million dollars and basically had proprietary control of the process. One was Eli Broad, who put in a million dollars. He basically became the majordomo of this development, the art museum development. And the other was Max Palevsky, who was a guy who made a lot of money in computers or software or what have you, kind of a freewheeling-very different than Eli Broad, but a man I liked a lot. But it was a little bit like a four-cornered chess game or something, and you never knew which wall he was going to come off. One time he'd be friendly, then the next time he'd be pissed off. He was a funny guy. And he wanted to be in control of the architecture. Essentially, that was more his interest.

So very early on when this thing arose, the artists had a big meeting in which everybody had to put in their two cents about what this thing was going to do and how they should get involved. But the problem was, basically, after the first night only about a half a dozen showed up to the next meeting. There were 50 or 100 at the first meeting. After the first meeting, there were like maybe 15 or 20 people. And then finally maybe 10 people showed up with any regularity. Alexis Smith was one. We were holding it in the studio that belonged to DeWain Valentine.

Anyway, and Guy Dill, myself, and-I don't remember all of the other people, but-so we met like, I don't know, once every two weeks or something like that, with the idea of sustaining some kind of involvement. And the problem was just that: well, some kind of involvement. Nobody had invited us; nobody was asking us; I don't know whether anybody really wanted us, but we all felt that it was maybe, at that time, the best, maybe the last opportunity for L.A. to have some kind of a venue that was an active contemporary museum. So we planned to try and somehow get our foot in the door, which is exactly what we did. And so we-I forget all the machinations and that, but in the very beginning I did that piece as a way-

MR. SIMMS: At Melinda Wyatt's-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, Melinda Wyatt's, as an exhibit of what a contemporary museum had to address or should address that hasn't been addressed anywhere, even in New York or Paris or wherever you want to go for so-called contemporary art-especially at that time.

There was a competition for the architecture and for the firm that was going to build this thing, the money. And the competition actually had five different people that were bidding for it., very large firms. Each had brought in their own architectural team, et cetera, to do the planning for it. One local man, Rob Maguire. And then-my memory is-it'll be tough on this, but I'm pretty sure there were some quite famous architects, one from Mexico and a couple of Europeans and-the office of-I forget now. So on my own, I decided that what I had to do was insert myself into that process and maybe through there get a foothold.

And so I attended all the competition meetings. It was a high-level thing; each one of them spent a million dollars on their proposals, very elaborate models and all that sort of thing. And it became very, very, very clear to me that by far the best team and the one with the best-was Rob Maguire, the local guy. And so I considered the possibility that he would maybe win.

So in the meetings, in spending some time with the different people and-there were three judges, two men and a woman. And it became very clear to me, very early on, that the two men were in the tank-they had already been bought off. I could just tell by what they said and by their language. The one woman was not. She was straight. And it made very clear that-it was some company from Canada and their architect was Arthur Erickson, a middle-range kind of architect. I saw his proposal, which was a disaster for the museum. It was a drive-by museum with slanted glass walls that you drive by in your car and look at the art.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, exactly. Just totally crazy. And so I thought, well, they're going to win and he's going to win.

So I had some access to some of the people on the board at that time, early on, and was saying-you know, I put myself in there. I started telling them, “You're going to have to get your own architect.” You cannot take their architect, because it's going to be a disaster because these guys are going to win. And they're saying, “Oh, how do you know? Nobody knows that.” I said, “Believe me, they're going to win,” because I felt these two guys were in the tank, like I said. So I went up to Vancouver and visited Arthur Erickson and looked at a couple of projects he did. He had done a courthouse up there that had a kind of a drive-through quality to it, you know?

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

MR. IRWIN: So I could see where the seeds were for it. And actually, a nice guy, I liked him and he wasn't that bad of an architect, but this was just a totally crazy idea.

And so I came back to them and I said, “You cannot live with Arthur Erickson. I'm telling you right now, you've got to get your own.” So they did. They started negotiating for having their own; they hired their own architect and built their own space and that. I don't remember at what point, but in putting this whole thing together, Marcia Weisman was essentially giving them her collection as part of the strength of the thing.

So they began negotiating with the idea that they would actually build their own museum. And it was part of a large complex of housing and business towers and what have you. The museum site started out to be a good size, reasonably generous site. And slowly, for considerations of business and having retail and this and that, the site slowly got hammered into the ground.

It became half underground with a small-nothing up above. And there was supposed to be retail behind there and they didn't want to block the retail-all of which did not happen. Sam Francis, who was a very dignified gentleman and I think very good artist, he and I became the sort of representatives of this committee, representing the committee and trying to get some incursion into this thing. So, anyway, we started attending those kind of meetings.

The first thing was, of course besides the building, was a director. We essentially, in our meetings, came up with the idea that there had to be co-directors. And the reason there had to be co-directors is that not too long before that, the Pasadena Museum had been swallowed up by Norton Simon, and the reason was that the Pasadena Museum, which was the best museum around, kind of in an old Chinese building there-Chinese-designed building-but it was the only really active one. And they had gotten themselves into debt by [$]750,000, which is nickels and dimes within that world.

And Norton Simon had been dragging his heels about making his thing public, but had been taking, for years, a public break in his taxes for his collection. They kept forcing-you got to do it, you got to do it, you got to do it. He flirted with different museums, but he wanted more control and so on and so forth-so he ended up buying out the Pasadena Museum and building his own little Norton Simon Museum.

It was a moment of real pain, in a way, because the museum, we liked it; we had empathy with it. It was not great-it was the best we had, but a lot of us had given work to this museum. So suddenly Norton Simon had inherited this museum and this whole collection of modern art, which he had absolutely no interest in whatsoever. So some artists wanted to contest it because they felt that it was illegal. All this work had been given free and just suddenly it was his. And it was worth more than what he was putting in the museum. No one knew that at the time, but it was very clear. Stellas and-anyway, good people, good work, very, very good work.

Richard Diebenkorn wanted us to contest it. So they got some lawyers from UCLA, pro bono, to enter into this thing, and then we all got a paper-we had to sign that we were going to go to court over this thing. And basically the problem was that nobody, ultimately, would sign the paper. They were all afraid of Norton Simon, who would probably, maybe, would have kicked our ass real good. As far as I know, I'm the only one who signed the paper. So-I don't know how-that was a little side diversion, but-

MR. SIMMS: Well, it's the prehistory of-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, exactly.

MR. SIMMS: -why there was this need for this new museum.

MR. IRWIN: Very big need. L.A. County was there, but it wasn't really active in contemporary art-it was somewhat active, but not really active. And it was just a small department in an alphabet museum like every city has.

And so, anyway, I came on the board and I started contesting how the museum was shaped. It was being shaped by Eli Broad completely. He was the dominant figure. And so I fought him tooth and nail, and he just kicked my ass continuously. I had no power; I had ideas and I tried to be persuasive, but basically I had no ability to win. And I chafed at that-and Sam was with me, but he was traveling a lot and not there all the time. But we were kind of a team.

And then I got myself on the architecture committee, which was run by the other majordomo, Max Palevsky, and a young architect named Coy Howard was on it and-I forget. There were about four of us. And so we scoured the world, as it were, for an architect. We looked and looked and looked and looked. And-to get it in order-we put up some candidates for this idea of having a dual directorship. And the reason for that is partly why I digressed to Pasadena-is that they couldn't raise any money. The problem in L.A. is that nobody was able to tap

into all the money sources, especially the entertainment industry, which is really big here, which had a lot of money, but they never got involved. They were involved with their own art.

So we felt that we had to have a director that had the kind of clout-the ability to maybe speak directly to all these people. Sam Francis had a real long-standing friendship with Pontus Hulten from Europe and from Sweden and who had to speak only to the president of France, had that kind of cachet. Nice guy, had a pretty good eye and what have you, but not the kind of sensibility that we thought needed to be here. So Sam Francis found Pontus Hulten and I found Richard Koshalek. Richard Koshalek, I thought, was the kind of guy that could stir up things for us here. So we proposed this idea of co-directors; in the end, that's what there was. I don't think anybody really realized that we orchestrated that.

And so when they came, Pontus Hulten was homesick. He was actually homesick. And he wasn't really any good at raising money, per se, but strangely enough, without any particular ability, couldn't really talk and those things, particularly wasn't that kind of person, he did. He raised the money for it by whatever-I don't know, $15, $18 billion, not million. And Richard Koshalek-they treated him like a janitor. The board, they had treated him like a janitor. They didn't let him come to meetings. They didn't let him come to the architectural meetings, which he had a great deal of interest in. They had him, but they saw Pontus Hulten as a heavyweight, and he was in a way.

So the way that played out is that, in the end, Pontus Hulten raised all of this money, just by his presence, really, by his cachet. But he was homesick. So he kept going back to Europe and to Paris and sailing his boat and stuff like that. So at one point he got an invitation to do a World's Fair from the president of France, which was obviously a tremendous coup. And so he quit, and they were really pissed off.

Now, in this process-at one point, in terms of buildings, I convinced them-Pontus went along with this-that we need to have a second building, because it became very clear that the first building's going to be too small and too limited. So we came up with the idea of the Temporary Contemporary, which was an old police garage in a gamier part of town. And how I convinced them really was that we had gotten to a point where we'd become known and we had a bit of a reputation, but we didn't have anything to show for it. The reason why I wanted the Temporary Contemporary in the beginning was that it really fit the model that this thing stated-it was a loose, open, free kind of space that can be manipulated in any way. Didn't have any of the pretentions of a regular museum.

MR. SIMMS: Right. That's interesting.

MR. IRWIN: And so the idea was that we should have both, which was now a pretty good idea. It satisfied all the different parties, and it really satisfied the artists.

And so we wanted to be involved in the architecture too, of course, and Frank Gehry was the man who shaped up the Temporary Contemporary, but it became the darling of the press. Suddenly this thing took off because the press-art press-really identified with this idea of this, at that time, open, uncommitted kind of space. Maybe there really isn't one on that scale anywhere else even now. But anyway, we started getting a lot of tremendous press from New York, which had always just ignored it, pretty much. There was nothing out here before to talk about. But a lot of good writers, essentially, got behind that thing.

So at a certain point I convinced the board that they had to do it, and they were reluctant to do it. They were not ready to do it. But the difference was critical in that basically the museum, the way it was shaping up downtown-on Bunker Hill-was going to be, essentially, a museum for all of the collectors, Marcia Weisman being the lead collector. So it was going to be a museum about the collections. And the other one was going to be about having a program and being active.

So I tried to convince them that they needed the other, and the key point that made it work was the good press from New York, because they were all very flattered by that. And that press, essentially, was pushing towards the other-not the little one on the hill, but the new one, the Temporary Contemporary.

So I convinced them. We wanted to start as a program and not as a collection. I convinced them basically that you couldn't lay dead. It was going to be another five years or so. You've collected all this money until now and you got a roll going; you've got good press; you can't just lay dead. This space, which we got from the city for a dollar, although it was rough space and needed to be upgraded and so on and so forth, the amount of money that it would cost to do was minimal compared to the loss, in the sense of all the momentum they had.

So they, reluctantly, started the idea of having the Temporary Contemporary, which they got great press for and which turned out to be very successful. Everybody loved the Temporary Contemporary. It made everybody look good, even though they all fought and the board fought it in the beginning. But anyway, so the museum started as a program because the other building hadn't even been built yet. So it started off in a very, very contemporary mode.

Now, in the middle of this, Pontus Hulten takes this new offer to go back to Europe. So they're all pissed off at him. Now they want to sue him, because they realize they've been paying him a large fee for that time, and now he was abandoning them and all that.

And I convinced them, basically, they couldn't do that. That what it costs to fix that building was a small amount of money, just nickels and dimes really, and that it would keep their momentum. And rather than suing Pontus Hulten, they should send him off with accolades because had raised money that they couldn't have even thought they could raise. He was totally successful-it worked, in other words. He just wasn't going to be here.

And so in the middle of that, they suddenly realized that Pontus Hulten had been traveling all this time and hadn't been here really, and that the person who was running the whole thing in that early period was Richard Koshalek. And so suddenly he became their darling. He eventually scared the shit out of them and they finally got rid of him-

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. IRWIN: -which was the biggest mistake they've ever made, because look now where they are; they're in the shit can now.

And it's the same people. They all thought they could-they're smart; they have been successful in business, what have you; and they think it just transfers over,;they can do it. They just ran this thing into the ground. It's a classic example of the fact that they can't. And most-half the museums, if not all of them, have the same problem to some degree with all of their boards. They have their egos and their ambitions and what have you.

But in the middle of this, I'm having this war with Eli Broad, and he brings two people onto the board, a man named Keeshnick, who ran ARCO, and a man named Hartett, who was running the biggest bank there. And this was a natural kind of thing; you bring these people on as part of the community and to fit them in. But neither one of these guys had any ambition for the museum. They didn't presume to have or know what art is and what have you, but they were smart.

So I started trying to convince them that the way the board is going is basically a disaster waiting to happen. And they'd say, “Yeah, yeah. Okay.” And I would maybe bring up a thing and argue with Eli Broad, and then he would win, hands down. It was a mismatch, you know. But I talked to these guys all along, kept trying to explain to them what his ambitions were and what he wanted out of the museum and-which he got.

And he's a very powerful figure in the art world now, very powerful. But at that time-one time he stood up at a board meeting and started to do something, which was quite egregious-because I was saying, “He's just using you as rubber stamp,” to these two guys.

So they both said to me after this one event, they said, “Okay. Tell us what's going on, what's happening” -and I tried to explain to them why and how and in what way this museum could function as a really legitimate entity in the city. And so they said, “Oh. Okay. We get it.” And about two months later they said, “Don't worry.” And about two months later Eli stood to say something, and Keeshnick just put his hand on his arm, and Eli sat back down. And within two months they had rotated him off the board.

MR. SIMMS: Well, one thread that we didn't finish up with was the architecture. Who was the architect who wound up doing-

MR. IRWIN: Arata Isozaki.

MR. SIMMS: Right. So how did we get to him, then?

MR. IRWIN: Well, we found Isozaki and we saw some-we looked at a lot of museums. We went around the world and looked at museums, and we didn't really like any of them. They all were-what's been happening to museums-they were pretentious, self-aggrandizing, et cetera. But Isozaki had done these factories in Japan, which were functional, operative, like the Temporary Contemporary, in a way. And we really thought that that was the guy.

Now, he'd done a couple of museums which were just as pretentious as everybody else, and we sat down with him and told him: we want what we want and all that. He said, “Oh, yes. Okay.” And basically we explained the whole thing, and he would come with a plan, and it would have all these little doodads and stuff on them, the same architectural things. We kept saying, “No, no, no,” it has to be this way and that way.

I don't really know what went wrong in that dialogue, but we ended up not getting what we really wanted, altogether. We, I think, did reasonably well, but it's too small and it's underground and big limitations, but the Temporary Contemporary, of course, gave us breathing space.

But Isozaki just, he did a building very lean, like the factories we talked about. And the L.A. art-architectural critic community-I can't think of the guy's name because he went on to New York, but he hammered it. He said, “This is not an Isozaki building. They forced him to build a fucking warehouse,” et cetera, et cetera. “And they've usurped this artist's privilege to do what he” -the whole routine that you get from architects that they're artists, you know. And so anyway, we got a half-assed building out of the thing in the end, but we were saved by having the other.

MR. SIMMS: You said Gehry was the one who was responsible for cleaning up the warehouses.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. He did the Temporary Contemporary. They didn't give him any money to do it with, but he did a good job, made it function the way it did. And got, I think, no real credit for it, but-because he was actually a good guy in this scenario. Richard Koshalek ran a great program, and for a number of years there it was the best program in the city. On a scale of one to 10 he made it a nine or a nine and half, a hell of a good museum.

I, on the other hand, from the artist community, they were all still pissed off because they didn't get what they wanted. That's when I got run out of town, in a way. I used up all my credibility and went off to live someplace where nobody would ever look for an artist, which was Las Vegas, and I haven't been back. And it was a horrible, horrible experience. It was a really horrible experience.

MR. SIMMS: So that was a key factor in why you went to Las Vegas, because of the way -

MR. IRWIN: It was *the* factor.

MR. SIMMS: -the way that the Museum of Contemporary Art kind of-

MR. IRWIN: The way I felt about being-I felt I had used up all my credibility, because everybody was pissed off and nobody really knew what happened. Nobody's really heard this story. It's a big-it was a big story.

MR. SIMMS: And you knew Richard from before because you had worked with him at Fort Worth.

MR. IRWIN: Absolutely. I brought Richard in and Sam brought Pontus in, and it was a great marriage at that moment in time. And Richard, Richard was good. Richard scared the shit out of the board, of course, because Richard is a riverboat gambler, which is what a museum needs. He was willing to roll the dice on something, and it wouldn't work. Or, say, the show wouldn't be that good on occasion, or it would be difficult to put together-but that didn't even bother him. He'd get a little criticism and then he'd just come back the next day, still bushy-tailed, and just do another one; do another one and then do another one. And he always made them economically nervous as hell because he was spending what money they had.

In the end, they wanted somebody more stable and less scary for them and something they could understand a little better. Plus, they all thought they could run the place; they really did. And mostly-a number of ladies, they were nice ladies, I liked them, but they didn't have great opinions about what a museum should be or how it should function. And they ended up firing him, getting rid of him. And they've gone downhill ever since, until they've actually squandered all the wealth they had, all the cachet and all the-

What I got out of that really finally is, I lost my credibility among the artists, I felt like in a way, because it didn't turn out to be everything we wanted it to be, and I created a real enemy with Eli Broad. We're still cordial to each other, but we're on opposite ends of the argument, as it were. And he's good at what he does. So I've conceded that world to him and it's not my world anyway.

[END AUDIO TRACK]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Robert Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on April 6, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is card number five.

Bob, I was wondering today if we could talk about Miami International Airport and your involvement in the Arts Enrichment Master Plan. Maybe we could start by talking about how you came to know of the project that was taking place there, or the ideas, how you got involved with them in the first place.

MR. IRWIN: Well, for me it was a very good invitation. But it wasn't an invitation to do what I did. What happened was the arts committee in Miami had money to involve themselves in all kinds of civic things, as they do.

And the airport was resisting them. The airport said, “Just give us the money. We'll do it. We'll spend it and we'll do it.” And they were saying, “No, no, no. This is a big deal; this is what we do. This is our thing.” So they brought in three artists with the idea of starting some kind of a dialogue with the airport to sort of bridge

the gap, as it were. The three artists were Nam June Paik and David Antin and myself.

So the three of us went to the airport and visited and talked with them, et cetera, and reviewed the project. And they wanted to do something. And the airport was resistant to all of that, so at one point or another they gave up and left. And I, essentially, didn't.

MR. SIMMS: When you say “they,” you mean the other two artists.

MR. IRWIN: The other two artists. They left. And I saw it as too good an opportunity, so I hung in there-I kept the dialogue going with them, and I just, over the period of time, slowly developed this much broader and larger and more ambitious approach: i.e., what I came up with is an Arts Enrichment Master Plan. That was my title for it. And I was saying, basically, the airport is in some ways very good, but on some levels it's a mess.

Now, to get involved at that point, to get a kind of handle on Miami Airport and Miami, I realized that Miami was a very, very unique and very special part of the world. And to understand that, I did a history of Miami, which actually turned more into a mythology of Miami. Miami was essentially-prior to World War II-not that highly populated. People didn't come down. They did all kinds of things to try and attract people to come down. They built Chinese villages, houses, Arab kind of architecture. It was almost like a Disneyland in a way, trying to attract people to come down to Miami. And that's essentially also where the Art Deco thing became instigated. They were trying to attract-the same thing Disney does - trying to attract a crowd of people to come there and vacation.

Now, the thing-real simple now, because there's a very complex history there. But as I say, they were really creating a myth about why one would come to Miami-a fantasyland in a sense. But the thing that was really holding it down was a mosquito problem. You have the Everglades there. World War II is when they came up with a cure, or a solution, to malaria and the mosquito problem. And so when they eliminated the mosquito problem, the malaria and that, from that point on it became a haven for what they call the “snowbirds,” who come down from New York, a big Jewish community, which populated the Art Deco hotels along the beach. But that's a long, long, long story.

But I did that to educate myself, because my observation in the beginning was that when you arrived at the Miami Airport-which is still true-you could be in Cleveland. There was nothing about it that essentially was unique or special or part of what it's like to be in Miami.

The thing had been built piecemeal. It started in 1930 or so, and it was built so you walked out on the tarmac to get on the airplane, and then it got more upgraded, then more upgraded and more-so it was a real hodgepodge of piecemeal-and it was famous as a place that you could get lost. There was a guy who wrote an article, apparently every week, in the *Miami Herald* that talked about the dilemmas of that airport.

Now, on the working side, the planes and all that, the guy that ran the thing, a guy named Dick Judy, he really ran it very well. It's a very complex airport in the sense that it's the hub for all of the United States and Central and South America. I'm sure it's spread out a little more now, but at the time everything went through Miami, which was a very complex thing.

And one of the things unique to that was that most of the airplanes that came-people, passengers that came to the airport came through different parts of the day, connecting flights, and came to Miami. Nobody flew really from other cities so much at that time. And so most of the flights left out of there at 11:00 at night, midnight, that sort of thing. And a lot of people ran businesses out of it. That is, you'd see people in line with five, six refrigerators or TVs or-there were huge boxes of stuff. It was hilarious, really, because they'd buy them here, take them down and sell them wherever they were in Central America and South America. And so it was colorful.

And also there was a very, very, very mixed crowd. You had all the people in South America, which is a very unique culture, very different than ours with regards to how people travel-basically everybody goes to the airport to send you off. And then you have the people, businessmen coming down from New York to go out to the Bahamas or Aruba or whatever, to chill out for a week or two weeks. They'd come down with a business suit and they'd go back with a straw hat. And on the way down they sat on a chair and-like you do when we travel, mostly. They didn't have a family or all that sort of thing with them. It was a pass-through stop. And then they would come back and they'd be lying on the ground with a straw hat, totally relaxed. So it had this amazing sort of dynamic that went on, much more interesting than most airports because of the cross-the cultures. The islands and Central and South America, and then New York and what have you, the rest of the United States.

So that very much fed into my thing, and I did a whole tracking on that, having to do with observing-they let me leave chairs, all the chairs and stuff, loose so you could move them. In the morning you set them out just, say, formally, and when you come in the morning-South America and Central America, they'd all be grouped. They were all grouped together. And, boy, the ones where people were coming from New York or just doing business

and that, everything was orderly and straight lines and separate and space in between everything-two totally different cultures. It was very interesting just seeing the grouping, how people used it. So I'd let that happen as part of my master plan.

So I did a lot of homework on this thing in the early part, before I started proposing anything. I would meet with those people, the heads of different departments in the airport, and with Dick Judy, who I really liked and respected. Dick Judy had been there for, like, 30 years, and he ran the airport with an iron hand. He did everything. He raised his own money, raised it and put up bonds and the whole thing.

The scenario of this thing later changed, because the city was going through a change at that time. The Cubans had come-three groups of Cubans had all come to Miami. The original ones were professional people-doctors, lawyers, what have you. And then the second one was a larger group of middle-class, everyday people, ordinary people. And the third were the Marielitos, where he just dumped everybody out of the prisons and threw them out of the country, and they came to the United States. They were actually a dangerous group of people. A lot of them had been in prison for different kinds of crimes.

But at the time I was there, basically Miami slowly was becoming a much more Cuban city. And there was a "white flight." All the gringos were going out to the suburbs to live. And the flavor of the city was changing quite a bit. That was another part of what I was doing, recording.

The airport was making money-it paid all its own bills. They ran a tight ship, really. And anytime they did something or expanded or whatever, he floated his own bonds and raised his own money. And Dick Judy was very good. I don't know what you'd call it, but he was the head of the airport. When all the airport people got together, he was the chief. And Dick Judy also was the first one who started the idea of not having just-I forget the names of the companies that service airports and service airplanes.

MR. SIMMS: The concessions?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, the concessions. He's the one who really started the idea during this thing, and it was part of my recommendations, to bring in local businesses, successful restaurants, to open a restaurant, which is now becoming-a lot of airports are doing that. It's changed the whole airport landscape. And so he was a good guy to work with.

He just sort of dismissed me in the beginning, because he had been running the airport. He was very good at it, but really more having to do with the airplanes and the runways and all that. He didn't have any real strong aesthetic or any real strong experience with that kind of thing, with the restaurants and all that. He was good with what he does, but he needed somebody like me to help him upgrade-because it just wasn't his area of expertise. And by the end of it I pretty much managed to convince him to do it.

MR. SIMMS: So this began in 1985. You've talked a bit about the airport. Now, you also had the Public Art Trust, the Miami-Dade public art group with César Trasobares?

MR. IRWIN: Trasobares, that's right.

MR. SIMMS: And then you had also the PAC or the Public Art Committee-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, they always have a committee. John Neff, Michael Auping, and a woman-I cannot remember her name-yeah, they're pretty good people. They're the ones who essentially allowed me to do this, because what I was doing was not what they had planned, and we got much more complex and much more expensive, I'm sure-I don't know the economics of it-but they hung in the whole time. They, I guess, were intrigued by it. So I would meet with them and tell them what I'm doing and where we were going. There was César Trasobares, who ran the local arts, and then he-they were his advisors.

MR. SIMMS: But they were independent, weren't they, to a degree?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah. Right. They were not put together by Miami. They came from elsewhere, from the government, I guess.

MR. SIMMS: Okay, because some national money was coming-in other words, national-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, there was some funding. All these situations were connected in one way or another with the National Endowment and the whole idea of developing the arts.

MR. SIMMS: Right. I guess the thing I'm trying to underscore is that this is a complex series of intersecting people with different agendas or ideas or hopes or aspirations.

MR. IRWIN: Absolutely.

MR. SIMMS: And then you were kind of in the midst of all this.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. And as I say, I started out with something that was a very low-key invitation, and slowly I took it into a major-it was a major effort. I had already spent I don't know how many, but a couple of years going back and forth to Miami, spending a lot of time in Miami. I had Adele help me with the history, the mythology and that. That took a fair amount of time to put all that together. And then slowly I started developing an actual master plan-which essentially addressed every aspect of the airport, having to do with how people arrived and really looking at how that whole process has worked or hasn't worked, especially with regards to the arts.

I say in the beginning of the story I always tell, which is a fairly simple one, you arrive at the Miami Airport; you're coming down the road, and the road curves to the right to go up and finally to go around a bridge. But when it goes to the right, the airport is off to the left, so you essentially have to just trust the idea of the signs, because intuitively, instinctively, it is not doing the right thing. And you're driving a rented car, and you're going, what, 40 miles an hour on this ramp, and you have to make some quick decisions.

And the first thing is that's always that spot. There's a certain amount of anxiety at that moment. That spot is where they put *Flight*, the piece of sculpture, *Flight*, for the airport. But all it really does is cause more anxiety, because if you have to look at it, you're looking at it in this moment when you may have to make a sudden lane change or turn right or whatever. The whole thing is just totally ridiculous. At that moment the last thing you need is *Flight*, and that's where it is, in all the airports. That's the ceremonial spot.

It's a little bit like the dilemma that we still have where you put all your money into the faÃ§ade of a building, about how the building looks and how it represents you and so on, all that kind of investment, and then you enter the building through the garage, where there's no money spent. The ceilings are low and there's not enough light. It's as hostile a place you could get.

MR. SIMMS: Right. That's true in Las Vegas with all the casinos. There's so much money put into that, but you're always coming in through-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, go downtown L.A., or go downtown New York.

Then there was the whole idea of how they used art as a kind of place-maker, symbolic and so on and so forth. The real issue at that moment was, in a sense, accessibility. Decisions had to be made. They would do a wonderful piece of landscaping, say, at the top of that curve, which, of course, made it impossible for you to see where you were going to go. So again, a so-called nicety but totally not thought out.

So the point-as I started to point out-was, who takes charge of these things? I laid the whole thing out-that essentially we have three echelons operating, in which I supply the aesthetics for the place; somebody else supplies the practicalities; somebody else supplies the day-to-day operational information data and what have you.

So the plan was much more than just a drawing of the thing. It sorted out the areas of responsibility. Later on I ended up being face-to-face with Richard Meier, where I have to fight it out, where suddenly is it the artist's or is it the architect's job, or is it, for instance, the engineer's job, and so and so? They're always fighting, in a way, because they hadn't cleared it.

So I broke the airport down into areas, as it were. For example, that moment of entrance is a practical question. That needs to be resolved by the engineer, by somebody who has good experience with all the issues that are there. It's not the place for the artist. You might eventually plant some stuff, but the engineer should be making the decisions.

Then after you make the left-hand turn, there is an area where the road goes straight, and now you're going into the airport. There are no other complex things going on there. There's no other issues that are there-a pretty good place for the artist. Now, what I suggested was something that you see in Miami a lot, the way roads are overgrown with huge trees and that. You know it's Miami. And then at a certain point you now have to split up and decide whether you're going out or going down or going into the garages-the arrivals and the departures. And so now, in a sense, the responsibility shifts again. Maybe you have a group of those who deal with going up to the terminal, those going off to the garage.

What I did was a kind of water causeway thing. The roads went over the water and around the water and that, which is, again, a very big, very unique image in Miami. You see these causeways everywhere. They're quite

beautiful. They're quite nice. So the idea of bringing those in and enriching it with, again, another Miami symbol or item. And then when you went around that, there was a big problem in that there was a double level that had been built.

MR. SIMMS: This is in the parking garage, or is this in the arrival-

MR. IRWIN: No, this is arrival and departure.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: Arrival was on the top; departure was on the bottom, which is the way they do it, pretty much. But the problem was that the bottom was not only claustrophobic and a really unhappy place, it actually was making people sick, especially the guards and people who had to work there, because of the pollution from cars, all the cars. The gas was getting trapped. So part of what I did was to make them a more lacy thing, so that carbon monoxide could escape and so on and so forth. And also, it was dark and it had very poorly laid out crosswalks, which were not very clear. I reopened-relit-the thing and made all that function better.

And then there was the garage, which was fairly simple. It was fairly straightforward in the sense that-a garage is a garage, but in terms of nomenclature, when you-"Where am I parked?" "Where did I leave my car?" It was always just a question of Level 2, et cetera and that. But some people relate more to color. Some people relate more to imagery, so that you-the simple or obvious thing which do now a lot is where you color-code it or where you code it with images unique to the area, but images so that I can remember that I'm on the water side, or I'm in the blue area or I'm in the-

MR. SIMMS: -Palm Tree Level.

MR. IRWIN: Right, Palm Tree Level, exactly. And then you come into the terminal, and you have the circular half-circle where all the concourses are going out. And so I visually record all that and how it worked and how it didn't work, and also with the security and all of that.

And one of the problems, like I say, is that everything was just Concourse A, Concourse B, Concourse C, that sort of thing. And so the way I addressed the concourses is that, of course, it's also the moment of arrival. It's the moment of departure, but it's the moment of arrival. If you arrive and you think you're in Cleveland-

So one of the things I did was to engage all of the different tourist sites that were there-a bird sanctuary, an orchid garden, all the kind of things you have that are special to the place. There were a lot of brochures and things. But for example, I suggested that on one of the concourses that you actually have an area like the bird sanctuary. I actually contacted them and asked them if they were interested, which they were, and they would have supplied all the ornithology, and they would have supplied all the maintenance for an event in that concourse. It would be changing, and it would be lively, and it would also-when that concourse enters into the half-circle terminal, it came in with character-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -something you related to that, the events in there and the colors and what you have, so that that event, that thing didn't just have to be known as "C." As you walked all the way around, each one of these concourses would come in and essentially introduce themselves with an entirely different aesthetic as such.

And so my idea was to have an artist come and not do a piece of art per se but actually take a concourse. It would be their concourse, and they would make decisions as to the physical shape, physical-along with the architect-or if it was already built, they would just have to then intercede. But they could do the walls, the carpeting, the lighting, essentially, in other words, make each one of those concourses a unique experience, and each one having its own themed element that was something related to what was going on in Miami: an Art Deco one, a bird one, what you have. So anyway, yeah, it was quite an elaborate plan. And then also-oh, go ahead.

MR. SIMMS: I was just wondering if you would say something about who some of those artists were who wound up getting involved in different-

MR. IRWIN: Well, I had just barely got to that level, because I never had gotten in any way an approval from the-I'm trying to remember.

There was a long walk from-on these tunnels, or skywalks-from the parking garage to the terminal. That was John Baldessari, which is exactly what John Baldessari kind of thinks and John Baldessari does.

Joseph Kosuth, who I think is really one of the best conceptual artists-he not only has the whole kind of conceptual aspect to his work but also has a real visual and a real, in a sense, tactile-some of the projects operated on a number of levels. He was the one I had for the baggage claim-and part of that fact is that, in the baggage claim, when you come down for the first-depending on the airport and that, but-and efficiency, but you can stand around there for 15 minutes, half an hour, just waiting for the bags to start coming. So now you have a moment where, for example, you could do something having to do with advertising all the things in Miami. There could be visuals, there could be film, all the kind of things that a conceptual artist might want to work with. Two things: information and entertainment. And also how-you spend a little time there waiting for your luggage and it not being completely wasted. You're getting information; you're being entertained, in a way.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah, and there's humor to it as well.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Well, Kosuth is good. And somebody like Alexis Smith, who is somebody who deals with all the environmental elements around you. She makes the art, but she integrates it into the fabric of the place, and so she introduces materials and surfaces, et cetera-and lighting elements and so-

MR. SIMMS: She had an Art Deco theme, I think, to the terminal she was working with.

MR. IRWIN: That's possible. A lot of the stuff she does is very vernacular. And Art Deco is a big-that's quite famous and really quite a nice item down there. So that I think-anyway, just barely started, those who were there. There may have been a couple of others.

MR. SIMMS: Alice Aycock did present some sculptural pieces that were sort of large plays on the fountain of youth, the-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah.

MR. SIMMS: The Ponce de LeÃ�n-

MR. IRWIN: Ponce de LeÃ�n.

MR. SIMMS: -idea, and those-

MR. IRWIN: You probably know more about it than I do-

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] No, I'm just trying to throw things out to provoke your memory here.

MR. IRWIN: -after 20-30 years or 40 years. Well, so it was a very elaborate plan, and got to about where you are now.

I think, really, one of the crucial things was that he paid an architecture firm, I don't know, a very large fee to come up with a way to light this lower drive. And when they unveiled it at the time, it didn't work. And so he got another architect and he paid him a good-size fee, and it didn't work.

And so I got brazen at that moment and said, “I'll tell you what. I will come up-for free, I will come up with an idea for that that will work, and I'll do it in a week, and I'll do it for nothing.” And I did. And there's still one of them left there. The one little mock-up that I did is all falling apart now. But it was a real-it was basically very, very simple. You have on the ground-you have a crosswalk going. You have the lines, stripes, painted, which is the crosswalk. And then there are-there's one there, and there's one there, and then there's one there, and there's one there, like that. [Sketching.]

So what I did was to basically make them essentially a light space and kept the color a little bit darker in the middle between them, so when you came in, you could see the crosswalk way ahead, and it carried you on around. So there was movement in it. And I did it simply by repeating the stripes on the ceiling with fluorescent elements that I made. And I did them very simple. And so stripes across on the ground, stripes on the ceiling, a little bit darker in between them so that those things are really bright places. From here you would see to there. It didn't have to be each-every candle foot doesn't have to be the same. It can pulse, which is also a sense of movement, a sense of progression through the light.

And it worked. And it was very simple. What do you see? Just fluorescent lights and repeating what was already on the ground, and just making sense-that the lighting just isn't here, there, everywhere random, that it's related to the task the lighting also had to do.

MR. SIMMS: So that captures this idea of the aesthetic and the practical intertwined somehow.

MR. IRWIN: Yes.

MR. SIMMS: And that seems like the broader thing about the project, is that there's a kind of hand-off between the aesthetic and the practical. It's not like there's one area that's only practical and another area that's only aesthetic. So there's a constant kind of shifting back and forth.

MR. IRWIN: But also it-you saw the chart I did about the relationships between one kind of activity and another kind of activity and who is responsible. In other words, the artist may be involved, but the engineer may run it. Another place, the artist may run it, and the engineer may be involved. But it sorts out this thing of who does what, who's responsible for what, instead of them all fighting, arguing back and forth, and really about asserting their role or what have you. But you need some structure in which you know who's making the primary decisions and who is making the secondary decisions. And they shift in every area.

Everyone has an area of specialty and their role is probably the most crucial to it. And at that point they become the head of the committee, of the group that's working there. That's a continuous, constant problem, especially for artists: bringing an artist in, and what does he do and who is he, and who makes decisions and what-this thing of committees in which you don't know who's on top and who's-in other words, who is the key responsible?

But you can relate it to the function, the job that has to be done: what's the key thing you're trying to accomplish in that, and who-who is-since this falls into their ballpark. It's what they're trained to do. It's what they know how to do. And so each of these parties, that whole thing, sorting that out in terms of how a group of people work, various expertises, how they can work together and work collaboratively.

See, I start with the fact that in this-in the airport-that when it came to certain kinds of aspects of the airport, Dick Judy was great, but there are other areas where he wasn't great at all. He shouldn't be. He may be the chief, but he essentially has to take a back seat in certain areas because it's not his area of expertise.

The thing is that the airport, first of all, it needed an aesthetician more than anything else, and needed it in a sense of some kind of real practical-where somebody else maybe could do as well as I did but aesthetics was not his game. And eventually they can go hand-in-glove, if everybody knows what their job or role is.

Now, most artists essentially just simply give them a sculpture called *Flight*. That's what they're asking for. They go along with it. What I did was to be audacious enough to hang in there for four or five years and propose an entire overhaul of their office. And I thought when I left that nobody remembered anything of all the things I did, the setting up relations and all that, which is not maybe normally what people think of an artist to do. But Sally Yard, she revisited it all, some of those people and what have you. And in fact, my verbiage, jargon, everything I essentially had, they started using it and started applying in Fort Lauderdale.

MR. SIMMS: I think at a certain point in the project you also proposed a central park area.

MR. IRWIN: Yes. I took the central area, which was a kind of VIP parking area, and turned it in-basically to a park.

The main reason is that they had a pollution problem, and they had a time problem, and that the middle area, which was small, as a park would solve a lot of-you also create vents going from the upper space to the lower space, but also color-wise and that, you take the whole park and the metaphor of the greening on that underneath area, because it's more like a grotto or something that's a little more interesting or charming in a way.

But also, when you come to the airport, basically you check in and then you go directly to the gate. Even if it's an hour away or two hours, you go directly, to make sure it's there, that you know where it is and you're not going to miss your airplane. That's number one. So once you find that, if you have 15 minutes, you sit right there and wait. You got a half an hour, you go buy a Coke, a newspaper. If you've got an hour, you might go so far as to look at couple of shops that are in there. If you've got two hours or three hours or four hours, you've got a problem, because most airports are not set up to deal with that-then even less. Airports have improved a lot since that project.

But these people had four or five-the South American thing was maybe four or five hours. So the idea being of going outside to sit in the park was appealing. It's also very Miami. Miami is a very rich palette of plant material and things that will grow there, and exotic-levels of exotica. So the park was rather exotic in its character.

There were a couple of places where water fell down from the upper level to the lower level, which aerates the air and helps very much again. And seeing out from the veils of water creates that not to be such a dungeon under there, or a black hole. So, yes, so I interjected-I think plant material was probably-plant material and water were the two things that in Miami are very distinctive, the kind of plant material and the way the water-

with the causeways and all that. So I tried to integrate them directly into it.

It's a little bit also like my Central Park argument: if I tell you that you're going to have to close the center of New York and have only five streets that go through it from, what is it, 59th Street to-I forget where it is, a hundred and something. But if I told you that, and that all that real estate property given up and so on and so on-if I tried to tell you that, convince you of that now, no way. People would tell you you're crazy. It would cause congestion; the city wouldn't work.

I would tell you New York would be unbearable without it. Central Park is absolutely crucial. It was one of the great decisions ever made in a city. And most cities don't have something of that scale, which then all small parks relate to. So they all work much stronger than having just a few small parks here and there in which nothing coalesces.

But that's my Central Park argument. I think it's a great one, because by all practicality, at this moment you say it couldn't be done, not possible. It's just simply not true. But also the city definitely benefits from it. It's actually crucial to that city.

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: So the same thing. This little park in the middle now in a sense becomes an anchor for each of those little-the bird place, the orchid place, and that. They all become small satellites to that park and are related to it. So it integrates all the parts of the thing with something that, in a sense, enriches or makes the place feel better. By the way, I'm at this point, of course, really starting to redefine what the role of an artist is and also having to experiment with, can an artist do this?

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: Can an artist-and is there a reason for it, a broader idea about the role of art and the relationship of a society? And it's the idea of the artist-art is a sensibility in terms of the teaching we talked about, this idea that an artist has a sense of the way he spends his whole entire life really developing the character and the quality of that sensibility.

It isn't about making things or objects or making a living or having a career. It's not about any of those things. It's about having an aesthetic, and that when you really take that idea in terms of enriching the world, that the artist in a sense says that's a role that artists are prepared to play, but they don't get to play, or they're not asked to play, or they're not even thought of as someone to play that role in a larger context.

But when you eliminate all the things, all the other baggage that artists had to do-flora and fauna and court the kings and be the handmaiden of religion and all, and social, political, all that kind of stuff, fundamentally artists can do all those things like everybody else. But what is the role that's unique to art? And it has to do with this idea of the artist as an aesthetician. It's an odd and clumsy word, but essentially that's what I took from that-from Miami.

It was like going back to school. It was like my graduate course in being an artist, to go back and work on that scale. To meet with 30 people on Monday morning and hash out who's going to do what and when and what this and all that for the week-to do that, can the artist survive it? Can he do it? I think I did it-essentially I didn't get it done, but I did it at the airport and I did it at the Getty and I did it at Dia:Beacon.

I'm not a landscape artist. I'm not an architect, but essentially I took on this whole thing of architecture, this whole thing of the garden, this whole thing of the airport as a whole. I would actually have liked to have a small chance to master plan or to intercede in how a city is organized or how a community is organized, because I think there is an aesthetic component to all these things, and there's no one theoretically who is educated and spends time with developing a particular kind of expertise, which is missing in a lot of stuff. It's missing, someone who's really-that's what they do.

And so this was the first big-and like I say, I've been thinking about this, been pushing it around in my head, but here was an opportunity to act-to act, even though it wasn't going to be built. I never thought it was going to get built. I spent five years doing it and it was a major education. It really was instrumental to everything I've done since then. It was a ground-also on a scale. It was big, complex, took on all kinds of issues: Can I improve the waiting time? Can I make it a nicer place or a nicer experience for getting the baggage, et cetera? And then addressing more directly filling in the five-hour wait or the three-hour wait or whatever was-also, fundamentally, when you arrive in Miami, you're goddamn in Miami-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -and you have a sense of Miami. And everything lends a quality moment of, “Oh, shit.” I get that

every time I go to Hawaii, but I get it because of the air. I arrive in Hawaii-which I've been going to for, like, 50 years, starting with my surfing days-but you walk off the airplane and the air-I just exhale, just relax. I don't have to be there a week to finally relax. I relax-that's what I love. I relax immediately. You just feel it. It's a whole different-just a different world. And you might have to wade-in Honolulu-through some pollution for a minute to get back-to get out to what's left of the nature. But I'm totally convinced that this is a role that artists can play, and that it's missing in the overall composition of things. And the whole history of modern art, as far as I'm concerned, this is where it's culminating.

It's not about dividing it up into little kingdoms or fiefdoms or little tasks or that sort of thing. It's having a shared value for the overall quality of the project of the thing you're dealing with, and understanding that there are things you can do and things you can't do, and that that becomes the real reason for a collaboration.

MR. SIMMS: This requires rethinking the organization of groups of people. You're talking about the way teams get built. It's about the way that people report to superiors. There's a lot of things that get changed in this model of-

MR. IRWIN: The thing is that everyone essentially-I'm going to use a funny word, but it “practicalizes,” makes it more practical, that essentially you have respect for, the need for, other people's expertise and their input. And then you have a rhyme and a reason for how you deal with that person. It isn't a little contest that people have, a little wrestling for position, et cetera, prestige and so on and so forth. The accomplishment is the whole thing.

And if you're really smart, you find people and work with people that are good at the things that you're not good at-supply the things you need so therefore you need them. So you have respect for them.

MR. SIMMS: Just to wind out this Miami thing. How did it come to an end?

MR. IRWIN: I actually think I was on the verge of doing this, that Mr. Judy understood it. He understood that some of this stuff was of some real value to him. And that was quite an accomplishment. He was very good at what he did. He was a very accomplished guy. And I think we were on the verge of doing that. And Miami elected its first Cuban mayor. The Cuban mayor looked around to see and saw that, financially, everything was a disaster, and the airport was a complete success. He tapped on it and he said to Judy, “From now on you-basically you work for me.” And Judy, who had worked independently all those years, told him to go, you know, fly a kite.

MR. SIMMS: On the public art side, César Trasobares also either quit or something like that, so you lost the two in-

MR. IRWIN: Yes, so I knew it was over. And the guy who, by the way, replaced Dick Judy, through the entire time that I was doing the dialogue with him, doing this and doing that, said, “Well, screw all that. I'll just concrete the fucking thing over.” I wasn't going to convince him. I mean, if I did, it would take the rest of my life, probably. So I retired gracefully.

[END AUDIO TRACK]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at his home in San Diego on April 27, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is card number six.

Mr. IRWIN: Six.

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: We're going to set a record here.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] We were talking last time about your project at Miami International Airport, and today it would be nice to talk about your work at the Getty, specifically the Getty Central Garden. As a way to get started, it might be interesting just to talk about at what point they contacted you, what you thought about this generally, how the project got started.

MR. IRWIN: Well, I wasn't there at the start, but Richard Meier had been working on the building for approximately seven years. Kurt Forster actually asked me to come one time. And at the time I was too busy to do that, so I didn't do it. But he is the one who decided that the overall plan was becoming too much of one thing, and he felt that it needed an injection of something to counterbalance Richard Meier's very, very, very organized and orderly plan.

And so he convinced them that-it wasn't a board but it was the president, and a couple of people working for him, decision makers, on that project. I'm having trouble thinking of names. Harold Williams was the keeper. He was the president. Steve Rountree. John Walsh.

Anyway, so they invited me to come and visit with them, and I did. And they decided that they wanted to do the project. They wanted me to make a proposal, which became a very, very complicated process. My observation, visiting the site, was that it was an incredible challenge, an opportunity really.

I was at that point in my life where I really wanted to test-which I had already done with the airport-I wanted to test this idea of an artist as an aesthetician; that what made artists distinct was not necessarily the art that we produce, especially when it's held to old forms, like painting and sculpture in the old sense, but the idea that what made and distinguished one artist from another just goes back to my teaching days, which is that each one has a sensibility, and it's the quality of that sensibility that gives a uniqueness and a specialness to the things that they do.

Essentially, of course, they've operated within a particular frame of history of how an artist functions. The whole thing we've been talking about is the idea that when we left the studio, artists could enter in in very unique and very special situations, respond directly to them. I did my homework at the airport in Miami, which was to test whether or not I could take on a project of that scale and have a unique contribution to it. So this was an incredible opportunity. I'm not a landscape person. I'd never even planted a plant. So I was on a long, hard learning curve. It was a very demanding project. Actually, the project itself was approximately five years, but then I spent 10 years in monitoring it and trying to insure its quality.

Richard Meier already had a plan completely in place, and it was an extension of the architecture. And it was not a French garden but a very, very geometric and orderly garden, and not really a garden, almost more of an escalade of a few steps-a landing going down-so I entered into it, although he didn't ever like it. I actually took the situation very seriously, i.e., the architecture. The thing is not out in a glen someplace, not out in a beautiful dell or something where it's in nature. It was surrounded by a very, very, very strong, large-scale architectonic setting. So you can't ignore that. It would be ridiculous to do that. You have to consider the conditions of its being there. And my first observation is that actually the space wasn't planned. The space is what was left over.

It was to be the garden, a footprint. But the footprint was not planned. The buildings were planned, and they ended, and where they ended, in the middle was what was in the middle.

So if you take the two sides of it, which are, of course, very important, each side was totally different than the other, and they were not coordinated really in the sense that this one had a curve here and this one had a curve further up and a curve in this direction, et cetera, and a very sharp edge but another sharp-so normally you try and tie it in very directly with those large elements.

So very early on the first real challenge was, how do you, in a sense, make this garden act in there and honor and deal with these large-scale elements?

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: So that was the first real challenge. The second was that, in terms of how they presented the project, what they desired for the garden-how it was to be used and how people would spend time there and what have you and all that-it was too small. The space that they were giving me was too small.

It's a little hard to describe without the drawings, but there's a utility road that came-you know where my wall is now? The utility wall came up that direction and went on around. So my first argument was that the space could not accommodate what was necessary for the garden to make it do all the things they wanted to do.

So I changed the direction of the road, and instead of having it curve in like that, I had it curve out in the opposite direction. So the space that I gained there was the lower garden. And when you go there now, you could just end it right at that point and realize it would be stunted and there would really not be any place for people to go-not really anywhere to sit and spend time and that. So that was the first argument I had, was to change the thing completely in terms of its configuration on the piece of land. We had the upper garden and the lower garden.

And so I divided them into two areas, one which was the trip down, and the arrival at the middle there, looking down on the lower garden, and then going down into the lower garden, so a three-phase experience. The arguments against it were that they didn't want to maintain that much garden, which really went against what the invitation was, that the maintenance would be expensive, et cetera, and that. And it is, but-so I had to overcome a lot of resistance to that idea, not even counting Richard Meier-counting the other people.

And the lay of the land as it existed actually had a fall line right down the center of it, which went past even the garden, went past the property, went all the way down to the bottom of this hill, because it's way up on a hill. And so that fall line became the first element, which was the actual existing nature of the space. It was the only space which acknowledged that. The rest of it sat on the hill. So I did, in a way, the most obvious thing, which was to use the fall line as where the stream goes.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: And it becomes the fall line and travels down the hill. So I came up with the idea of a stream, which was very obvious and very simple. And as I say, I then captured this lower part. So I divided them first of all in terms of this garden, in terms of the upper garden. It's basically a perennial garden, and the bottom part is an annual garden. So there's actually two kinds of gardens.

The second thing was the gardens are made up, on the whole, of plants that are really quite small. There's a small item compared to the architecture. So I felt I had to have something which had the stature, had the scale to engage the building, or to make sense in the space.

That then became, in a sense, a line of trees along this fall line. And I needed big, very strong physical trees, which in California is actually not something you see mostly. You see those kind of trees somewhere where there's a cold winter, so the trees, they go through the winter and they get that-they gain this strength, apparently. And the trees here are much more languid, almost-not oriental but much more soft and languid, going along with the weather. So finding a tree that would do that was the first order of-

MR. SIMMS: Right. And were there already some plans about the kinds of trees that would be on the site elsewhere that you consulted? Or were you thinking just about what you might-

MR. IRWIN: I was thinking primarily about that. I was definitely-I weaved those into it at a later stage. The first thing was, as I say, was then-the only tree that really has that is the sycamore out here. There's a California sycamore, which is a very lazy kind of a tree, and then there's a version which is called a-what is the name of it? It's a London plane. They call it a London plane, but it's-

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: They're both the sycamore family. London plane is one that you see down the Champs-Ã�lysées-

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: -the park areas along the road.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And they're hedged. You see it in the-not the Tuileries but you do see it in the-what's that-

MR. SIMMS: The Luxembourg?

MR. IRWIN: The Luxembourg, yeah. You see it in the Luxembourg Gardens. And very trimmed. So when you do it that way, trimmed, there's really an architectural product. It looks very architectural.

I was learning as I went along, and I did it by just asking everybody. Everybody I saw, every gardener, every person that had any relationship to it, I started questioning them. And so I started trying to find the trees, which is a good little story in terms of how I worked with-Richard Meier, of course, had connections, and he had some landscape people working on it with-good people. And so I kept asking them.

And they finally zeroed on-there are a number of cultivars called-a Bloodgood was the tree that I had to have, and the Bloodgood is the one that you see the most of. But I was very concerned and nervous about-the one downside on the sycamores here was that in the summer the leaves kind of burn up. They get all brown. You see them in the summer and they're not very handsome. They look bedraggled. So I asked and asked and asked, and everybody finally agreed-there was a real consensus on the Bloodgood.

So I went to Oregon, which is where you buy trees-the big tree place-and picked myself out some very good Bloodgoods. And on my way back, I was in an airport in San Jose, literally, and I look out the door and there's a guy out there like kind of hugging a tree. And I'm like, what? So I was very interested. There was something about him and about what he was doing that really appealed to me.

So I went outside and started talking with him. And it turns out he lived up near San Jose, and he had the job of

caring for all the trees for the city of San Jose, but also other places. I mean, he was the best. Barrie Coate. And Barrie Coate was-I loved him immediately. I trusted him immediately.

So we started having this long conversation. And I told him what my problem was, what I was doing, and he said, “Well, what tree did you choose?” And I said, “the Bloodgood.” And he said, “Oh, no, no, no, you don't want to have the Bloodgood. The tree you want is the Yarwood.” I said, “Oh, really, the Yarwood?”

And I started asking him why and all this. And so he convinced me, and I literally went back in there, cancelled my flight, and got a flight back to Oregon, went back up to Oregon, and I got the last of the Yarwoods that were there, literally. Maybe they had been picked over a little bit, but I got good ones. And so the first spring and first summer all the Bloodgoods were brown, and my Yarwoods were green and beautiful. So-

MR. SIMMS: Would you keep them up, let's say, in the nursery so you could observe them, or how would that work?

MR. IRWIN: Well, in this particular case we brought them-I had to make a commitment. I had to buy them and I had to bring them down here. We had a place out in the valley, which was a crucible for this issue because it's warm, hot and dry out there. And Richard Meier had his garden. People had actually brought down some Bloodgoods, so it was very interesting, a moment of victory, as it were, that my trees were beautiful and theirs were not. But then of course, the way that these things kind of developed, you have the-they have the stream going down, and then I have the trees following the fall line. And I wanted the trees to grow together at the top so that I could hedge them. I didn't want to hedge them the way they do in Paris, where they make them real rigid, but I wanted it to have that big-so that was the big scale for it, and my plan was to shape it and wedge-definitely a geometry.

By the way, Barrie Coate is the guy I worked with on that all the way, and he said, “Well, probably to get it to do what you want to do there, they need to be planted no more than 22 feet apart, because if it's anything more than that then they're never really going to get together.”

And so that puts a restriction on the stream, now. The stream does go along, but it's narrow now, and that almost makes it project a big enough place for the tree to stand, and then the sides of the stream and that. So that, in a way, couldn't be just a lazy stream. And so I looked at it in a more formal way, say, like the way the French do, et cetera, and tried to play with doing the thing being a little more formal stream, which was going against the grain.

And then finally none of those really worked. And so I decided that the stream had to be, in a sense, a strong factor in it, and it had to be like a piece of sculpture in itself. So I met a guy named Laddie Flock, who is a really good rock man. He's born and bred as a rock man. And there's a talent there and an ability to see and understand all the different rocks.

I told him what I needed and what I wanted, and so he found me half a dozen places that had rocks that might be candidates for it. So I started traveling with him. We traveled all over the place, but mostly up into the California gold country. And we traveled up along the Canadian border up at the top of the Montana and places like that.

And that was a great introduction. There's some spectacular rocks in the world. And this guy knew where they were and how to find them, and what they did and what they couldn't, and what they cost and what their strengths and weaknesses were.

That was a real adventure. And so I started picking out each rock. I kind of laugh right now when you have that rock-you know, that rock is all right, but it's not a great rock. I've seen great rocks. And in this thing there were just-every single rock was a specimen, and I marked them at all these different places. And then we had to gather them up and bring them down to the site. And up to that point there had been some resistance among the people doing the construction at the place. And I had these rocks laid out on the ground; every one of them hand-picked. And I spent, oh, about seven days, eight days, and I essentially assembled them. You know, this rock fits here, and this one fits under that one, and this one here.

And as I did it, I put a certain kind of a rock at the top, which was a little larger, and very bold. And the water actually went underneath it. And I realized that one of the things that's really crucial there is that this water has a different sound as it goes down. So I actually, in effect, learned very simply by spending time up in the mountains and watching a stream, looking at all the variety of visuals there are in that, and also all the different sounds where the water courses underneath and you can hear it but it has a kind of a flowing kind of quality to

it. And then it will rise up and it will bubble up, and then it will course between rocks and it will fall, the different kinds of falls that it can have. And so as I went down-I assembled the rocks at the top. They were very close to the bridge that had to cross over it. And you couldn't see the water, so I tuned it so that it was like an A and an E on a cello, from one side to the other.

Probably no one knows that without being told, in a way, but if you stand on each bridge, there is actually a sound-two sounds-one on one side and one on the other, which I think really enrich the experience. And we'll go into, in a minute, about the crisscrossing.

But anyway, I brought all those rocks down and I assembled them, and I did it in a week.

MR. SIMMS: Now, did you assemble them in a staging area, or right there, right off the bat?

MR. IRWIN: Right there. No, I laid them up on the ground around it. And I could look at this rock and say, let's move that one. I had a couple of cranes working for me. And we'd bring it in and sit it down. I was amazed when I saw I was able to-it was like a piece of sculpture-fit this rock into this one and that one there. Find one that was the right size and the right character and put them together, and worked my way all the way down. And I did it basically in a week, and those people didn't think I could do it at all. So after that everybody-I was very lucky because everybody then said, “Wow,” and they became very helpful rather than resistant. People tend to be a little-in the building industry-tend to be a little resistant to an artist-you know, a pussy.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.] And for the record, this was Dinwiddie Construction.

MR. IRWIN: That's right. The guy-I'm trying to think. I don't remember his name, but the guy he was really helpful. He was great. And the people around him were first-rate people and they did the first-rate-I always have liked best to be in the field like that because I like those people. I get along with them.

I decided at one point that the path would sort of follow the stream, which is how you normally walk down a stream-it's alongside the stream-and maybe cross over someplace. But primarily, it just follows the line.

And the handicapped people came along and said, “Well, you can't do that” -because this whole thing was on a slope-“you can't do that because we can't do it.” In other words, it's too steep and what have you. So at first I really riled against that because what I realized is that it's interesting that the handicapped people-by the way, at that time my wife, her mother had lost both her legs, so we used to have to move her around in a wheelchair. So I wasn't insensitive to the issue.

But what had happened is that the handicapped people, the argument he made is that-all great arguments are won by a winning metaphor that collects the ideas into a metaphor that is overwhelming and wins, and theirs was equal access: “All we want is equal access.” How do you argue against equal access? I mean, it's a very democratic idea.

MR. SIMMS: Yes.

MR. IRWIN: But how it plays out in the world is that, “If we can't do it, you can't do it,” which means that three percent of the people basically are dictating to 97 percent. I won't go into the whole thing, how that affects you. Like you buy a little restaurant-you've got a little restaurant and you want to upgrade it a little bit, and you find out to get the person to the restroom, you have to put a ramp all the way around the building. It's just ridiculous. So the guy is either out of business or does this incredibly clumsy entrance situation.

So I riled against it a little bit. And they had a guy there and his job was to make sure that everything was handicapped accessible. And his bottom line was-since it's rather vague, the definitions, the edges of that argument are sometimes debatable-he always said, “Well, you wouldn't want to do just that. You'd want to go further, wouldn't you, go beyond” -

MR. SIMMS: The minimum required, right.

MR. IRWIN: Right. And the way they did it, which was very clever, why everybody was afraid of them, is they didn't go to you directly; they went to the city. And since the rules are rather vague and undefined, the city does not want to get sued, so they went beyond the-it was amazing. It was interesting. But it's in place so you have to deal with it.

So I didn't know what to do, and then all of a sudden-it was one of those moments where it all happens very quickly-I made a path which is curved across the stream, straight, straight, straight and curved. And you cross over the stream five times, which turned out to be the best thing I-if I had done it the other way, the old way, it would have not-and so it was one of the great things to learn about doing projects in life and in the world is that, if you pay attention, everything talks to you. There's all kinds of-and you find yourself doing things you would

not have thought of doing, and it becomes, in a way, a whole new creative process. And you sort of do it in motion, and you bring all your old ideas, the things you think about or have done before, and they don't work.

So you're being fed information all the time by the site, so it's a completely different activity. And it has to do with sensibility, that you essentially have to look and attend all the characters and physicalities and motions and lengths of time, and so on and so forth, of how a site presents itself.

And so you come up with some things every now and then, things that just totally surprise you. Those are really good moments. So it's not clichéd. It's rooted in a site and makes perfect sense, and yet at the same time you've never done it and you've never seen it before.

MR. SIMMS: So that issue of access in the end wound up being-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, totally. It was the best move I made. It was sensational. When I did it, I said, "Wow," you know? Just wow, like that. So as you go down-as I said, every time you cross a bridge-the sound of the water, the look of the water-the sound of the water is slightly different, sometimes rather dramatically different, but it's different all the way down. But it's nothing I think most people cognate on.

But also, to reinforce that, the character of the plant material each time you cross there-like in zones-I have the Zone 1 above the first cross-over, Zone 2, Zone 3, Zone 4, and Zone 5. And divided up by the fact that you're crossing over every time.

The first thing is you have these trees, and they come down to a certain point in this where you trim them to, and you have your trunk. Again I had Barrie Coate come, and he worked on those trunks for, like, 10 years in the very beginning, and he still works on them. Most trees, a lot of trees, they just grow however they grow, but they do have natural characteristics. They do certain things and they have some things unique to each one of them. But that uniqueness can be brought out and made even stronger, and you can take away maybe any kind of the weaknesses the tree might have, so that you have someone who actually trims the tree once or twice a year, especially early on, and you start actually giving the tree-accentuating the strengths of the tree and minimizing whatever weaknesses it might have.

And he did an amazing job. Those trees are beautifully shaped. The ones down below, which are crape myrtles, those trees, the trunks are great sculptures. They are just-every one of them is just a beauty, an absolute beauty. And so the first time you cross the first bridge, the tree is trimmed at the bottom. That was where the leaves happen-it's open. In other words, you can see all the way out every way. It's kind of flat up at the top and it's-because of the decomposed granite at that top area-a little drier-looking area. So the quality of the plants there were succulents, not desert plants but things which bordered on that a little bit. So they had that kind of characteristic to them.

The second time you cross the stream, plants now are really subtle, but a lot of color. And they're taller, so that when you're in there, when you're looking out, the space between the height of the plant material and the tree is almost like a window. You're kind of looking out a window.

The third one, you come in, you're actually inside. And the plant material has a more verdant quality to it, greener, a little bit-plants which maybe are adaptable to shade, because it's now more shaded and you actually feel like you're inside. Then the fourth one you start coming back out again. And the colors change in each one.

So there's a different kind of planting all the way down, which means there actually are distinguishable smells from one to the next. They are distinguishable in the sense that you'll find bees in one area and you'll find butterflies in another one. And so they attract an entirely different kind of colony or support mechanism. So it has that level of subtlety: sound, touch, the overall related to the actual moment of crossing over.

Also, it took a length of time. If it was going straight down, you would have-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -so many minutes, but this meandering back and forth was again really essential because if I would have gone straight down, it would have been over with too quickly. This now is an opportunity to do all these shifts and changes. And it took a period of time which was acceptable. And also it was a great way to see the architecture you were in. You came out looking at the architecture. So it was a nice combination, I think.

MR. SIMMS: When you go there on a busy day, you often get these little bottlenecks of people with strollers going down and things.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: And it's actually very effective in the end. It's not a negative. It's a positive, because what it does

is it suddenly-you've got people who want to come down quickly and-

MR. IRWIN: Right. Well, yeah, some people will-they're not looking at hardly anything. They're just going along. And other people are really taking their time. Like, different cultures-a little group will just spend 10 minutes looking at one flower, and other people are just going along not seeing anything. But there's a variety of motions that-

MR. SIMMS: And the Cor-Ten retaining walls actually bring you down.

MR. IRWIN: It actually cuts into the slope, the Cor-Ten. Rather, the path doesn't ride on the top. It cuts into the slope. Sometimes you're deeper. Sometimes you're higher. Also, the use of the Cor-Ten, which is the first time I used it, it's a material people don't tend to think of as being in landscape because it's steel, but it develops this real brown, soft patina to it.

And the beauty of it is three-quarters-seven-eighths-of an inch holds back the bank. If you wanted to do that with concrete, it would have to be six inches or eight inches. And if you wanted to do it with rock, it might have to be a foot thick to hold back that much bank.

MR. SIMMS: Right, so it looks good and it's effective.

MR. IRWIN: Well, you're thinking about the architecture of Richard Meier, which was very concise, with very strong lines. He just-he didn't like it, period. He did not like the garden. Maybe because it was shoved down his throat. I never blamed him for his resistance, nor did I lose respect for him over it, because Richard Meier was a guy who everything touches everything. Everything is a very-it's a very strong rationale about the whole thing.

He had been there for seven years, and it was his building. It was his thing. And he already had a garden planned for it and the whole thing. And so to suddenly insert me right in the middle of it was obviously an absolutely painful thing for him, because I didn't adhere to that at all. It was his thing. So it was me painting on his canvas, and nobody is going to like that. Nobody is going to like that. So I understood his resistance, but it was such a great opportunity for me I couldn't resist pursuing it.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah. And also the reasoning that someone like Kurt Forster and others had was sound, and that is this idea that to offer a variety of experiences is not a bad thing.

MR. IRWIN: No, no, I think the rationale was very good, which is why probably-not just me, but it's why there was a force that was dictating that it should happen.

Anyway, by the time you get to the bottom, there's a plaza, which is where the garden would have ended, the two paths coming down from the building each side. It is the refuge in case the building is on fire. There are these built-in logics that you don't have any idea about at all.

I should say also about going down, a lot of elements I see-the railings-they're very low key. They don't make a big thing of it, just simple bronze railing. The main reason is that I didn't want you: oh, look at that railing, that piece of design. With so much going on I didn't want it to be about the thing, yet at the same time if you went back and you're with somebody who knew something about that kind of material, you would look at how it was put in the ground or how it was joined and all that.

All that was done, hopefully, immaculately, because that's where the guy who goes all the way down and says, gee, that was pretty interesting-and he's a craftsman or he's a woodworker or he's a plantsman or he's a designer, or he's a-you know, has a formal mind or a very loosey-goosey-if he goes back up, all the things that he will look at, that he's most attuned to, they have to be done perfectly, because that's what gives the whole thing authority. You get to the bottom and say, wow, that garden piece was really-the garden is great. It's just a really beautiful place to be.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And so if you start looking at it from your particular point of view, it has to hold up on all those levels, even though they're very understated or are not a key-and the path, as it goes down, every time you cross a bridge, it's wood and then it's stone, and it has a very understated flow to it in terms of how the stone is laid and how the wood is laid. And an attention to the difference between how stone-in the simplest sense, stone, if you make it too narrow, it doesn't really look like granite, let's say in this case, or it doesn't look like a particular level of wood if it's too wide.

MR. SIMMS: You mean if you cut the piece too small, it doesn't seem to have the presence of the-

MR. IRWIN: Of the character of the material. You define the-let design become the element rather than the quality of the materials.

The one argument I would make with Richard Meier is that he had a material he's used for years, kind of a metal paneling, and very nice and very modern. In this particular case he was asked or told that he had to use stone. I'm trying to think of-I can't think of the name of the stone. Travertine. And it was a nice stone. And the way they live together is that they're all like a three-by-three panel, so three-by-three panel in stone, three-by-three panel in metal.

What I did-let's say we went from wood to stone-at the point of the stone there would be, say, a metal bar laid this way-how a bridge is tied in to both sides. It was mediated with-and it also had a functional level. You did not want the Cor-Ten and the wood to bump against each other-especially on the sides, because it was harsh. You put a little space in there, which makes that relationship amenable. But also then that relationship and these cross ones all became the drains and did all the drainage. You're not aware of them as drains.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: That kind of detailing was critical to the whole thing. I designed and had the benches built right into it. They were complicated benches. They curved and both were considered compound curves-beautiful woodworking. The guy-if anybody knows woodworking, those benches are dynamite. They really are. They have Cor-Ten footings to them-so the introduction of the relationship but at a different level and a different scale and a different relationship between them. They're teak.

All the materials are a little bit like it used to be in the olden days in the sense they're quality materials that are going to patina well over time. The bronze gets rubbed, then it gets a used look, but it's-you never have to put it back. Nothing in there actually has to be maintained in that way. The wood-the walking path, the bridges, they're going to last. The teak. And the stone are hard-quality stone that's going to last, so-which is one of the problems in our-what kind of killed the â��50s is that all the materials disintegrated and just fell. They had no quality.

MR. SIMMS: They didn't age well.

MR. IRWIN: No, they did not age well, and it's what killed-we make something real simple that has to have all the right proportions, the right materials, the right relationship. You pare it down to its essentials, but if the essentials are not carried out, then you've got nothing.

And what happened after the â��50s in architecture is it's in the hands of journeymen, not real architects. Buildings looked nude and the materials disintegrated, and then they just became a disaster. So what happened in that period was architects that didn't know how to handle that simplicity actually went back and started begging and borrowing from all history and putting fenestrations on everything, decors and stuff, to hide the fundamentals, to hide this mistakes. It's my argument with architecture in this day and age. We've now gone into another era, but definitely the â��50s, '60s was a low, low period.

MR. SIMMS: And you were-going back to the comment you were making about Meier and the way he related the panels, the metal to the-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah.

MR. SIMMS: Was it because he had not, in your opinion, thought about the material and-

MR. IRWIN: He hadn't thought about what happens when two things come together.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: Two things of different character, they come together. Something has to happen at that moment.

MR. SIMMS: I see.

MR. IRWIN: And if it doesn't-first it's an opportunity.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: If done low-key and sensitive with regards to the material, and let them speak to you, they will enhance the situation. If you over-jazz it or decorate it or whatever, you essentially destroy it. He just-it was neutral.

But the other thing is he has, like, some columns that are tall and not very wide-I mean a very small column in width-but tall. And you look at it and you know damn well that that's not-it's all clad in stone. Not a chance. There's a steel beam inside of that thing, because he's making a material do something it doesn't do. And you know damn well it doesn't do it. So to me those are fundamental mistakes that are-so he was dealing with stuff

he hadn't dealt with before. He has a vocabulary, which is really done very well, and a level of detailing that I really admire. There's parts of his architecture that I really admire a lot, but that building was not his cup of tea. And I think he had problems with it.

MR. SIMMS: And part of that was the Brentwood Homeowners Association.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, they were forcing that it had to be these materials and that, and so he was forced to do stuff he didn't want to do, wouldn't have done normally.

Now we get down to the lower part. And the stream now goes down a fall and a curved wall that-what is it, about 20 foot tall from top to bottom? When you arrive at that bottom, there are these bougainvillea structures that have a real character to them, a real quality to them. The bougainvillea grows up inside them and blossoms and sits out on the top like a big bouquet. I've now seen them copied in China. I've seen them copied in South America.

MR. SIMMS: Oh, is that true? [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, people are knocking them off all over the place, different versions of those bowers.

And then at the bottom, my thing was, by the time you arrived there, you've kind of taken a trip and you've come down to someplace, and there has to be a destination, something there. And I did this-well, first of all, it's a lower part of the garden. You go around the sides and descend down into it. And in the middle is a pond, an oval pond.

And, oh, the bottom of it-first thing was, I'm going to have water down there. So I started looking at all the pools and fountains in front of offices, and most of them are a disaster. Half of them are off. They turned them off. The other is that they've patinaed really-and the bottom is just ugly, ugly-in the bottom. I decided, you're going to look straight down on this thing, which means it's really going to be egregious. So my solution for that was to go back up into Kalispell, Montana, and I found a mountain in Indian territory that had been-I don't know what you call it-it had been disintegrating or falling-like it does from wear and weather and all that. They were all in shards, about three inches by half to a quarter thick, and about two inches deep.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And there were just millions of them. That's how this mountain was breaking apart, the character of the rock of it. And so I hired some high school kids to go up there with gunny sacks-well, first of all I negotiated with the Indians-hired these kids to go up there and put them into gunny sacks for me and send them down. And that was probably the most tedious thing of the project. They're all laid out in an oval, in a curving oval pattern. And because the water is-if you take the water out, there's space between all of them. They're held at the bottom by the concrete but they stick up above the concrete so that there's a dark-and it never gets that patina to it. Down in the groove it may, but you never see it. And the pattern is, I think, a really nice pattern.

MR. SIMMS: And it's all standing on end. Did you also use that at the bottom sort of as the stream kind of widens out?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, as the stream widens out, it goes from larger flat pieces for the size of the stream, and then it goes into this-it starts at a point and slowly widens out, so then it goes across the plaza. It's this stone, this pattern of stone that goes, and goes over the cliff.

And the wall that went down there, it's a granite wall, massive, really strong-looking. It needed to be. And for economic reasons and whatever, the blocks are only that big, except on the top and on whatever the sides are. Then they're big blocks.

MR. SIMMS: So you're talking about six inches, or about eight inches?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, which was out of character. It didn't have the weight and the strength to be what it was pretending to be, but all surface elements, all sides, are large blocks, so it has that strength to it. And the fall is now a series of stepped rocks that fall down in a somewhat formal pattern.

By the way, most of these things have a degree of formality, or a base of formality, because Richard Meier is so formal that you can't just suddenly be in this rustic place. It's got to have a similar quality to the Meier kind of order, the pattern or design, if you will, even though you're using materials which do not necessarily lend themselves to that, so you had to be very careful about that interface between those two.

And so I came up with this idea of a maze with azaleas, three different kinds. There are three overlapping circular mazes. That plant, the azalea, is sensational. Unlike most plants that are hedged, the flower is embedded in it, so when you shape it, you don't cut all the flowers off. And these things are oval, somewhat

oval forms and oval shapes. It flowers early in the spring, March, and it is brilliant. I mean, even if I say so myself. It's spectacular; very, very powerful, something that nobody else would know. The edge of the pool is kalanchoe. So you have the bottom of the pool and you have azaleas now, and the azaleas sit right down on the water. They're not very high off the water. So there's a pattern of stones right at the bottom where the waterfall is that calms the water so that it doesn't ripple out. Because if it did, it would certainly touch the azaleas on the edge because they're right on the water.

MR. SIMMS: And splash them and-

MR. IRWIN: And splash them and make them-it would be not good for them.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: So those patterns of stones there is just to transition the water from roiling to flat.

MR. SIMMS: And was that an aesthetic as well as a functional decision, another one of those both-and situations?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, well, the thing is the best-the easiest ones-the best ones really are ones which come right out of the function and out of the character of the space itself. Sometimes you have to supply it or exaggerate it. You have to modify it slightly, and so on and so forth, because now you're marrying the two things, the fact of what is there and the condition of the place, and how and in what way that condition is going to be seen, to what degree it's going to announce itself.

If you have an audience that's very sophisticated, that relationship is easy to do. If the audience is dumb-which most audiences are-you have to every now and then do something a little more exaggerated and enough that they can't miss it-that sort of thing, draw them in. The thing about the garden you have to keep in mind, this garden has to work-this is not a normal garden. This garden has got to be there 365 days a year to people coming from all over the world from different sensibilities. That's two-fold, an incredible responsibility, and also an amazing opportunity. The audience is a million-I don't know-people a year.

MR. SIMMS: Right. A huge amount of people.

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah. And my argument continuously with them-they kept saying, well, it's just costing too much. And I said, “Compared to everything else, compared to the stuff in the galleries, compared to the building, this is 10 cents on the dollar this garden is costing you. This garden is cheap. Now, you have to maintain it, though.”

So we come to that point of the plant material. You walk around the sides, there's a stand of trees all the way around, which are crape myrtles. The azaleas bloom in March; the kalanchoe, April; the tulbaghia, May. And the trees, they all have their time of blossom. So the color actually starts in March and moves up in April, moves up in May, and moves up in June. So the color actually rises out of the thing. That is for the people that work there. People, of course, visiting are not going to know that. And also it means that at different parts of the year something is happening, something is at its best.

The thing about plant material is that all of it's good. When it's at its best, if it's great material, at its best it's spectacular. So the whole key to the thing is that at every period of the year, 12 months of the year, something has got to be happening for a garden like that.

MR. SIMMS: But also this idea that it's a seasonal garden and there are changes happening-

MR. IRWIN: Well, what you mean by “perennial” is that they're all the time. And annuals, we replant whole huge amounts of plants every two or three months. We have a spring garden; we have a summer garden; we have a fall garden; we have a-there's kind of an interim garden after the fall, which is very pretty, where everything is just going down. And then you have a winter garden. And in L.A.-or in California-people don't think there's such a thing as a winter garden. All the trees are deciduous, so the biggest item in the place has a winter state. And the crape myrtles have beautiful trunks. They're just-they're maybe even better when they're naked. They are really, really pretty trees, great strength, great character.

[Audio break.]

MR. IRWIN: [In progress.] I've got the bones of a winter garden, even in Southern California. So essentially, what we did is the opposite, what I did is the opposite of what everybody else does. People in the wintertime

protect plants, and then they bring them out in the spring-you know, the spring planting. Since the trees are already bare, I have plants that I take care of all summer and bring them out in the winter that have berries on them or that have very brightly colored stems, sticks. So I accentuate the things that you actually have, in California-I have a winter garden.

MR. SIMMS: It's like they're coming on stage-[laughs]-and going back.

MR. IRWIN: That's right.

MR. SIMMS: And then they have their different moments.

MR. IRWIN: Exactly, because, like you say, it has to work 365 days a year.

And then you come to the plant material. The rings are like a bulletproof plant, because they're there all the time. And you don't want to have to be tearing them out every year or every three years, so the kalanchoes are the first ring, I said it earlier, the tulbaghia, the garlic-smelling one. And then the back wings are-they're beautiful, God, what is the-we had to replace each one of them once now over a period of these 12 years, so that's pretty good.

So we actually plant five times a year, and what we did in the beginning, in terms of doing the plants, like I picked out every rock, I picked out every plant. I had a gardener, name was Jim Duggan, and he's still there. He basically runs the garden. For a garden, you got to have a gardener; you can't have a maintenance crew; you have to have a gardener who's down on his knees, hands-on, see your plants-it's in trouble-months before it's in trouble, before other people see it. You got to know what to do; you got to understand what the problems are.

The thing that's gone on over the years-for example, the upper part of the garden, when the trees were young, or in the summer, the trees are-it's a sunny garden-and as the trees were getting larger; it's become a shade garden. And so you have to slowly change out all the kinds of plants.

Also, we would go up and we would start way up in Canada-actually, we were at the Canadian border-and we'd rent a truck and come down, and we'd stop at all the mom and pop nurseries. Not so much the big nurseries-you want azaleas, for example, and you go to a big nursery, they'll have maybe seven different kinds; you go to a mom and pop who are in love with azaleas-they'll have 20.

So you buy these things, and we built shelves into the truck and we'd slowly fill the first truck up. Then we'd rent a second truck, and then we'd slowly fill that one up with all these plants. And we brought them down. And then we have a place-Jim Duggan did-where we'd plant them, not at the garden, but we'd plant to see which ones did well, what the character was.

The planting area is similar to the conditions of the garden, and funny things happen to that. We had plants, they say, that are a nuisance in Washington, in that climate. In fact, you're not supposed to even grow them; they're invasive. And they're well-mannered and are incredible down here. One of the people from the National Arboretum came. We had a luncheon, and every one of them said they saw half a dozen plants they didn't know. And one of the limitations in Southern California is that the nurseries grew what they knew they could sell, and the reverse-people would buy what the nurseries had. But we introduced dozens of new plants that nobody knew, nobody had done-I'll show you one here. It's a great plant.

The point is, it had to be an authentic garden. It couldn't be one of those gardens where you bring out plants and do what you see around corporate headquarters. It had to be a real garden. You had to see things that you'd never seen before; you had to see things in the process of growing. Anyway, it had to be-

MR. SIMMS: A real garden.

MR. IRWIN: -a real garden. The real thing. And I really take pride-actually, now that it was a real garden, it changed the vocabulary in Southern California, because people would come and say, “Oh, I-what is that-what's that plant? I really like it; I'm going to go to the nursery and say I saw this plant and blah blah blah.” And then I find the nursery raises them the next year, and now you got a new plant that's been introduced. So it's a real garden and it's changed the industry. The docents tell me that over the years, they were telling me all the time-honestly, that's what they say-more people come for the garden than any other thing at the Getty. And people come back; they were repeat visitors. The garden is a huge success. I mean, forgetting any ego or anything, it's a real success. It's a great garden.

MR. SIMMS: Right, and of course, early on, there were some naysayers, some in the garden community who-

MR. IRWIN: I didn't read them, but apparently a lot of articles-he doesn't know what he's doing; you can't do this; you can't do that; that won't grow here or this-and said, you know, blah blah blah. I don't know how it all

worked out. But I picked out every stone, rock, plant in that garden, every one, total hands-on. But what was great is I go back to the garden constantly and it's always doing something I didn't anticipate. It's always better than I thought. I make this plan and then it has its own plan, and it's a thrill. God, look at that. Isn't that incredible?

What I'm also saying here is you can't plan nature; you can court it. They're very different, right, you think of this, you've tried this and then it does something sensational, better; something grows together, grows under or on top over something, you say, “Wow, that's it.” So I would try and repeat them sometimes, but some of them, you can't. It just teaches you all the time-and the key to it is every plant at its prime is a great plant. They're all great. So the trick is, with the garden, it has to be really healthy. It has to be really maintained.

MR. SIMMS: I think at some point, you mentioned going to Giverny to see Monet's garden and looking at that. Did that happen? Was that inspiration or-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, I did-but no, the thing that I tried very hard-I thought to myself, well, you know, I-since I had never done a garden, never planted a plant, the natural instinct is to look at Italian gardens, look at Japanese gardens, look at French gardens, look at English gardens. But I knew if I did that, I essentially would not do what I wanted to do, which is I wanted to do a 20th-century American garden. You see, they talk about the modernists and gardening, but what was considered a modernist garden was simply-it looked like a-what do you call it-a Cubist plan. That's not a modern garden; that's cliché.

But there's a whole philosophic ground underneath why we have so-called modern art. It's not just a style; it's a mindset. It's a way of thinking about the world. It's a set of values. And I wanted to do a garden that essentially was based on that-to the best that I could, the best that I could understand.

MR. SIMMS: And there's one more element in that garden that we haven't talked about. And that's that inscription, or the statement-I think it was inscribed on the stone. I don't know if you remember the phrase.

MR. IRWIN: "Ever present and never twice the same." That's the thing about a garden: it's ever present but it's never the same. Every time you go, it's something new; something else is happening. It's constantly evolving. But it's also a statement about the nature of things. The whole thing around us is ever present and it's always changing. Only one inscription there. The other little thing was that my wife came and she said, “Oh, my God, somebody's already graffitied your rock.” And she went and looked and it was Anna Grace-Adele and Anna Grace.

MR. SIMMS: Well, are there any other aspects of it that you felt that you wanted to talk about?

MR. IRWIN: Well, the back of it, as the bowl dives and comes together, interweaving, and at that point you're looking out-you're at this vista. You're looking out at the whole-all the way to Palos Verdes and Catalina and the ocean and the whole thing.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah. One last thing maybe we could talk about before we end is this question of views, because Richard Meier, one of the reasons he wanted this garden the way he had originally had it was because he was going to have the view be the major element. And the view that he was talking about was the view out toward Palos Verdes and the water. What you wound up doing was treating the question of the view differently.

MR. IRWIN: Well, first of all, up in the buildings and the architecture, there are spectacular views-the one that you're talking about, the one down to downtown L.A. looking east, and then looking west straight at the ocean, as opposed to the long vista to Palos Verdes-spectacular, all these balconies on all the buildings. And they're there, totally available.

The thing about my view is it's essentially woven into it. It's there, but you see it up into here, and then you descend down, and you come and you see it. And it's all like a framed view now, and it's interwoven into the texture of the garden.

So I'm just saying, look, you've already got that view-the one he wanted. I say, you've already got it and you got it in spades. You got it better than you'll have it here. But let's have a series of kinds of views. You see it this way; you see it in this condition; you see it that this is a situation now where we're going to add to the vocabulary.

MR. SIMMS: And you've spoken about a power spot where there's a view that's-

MR. IRWIN: Well, that's coming back. That's facing back at the building. I liked it because Meier was so-he felt like it was an incursion on there that had nothing to do with his architecture. From the very beginning, my absolute bottom thing is that you can't go into a place that has that much character and go against it or pretend it's not there.

You have to make it a piece or a part of the whole thing. And there is a spot right when you're at the bottom and you're ready to turn around, you look back and the buildings are circling this way and the garden is right around you. It's like what the Indians call a power spot. The whole thing just comes together and makes perfect sense.

It's a great view of the architecture. But it's also a view of the thing-you start with the curves here and you move to the curves there. And you go to the straights and-but the garden is, if you stand in that spot, it's all woven together as if it was inevitable.

MR. SIMMS: When you go back to 1992 when you were originally contacted and you have your first meeting with Richard Meier and you're seeing his models-

MR. IRWIN: Amazing models, spectacular models, huge models.

The success of the garden for me is that I proved to myself that an artist could come into a situation that's as complex as that, that decisions have to be made-the world will change to some degree if we apply this kind of thinking to it.

Right now there will be 20 people on Monday-I'd have to sit at the table with all these people-construction people, material people, garden people, rock people. And we'd talk about this and that and that whole thing. And we'd have to make decisions. Okay, this is what we're going to do today, tomorrow, the next day. And on Friday we would meet again. And on Friday we would talk about what we did, what we didn't do, and that thing. And I would have to sit in that meeting.

Early on, for example, during the proposal period and when I was lobbying for the job still, where we met in Richard Meier's office every month. And there would be a situation and the people would say, “What are you going to do about that? This is a problem?” Richard Meier would have an answer for it. And they'd say, “Okay, what's your idea?” And I'd say, “Well, I'm going to have to go home and think about that.” Or I used to say, “I have to go home and scratch my ass.”

But the point being, in a sense, making a decision from a long, highly developed learned logic, but also making one from a long, highly stylized learned sensibility, it's a different-can you look at a thing logically? We know that. But can you look at it with just a sensibility?

Now, when times were slower and buildings were built over long periods of time, where it took 20 years or something to build a church or something, the institution did, in a sense, operate in a much more integral part of all that because decisions that are made by looking at it-the feel, the touch of the thing-the rhyme and the reason of the thing-not the logic of it. There's two different kinds of ways.

I think that the lack of a sensibility is what makes a lot of our world not very livable. It doesn't make a lot of sense in terms of how we live our lives. If you read the history of modern art, like I've said before, I think that's one of the rhymes and reasons of why it took itself apart and asked itself to start all over again. And so this idea of a conditional art that's not in the studio, not on a campaign.

Like I said, it goes back to my first question that opened the whole thing up to me, is that one day I looked around and said, wait a second, I don't see the world in frames. That's not how you see. You see with all your senses. You see immersion and you see emotion and see activity. But all your senses are filling in making this picture. That comes from a sensibility. That's what's been lacking, I think. That's part of the rhyme and reason of why modern art. I think this is part of the fruition of it.

[END AUDIO TRACK]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Robert Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on May 4, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is card number seven.

Bob, I was hoping we could talk today-or at least get started with talking about how you became involved with the Dia Art Foundation, and ultimately, leading to your involvement with Dia:Beacon.

MR. IRWIN: I think probably the main thing was that Michael Govan and Lynne Cooke asked me to do an exhibition at Dia in New York, a place that they had there [that] was, I think, four- or five-story building in Chelsea, 22nd Street.

To make things brief, I came up with, I thought, a pretty good idea. I divided the floor-I think it was the third or fourth floor-up into 12 spaces. I think 12; it might have been 10. It's been a long time. But anyway, I divided it up into 10 rooms, essentially. The whole thing was done with scrim-making scrim walls. And I say walls because it wasn't just a single; it was a double scrim making each wall.

And I made the spaces so that they all interlocked, directly; so all of the interior spaces all had four entrances; all had four corners. And I actually did it in two parts, but it turned out to really be one part in the sense that the first part was for three months or four months. And each room had a double fluorescent fixture in this on each wall, a double one on each wall.

MR. SIMMS: How did you hang those? Because if it was a scrim wall, you must have had some structure-

MR. IRWIN: I did. There was just a post that came down that worked on both sides, two on this side, from this room, two on that side for that room-a double fixture. And the first one-I thought that it was going to be fairly difficult for people in New York to get involved with the second part. So the first part was a kind of a modified version, in which basically, the fluorescents were the same in every room. And more formal, it was much more formal, easier than the second part, which was every room was an individual and completely different place.

MR. SIMMS: And made so through the introduction of color.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, well, the first one had color, very limited, the second one was very rich in color. And every room, like I say, was different.

There was also a band that was painted on the scrim that went all the way around all the rooms and under the windows in the front and the windows in the back. It was very subliminal. And each of the fixtures had a corresponding band in them, so they were kind of in parts, three parts.

The second part really became the pivotal part, in that it generated a lot of interest and a rather large audience. And they became so enamored with it that they kept it up for at least two years. A lot of people came back again and again and again, especially to the part two. It had a kind of hypnotic effect to it, really. And I think it was quite beautiful and intriguing.

I learned something from it, which was very interesting for me. I had been talking about this idea of a conditional art for a very long time, and the idea that it did not function as a kind of normal piece of art, in the sense that it was this idea that it had no beginning, no middle, no end to it. It didn't start in one place and follow some kind of rationale-or some linking rationale that pulled it all into a unit, really, but rather, in fact, you discover the thing piece by piece. And at every juncture, there were at least four, and in some cases, six decisions you could make, but there was no logical rhyme or reason to it.

I didn't totally know the key to it until later. I'd been talking about this idea of a conditional art for a very long time, and what I did was actually accomplish it, the idea that there was not a normal structure to it, that every decision had to be intuitive or instinctual or tactile. You decide to go this way or that way, but there was no beginning, no middle, no end, and so there's no hierarchical structure to it at all. And at the end of it, after you wander for a while, you just ended it yourself, because there was no solution to it.

And so I've been talking about this for a long time, and it took me a couple of weeks before I realized that I had actually lived up to my words. I did something that had none of that kind of rationale left to it at all, and had no structure in the normal sense of the word.

And what I found very fascinating is that I'd been talking about it for a long time, but I didn't actually make it the other way. I didn't intellectualize it. I essentially did it because I had become it. I felt that was a very interesting way to learn something..

MR. SIMMS: We should just make clear, the first version was called *Prologue x 183,* and the second part was *Excursus: Homage to the Square3.*

MR. IRWIN: Cubed.

MR. SIMMS: Cubed, right.

MR. IRWIN: Everybody leaves out the “cubed.”

Because these were all squares, or boxes; a square had become a box. And it was not homage to Josef Albers, it was homage to the square, cubed.

And it was a whole thing, taking what had been a much more formal structure and elaborating on it to, in a sense, making it three-dimensional now. And then you've cubed it, made it three-dimensional.

MR. SIMMS: Some people who wrote reviews mentioned that as they entered it, they had associations with mazes. I don't know if that was something that you were interested in at all, or felt that this was a relevant

association, or what your thought was about that kind of comment on your work?

MR. IRWIN: I was not interested in it. For me, it was fascinating that I had learned-I had worked about and thought about and talked about something for a very long time, and then when I accomplished it, I accomplished it because I had become it. In other words, I didn't intellectualize it. So the making of it was in kind with how I actually experienced it.

So anyway, they kept it. They kept it and they kept it, for quite a while. And then on the basis of that-they had just found a building up on the Hudson River, and they both asked me if I'd be interested in participating in it, and kind of had a little debate about it for a good period of time, because the offer they were making was very piecemeal. And it was not something I was interested in. I basically wanted to take on the whole building, all the grounds and work out all the rhymes and reasons for how it is and how it worked.

I assume that they were at the beginning, looking for somebody more of an architect or something like that. So it took me a while to convince them that I could do it. And so within the next month, I conceived a sort of base plan for it-in other words, it didn't change. It was articulated and extended and refined and what have you, but the basic plan was there, and it went through a number of changes-like, for example, the building had a particular height to it, and it was a basic box, except it had an extended office space, a little bit of an eating place in it on one side. I originally had a more ambitious thing. The idea would be maybe a restaurant or something like that, on the other side. And the key to that was to create this inclusive space.

But then I started extending the thing even further, in the sense that I decided that there were a couple of things that Michael wanted: one was that he wanted you to enter through the space directly to the art. He didn't want you to have to go through a lobby or through a bookstore or what have you, which I think was really a good idea. You go to MoMA and all these places now, and there's a lot of ceremony and entrance, and so on and so forth. I like the idea that you can just enter into it, so it was more of an intellectual decision.

And so I decided that the project actually began for most people, and certainly for New Yorkers, at Grand Central Station in New York. And there was a great ceremony there; it's an incredible place. You get on the train-and for New Yorkers, who basically don't go out of town-pretty much everything they want to do in a day is there. They might go up to the Hamptons or the beach on occasion, but they don't really-New York is New York, and New York is the center, as it were.

And so you enter at Grand Central Station. Half the time, most of the time, you enter out from a tube, one or another, which is not a very happy place, and you arrive in Grand Central with a very grand sense of place and space in that.

And then you take a train ride, which, for a New Yorker, is really-I mean, for anybody, really, that goes up there-it's that kind of catharsis that goes on when you start out and it's the suburbs and Harlem, and then in a sense, it disintegrates into nature, and you start seeing fields and trees and the river, beside it all the way.

So it's a kind of catharsis. There's a whole sequence of the sort of emptying out what has been and all the presumptions about what is going to be.

So the trip up, to me, was part of the experience. And I think it makes the experience way richer, because after a while, it becomes kind of like a day in the country, which, in itself, is a kind of opening up and freeing up and a change of attitude and physicality.

And you arrive at Beacon, the city, which is a kind of, almost nonstation station-you come off the train and there's the river right there, funny little funky harbor with a few boats sinking and all the trees, and on a really nice day it's a pleasant place to be. And then you take a walk of about seven minutes, which takes all the kinks out, as it were. It's all part of a letting down. And you arrive at the top, and the key to the whole thing is that this now becomes-arriving at the top is a moment of entrance, where you look down on the space.

It's down below you, and so you've had a series of sort of-you have an entrance and an entrance and entrance and now, a more formal entrance. And so it's taking that building, which was really a nice building-it was a factory for making boxes, a Nabisco box factory. And it was a cookie-cutter building that-what that means is that they built four of them, same plan, exactly, and built them in different parts of the country. And this particular one, what was odd about the idea of a cookie-cutter building was that the prime element in the orientation of the building was the light, all the skylights. They had those factory sawtooth skylights, and they had to face north or they don't function really well.

So the building had to be set up with the skylights facing north, which means that the entrance was, in this particular case, on the wrong side. It was up against the hill, which is the worst thing. It could have faced the river, which would have been interesting; it could have been the other way, but you actually had to go through the parking lot in this thing, which is like going through the-you know, the asshole of the building.

That's why I started thinking of things as multi-entrances. So you have this moment where you're up above; what had been the parking lot had now been, in a sense, made into a nice place. I hear that architectural schools bring their architects to see how to deal with the parking lot, because it's the bane of every building's existence, and here it is, right in front.

So I turned it basically into an orchard. It has parking spaces, but when you look from above, it's a whole field of trees. In the summer, of course, the trees are green, and there is a season of flowering in the spring, and so it's all very, very pleasant. Winter up there is very mean in this particular place.

All the gentrification along the Hudson River, which leads all the way up the Rockefeller Estate and to the Roosevelts and all that-which is just above Beacon-but the areas below it, the little towns below it, had slowly become really rather pleasant places. Beacon was the one place they jumped right over. Beacon was a factory town. There are just all kinds of old factories, abandoned factories around it. It's a town in which the houses-it's not a fancy town. When I arrived there, from the beginning, there wasn't even any place you could get a bite to eat or a lunch, really. It was just-it was a tough little town..

So you come down through the trees-you descend and now go through there, and there's this really nice vista up to the front of the building.

MR. SIMMS: But there's more in the parking lot. It's not just the trees. You've also-the grasses-

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah, of course: islands in which[illegible]-all the cars parked in between them. They sat on a series of angles that went in, but they were rounded islands. There's all that detail.

And the point is, what I'm trying to lead up to is a very, very complex, detailed in terms of the path, the beginning, the arriving-so go up this path towards the front of the building, which is just-all these things lead you in that direction, and you arrive at what has now become a court, in the sense that there's a building on one side. There was going to be a building, I said. But what I did was now make a bosque of trees-you walk up and it's now a nice place to sit and watch and look at the river and what have you. But the bosque of trees are at the same height, so that the building and the trees and that form, in a sense, a plaza, which has a nice paving on the ground. And the cars actually go into the plaza and turn around and come back.

We used to have to enter from the side because there was no entrance on that side. For me, the first work was to change the whole orientation of the building to make the entrance to come directly off the parking lot. And all the good fenestration and quality brick were all on the other side, facing towards the hill, the bank. And the side that I was on was a very low level of brick; it had no fenestration really at all. The idea was at one time if the factory expanded, it would expand right out that way and they put the parking lot somewhere else.

So when we used to have to enter the building, we had to enter the building through what is now the coffee shop, the bookstore.

But if you went in that way, when you came into the main parts of the building, it was amazing. The light-the quality of the light was really good. But that would be missed if you came directly off the parking lot because you're now already standing, you know, high sky, in the sun, what have you. So you miss that power of that moment.

So there was a restroom there. It was the toilets for the factory. So I took that away and built a very small entrance building so they could accommodate the taking of the ticket and maybe hanging up your coat.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah, I've been through there. It's very simple. It's very basic, just one little desk on one side and on the other side, I guess, you put the jacket and-and that is a dark little space.

MR. IRWIN: And that was the key to it. We wanted to bring you down on scale to a small space with indirect light. And then you got that moment of entrance. So all these parts are all for that one moment of entering the building. So this whole entrance sequence goes to there. And I think it's very effective, actually.

I also made the entrance a double entrance, and that is repeated. It's the only architectural device that's in the thing, and that has to do in each case with a choice, and also orientation. But you enter in at that moment, so there's a great moment of entry. The scale of the building feels really great. The quality of the light, which was the power of the space, which already existed, but you just had to make sure that you experienced it. So there's that moment of entrance, which was pivotal in the whole thing.

The second thing, then, is that whenever you get a space of that quality and that scale and power, it often times gets turned into kind of rabbit warren. You've got to start building walls to hang paintings and present sculpture and so forth. So most of the spaces end up-they start coming down and down and down until finally you're starting to deal with just a series of little spaces.

So the two doors halfway through the place are left and right. You would come at this scale, and you go into a couple of galleries, and then you arrive at a point where there's a crossing. So now there's this door on the left, the door on the right, and the door behind. You revisit the scale and then you go back into the small; revisit the scale, go back into the small. That keeps the experience full of choices. And like I said, you start out on one side, then another side. I would have even gone further, in the sense that I'd make that moment of entrance sculpture on one side, painting on the other side, so that you choose. The whole thing about a museum visit, for me, is that you have two ways of going through it: a formal way, an organized-you go from room A to room B to C, and they lead you to the thing, which is the way a lot of people like it-no decisions.

But the other side of it is that you can make choices. You can decide not to go this way or go over there. In other words, more than one way to traverse this whole thing. And in a sense, it accommodates two kinds of viewing. One is unstructured and the other is structured. Different people really like to do it a different way.

The one problem the building had before that is that as you go through, it's not a circular building or anything, but you tend to have to come back through. So you really repeat. It's possible that you go through following a path from one side and circle around to the other side. So that was one thing that gave the thing a rhyme and a reason so that you're not just seeing the same thing coming back that you were seeing going forward. The building is actually-which already existed-split in half. It's two buildings matching. And so you, theoretically, could go down one side and turn around and come back.

But I added to that-there were a few places where the ceiling was lower. There were some parts where the opening to the outside was not as much. A classic example was what had been a siding for where the trains came in and unloaded materials. I filled the track part in. It had been a train siding, and it was a real masculine and a very physical space. From that moment, for example, I knew I was going to put Richard Serra there because it was the perfect kind of space for his work. And I think it still is maybe one of the best spaces for his work. They're really corresponding.

But the clamor was, and the controversy was, two-fold. One was that the board said, when I was presented to them as being the architect, as it were, some of them rejected that. They said, no, we have to have a real architect. We can't have just amateur night in Dixie, or an artist or whatever.

MR. SIMMS: There was an architecture firm that was partnering with you, wasn't there?

MR. IRWIN: Well, let me get to that in a minute. That was one controversy. And then the other was that certain artists complained that they didn't want to be inside somebody else's art. They didn't understand that one of the problems with being inside of a lot of art museums is you're inside of something that has an ambition to be art by architects, which is kind of the destructive force that architecture has had on art. There are a lot of buildings that have been built that are bad buildings.

MR. SIMMS: Are there some examples that jump to mind that you can think of?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, a lot. Bilbao would be one. God, there are so many. Oh, man.

MR. SIMMS: The Guggenheim in New York, Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim is a bit like that.

MR. IRWIN: Well, it works better than most of them, but it's also a very awkward space. Artists do oftentimes change the rules of the game to-even with their own work because of how it's presented in that space. And a lot of it never really works. It's not one of the best spaces. But I'm trying to remember. Name 10 museums that have just been built and most of them are a disaster. I mean, they really are.

MR. SIMMS: So you had the two objections. Some of the board members said, we need an architect, and then some of the artists said-

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, right, exactly. They didn't understand that basically I was pursuing what I've been doing, this idea of a conditional art. But also, when you start working in public places, in the world, on a day-to-day basis-we talked about the Getty; that was about making a really great garden, aspiring to be art, and it was to rise to that level. But it also was a challenge to see whether or not an artist's sensibility can work directly in the world, not within this modified world of an art world and art galleries and art spaces and so on and so forth that are part of a long history and a tradition.

But not being an artist in the sense of being a painter and a sculptor and that, and breaking away from all of that, I've come to the point-and the homework, which we've already talked about, was done with the Miami International Airport, where I tested this whole thing. Decisions are made by a committee, the architect, the builder, the engineer, et cetera, et cetera, and the different crafts and so forth. I wanted to see whether or not I can make the decisions.

Now, that happened very much in the very beginning when they-I spent 12 months at the Getty. We talked a little bit about this whole confrontation with Richard Meier. And when they would say there's this problem and that problem, he would have a solution for it from his bag of solutions of things that he had thought about. So they'd say, “Well, we've got this problem,” and he'd say, “I've got this solution.” And I would say, “I've got to go home and think about that.” I used to say, “I've got to go home and scratch my ass.” So for the first few months they were baffled by me. And I was, in a sense, testing whether or not I can-can I actually make decisions like rubbing my hands. Can I visit the place and visit the place and visit the place and visit the place and finally make each decision based on what was there, what was presented, how we're going to use it, et cetera, et cetera?

I had done it with a garden and now I was taking on that architecture. But I'm not an architect and I'm not a gardener. I'm approaching the whole thing as an artist. That became the question. Can you use an artist's sensibility and an artist's way of making decisions, and actually apply it in a busy, everyday world where you have committees and groups and all kinds of responsibilities? Can it work?

I think I satisfied myself that I could do it. I tested it with the airport, which is a very complex-maybe the most complex interface of rules and responsibilities that you can find anywhere. An airport is pretty much now a public place; it's the entrance to a city; it has all kinds of roles, and plus all the complexities of flying planes in and out and safety and what have you. So doing the garden was a way of testing that. And for me, the fact that I could do it and it came out as good as it did-the same thing was here. I was doing something which would normally be thought of as art, which is the where and how and the making and all that. The results are a real testing of whether artists can take a broader role in this dialogue in society.

And it's the whole part of this idea of a conditional art. Can decisions be made instinctually? Can they be made tactilely? Can they be made in terms of just the quality of the space in which quality takes precedent, in a way, over practicality? But practicality has to be served. It has to actually work, and the reason for that is absolutely a given. But generally speaking, that rationale commands the decision-making process. I want to reverse it. Let quality and quality processes make the decisions and with all of the practicalities addressed and make sense.

So that was an interesting situation. So they said “No,” they didn't want me. But it was a great opportunity, so basically I did for it for nothing. They did not pay me. For a very long time they didn't even know I existed.

I worked directly with Michael. Michael was an unusual client. I mean, clients are usually-they're not the kind of people that you want to tell things too early or get them committed too early or get them involved in-they think they know; they're good at what they do but this is not their area of expertise.

But Michael was the opposite. Michael, in a sense, I wanted his opinion. I brought everything to him because he really came back with good-he fed back good information, and so it was expanding. It was actually more useful. So the two of us really worked as a team on the thing, him working from his side, me working from my side. It was, in a sense, the best relationship I've had in all of these things I've ever done. He's a very smart guy and had really good ideas.

Now, when architects move-like Isozaki, say, “Come to L.A. to do MOCA” -well, he doesn't have a license. He doesn't have familiarity with the place. And so they always hire a secondary firm, someone who can do the drawings for record, can pull all the permits, all that sort of thing. And I did the same thing. I looked at about five, six candidates and interviewed all of them. Certain ones were very strong. They were taking on the idea that they would be doing a lot of it. So I ended up getting a firm which was all young people who had very little experience. I think it was called Open Office.

It was a cooperative and full of young people that really were ambitious and really wanted to do things. And they contributed all the way along. But actually, they also were my beard. I was hiding behind them. People thought that this was the architecture firm, which they were not. The plan actually, as I said, was done before I ever met them, and it never really changed after that. It had to be implemented every step of the way and modified and so on, so forth. But the plan was the plan, and they-I did that right at the fore.

So it was a collaborative forum, with Michael being one, and them being one, and myself being one. And also trying to take into consideration all the different art that was in the place. In other words, I think the strength and the beauty of it is that you're not aware of my hand. You're not aware of it. There is a great architecture, great feeling with what happens with the windows and the space and the light and the divisions and that kind of-as I said, the reintroduction all the way through of the sense of the whole entrance and that's how it's divided up into parts.

But you don't think, well, who is the architect for this? You just say, God, this is really great here. A lot people, smart people who are not critics, have said it's one of the best places to look at art that they've ever been in, which is the point of the whole thing. We're not saying, well, Robert Irwin did this, or the architecture's really

beautiful, or it's interesting or it's-et cetera. They just said, it's a great place to look at art. And I think that's the crowning blow.

I told you about that one little article in the *New Yorker* magazine.

MR. SIMMS: Right, by Schjeldahl.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. And I loved the thing, because if you read the thing-

MR. SIMMS: Yeah, I'll just read it out loud. This is Peter Schjeldahl. And I don't remember what this-

MR. IRWIN: His reason for being there was he was doing an article on Agnes Martin. There was an Agnes Martin show in town. And there was an Agnes Martin show at the Dia:Beacon. I think the one at Dia:Beacon was mostly Pace.

They were both very low-key, the one up there was in one of the areas, one of the rooms. And so he was not there to review the museum or to review the building or review anything-he was there to review her. And his response to it is not to say, well, this is a good building or a critique of it or that sort of thing. It was just how it felt for him.

MR. SIMMS: Right. And how it felt was this-so I'll quote, “I thought about this at lovely, light-drenched Dia:Beacon, a magnificent place that devotes a terrific amount of real estate and remarkable architectural skill to implementing little hits of pure aesthetic emotion. An antichurch, it offers, in place of religion, beneficent addiction. The hits wear off quickly. You want more. This may be the upward limit of what liberal culture can provide for the common soul. Perhaps it's enough. Certainly Dia:Beacon stirs grateful awe-look at what we humans can do,” end quote. That's great.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. The point is, it says in a way everything that I'm arguing, that beauty is a real factor in this whole thing and that it's not-it's not anti-religion. Religion's not a player in this. It's about liberal culture. It's about human beings defining their own existence and defining their own value sets and values and that. And for him to just respond that way was almost to say everything I've been trying to say in terms of what I'm thinking about why art and the whole process.

I've always asked this question, why art? In the overall scheme of things, what is the unique role that makes art art? And his response is dead on the line with everything I could have ever asked for. It makes me feel sentimental every time I-what I think was great about this is it was just him saying, wow, and also really realizing the difference between the formal or religious as opposed to the liberal and the aesthetic.

MR. SIMMS: One—if I could just interrupt you—one of the things I remember you saying that really struck me is that there's nothing more unethical than having ambitions for someone else's mind, which fits into this sort of liberal idea, which is that it's about people setting their own intentions and ultimately operating in this way.

MR. IRWIN: Also, in response to the teaching thing, the idea that what you're really dealing with are a half-dozen or a dozen different sensibilities, people that have unique ways of being in the world, and that that is what, in a sense, distinguishes them. And that the process of teaching is to help them, in a way, recognize that and exercise that and put that into play.

So you don't teach them-if I teach them how to do this or how to do that, I've trapped them with my limitations or my point of view. These minds are open right at this moment. You can screw them up. And most art schools screw them up with all kinds of clutter. Now, a few of them work their way free of it and end up-and the group of people that were students of mine, they don't look like I am; they don't work like I do. They are completely, you know—

It becomes quite obvious that I didn't teach them, not in that sense. I encouraged them. I provided what was necessary. If you needed some historical structure, if you needed some sense of materials, if you needed an idea about how to proceed and that, we'd have a discussion about it, but that's all just the minutia of it. The real thing was each one of them finding their own voice.

And so this says it. And a lot of people just feel comfortable there.

MR. SIMMS: Coming back to Dia:Beacon, there are a few details I'd love for you to talk about. One would be the windows and what you decided to do with the windows.

MR. IRWIN: Well, the whole sequence of entry, that isn't an accident. That's all factored-time-wise and space-wise and the change from being in the city to being in the country. That's a letting down, an opening up, becoming more amenable. You're not busy. You're not here to do this and that and you've got to be in an office, you've got to be this.

There's a lot that has to enter into a space and how comfortable they feel there and how they're not distracted by any of the other things. But they have a chance to commune with the art, spend a little time with it, see how they feel about it.

MR. SIMMS: You did do something unique, though, with the panes in the windows.

MR. IRWIN: Well, I did-there were little-how I staged the skylights, the rotation between open and closed, the changes between lighter and dark-and darker.

MR. SIMMS: Did you close off some of the skylights?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You have people like Joseph Beuys. Joseph Beuys is not about being necessarily in a light, airy space. It's much more enclosed, smaller, lower ceilings, a darker-the Richard Serra needing a space in which a power has something to work with and against. The scale of the room is not too big. It has a feeling that a railroad siding has, which is the strength of his work.

So you go all the way through and you go to the Serra. And then there's the room upstairs. What's her name? Louise Bourgeois. And her work-*Spider* and those kind of-that was a perfect room for her. It was not light and open and airy. It was spider-webby and clumsy in a way. And when you go through those, then there's that moment where you can come back out on that balcony and look at a very nice little garden, some nice spring-cherry blossoms and a series of hedges and that.

You can glimpse the water from there. You actually see the water really only from the second floor, up above. Not the basement area. You are there. You're outdoors, real nice. And you can now go down in the garden; you can spend a little time or what have you, or you can go down in-there are two entrances down into the space below, which is a fairly underused spaced, but people do-there is work -

MR. SIMMS: Pretty dark-a basement-type area.

MR. IRWIN: Oh, yeah, very-regimental, with the columns. Or you can go back up into the space and come out the opposite way. So it was all part of the circulation, but not organized so that you have gone through rooms A, B, C, D, E, F-that sort of thing—but you can wander in each one of those places. You can stop. You can spend time in them. There's a change of pace of being indoors, outdoors. You're being in very confining spaces and being in very open.

And then the side windows, which were a major feature in the place because they run all the way along-you have the entire east-west sides. The river side and the hill side.

MR. SIMMS: But there are also a lot of windows, I think, on the south side.

MR. IRWIN: There are, yeah. But the real major parade of windows is east-west. So they're an interesting decision-making process. In a sense, they are one of the really nice things in the place. It's one of the benefits of the place. If you leave them clear glass and you can see out, it's a great view. It's really quite beautiful. That's one of the nice things. This side's not as nice as this side. West was better than east.

But still, very, very nice. And the old 1920s, '30s steel-framed windows, which basically almost everyone likes but you can't make here-they're not really up to code these days. And in the windows originally, they were all, what do you call it-like frosted but they weren't frosted. They were just rippling glass, that way, a wire-glass kind of thing. And the windows had a normal pattern of steel-framed window with multi-panes. But there were four panes in the middle in each section, there were four sections. There was one pane in the middle of each section which actually was made because they didn't really have air-conditioning in those days, so they would open those four panes up to let the air in; it was a kind of air-conditioning thing. And so if you make them all open, it's too much. The building falls apart. It becomes competitive to the art that's inside.

MR. SIMMS: You mean if they're all transparent?

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. But if they're all closed, the opposite is true. It starts becoming claustrophobic; you start to lose the sense of place; you lose some of the benefit of the character or the quality of the space. So I made a really simple move, which was probably the main one. I just made those four panes transparent and left the rest of them still frosted—so that there was some out and some in. But also the out was not a view; it was a kind of abstraction, in a sense. It really did an amazing thing, which was the most important thing that turned the corner: when you take a factory like that, how do you change the overall feel of the place from a factory to a museum without, in a sense, saying "museum"?

The windows did that. They just, by themselves, gave a refinement to the building. It emphasized the refinement that was very beneficial but also not really a factor in terms of your objective view as you were going

through it. When I did that, everybody that was there-Michael and everybody-all just said, “wow,” because suddenly the widows had become not just steel-framed windows, but they actually started really looking like a lovely kind of Art Deco thing.

But not obviously Art Deco, because it was just everyday factory windows. But it gave that kind of refinement to it. It gave it that kind of really sensitive view of the building. You start seeing up in the skylight areas that there were-basically you had to have some light, and there are these fixtures which are inlaid right at the base of those, long, angular fixtures that were made just to fit into that. During the day you're not even aware of them. You don't even know they're there. They don't stick out in any way. They don't look like a fixture. But they're there, and they serve for evening events and stuff where you need a general light for the whole place at night. And so it was those kinds of refinements.

One other one which took great debating was-in fact, in the beginning it took a great deal of convincing. Everybody wanted to run the walls that we had built for the cubicles or spaces up to the ceiling. And I argued that it should not touch-those walls should not-there should be just the space enough in between them that they become independent of the structure. And also so that when you're inside the space, you're not totally closed in.

You have a sense of-because all through the thing you're going in and out and in and out and in and out for every one of the spaces. And you get a nice sense of rhythm that goes on. And so when you're in the space, you're in the space. When you're out, suddenly you're back in the big building. Then you're into the space, then out to a bigger one. You have something that's small-Agnes Martin is in one room; Joseph Beuys is in another.

Each space, in a sense, has a quality, because this is a building that its initial thing is about showing the collection. You knew that there were these different kinds of works in the collection. And so the spaces were not tailored to them, but they essentially-there was space-if you think, well, this is where I'd really put a Warhol, or this where I'd really put an Andre, or a wonderful guy, Fred Sandback. So the spaces would work for them particularly. So then basically-oh, we talked about the trees outside.

One of the issues was-that was a very tough winter and very hostile. You're in this factory. In a way, you're down in a hole. The big issue for me was the winter. And I kept looking for stuff to do there.

In the beginning, it happened to be a period where there was very little material. There had been an upbeat in building, and everybody had bought most of the nurseries out. I was looking for the side garden. I was looking for some cherry trees to be there-pretty obvious, but perfect for the situation. And I was also looking for the trees in the parking lot. And I didn't really have—I had the problem with the winter. Like I said, you look down on this; it's one of the first moments of entrance, so of course, in the spring and the summer you're looking down on an orchard, which is very, very, very nice.

But so I looked and looked and I couldn't find any-I couldn't find trees, period, for some of the things that I needed. And so I started asking everybody, you're going to New Jersey-it's Oregon on the West Coast, New Jersey on the East Coast-all the great nurseries are there. And basically, most of them were out.

So I kept asking around. And a couple of guys told me, well, there was this one nursery where the guy's a real pain the ass to deal with. And they said, he may have some trees because he, you know, a lot of people-

MR. SIMMS: Nobody wants to work with him? [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: Nobody will work with him. And so I went out there and made friends with the guy and spent some time in there several times to look at what he had. And he had trees. I ended up getting most of my trees from him. But the real discovery was-which you have to do: you have to go to a nursery repeatedly-spring, summer, fall-that sort of thing, because every plant, when it's really at its best, is a great plant, you know? So the first time you go in, you don't see the thing. It's either dormant, or it's not its particular time to shine.

There are fundamental things. Like on trees the most fundamental thing is structure. That's the first thing you look for. And then you start looking for a scale for your situation. Then you start looking for complexity, whether it's a simple or a really formal tree or a languid tree and so on and so forth. Those things are really important. Then comes the leaf and blossom and so on and so forth. But I went back, on about my fourth trip or something, and it was wintertime.

Everything looked just dead, like it can be in winter. And suddenly there were these rows of trees with bright red berries on all them. And you think about them against a brick wall, an old brick wall but a brick wall. And suddenly you have this amazingly beautiful forest of red floating dots in the air. And so-and the man said, yeah, those are very good trees.

One of the problems is most people won't buy them because they have these amazing thorns on them. Really-

like daggers or swords. And he said, so you can't really have them in public places because people can get hung up on-you have a danger problem there. And so on the way home I'm just, you know, pissing and moaning because, God, those trees are absolutely prefect. And you've got these ugly thorns. And can I use them?

And so I called the guy that I worked with at the Getty-Barry Coate, who was a tree man. And I explained the situation. I explained it. And he said, “Well, just cut them off.” I said, “Wait a second, you can cut them off; it won't hurt the tree? They won't grow back?” He said, “No.” Now-amazing solution. You can't do this. And so I had to take the time to cut the thorns-

MR. SIMMS: Every single-

MR. IRWIN: -off all those trees. And suddenly they're user-friendly.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

[Audio break.]

MR. IRWIN: [In progress.] And so I think that's one of the most beautiful times, is on a snowy day, these red berries, just floating in the air, against the red building. Very nice. It's those kinds of low-key, but not showing off necessarily, developing this thing of the overall quality of the place that one feels when you go through there. And I think that and the windows are probably the couple of most important things I did, besides the organizational and what have you.

MR. SIMMS: It's interesting, you took a building that was existing, and you essentially made it work. You didn't rip it down. It's a conditional approach.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, it is a classic example of a conditional art, that you refine it, you essentially accent its qualities and its specialness so that they work for the building.

MR. SIMMS: So is this a glimpse into conditional architecture that we're seeing here? Or is it-this is still conditional art in a sense?

MR. IRWIN: Well-

MR. SIMMS: There's this interesting borderline that's-

MR. IRWIN: No—I've said before here on this-that I'm basically dealing with a whole idea of how one enters into these complex situations that are piece and part of the whole social structure and how you make quality the equal of quantity. You've got to meet all those quantifying things, but at the same time, the building should be a nice place to be. It should be beautiful. It should be interesting. It should fit its use, it should really make sense in the most—go and make the thing. It's a great place to be; I like it; this is uplifting.

I don't know if I'm even able to remember and say all these things now, but if you add them all together, what we're going through like in these seven days, it's been one single-once I left the studio and why I ceased to be a painter-but going through all those things is a fairly good explanation of what I was trying to do. I was trying to find out-and most of the time, it was an inquiry which I don't know the answer. Let's say we play by those new set of rules-what kind of world is it making? Is it a plus or a minus? Is it an advancement of architecture, of landscape, city planning, et cetera?

[END AUDIO TRACK]

MR. SIMMS: This is Matthew Simms interviewing Robert Irwin at Robert Irwin's home in San Diego, California, on May 11, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number eight.

I think it would be nice to talk a little bit about some of the work that you've been doing more recently, say over the last decade, starting with *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue3*, and what it relates to and what you're interested in and what you were exploring with that.

MR. IRWIN: Well, the-I'm glad you said “cubed.” Most people don't see that little "3" up there and don't know. But I had done that a couple of times, this dimensional thing, the window here in San Diego, *1 2 3 4* and the piece in New York at Pace.

So all these are touching on the obvious, that I had given up the-remember I said that the biggest revolution for me was that that's not how we see the world, two-dimensionally and in a frame. And so when I broke the frame, that, of course, changed all the rules of the game.

And I've been pursuing that one single thing, which I think if you had to take it down in one summary-at the end of his meditations Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” And basically what I'm saying is, “I feel, therefore I think, therefore I am.”

MR. SIMMS: I see.

MR. IRWIN: That's a big statement.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: But he, as I say, resolved it down to that, but I think it's incorrect.

Which means, in a sense, if you break the frame, you are moving into another set of dimensions. And it's not really just about dimensions. It's the whole thing of “I feel” and having to account for the fact that the world comes to you in multi-dimensions and all kinds of conditions, and that everything, in a sense, is informed by that.

And I think I-you probably-I don't have it here today, but the little breakdown of quantitative, qualitative?

The point is they're both true, and they both are part of how we do and how we function. A lot of that is determined by what it is we want to accomplish and all the kind of day-to-day things we have to deal with. The cognitive self is the primary player in that, but actually behind everything is the sentient being.

I've broken it down into two areas. On the sentient being, you have immateriality. You have things that exist, a smell or touch or feel or air or what have you. All this has a very tactile quality to it. In fact, the entire body functions tactilely. All the senses are actually fundamentally tactile processes. The most elaborate one-this was a surprise to me-of course, they experiment with all this stuff, but the eye is continuously moving. If you stop the eye from moving, it can't see. It doesn't see. It's just constantly scanning, scanning, scanning. Well, the same thing with hearing. The ear is activated, and at the Brownian motion, which is the most sensitive motion ever measured. It's constantly moving. The same thing skin-galvanic skin response and so on. The whole thing is in constant motion and therefore it's an energy machine.

And then the cognitive self deals with the results of that and translates into some kind of material understanding.

And then-so just using the words. So a sentient being is visceral, and the cognitive self is cerebral. We are talking about two realms of knowing: perception, which is this energy thing, and conception, which is to give all that some kind of structure and a meaning. It's a meaning game. And those become the next things. So this process is-one is, of course, feelings and the other is thinking.

And then you have the difference between actual and factual. The first level is, it just “is.” It's actual. It's there. Factual is when you begin to put it into some kind of conceptual order, identify it in some way and give it a name, a number, what have you, which is a big and very important thing.

Then you have logic and reason. Our sentient being is a continuously reasoning process, and our cognitive self is, again, this thing, naming it, ordering it, what have you, which is logic. But if you think about it a second, logic is-I don't think people even think of it in these terms, but I can reason but I cannot logic. This perfectly defines the difference between the two, that actually logic is a structuring of all these parts, but in a sense it is ultimately a subset of reasoning.

MR. SIMMS: Say more about that.

MR. IRWIN: The larger body-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -the larger knowledge is, in a sense, reasoning. And the difference between reasoning and logic is, I can reason but I cannot logic. Reason is a process where I am in control. I make all the decisions and all the recognitions and what have you in my process of reasoning. Logic is a subset of it, in which it tries to organize it into kind of social structure.

MR. SIMMS: So reason exceeds logic?

MR. IRWIN: Oh, definitely. Yeah, logic is a subset of reasoning. But the big difference is, I reason but I cannot logic. In other words, logic is a structure that's outside of me. It's a set of games having to do with social agreements and organizing, in a sense, interacting between human beings as such. Reasoning does all that, too, but it just doesn't do it in the more formal sense that logic does. One is a process and the other is a

system. Reasoning is a process. Logic is developing a system, systematizing things, and I think it is very interesting that it's a process/reason thing.

And the final level, cognitively, the summary thing is truth, a kind of factual truth. The other is reasoning, is essentially beauty. Truth and beauty are essentially-what do you want to call it-equal parts of how we ultimately define this thing in its broadest sense of the word.

MR. SIMMS: So beauty stands on the aesthetic side, but not limited by the categories of aesthetics, which actually are provided by the other side.

MR. IRWIN: There have been attempts essentially in all the process, through all of human beings, of compromising one with the other, to have logic override reasoning as being more permanent, more repeatable, more measurable by all-in other words, so you also get the same-something being-what are the terms I always use?-“both/and.” The thing about both/and, of course, is they're both true; they're both part of the overall thing. One is not subsumed to the other. One is, in a sense, larger, more speculative, and having to do with things like aesthetics and beauty and so on and so forth. The other has to do with organizing and structuring and defining and all those things, which are very useful and meaningful tasks.

The idea that eventually, when they measure every synapse of the brain, they're going to know what the brain is, is ridiculous because they'll only then know what the mechanics of it are. They won't know what it actually is.

MR. SIMMS: This is obviously not the same as something like Freud's conscious and unconscious. We're talking about something different.

MR. IRWIN: Freud is now going further and trying to figure out how to use it as a functional term, in this case developing a psychoanalysis of process in which he can somehow help people function in the world, and in that process there has to be a whole system of nomenclature, naming. The first step is naming. But all the things in the beauty side already are. Naming them doesn't change them. They are. I feel. It is. When they get to the end of measuring anything, that will be very, very interesting and very, very important, but it won't be-it will not be the brain.

When I did the discs, I always used the shadow as an explanation for a quantitative and qualitative-I don't know why they're not in here. This thing is quantitative and qualitative. A simple explanation of that is that the shadow that was around the painting, it was at first how I really recognized the distinction here, because you take the shadow, and it has actually no quantitative dimensions. You can't measure it. You can't weigh it. And if you move the light, it's gone. It's not there. So it's fugitive. So from a quantitative point of view the thing has no importance whatsoever. It can be pretty much dismissed. On the qualitative side, you couldn't move without it because seeing is totally dependent on shadows. Anyway, the light and the shadow and the relationship between the two, and the modifications that take place in one with the other under any circumstance. So I rather like the shadow at that moment because for me I suddenly saw the distinction between the quantitative and the qualitative.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: When I first hit that thing of the shadow and the frame, and that that's not how we see-for me it was an overwhelming distinction about what and how things function.

I think that of all the disciplines we have, artists may be the one that's most closely involved, always has been, with the sentient being-so-called aesthetics, how decisions are made aesthetically as opposed to quantitatively, that whole area of how-and beauty and et cetera and all of the arguments and definitions over beauty and how beauty is determined and what the processes are, all of which are an attempt to kind of grasp the thing.

But in fact, it's totally within in the qualitative realm. Qualities are something we essentially understand through participating in them, and so the first thing was, for me, I thought about that in the very beginning and realized that also probably had a lot to do between energy and matter. You can almost put that on the list, that the matter is essentially where something has solidified and becomes a thing. In other words, it becomes lead or water or air or what have you. And we distinguished between them and the properties of them.

And essentially when you step outside the frame, you realize that what becomes the media-and it became, of course, energy, quite obviously, but that's a big step. And I had absolutely no idea how an artist actually

participates and the things that he does, in which energy now becomes material and immaterial.

So immaterial is just a way to distinguish between the two, because when you think of air, you don't think of it in a material sense. If you think of water, you can think that it has some properties of being a thing.

MR. SIMMS: Some density.

MR. IRWIN: Our understanding of it and our dealing with it is not on that level. It's in the-our whole perceptual system is that-is perpetual motion-activated process.

MR. SIMMS: Energy, of course, is something that can be measured. There are qualitative and quantitative approaches to energy. What you're talking about is a feel of energy.

MR. IRWIN: The point is that energy is first a feeling, a feeling of something in motion. The sun hits you, and you're on the beach, and you think, wow, what a wonderful-wow. You know? Then we can start measuring that, because you're quantifying that and explaining why that's a good thing or a bad thing. And we start talking about Vitamin D, and we start talking about the sense of well-being and all-you play all these games, but finally it's more. It's a feeling at first.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: And so when we think of vacation and luxury and that sort of thing, we often think of going to warm climes to lay back and relax and et cetera. So you can play with it and play with it and play with it, but fundamentally-anyway, for me as an artist I thought, okay, we're really dealing with perception here. The whole history of art has always been about perception, but it also goes along with the quantitative.

And the role of art has been overwhelmingly determined as a quantitative action, in the sense of-first as an illustrator of flora and fauna and then an illustrator of the text, and then maybe as a handmaiden to the church and religion and a handmaiden to social action and politics and. The second question for me was, if I really-I think there's an interesting distinction here. I think, in being an artist, that this is absolutely crucial. It's right to the crux of the thing.

So while all those other things have-I mean, there's a purpose behind them, to make religious statements or make political activism. I'm not saying those things aren't there. But then my question became, what is the actual role of art that distinguishes it from everything else? In other words, if I'm a black person and I'm involved in the politics of equality and I'm in the march and so on and so forth, absolutely, no argument whatsoever. And I will bring art and everything else I have to bear on that.

But finally, in a sense, there is an ultimate question of what is the unique contribution of art that is not somehow a handmaiden of something else? What does art actually do in the overall scheme of things that justifies its high standing? We built cathedrals to it. It's an amazing power. And so if essentially I tack it onto some political situation, I'm not really doing art per se. I'm now doing art in the service of something.

And so the question then became, is it always just "in the service of"? Is it always just an illustrator of the text, an apologist for different positions in the world, or does it actually have a role of its own, which I ascribe to having to do with a whole perceptual being in the world?

MR. SIMMS: Maybe this is the time to raise that question of "dialogue of immanence," of people in dialogue, people who may not know each other, may be living at different moments-

MR. IRWIN: I'm going to have to say, hopefully, in dialogue of immanence, is that in the long term all of this stuff will count. It will get sorted out. If not, then maybe it's lost.

Now, maybe it would get lost. I just saw this thing in the paper this morning. It says that scientists have decided that already we've just reached the absolute critical point where the protection we have from the sun that keeps the balance in terms of our weather, we have gone beyond the point that it's never been beyond that point—before in the whole history of the globe. So if they have already gone to that point or over the edge, and nobody's really dealing with it seriously, maybe the immanence will never take place. Maybe we'll blow it all up, as it were.

So anyway, the history of modern art is a radical history. Very seldom we have a radical history. Most of our histories are homogenous, that we have a good idea, and we've built upon that idea, and we have a kind of sense of organized knowing. That is, we proceed from one part-from one rung on the ladder to the next rung. And there's a sense of progressing, going forward. So you're taking an idea and examining it and going through its pieces and parts and trying to make sense out of it. It has a kind of orderly sense of ascending, in a way,

which is a very nice feeling.

And what happens every now and then is that we get a question, or we get a discovery, which essentially completely obliterates that idea that we're in. This history is not just in art. It's been very much in the sciences and in the kind of experiments and so-called social structures and that. The 19th century was really, on one level, a very, very radical history. And art is-you go from David to Malevich-either totally destructive or, in a sense, what does this mean?

MR. SIMMS: We did start with *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue3*, and I was hoping we could talk a bit about that new material that you were using there, which is aluminum, honeycomb, panels with lacquered surfaces, and the-

MR. IRWIN: Those are all just, you've tried to make something happen. It's like-the joke when you're young is that-"Unfortunately, I don't have a skyhook, because I could do this really wonderful, magic thing, but physically I can't do it if I-if I had a skyhook and I could hang it on that-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -I could do this wonderful phenomenological kind of thing, but no such thing exists."

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: You're trying to break all the boundaries; you're trying to get outside of all the constraints; you're trying to do something that in a sense is ephemeral and rich-full of rich and astounding maybe-whatever-but you can't. So one goes through a lot of experiments and processes to find a material, or a sense of place.

Part of breaking into the thing was this idea of-I've written about it more than anywhere else in "Notes toward a Conditional Art." And one of the big ways is that, no, we don't have a skyhook but what we have is this-we have an art place, which has got slowly reduced down to a white cube, and then you've done about everything you can do on a white cube, and then you realize it didn't have anything to do with that at all.

The constraints of that are actually the pressures of being an artist in a recognizable term. But actually the idea of holding our dialogue or our activity to that is absurd. So I started looking for how to act in the world, because every situation, every set of conditions, elicits a new and sometimes quite surprising, in fact, sometimes even quite thrilling result.

So, of course, you have to develop some ability to find tools and methods and materials that you can-the scrim was a very useful one for me. It was a great way to act on and really affect a space where there's as minimal amount of materiality as possible, because remember I said early in the very beginning that it was more about light than it was about matter.

So the scrim is a classic example of something that-you can do a lot of stuff. You can break spaces up and make all kinds of things, capture light in a lot of ways. I think the one I just did recently I like very well, which is *Square the Room*-

MR. SIMMS: Here at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

MR. IRWIN: -here at the museum-because it is so there and not there at the same time. People actually are startled by it.

So, yeah, along the way I've discovered all kinds of tools and methods and what you have, which are not really important, only in a secondary sense. You're not going to start educating people to do scrim work. But we do. We have potters and we have painters and we have sculptors that are all taught with old-fashioned methods and old-fashioned processes.

If you have a student, he has to have versatility in that area. He has to be able to invent. He has to be able to discover. I used to go every six months and go all over to all these different-especially in Southern California, where you could rent a small industrial space, and there would be people out there experimenting with new tools, new materials. And you find something like fiber optics, or you find something like what's become-what is it-they make fly rods out of it now because it's-

MR. SIMMS: Oh, I'm sorry, I don't know. [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: I do.

MR. SIMMS: Okay.

MR. IRWIN: I can't think of it right at the moment. But the point is that I always think about them and try and find out what the different-I found that my friend Jack Brogan, he was really good at it. He'd see a new material, and he'd immediately buy it and start experimenting with it, just because of his curiosity. And so as friends-he was a great resource for me. He'd find out this and find out that and help me put it together or make it happen, because I was-I had limitations. And he would fill big gaps in for me, you know?

MR. SIMMS: And I think he was involved in those honeycomb aluminum sheets.

MR. IRWIN: He was. He's the one who found the material. This honeycomb aluminum for aircraft-of course, the aircraft industry is looking for great strength with minimal weight, actually, because you've got to fly this thing. The stronger it can be-because it has to be strong at high speeds-and yet at the same time it has to be really light. And honeycomb aluminum, it's not the same as, but Buckminster Fuller was always talking about the geodesic dome-the thing was light and airy and open and what have you. There are lots of people in that world that have done some incredible stuff with-and now even more.

God, it's just-the one thing that I've really admired, and it always pissed me off when people say, “Well, we wasted a lot of money on the space program. We could have done this, we could have done that.” I think there should always be a space program, a space program in the sense that the really great strength, the great power we have as human beings, is our minds.

For the scientists there should always be something, a real thing, for them to exercise with. Whether it produces or doesn't produce is not the key thing. The thing is that it produces these minds who are capable of incredible flights of genius. So that alone-and just take, say, one element out of the space program that has radically changed everything, and that is just what you're saying about the thing—miniaturization, for example. What has happened by miniaturization has, in a sense, been one of the most powerful contributions to this society there has been, beyond everything else. Think about the whole world of-a computer-a computer that's as big as a room is now-it's in your hand.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: Spectacular. The stuff that's going on just on that level, or materials that really are amazing in terms of their structure, in terms of their properties. I'm being astounded every day by the kind of stuff that people are doing. And a lot of that came out of the space program.

I suggested-and when confronted by skeptics-that there should, at all times, be a project-and this is an argument for the government to some degree because they're usually the only ones who can underwrite that-something on that scale, research on that scale. There should always be a space program-not space per se but that kind of inquiry going on, with the best minds collected together, underwritten to develop and produce, in a sense, all the possibilities.

There should be a space program of energy. That was, like, 50 years ago. If there had been a space program of energy, that kind of concentration focused on energy, we wouldn't have the energy problems we have right now. There are, within grasp, solutions about not only fossil fuels. They're saying today in the paper we're at that point where fossil-it's ridiculous.

MR. SIMMS: For you making art, though, is crucial. We're talking about broad implications. But the physical fact of engaging in something where you're able to explore in a tactile way here and now, one-on-one kind of thing-I've seen you in the studio with the new work. It strikes me that there's a value to that aspect too.

MR. IRWIN: Well, it's all part of when you think about something, you could sit in a corner and think about it, or-I think that Merleau-Ponty put the thing about as well as anybody else. He thought that artists possibly had an advantage over philosophers in that they could function both physically—tactilely—and intellectually. See, he didn't get the chance to work with his hands or have the tactileness. He thought about things in a cerebral way.

And he felt that maybe in this kind of a dialogue especially, that having something like that in which you're engaged tactilely-not just about making, but essentially dealing with things and sorting them out in terms of how they feel and touch and so on and so forth-that that was somewhat of an advantage. I think that's a pretty good possibility, and that artists, if they took their role a little more seriously and stopped worrying about having a career, they might actually find out some things that are really quite startling, some opportunities now that are untouched.

These simple things I'm doing now-and maybe at 85 I'm being self-indulgent, but I would go for months-six months, a year—and then every now and then I'd have one of those moments-[clapping]-“Wow, I found the gold, I found the gold,” you know. Just exciting, because you finally do something that's actually really quite spectacular and beautiful. I would think so.

I might have done it in Kansas, or I might have done it on a project I was doing in the Southwest desert, all of which can't be transferred to New York. They can't be put in a gallery. You're not going to take bus tours out there to them. So in a funny way, during the time I was doing them they were completely obscure. Which is why I came to the dialogue of immanence-

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: -because nothing is that obscure. There is, in a sense, a connecting membrane, and it has to do with this dialogue: if I can think it, if I can do it, it's because it's thinkable and it's doable, and I have to assume somebody else is already doing it at the same time; I may not meet them, but I'm having a dialogue with them. And that's what I meant by a dialogue. And it sustains that kind of inquiry. They talk about philosophers being completely asocial-

MR. SIMMS: Yeah. Right.

MR. IRWIN: And some of those stories are painful-painful.

And so basically they're flying on the dialogue of immanence. They're talking about something that is now, really now, even though “now” is 50 years ahead of it. But the new work-maybe it was self-indulgent in the sense that especially during the early-even now I get a hit almost every day-I get two or three, you know, “Wow, geez, look at that.”

Before I can put anything in the world, I have to wait at least a couple of years and edit them. Nothing is going out that hasn't been edited a dozen times. The reason is because the first time is, wow, it's so interesting, so spectacular that you have no judgment, you know?

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: So you have to put it away and then do it and do it, and you maybe proceed in some way or improve it, and you go back in and you have to look at it again in that light. And now you're a little more judgmental; now you're a little bit harder and a little more-and so I've had to put a process-a repetitive process in there to essentially protect myself from my own enthusiasm because when you first see the phenomena that takes place there, they're amazing. It's like a palette that nobody's ever seen. Maybe somebody does, but I've never seen it or heard it anywhere-a palette of color that's as good-in fact it's, in a sense, tied up in nature; it's tied up in energy. The means are, in a sense, rather mundane. Of course, one can see the means and stop there.

MR. SIMMS: Right. The means in this case are fluorescent tubes with theatrical gels.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah. Well, it goes way back to when I did the disc and sort of broke the frame of the painting. And I said this thing about energy. The first thing I did was to investigate light.

I got a room, made a ganzfeld out of it; borrowed, begged, bought every kind of light that was possible, put them in the room just one light at a time, and looked at it for weeks to try and get a sense of what its properties were, what its possibilities were, like the aluminum that we're talking about being so lightweight that there's no generic problems to do *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue3*. It's so light you can just-also, it is really strong. It's rigid. It's so good. It's flat. It's flatter than flat.

MR. SIMMS: Right.

MR. IRWIN: Everything else I've ever seen has never looked as flat as that does. It's absolutely pristine in that sense of the word. No ripple-and of course, the structure of it is amazingly strong and light, for me, but also flat.

MR. SIMMS: I read somewhere that you contemplated allowing people to walk on them. Or was that never-

MR. IRWIN: Well, I'd like to let them walk on it. But it's like, when I used to do a scrim, most people would respect it, but every now and then you'd come in in the morning and you'd find a perfect lip-lips on one where somebody just walked right into it.

MR. SIMMS: That was in San Francisco when that-

MR. IRWIN: That happened more than once, but San Francisco-

MR. SIMMS: Oh, Okay.

MR. IRWIN: But in San Francisco they were the most destructive of anybody.

MR. SIMMS: In 1985 when you did the installation.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, at the museum there. People would-I don't know if they were on drugs or what, but people would kind of run and dive into it.

MR. SIMMS: [Laughs.]

MR. IRWIN: I'd come in in the morning and it would be all torn down or whatever.

MR. SIMMS: And you would go fix them.

MR. IRWIN: I would go fix it, yeah. And you had to sometimes attend to something like that because some people just don't pay any attention. Some are intrigued; some, in a sense, are puzzled. Others, I guess in San Francisco, I guess because of the history San Francisco has, were kind of euphoric, and they just-they'd want to dive into the abyss, as it were.

[END AUDIO TRACK]

MR. SIMMS: You were talking about this question of light and the energy of light. One thing about these new pieces that you've been doing-now I'm thinking of the walls with the irregular grid of fluorescent tubes, which you've been calling *Light and Space I*, *Light and Space II*, *Light and Space III*—and it struck me as interesting, because you never used that expression “light and space” for work before, as far as I know, and in fact avoided that kind of categorization.

MR. IRWIN: I avoided it, absolutely. But finally, there's nothing else to call the thing. And it is just a nuts-and-bolts title.

MR. SIMMS: Right. So it doesn't represent you taking ownership of that somehow?

MR. IRWIN: No, none. You can't take ownership of light and space. [They laugh.] It is everywhere, so there's no such thing as ownership.

MR. SIMMS: Well, you read all the time people saying, “Robert Irwin, a leading member of light and space art and all that.” And I know you've avoided that, and I understand why. So it's interesting to see-

MR. IRWIN: They're hanging tags on it so they can hold it or classify it or organize it or make it fit into some scheme, the so-called art scheme. And basically, the more they do it, the less they're about art, the less they're talking about it.

MR. SIMMS: Well, the interesting thing about Jan Butterfield's book, which is about light and space and has these individual profiles-it starts with you, and then none of these artists want to be called that.

MR. IRWIN: Of course not. It's like taking the thing by the tail rather than by the head, you know? They become disruptive, those terms. That organization becomes, “Oh, I know what that is, oh, yeah.” And you understand, somehow, intellectually, and it's all wrong. It's not an intellectual exercise. So, yeah, I'm sure any artist that is worth talking about has some aversion to that kind of classifying. Now, there was a time when that was, in a sense, stylish, to become the Impressionist. I don't know. They probably didn't like it either.

MR. SIMMS: Yeah, I think that label was thrust on them.

MR. IRWIN: And usually the label, from that period especially, all this came from negative criticism-

MR. SIMMS: Yeah, that's true.

MR. IRWIN: -which is kind of interesting, that it's the negative term that finally became, in a sense, the existing term, the historical term. Because as I said, the value of art, that thing of history is just astounding to me. In the paper I read this guy paid $2.1 million for a Honus Wagner baseball card, and he didn't even get the bubblegum, you know?

MR. SIMMS: He didn't even get the bubblegum. [Laughter.]

MR. IRWIN: And somebody bought, what is it, *Scream*?

MR. SIMMS: Oh the Munch.

MR. IRWIN: Yeah, the Munch. It has to be because it's historical; because as a painting it's not very good at all. It's not even interesting.

MR. SIMMS: No, it's true. You have to ask yourself what are people buying.

MR. IRWIN: They're buying history. That's what they are. Letters by George Washington and the shoes of Samuel Jackson, et cetera and so on.

MR. SIMMS: Well, can I push you a bit more on the recent work? How about back to the context of you in the studio? You're looking at the work. You found the gold. Now you've been doing this work, and you've recently installed one called *Niagara* at Albright-Knox, which I remember you saying, for you, is a kind of major-

MR. IRWIN: Well, the first thing I did was essentially-I was doing a retrospective in San Diego, and I sort of resisted doing it. It was going to be an awful lot of work. They'd taken over this baggage claim thing from the railroad station. It was a big, rambling space. I knew that I was going to have to fill this space somehow. And so I had to come up with whole new things for it. *Light and Space* was one, that whole wall of that. And in doing that, I needed an experimental space. The first time I'd had a studio in a long, long time—and so I had this studio and I was working on it. To kind of get an idea of what I was going to do, because it was going to be big and I'd have to buy the material and all that. And a couple of very funny things happened. One was that's where I met Joey.

MR. SIMMS: And Joey is your current assistant?

MR. IRWIN: The first-not current. He's the first and only assistant I've ever had. I've never wanted an assistant. I've never liked having an assistant.

One of the problems in going to look at a site is everybody-the people who've asked you—they want to walk with you and they want to talk. And you just can't do it. You have to be alone and you have to-I mean, you see it but you don't see it-you're not really running your hands over it. You're not being really tuned into it.

And so having an assistant around was the same thing. It was just a major distraction for me. And some really nice people have asked me at one time or another if they could do that. And they were sincere, but I was never comfortable with it.

I think maybe it partly had to do with the way I found Joey. Joey was a guard at the museum, had never seen the work. All right? He'd never seen the work, any of it, but had read all the writing because he's a voracious reader. So he's the first one who ever walked up and asked me about the writing. After 40 years, nobody's ever asked me. So-and I never thought about it-this is what I did. It was useful for me and so on, so on. But he not only asked me, he wanted to argue with me about it. He likes to argue and he likes to get into it.

So we had an instant dialogue, because I'm at the point in my life where I'm not reading as voraciously as I did; I'm not studying the way I did at one time or another for different things. I have gotten caught up in this light and stuff that I'm doing now, which has been very exciting. I mean, a great discovery for me. I don't know how they fit or what they fit or to what they fit, but they-it's been terrific.

And-but he does. He reads voraciously, everything. He is on top of all the arguments, philosophic and cognitive, and all the stuff that's going on in cognitive sciences he's read up on. So when we take breaks, or even when we're working, we have a stimulating conversation. He's keeping me tuned up. So he's become more than an assistant. And these things we're doing are complicated in terms of how complex they are to put together, and so he keeps the notes. We do it and he writes everything down. And the notes are really very complex. They're quite spectacular drawings in themselves.

And now I'm to the point where since he's been keeping the notes for—how many years, six, seven years, something like that-in some ways he could put one up again. I couldn't put one back up again. I'm dependent on him now, which always makes me laugh, because I always thought about the funny movie with Dirk Bogarde, the English movie called *The Servant*.

MR. SIMMS: I don't know it.

MR. IRWIN: So the servant comes into this large house with, I don’t know, a large family of 15 people, quite eccentric. And he becomes so invaluable to them that after a while, he's running the whole thing. He's actually running their lives. It just turns around. He starts as a servant and he becomes, in a sense, the boss. And in some ways that's even a little bit true here. He's very talented. He's going to leave at some point and go off and do what he's doing, and I think he's going to be one to be reckoned with as an artist.

But for the moment, what's happened to me a lot is I'm dipped in shit and coming up smelling like a rose. That's another instance of I'm like on the edge of hanging in the middle of nowhere, and then somehow it works out. I don't say it, but it's very curious. In that sense I've been very fortunate, very fortunate.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]