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Oral History Interview with Jack Prip Transcript

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JACK PRIP
INTERVIEWED BY JONATHAN BONNER
IN PRIP'S STUDIO
JANUARY, 1997

Tape 1 Side A

Jonathan: How did you end up at RISD?

Jack: We're going now? How did I end up at RISD? Well, its a .. before we do this, that's the first question on the...

JB: That's the first question on the interview.

JP: That's all right. How did I end up at ... Ok let's try that....all right...

How did I end up at RISD? Well, I had been teaching at a number of other places before I came to RISD. I started teaching in 1948, at the School for American Craftsmen in Alfred, NY. And later went to RIT in Rochester and then ended up in New England and was teaching at the Museum School in Boston.

Tage Frid, a very close friend of mine, had gone to RISD a few years before that, he knew that I was not very happy at the Museum School and he invited me down to visit the school one day. And I met with a few people down there and that's sort of the... and in the end they invited me to come down spend some ...

It just so happened at that time RISD was undergoing real a sort of turn over, you know, because they had a new president, Bush Brown. He was trying to get a lot of people out there and bring new people in, so I happened to come in on that wave there.

JB: You were brought in to teach in the Metals Department?

JP: Well, yes, actually I was brought into the Industrial Design Department.

JB: I see.

JP: They were, they had a small shop program there, that they called the Shop Program, Loutay was involved there, and I was. Ken Hunnibel was teaching there, came in at the same time I was teaching. The idea was really just to give the ID students introduction to these materials. Some basic knowledge

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of these materials and processes, and help them to develop prototypes in their work. That was pretty much the intent of the program. It was headed up by Marc Harrison.

JB: Let's stop for a second.

JB: Basically you came to RISD to teach in what department?

JP: Well, at that time it was an Industrial Design Department, and they had as part or sort of, sub areas, within the Industrial Design Department. They had a place where people made wooden objects, mainly for the development of prototypes and things that were, one might think of, in connection with Industrial Design.

The metal shop was sort of the same purpose, and they had a machine shop as well. But, I spent, it really was not an ambitious program at all, this was an introduction to metal, or something like that. You know, they bang little spoons and things like that. They had an Introduction to Metals II, you know, advanced metal or something like that.

That happened, that came about, that was in the what we would call the few years ahead, to the mid-60's. There were a lot of stuff going on at the colleges at that time, as you well know, and a lot of turmoil, and students being dissatisfied with stuff going on outside. And also, perhaps not wanting to go out and join dear old dad, as, work their way into the corporation, whatever, you know. They had other ideas about life and what they wanted to do. For many of them it seemed that the life as artist/craftsmen, or something like that, came much closer to their ideas. You weren't destroying the environment to any great extent, you weren't, you never going to get rich, but you could probably always support yourself and things like that.

It was sort of, somewhat based on a very idealist and some ways a very naive approach on the part of the, of everyone involved, I shouldn't say the students, the teachers, because there were a lot of wishful thinking involved in it. It sort of just grew that way, you know. You had nothing really to aim at because there were no programs. There were no people out there doing this work really, in any meaningful way. There was industry, but there was just a sharp separation between what artist/craftsmen were doing and what

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industry was doing. There was no place where these two met, they just separated.

But somehow, you know, they didn't, really didn't want me to start a department there, I had students come to me and say, "Jack, I would like to major in your," and I said, "you can't do that there is no program here." "Well we'll see about that!" Like Patty Dauni, she went up and she came back a couple of hours later, and she said, "you now have a full-time student here." I said, "Good, okay," and then a few more showed up and a few more showed up.

I can't remember how it happened, then Howard Newman, told me that he wanted to come in and do graduate work. Gees, we don't have a graduate program, they will never go for that. Then Louis Showda came and Doug Legenhausen and a few other people. So you went through all the little political things you had to do there, talk to the right people, and finally they approved it. They said "Okay, let's try it."

I had a graduate program and no under-graduate program really. I had, it was just going bananas down there for a while, we had all these students coming in taking electives. They were doing special studies, in my area, they came from illustration, textile design, all over the damn place. That was sort of the beginning of it. It wasn't really structured in any way, I just worked with whoever was here. The program, actually the structured program, grew out of that, the chaos, or whatever you want to call it.

JB: I there, I know from where you were before, which was you started off in Alfred and then went to Rochester. And, there was a certain sort of movement, you know, daily, like a post-World War II craft movement. Which, I don't know, was that an existing entity or identified then, I heard about in it the late '60's, '66-67. I knew of you, from elsewhere.

JP: It was being formed at that time, it was in the process of. I don't know whether if this is taking things in the right, proper order, but a.. When I originally came over from Denmark, although I was born in the United States, I went to Denmark as a child and lived there during the War, served my apprenticeship as a silversmith, and worked over there.

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Came back, I was invited, I won't go into all the details, but ended up teaching at the School for American Craftsmen, which was a brand new school in Alfred, New York. It was essentially develop to serve the returning GI's and that sort of thing. But there was no, there was nothing going on, there were no outlets, there were no museum shows, there were very few books. It was very difficult to find anyone, that knew enough about this work, that could even show you really what, or how to do it. The standards were really not all that high, looking back, you know. If you could do anything at all people thought it was somewhat of a miracle.

So, it was sort of an interesting time, it was a wonderful time for me, because I had been working, in a much more structured environment, and here I suddenly found myself with a bunch of guys, most of them were older than I was, and they were, we were sort of trying to figure out, not only how to [do] things, but really trying to determine what to do. And there was some sense that this had to work into society, it had to be a certain social and economic reasoning in back of this. They had marketing sessions and things like that. It was very interesting for me, the school was open like 24-hours a day.

JB: This was at Alfred?

JP: This was at Alfred. You would walk in there and there would be people at one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning, you go in there and you would find half the people there working. It was that kind of thing. But that's just going, it was not my intent to discuss it, that's really the state of the craft or the artist/craftsmen movement in the United States at the time.

RISD, when I came did not have a department. Now that surprises a lot of people, because they knew Rhode Island School of Design is a place people went to in order to learn jewelry, design jewelry, textile and so on. But, at that time, that was before the World War II, there was a link there, a definitely tie-in with industry. So it made some sense, people went to RISD to learn certain design skills and to learn certain specialized skills and then they were fed back out into the jewelry industry or textile industry, but that had broken down, when I went there.

There was no, there was a room in the basement, where a woman, I think her

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name was Mrs. King, was teaching a course for people out of industry. They called it a sample making course, or something. What they did was soldering findings together, that was pretty much the extent of it. Now I had heard that they had this fantastic collection of old silversmith tools down somewhere. I could never find them, I had looked all around.

One day I was finishing off an old stake, an old piece of equipment down there, and the janitor, the head janitor came and he said, "did anyone tell you that there are a couple of barrels way in back in the basement there?" I said, "no I never." and he said, "well, you ought to take a look at those, they belong to this area here." And there was a beautiful collection of stakes, and he had salvaged them. Because when they did away with that program at RISD, people were just taking them and using them for anchors for their boats and stuff like that, beautiful big stakes and things like that. So we salvaged some tools and then we scrounged a little here and a little there and slowly built up a respectable assortment of tools. That was the.. excuse me I'm breaking right here. I'm not making a whole lot of sense.

JB: This is...

JB: You've talked a little bit about how the department evolved. What was your teaching philosophy, you know, in that context?

JP: Well, teaching, there was as I just mentioned to you before, there was an awful lot of wishful thinking on the part of the people. They were just sort of signing up and showing up in our department or our area there and I would teach them some of what I knew. And I thought for a while that we could develop a firmly sort of, shall we say, guided and structured curriculum that would take care of them once they left, but I soon discovered that, that just wasn't possible. In the first place, people came with, they all had different ideas about what they wanted to do.

So I felt that the best thing we should do was to teach them and give them a good basic vocabulary or technical vocabulary and otherwise just try to attempt to provide them with good stimulating pleasant environment. You know, so far as we could do that, so that there was a place set and set the scene in such a way that the people got together there and something would happen. Not by accident, I mean, you would try it and it just, there was

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nothing really that I could look too and say that "Awe, I would like to have a program similar to what they have at Cranbrook or what they have at, you know, Oakland School of Arts and Crafts, or anything like that, because there weren't schools that really were wide yield.

It was very much, you know, a question of very often people would be looking at European trade journals or art magazines and a magazine like *Studio* would come in from England. And that would pretty much, you know, that would show up, very rapidly in the work the students [were] doing. But there was nothing, there really wasn't much for them to look at, it's not like today where you can open a half dozen sort of stampy glossy magazines, there are shows all over the place. You can send to the Craft Council and they will send slides of anyone's work that you would want to look at. It's a side that just didn't exist at the time, it was sort of.

To get back to the philosophy, I came to teaching, you know, what in many ways, at least in Europe, would have been a perfectly natural approach. I came up as an apprentice and worked and then began designing a little and working for companies and would have perhaps eventually could have ended up teaching in a school, a trade school, or something like that, a vocational school, there weren't many real art/craft schools, there was one. But most of the people, I found myself, that were my colleagues at RISD and other places as well, were products, art school products, they didn't, not saying this necessary bad or good they did not really know the world, much about the world outside of the college art department. That was, that's the way it was done, it was done that way. I was always standing sort of to one side as an observer, watching a lot of this stuff going on. Probably was somewhat of critical of a lot of it, but also didn't quite understand a lot of the things that were going on. I had to really learn how to function within that environment.

I had worked for industry, I had worked as a designer, I worked technical work for people to develop prototype, all kinds of things like that. That I knew I understood reasonably well, but the interior workings of a art school, college or university art department was totally unknown to me at that time. So I had a lot to learn about how to function and to ... you know, it wasn't a question of sitting down one day and determining this is the way we're going to do our program, we're going to, it just sort of seemed to grow bit by bit.

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I do remember visiting a few schools and seeing things, I was invited out to the West Coast and I went to visit with Al Pine at Long Beach. I saw some good things there, things I thought were good, you know, you had a good basic introductory program. I thought we could get some of that, and eventually George Van Dimeworth came from Long Beach, and he taught the.... And the reason I wanted George to come in a way was because he had, I knew that through George we could sort of lift and transfer that program too or the parts that we thought were valuable. I had never really been able to do that, because I never thought, I was never really capable of thinking with the students at that level, because I had been working at a different level. So that's, you pick up a little here and there and we had a few, eventually, a few guests, instructors, people came in.

And the students were, of course, a source of most of the information, because they were out scouting all the time looking for things. They would bring in information and tell you about people, tell you about shows. At that time, we're now well into the '60's, the mid-60's, the late '60's. Things were picking up there were shows, there were things going on in New York. Not anywhere close to what it is now, you know. A few things did change, the conditions I might say. Such as the opening of the American Craft Museum in New York, which really set much higher standards than had previously existed.

JB: Jack, were there other influences at the time that affected the direction of this program?

JP: Yes, very definitely so, the trouble was sometimes you see something it makes a, creates a perhaps a very substantial impact on you. But you don't really know what to do with it, and that was to a great extent the problem that I experienced at any rate. I knew how, you know, I had certain amount of traditional skills and knowledge. But they didn't really apply to, well let me go back. There is something here that I'm trying to say here. I think I'm going back here a few years, to the period after the war. Definitely the most influential and most strongest art influence was abstract expressionism, you know.

I remember going to New York, going to the Museum of Modern Art, going

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up there to the show of Sixteen Americans, or something like that. Oh, I can go into and look at that and action painting and get all cranked up. Wow! This stuff is all woo! This blew me right away. But what the hell, you can't really, how do you respond to that with a hammer and a sheet of metal? There is really a...

Clay, it's a different matter, it's loose, fluid material, you know, you can manipulate it with your hands, but it's hard to get stiff, rigid materials to respond. That was essentially what I spent years trying to make metal objects that had some sense of spontaneity. Until it dawned on me one day that really metal and spontaneity really didn't have much to do with one another. And the only way you could do that was really by casting, working with wax or something else. At any rate, that's all part of it, but that was... I don't know if other people were aware of it in the same way that I was and I'm not, and I don't even believe that I was aware of it at the time. Looking back, I know that was what was really going on in my mind. I would see all these exciting things taking place and really wanted to plug into it, but didn't know how to do it.

JB: This is a question getting back a little bit to this philosophy of, your teaching philosophy, within the school. Did the school have an overall teaching philosophy or was it just a result of the personalities in each area?

JP: Well, I could make some sort of snappy remark here, such as, if there was an overall philosophy they never let me in on it, you see, because I know. I don't think so, I think it was pretty much these departments and programs were existed pretty much on the, shall we say, on the will and the character, the determination of the person leading the program. I don't think, you can be at total odds with person that was working in the next studio or something like that. It, the answer is essentially, Jonathan, is no. Not really. We would have meetings occasionally in industrial design or something, but nothing ever really came of it.

There was more, you sat around drinking coffee and then you would say good-bye and talk about fishing or whatever the hell it is, you know. Nothing really came out of, which in some ways, I remember, I was sort of a little upset about that after a while. I said, "Gees that's awful," you know, we had this guy over here that is the head of the division chairman, his name is John

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Lincoln, at the time. I'd never seen him, I don't think he'd ever talked to me about what I'm doing. I can't remember who it was, I think it was Norm Schulman at the time. He said, "Jack, it could be worse" he said, "He could be over here every day telling you what to do." I said, "that's that's, I'll go with that."

So, he left me alone and I just reached the conclusion that if they didn't, if they weren't getting too many complaints from your department, they just left you alone, you know. Which was good for certain individuals but bad for in other instances, because what happened was certain, that problems could build up within departments and no one really knew about it. The students, would be unhappy, some people would be unhappy, and all of a sudden whoosh, it would erupt, it would explode and then it would be too late. So, I always felt that the division chairman should have played a more active, pro-active roll there. I'm not sure I know how they could do that.

I think, I think, and then, of course, it changed the different, the number, we had Bush Brown was president when I was there, and then Rantoul came in after Bush Brown.

Then we had Lee Hall and they had different, I guess you would call it managing style. I would always hear about John Frazier, you know, he sort, just spoken of, sort quietly and with a certain amount of awe in their voice. So he must have created, you know, left quite an impression and an impact on the school. I never knew him, I would hear these stories about John Frazier, but that would be before my time.

The other presidents, Bush Brown had a certain, jumping around here, but had a certain flair and a certain pizzazz and certain amount of style, I thought that appealed to me at any rate. We would go to his place and always get drunk as hell, you know, then he would take off his shirt and he would be dancing. I'm not saying he did, this would be at the tail end not, he didn't just go up to people without his shirt on. I remember him and Tage [Frid] dancing around outside in the street.

JB: What did Tage have on? That is the question.

JP: I don't know, okay, Tage, took his pants off so you can start the party now.

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The party is officially opened, you know. But no this is, these were the good parties that we had.

Then Lee Hall came and she, it was very hard for her, she couldn't handle that stuff at all. I don't know, she sort of isolated herself, I think needlessly from the school. She had been there half a year, or something like that and I don't think anyone, I think she was in touch with the trustees or something like that. We, I don't think that she ever came to, it's sort of a matter of thinking that she never came to the area once in the years that she was there. I don't think she knew where it was. I'm not trying to be, you know, snide or nasty about it.

But a... I don't know if I should get into things like this. One thing, one thing clued me in on the way she was functioning as president of the school for a while. I was pretty good fiends, rather good friends with Merlin Szasz, and Merlin was, what was it, associate or assistant provost, or something like that, at the time. Had worked very closely with the dean of the college, which is Don Lay. I was once having a sandwich and cup of coffee, and I said to him, "how's the new president doing?" I never saw her, none of the faculty knew what she, so I thought here's Merlin and he's provost. And he just looked and said, "damn if I know." I said, "what about Don, what does he, he must know what's going on over there?" He hadn't met, she had been there three or four months now, he hasn't met, they had meetings and so forth, and she hadn't talked to him. So I said, "that a different approach."

I think that in a way was not right for RISD, that may be okay at General Motors, a style of, you know, leadership. But at RISD, where up until that point if you had a problem, you could just walk across the parking lot and walk into the Dean's office and ten minutes later you walk out and the problem, in all likelihood it would have been resolved. Not necessarily to, you know, your liking, but you could settle it. That's what the whole nature of RISD as an organization change, you found that you were writing memos all the time, you were getting memos, you were dealing with the assistant to the assistant, something like that. So the lines of communication became less clear and less qualified. I don't know what that has to do with design, but it definitely had something to do with RISD at that time.

Cut
End of Side 1 Tape 1

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Tape 1 side 2

JB: When I was a student, when I was your student in the early '70's, a Jun Kaneko came into the ceramics department, it seemed to have an amazing effect on the whole interior Metcalf Building. I wonder if you could talk about that and other personalities like that, that sort of come?

JP: Yeah, yeah, Jun Kaneko was a very potent, powerful guy, I mean, Norm Sshulman brought in some pretty good, some good people into that department. He had a very firm, oh I'd call it philosophy, he would, people could not be there more than two years. He was the, he was in charge of program, he had his graduates, graduate assistant, and then he would bring in a second teacher. He had a half dozen people there, and although most of them after two, wanted to stage there, really, they loved the place, they like the department. They liked everything about it. Norm had just, to say, the only way to keep that department vital and alive and really moving was to have them move on after two years.

And I know particularly in the case of Jun Kaneko, that really hurt him when Jun left. When he had to tell Jun that he had a two year contract and could not be renewed, because he enjoyed being with Jun, they used to work together. I used to visit and Jun would be over at Norms place over here. And that guy, just had it, I'm signaling in and out, but he just consumed enormous amounts of clay in that room up there. He was just building things, working on things. He was a great influence on the students on the whole, as you say, the whole building sensed that level of energy that flowed from the guy. There were a number of other people that were there, I'm going to take this little piece of paper here, because I made a few notes.

JB: Besides Jun, were there others people that had a sort of similar impact?

JP: Yes, there were a lot of, I mean not a lot of people...

JB: Were there other people besides Jun who had a similar impact on the school?

JP: Yes, you know, I happened to be very close because he was right up stairs, and because I was good friends with Norm Schulman, you know, I had, I used to spend some time with Jun, so I knew him well. But there were other

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people, there were at the, some people had been there earlier. Just get my glasses, I've got a few names here, I'll put this down here. At just about the time that I came in Harry Callahan came to the school.

Yes, there were a number of people there were a awful lot of people there that would just do a very good at what they were doing, I didn't know them at all that well. But certain people came to the school, many of them for a shorter period that left a real impact. If I guess this sort of fit into my way of, or I tried to fit into their way of thinking, for whatever reason.

I mentioned people like Harry Callahan came, and Aaron Siskind came in there, Italo Scanga, although I remember thinking that the guy was a total fruitcake, you know, nut. But he was and but that was not his, that was my fault, I just wasn't capable of seeing what Italo was doing and then we had. I'm thinking of some other people that came.

Peter Rouche, Swiss, very well known, person who is very, very well known in Europe, you know, he was there for a while. Marian Marzynski, the film maker was there, and again.

Some of these people were not really all that popular around the place. They were wave makers, these guys would stand up in faculty meetings and start yakking and going at it. A lot of them were sort of, you know, staid members of the faculty thought that "gees these guys are going to cause trouble, you know." But, you know, in his own, in his way, you know, like Art Wood, was a real --- how was, he just tuned in totally on what was happening there. He was very, he was a very, he was conscious of what was going on in society, you know, he had that, he had a political attitudes. He quit, actually, he quit, left the school in response to some of things that were dictated to faculty by Lee Hall. I think that it was his hope that he would be starting a movement and the faculty would quit, but it didn't happen. I don't know if that is fortunate or unfortunate. But...

There were other people that came, not necessarily, came to the school, not necessarily to teach, they were there as friends of friends or they would come and spend a weekend and they would do a workshop or something like that. I remember a the video art meeting down at Malcolm Grear's studio, he had an evening with [Nam June] Paik, and he had what's his name, Charlotte

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Morgan the Cellist, that always, you know, I guess when it was too hot for her to play with her clothes on so she would start stripping down.

This was sort of interesting stuff, for people living in Providence, this was sort a little taste of the big time, you know, what was going on. Did I mention Peter Rouche, I can't remember. He was... I remember going up and looking at faculty show and thinking, this guy is crazy, they should do something about him. There was the case with rotting food inside the case, you know.

I have to, you know, confess here, make a confession. My art background is minimal; I had not really been exposed to any really advanced thinking in the Arts, you know. Up until that point, I thought I was pretty good at doing what I was doing, and was a good designer. You're dealing more with a case level when you do that. In other words, you're trying do things that people like that are nice, that they are really nice enough some industry can pick up and sell a lot of it. But there is a big difference, between imagination and good taste, you know. The one who is dealing in taste and that's something that can be taught. People come in, they can be total dummies in a way, after they have been there, they begin to pick up on the prevailing level of taste. They are making very nice things and then there are occasionally there are these people come in and showup that do this really off the wall stuff, you know. They are really, and I always found that to be much more interesting, you know, interesting. I found it hit certain veins, certain areas within me that I probably didn't know existed in a way, up until that point.

No, I found myself, one of the nicest things I can say about teaching over the years. Was that I was could... totally considered myself a student along with the students there, I mean, I was always doing things and experimenting and working along with them. The students may have not seen it that way, they probably thought that I knew what I was doing, you know, all the time, but I didn't really, I just Cut.

JB: Jack, you taught in this country from 1948 until you retired in 1981, and you talked a little bit about the sort of GI Bill students when you were first teaching. Can you discuss the transition, what happened to the students as a class from early on until the '80's?

JP: You mean what ...

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JB: How they changed?

JP: How they changed? Well...

JB: Yes.

JP: Well, the first group of students, I mean my first experience at teaching [at the School for American Craftsmen in Alfred, NY] was with a group of GI's that came out of. And there was, you know, was really quite simple, you know, they, I had certain information and they wanted it and it did not have to be presented in a formal matter anyway. They were just, they were so eager, they would pull the information out of you if need be. It was, you have to understand all about the whole way of thinking. The craft/art scene as we know it today, simply did not exist. You had people coming into it that rather, or perhaps some of them thinking that they would like to study something, go to school and become an auto mechanics, or something like that. Then as an after thought they decided they would rather be silversmiths or something like that. We ended up with a weird bunch of people up there.

It was, it was, it was interesting, we had, we associated, the school was tied in with place called America House in New York City. Which was founded by Eileen Webb. Mrs. Vanderbilt used to come up there all the time, and she had as her second in command down there at America House, she had a woman named Frances Caraway-Wright, who was Frank Lloyd Wright's daughter. She was shall we say a rather strong lady. She would come to the school once a month and conduct classes in marketing.

The students, it was a two-year course, the students went there two-years and they had to develop, they had to devote approximately half their time to what they called their production program. They had to develop items that could be sold in America House and was the, was the sale laboratory, you know where things were tested, and things like that. It was just interesting. I just ... there are many things that you could criticize, you know, about the school, and I won't go into all that. None the less there were, the thing that made the place interesting was the students, the quality of the students that were there.

I had people that had gone into the Army, you know, in the early '40's that

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were lawyers, mining engineers came in, decided that they just never wanted to go back in an office again. They wanted to work with their hands and do other things. Musicians. All kinds of people, a guy ran a diner, guy had a coffee shop somewhere and just a mixture, a cowboy, you know. Some guys looked like they come out of, you know, out of the hills of Kentucky.

Just a strange, nothing strange, they were people, not the kind of people you normally associate with an art school. Most of them didn't, in all honestly, they did not survive within this, you know, they had good intentions, they went out there and they worked and I guess it was just a lot easier to, for them to take a job working for their father-in-law and selling automobiles or something like that. Because one of the things that was true then and it certainly is still true is that that it is extremely difficult to make a living doing this. Not just hard, but it is, for so many people the find it pretty much more or less impossible to do it. And it requires such a combination of talents and skills. You have to be, you know, reasonably good at what you're doing, you have to have some technical knowledge, information. You have to be able to design things, and all the other things that go with them.

If you design them, you've made some interesting objects, pieces, products, whatever they happened to be. Then you have go out and sell them, you have [to be] able to deal with people, you have to meet, you know about this stuff. You have [to] be able to make delivery on time if people depend on it. And, and along with all things you must also be able to working, to be sitting down on your ass working for 60 hours a week, you know. And very few people are able to do that, or have the will, because it's the will, that enables them to do it.

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JB: So how did those earlier students compare with the ones you had later in the late '70's early '80's?

JP: Well, number one most of them were older, a lot of them were quite a bit older. They were as a result of life experience, some guys, you know, guy had been in the Pacific and lost a leg or something like that, was early 30's or mid-30's, you know, which had experienced things in his life that most of the kids coming into RISD today had never, never could dream about, so that obviously did, that had an affect on them.

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There's something else that I would like to touch upon that had. There were at the time, for some odd reason, not a odd an odd reason, we could talk about this obviously. The interest in this work was growing, somehow it sort of took on a life of its own. Programs were developed, the museums were showing work, magazines were publishing things about it. And as a consequence there for a number of years, there was almost, I wouldn't say there was a open door, but there was a great number of teaching jobs available. If you knew anything about it and if you come through, especially if you came through a university college program and you had, you were able to go in and teach. So they had, so many of the people went on to become, left school and within a few months they were out there, they were the head of a department somewhere.

They would teach, they would start a department getting on. Which was fine in a way, that the way the word was spread, in a way, it got around that way. Unfortunately, the only thing that very often you had students of students of students out there. You know, you had four generations of students something like that teaching, and it didn't really expand in a way. These were people whose total experience, professional life experience had took place, been formed within the college or within the university environment. And of course, this, you have to get this, is very important to me, something I was very aware of at the time. That these skills that were traditionally, and were rather humble skills, you know, you were a blacksmith, you were a cabinet maker, or woodworker, you were a weaver or potter, you made ceramic pots or something of that.

These were not guys that were thought of, to go back to turn of the century, as people who had advanced degrees in, you know, Art History, perhaps working out of an university environment. It was a rather humble trade, so you had this, were people, when when society in a way, turned away from the crafts as a way of, in other words the crafts were no longer part of the our economic system, you know. The .. Had it not been for the colleges and universities, the schools that sort of took them in and adapted them, took them in and provided them with shelter and a place to work and nurture them during those years. Probably would have just died out and withered up and disappeared, other than what was needed in industry.

So you had, so you had, you found, so these people that possessed in many

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way, rather humble traditional skills. As head of a department and within a college art department and many of them, of course, they had to gain, they had to try to gain a little status, you know. So they were competing for space, for money, for prestige, for everything else where people paint, that had established painting programs, painting and sculpture and architecture and so one. So some of it sort of became a little silly and was pushed a little. There was a determination on the number of people who that they recognized as artist, you know. So they began making, myself included, started making a lot of silly little things, I call them silly, I mean they were art statements but they sort of came out of, there was no real tradition for doing a lot of this work, you know.

The only way you could stand, you could stand out as the head painting department with equal footing was that you were an artist of the caliber and you had shows and museums and you had articles, and books and catalogs. All the trappings that go along with it, you know. That are part of the, of selling art, selling yourself as an artist and selling art. Which had not been, was definitely not the tradition of the artist/craftsmen before. There again, that the whole, its, I see it as rather simple, but it would take me a day to try to get to the bottom of the way I feel about this.

JB: Do you think at RISD you had, you know sort of played into that?

JP: No, I think that some of these things, see RISD had no. When RISD hired Tage Frid in wood shop and they hired me and they hired Milfred, they had no idea, I don't think that they bargained for what they were getting in a way. It was just a, we were going and then we would teach introduction to wood, they would learn how to run a piece of wood through a planer and then they would learn how to make a frame out of it or do something like that. The whole of this, what we know of today is the American Art furniture movement. That just grew up during those years, ninety percent of the people that were working with, the teachers are the people that are working now, probably were students of Tage, you know.

As an example. Glass did not exist. When Norm Shulman came, when Norm Schulman came in 1965, I recall one of our first conversations, I said, "Gil Franklin said, you know, I want you come here, I want you to teach here, but do you know anything about glass?" and Norm said, "yeah, I know a little

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something about it, I've worked with Harvey Littleton out in Wisconsin," or something like that. And he said, "okay, I would like to you to come here start, take over our ceramic program, but one of the conditions is you have to start a glass program here." "Sure I'll start a glass program" said Norman. So he had been here a year or two, when it came time to deliver on it, start a glass program. Where were you going to do it, there was no space in there so, Gil Franklin said, "will \$1500 do it?" or something like that. Keep in mind, my annual of budget at time, when I started the program was \$600. So he said, "It's really not a lot of money," he said, "but if that's what you can give me, that's what we will work with." Well, Norman's very good at building equipment, building kilns and, you know, he, that was his. He was a real whiz when it came to equipment and stuff like that. So where do they do it?

Ken Honnibell had built a little, I don't know what it was, a small building or a little space in back, a little tool shed. So we got together, Norm, I say we got together, Norm got together with Ken and they decided to build a little, you know, steel building, frame building. They did all the work themselves. I was over there working with them several times, putting on roofing and working on that. And finally, we built a small building, about this size or something like that. That was, they didn't have anyone, Norm had blown a few little bubbles, which was pretty much the state-of-the-art at that time, in glass blowing.

So Harry Littleton said, "well I had this guy here is a graduate student here, Dale Chihuly, something like that, maybe you could get him to come in and do another year of graduate work." So Dale came there, but the department had been? Most people thought that Dale went in there and built all this with his hands. It was Norm Schulman and Ken, and had done this really. Dale just plugged into that and he didn't really, the whole thing was such a minimum level.

I remember, Harvey Littleton would come through once in while, he would always stop over in Rehoboth. They'd say, "Harvey, what are you doing?" and he'd say, "oh, you've got to see this glass stuff we've been doing, it's absolutely, it's amazing!" "So... you going to show me these little bubbles, again?" So he would take out these things and they looked like glass turds, whatever, and everyone was excited about them.

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They were getting these glass marbles out of John Mansfield, you know. That was pretty much it. It was the glass that came out during those years was very crude. People just said, "it's impossible, you can't, one person or you can not work as a studio glass blower, technically and physically it's not possible. You would have to have a crew, you'd have to have several people. A gaffer, you have to have all these people." Well, that all changed, that all grew, and developed. I must confess when I saw some of the first, the works that came out after ten years later, I was just amazed. What happened here, I mean, largely due to people, someone like Chihuly, you know, they just set certain standards, people had something to look up to and to pursue.

The American Glass Movement was a total, was phenomenal the way it happened and how fast this developed. I'm sure that other people could tell you much more about it. I'm speaking here as an observer, looking from the outside, and there has always been a tradition for collecting glass, art glass. A lot of collectors, they just tap right into this thing, plug right in.

I remember going down to the Renwick, down to the, where Michael Monroe was down there, a number of years ago. He, they were setting up the glass show at that time, I said, "Oh you show a lot of glass." and he said, "oh, yeah." There were certain things that he had to consider because these glass collectors are going to be here. He said, "we have an opening tomorrow evening," or something like that. "Three o'clock in the afternoon, these guys are going to be lining up out in the street." He said, "oh we've experienced fist fights in here," he said, "between these guys that want to buy stuff." It was totally outside of my experience. No one had ever punched anyone out to buy my stuff, you know. But that was wood had a, not the wood the glass had a real magic, its, you know. I don't know if people can look at glass or metal and understand. But glass is a total mystery, you know, you take and roll this stuff out and you sprinkle a little blue and green and whoosh you blow a bubble and the stuff starts whirling around and it's you know fantastic.

JB: Did you ever consider in your own work, just lying and saying that it was glass?

JP: Silver plated glass.(ha ha) Hardly would have made a hockey puck. No, that was, but that, so people entered glass, this is a long round about way of I don't know where the hell we were, but you, it's . I keep trying to get across

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this, when I tell people that, you know students, who would be talking to me or asking me questions. I tell them, "well you don't understand, back then there was nothing, it didn't," they would look at you and they would say, "oh yeah, wow, what were you saying?" They don't understand that when you were saying that there was nothing, it means that there was nothing. They say people weren't making a lot of money doing this. It means that they were not making any money. And you didn't know anyone, you didn't have any friends that were making any money, doing this, a lot of money doing it. There were very few shows, there were no outlets, no shows. That doesn't mean that there wasn't one on every street corner, that means that they weren't, they didn't exist.

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End of Tape 1 Side 2

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Tape 2, Side 1

JB: How did you balance your work in the studio, your career as an artist with your teaching?

JP: Well, how did I do that? I don't know. It's certainly not by, it was not the result of careful consideration, or sitting down thinking this through and thinking this was what I wanted to do. I think most of it just sort of do what comes naturally to you. I had been working as a designer for Reed and Barton, and when I left they were, I was very pleased the president came down a couple of days before I left and asked me if I would like to stage on as a consultant designer, and they would put me on a retainer, which I remained on for ten years. Oops, I blew it, what the hell were we talking about?

JB: How did you balance your....

JP: Yeah, yeah... So a keep going? Sure.

So what happened, at the same time I had been in to see the people at the Museum of Fine Arts, in Boston, and met a fellow by the name of Perry Rathbone, who was the president in there. I don't know, the sculptor, Charles something, the guy who makes these little movements, moving things, he had something, I don't know how the hell that worked out. But it doesn't really matter.

But I, at that time I moved over to the South Coast over to Duxbury, cause we wanted to be closer to the beach, I don't know how we did it. I was being paid, not an awful lot of money, but getting some money on this routine. I was getting a very small salary, at the museum school. I thought, I'll supplement my income, I'll make things and I'll try to sell it. I soon discovered, I was sort running myself a little ragged, I was working, there is a limit to how many hours a day you can work, it probably worked in that 12 hours a day, every day. But I loved it, it wasn't, people didn't really have to force me, I just realized at a certain point it became counter productive, you know.

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So, I, in my mind I sort of thinking of something like splitting my life into one-thirds, thirds. I thought why can't you have a certain number of hours to spend a third of your time teaching and in terms of hours. And I would spend a third of my time working for Reed and Barton. Now that enables me to get by, to feed the family, keep shoes on the kids feet, stuff like that. Now the last third, now the last third belongs to me, that was something that I decided at that point. I'm going to use the any damn, any way I please. I'm not going, I'm not going to spend my time knocking out silly little pins and earrings and things. Nothing silly about it, I mean, things I really didn't want to do because I knew I could sell them and make some money doing it. I'll go where ever the path leads, I'll follow it.

So that's what I did, looking back I think that's, I succeed doing that. I never, you recall at school, I never worked at school. I could never work in that environment, it's just. And also, I know when I get involved in what I'm doing, I didn't want to reach the point where the students were, I'd feel like the students were interfering with my work. In other words, people teach and they're so busy with their own work that students come and ask them a question, it's "get lost can't you see that I'm busy?" Sometime like, you know. I always felt very strongly that the student, I was being paid to be at the school, to be a teacher, that was my job, that's what I wanted to do.

Occasionally, I might roll out some stock, or do some things like that or use some equipment that I didn't have, but essentially, I kept it at home and I worked. I just, no one had to force me to do it, I just loved doing this work and I spent just many, many hours a week, and I worked Saturday, Sunday and summer, you know, summer vacations. Vacations that was great, that was more time to work, you know.

I think that in retrospect my family probably suffered a little, at least. I always thought it as being something I had to do. I was doing it for the commonwealth, however, I hardly ever sold any of that stuff. I realized that from, I wasn't kidding, I was really doing it because this was what I wanted to do, you know. But I still try, I kept, I tried to not, in other words, I tried keep my obligations, not to interfere, separate from it. So it meant working a lot of hours. And then there is one thing that you can't force upon other people, you can't teach them, that's, you have to want to do it. Especially, if you are doing something that's not, you know that you're never going to

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make much money, it's almost like a vocation. This is something you do and you don't ask a lot of questions, you just sort of do it.

I consider myself really very fortunate to have felt that way about my work, because most the people I know do, hate their work. If they don't hate it, they're looking forward to the day that they can retire or the day that they can devote all their time to playing golf or more time to it. I never did that, my only hobby was fishing, I go fishing once in a while. Other than that my good time was to go into my studio shop and work, you know.

So, fortunately again for me I had a supportive family, I mean, Karen was wonderful that way, she never, she supported me in all ways that were never questioned. The kids, I wasn't one of these people that had the kids in my shop all the time, come in here and help daddy, and I'll show you how to make such and stuff like that, make bracelets or something like that. They come in the shop and if they were there more than ten minutes I'd tell them to get lost, can't you see that I'm busy? Or something like that. Not by today's standards, the nicest way, you know, to be with your kids. You know, I don't think that I was mean about it, but I just, they grew up knowing that when I went in that shop, whether it was a converted garage or whatever it was, I went in there to work. I didn't go in there to fix bicycles or anything like that. Which I probably could have and should have done more of, but I didn't.

Most of my friends were that way, I mean, the people that I worked with, especially the group of people that I worked with in Rochester. They were, these were people that really worked. I think that's where my attitudes, my standards sort of was set.

Especially, I think everyone has someone that made a real impression on them in a certain time in their lives, in my case it was, not a mentor, he was a potter, painter, sculptor, whatever, named Franz Wilhelm. He had been at the Bauhaus and he went to California and he came back, he ended up at the School for American Craftsmen. We became very close friends, he was older than I by, you know, by 15-20 years or something like that, but we had an understanding. Franz was my teacher, in a way, oh I knew how to make things and do things, but when it came to thinking about what I was doing, he was, you know. Someone has to crit the teacher too, come in there and Franz

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could, he just had a wonderful combination of, he had been fed and brought up on the German philosophers and his grandmother was a philosopher. You know, he was always spouting poetry and had these folk sayings. But, at any rate, other people, I know people didn't like him at all, didn't think that highly of him. What I think it is really, that it is a time in your life, a time in your life when you're wide open, you're looking for something, and if you're lucky and you're walking down the street and the right person comes along and that's it. That's the defining moment, my moment, my time was becoming involved with that group of people in Rochester, that set my standards.

JB: A question that sort of ties in with this. When I was a graduate student, one of my finest memories of it was coming here, I guess next door, to the dinner parties, was sort from my view point, unified the department, but also exposed me to your studio. Even though you weren't obviously working in it, because it was a party, but none the less it sort of involved us all in your life as an artist. I just wondered what you think about that?

JP: Well, I'm very happy that you felt that way about it, again, that was, that just seemed to be the way that things worked out. We had parties that ended, we had more space than most people, so they had parties out here, and some of them were pretty good as I recall. They worked out well and there was always a lot of loud music, people were dancing and drinking lots of cheap wine.

I look back very fondly of that period, because I, it also tied into the times, Jonathan, the '60's, you know. The '70's actually, and what was going on in music and sort of people rebelling against a lot of things. Although I was older than the students, obviously, you know, somewhat older. I just seemed to, I just sort of, I felt very comfortable during those years. I mean, I say comfortable, you know, I seemed to enjoy it. I had good a time, I had fun doing it, hopefully some of the people learned something. It was just a, you know, it's life that just sort of tends to forms itself. It's not structured by a lot of things, you just sort of follow your nose, you know.

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JB: What affect did the graduates in your department have on the field?

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JP: Well, on the field or on me or school or in general?

JB: The field, the field of metalworking?

JP: I mean, the students that went out?

JB: Yes.

JP: Well, let me just address the two steps. Number one they had a... they certainly had an effect on me, because suddenly I found myself with people that were really serious about what they were doing, they were smart and they were clever, they were doing nice things, and I found it very challenging to be working with them and within this environment. Now what they did was come up and became, some of them went out and became teachers, established departments. Others became independent, artist/craftsmen, were working within their field. Some went into industry and others just sort of disappeared, I really don't know what happened to them. You keep contact with some of them, I still do keep in touch with some of the students, but I must say for many of them I really don't know what happened. It's in general I'd say that they managed to form a life, to, I'm not going to judge the degree of success they experienced, because I don't know. But they did so many different things.

Ron Nakamoto comes to mind, we're talking about who spend most of his time while he was in the graduate program, tinkering around with various, developed a little, small clever, electronic devises and things like that, and ended up going to California, well, and starting along with his wife computer company, developing computer software and voice, I don't know. A lot of these people were so much smarter than I was really. I didn't have a clue of how they were doing, but I always had the ability to get someone to come in and to do the things.

Like Tom Sawyer, painting the fence, or something, you'd get them, you'd rope them in and get them to do it, you know. Something like that. It was true of a lot of things. I never considered myself all that smart when it came to, I'm not a whiz with equipment, I never have been and I still don't know what the hell makes my car run other than put gas in it. Kick the tires once in a while, stuff like that. Fortunately, I was able to get other people involved,

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they knew how to do that stuff, they knew how to get the vats working and the electrical foil, you know. I knew how to do it, they could always get the, make better castings than I could. They get the investment to work properly and to get the vacuum pump to working, all that stuff.

Ideally what most of the people, I think a lot of the people, the graduate students, would look at their teacher, and they'd say, many of them, for very good reasons, reached the conclusion that this guy or woman or whoever she is has a pretty nice life, in a way. The guy comes in and he works, he's doing what he wants to do. He's done it, he's not getting rich, but he seems to live a fairly decent life and so on, that pretty good. I think I would like to buy into that. The problem was beyond the, we got into the '70's, into the late '70's, the jobs were, most of the places were, the jobs were filled. There just weren't that, you know, I've , I knew how fortunate, I had this job at RISD and there weren't.

There were jobs that paid people, that paid a lot better, but where you had a lot of other stuff to deal with. I always felt that I was one of the luckiest guys going, you know. Having this position, working with intelligent, you know, high quality students, that I could contribute something to their lives and they challenge me constantly.

I don't know what this has to do with what the graduate students did, but, I always felt the best, what you could do, you give people a certain amount of information. You could try to stimulate them and get them to think about the environment in which they were living and growing up in. Beyond that there wasn't that much more you could, you know. Most teachers loved to take credit for all the people that go out and succeed, are brilliantly successful in some ways. My honest opinion is that these people are going to do it more or less, in spite of you, with your help, without it, you know. You give them as much support as you can, you help them, you give them information. But they going to, that's ten percent, or whatever it is, 20 percent of the students are going to take care of themselves.

There is another ten, 25 percent of them in the program, that no amount of help or push or drive is going do any, you're not going to help anyway. You don't discover this right away, they all come in bright eyed and bushy tailed into a graduate program. It takes you a year probably to catch on to the fact

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that some of them are just not going to do it. By that time it's really too late to really, you can't kick them out so they go through the program. And then there are the others who just come in day one, they sit down and they start working and they start looking and searching and experimenting and doing things. Very often you don't, they're not necessarily bright, flashing, they're people that some of them come in and they just plug their way through it, they just work slowly. They take an inch at a time and they work their way up, they're, they just making, just continue to make improvements.

There is no way to really know what the hell is going to happen to these people. I always, but I always, I always thought for instance, that the people that went through the program in wood, were well off because, you could conceivably you could say the same thing about the metal program. And yet we were not, we were not quite as nuts and bolts as they were down in Tague's program. I mean that the people that came out of that program, the furniture, they really had valuable skills. They could go out and sell themselves, they could do kitchens, they could do interiors, they could do anything. There was a demand for that, those skills. Let's face it, there weren't that many people out wanted you to go out and make teapots or silver plate. And another problem with that pursuing this, I'm jumping around a little.

Another problem was with silversmith. One of the reasons why I kept looking for other, searching for other ways of expressing these traditional skills was that I don't care how you do it. At best, if you make, let's say you make a silver bowl or you make a silver teapot or something like that, it's going to be, even if you work practically for nothing, if you work for one third of what a plumber gets, the damn thing is going to be very expensive. Then you have to bring it down to a gallery and they are going to mark it up, something like that. I'm not saying that it's impossible, but I'm just saying that it was extremely difficult. So I choose, at a certain point, I'm just not going to deal with that. But what I will deal with, as a teacher, I will deal with the skills that are necessary for a person to do that. I wanted the students to gain certain basic metal smithing technology.

Knowledge of these things, because people, I'm using the term people, people look at something and they say, "well," you know, the student, someone will show you something that is this big or something like that, and they say, "yeah, I was going to make it this big, but I decided that I'd rather have it like

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this big.” Looking at what they were doing, you know that he couldn’t do it this big if his life depended on it, you know. Because it’s, you just entering a different realm. Most people that are working in metal today, that come out of these metal programs, they can’t handle a piece, they can’t control a piece of metal over two inches square or something like that.

I’m not belittling, and because there was not one there to teach them, very often. The teachers don’t know how to do it either. Learning how to make something, you know, keep yourself, from scratch, you start with a sheet of metal, you’re going to raise this up, end up, you’re going to make spouts and handles and hand made hinges, and all that. It’s just that you couldn’t dream up a more time consuming, cumbersome way of working if you tried.

Glass is a different, you know. I would just, I would absolutely turn green with envy, my toes to the top of my head and I would go up and see the amount of work these people could crank out. The kind of money that they could get for it, you know.

And potters, one of my friends was a potter. I would go down, I remember one, a certain experience. I remember going into the school on a Sunday morning in Rochester, I went over to do some work, and when I walked in I walked to the back way and there was a guy named Olein Russen, the potter. He was throwing some bowl shapes there, and I was there for four or five hours and during that time I had made half a hinge and then it didn’t work out right. So by the time I went home for lunch around one o’clock or something like that, I’d realized that I might as well have stayed in bed that morning, or something like that. Here Russen had the whole damn table was covered with these bowl forms he had made. Karen used to get mad, she said, “will you stop talking about these god damn potters all the time. If you feel that way about it, why don’t you start doing that and being a potter?” Or something like that, you know.

cut.

JB: What are you working on now?

JP: What am I working on now? Oh, I didn’t see that question. (ha ah) The answer is not much, the other answer is a lot in a way. I haven’t talked

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about, mentioned the fact that I had, I went through a period where I had a lot of physical problems. I had serious operations that left me, I don't like to say in a way, but almost an invalid for a couple of years. I really couldn't move my much, I couldn't do much. I spent three or four years just sitting in a chair. I couldn't, that is the reason I left RISD as early as I did. I just did not feel that I was capable of doing what I should do in there. There is no way the people could say.

I remember Gil Franklin saying, "well, the students don't really care, they just want what you have in your head, they don't care about what you do with it." But you're trying to show people, there is no way you pickup, you know, there is no one around, you're not going to ask a couple girls there to move the anvil, you go over and you do it, or something like that. So I was hurting all the time and I was miserable half the time. When you reach the point where more aware of your physical discomfort than you are of the subject you're involved with the students, then it's time to quit. But at any rate, I didn't work for probably a total of six or seven years. You might say I just stopped working. I kept making little drawings and sketches and cutting things out of paper. I also, oh I don't know whatever, I felt, I spent a lot of time feeling sorry for myself, I guess, too.

Then in 1983, we had moved to this house, I didn't have a shy, given up my studio, I was never going to work again. Then I took this, I built a three car garage and one, I'd say, one cars got to go, so it was now a two car garage with one car. I had to have a place to put my tools and equipment. Then it became, eventually, then I thought, I'm really going to have to do something. Hey, I can't move in this place, so it became a two car workshop and a one car garage, or what ever you want to call it. That's what I have right now.

Actually I think I went through a reasonably productive period there in the mid-80's late 80's. I didn't make that many pieces, but I spent a lot of time drawing, designing, which I still do. It's sort of a strange thing because I no longer feel the same compelling need to make things. It probably has a lot to do with the aging process. I just walk around, I had a super guilt feeling if went through a week and I hadn't made anything. I would go around, I would wake up in the middle of the night worrying about it, you know. Now I just don't really, I don't really care about that any more. So I make things, I make a half, most of the stuff I make out of paper, those things in back of

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you there, stuff like that. Then they sit there for ten years, I think that someday I'll get around making some of those. Usually I don't.

It's not very satisfying in terms of, and yet I find that, I say it's not, I found that when I showed at RISD here a number of years ago, I thought they wanted to show a couple of dozen pieces of silver or something like that. So, they sort of asked me, "do you have any drawings, do you have any, what's your working process?" I said, "well, I'll bring some in and show you." "Gees, those are interesting, do you have any more?" So I brought in more. I ended up there were 500-600 individual items in there. I'd saved stuff, paper models and drawings and so on and stuff. Paul Smith came up from New York, from the museum and said, "this would be interesting to get." It changed totally from being a show and I thought a small space or something like that. There's going to be different pieces, there's going to be some work done by some of the former grad students. Finally, they wanted to put all this stuff in there. Well the other problem was that no one else could do it. I was the only person who could ever make head or tails out of it.

But at any rate, that's when it really dawned on me that although I enjoyed doing it, I never took it, I'm just fooling around, you know. That's really what I would like to do. That's really what I like to do. There is not much of a market for fooling around, you know. It gives me a lot of pleasure. So I spend endless days and hours, cutting out, making things, constructing things out of paper that end up somewhere in a box in the attic or something like that. I draw a lot. I just spent a month or two months just working on notebooks, consolidating things, taking old notebooks and ripping out things and making up new notebooks out of it. I don't take them all, I think, well this is something, you do it, it's sort of a practical thing to do because when you, you know, you'd have 10,000 drawings what good are they if you can't find any of it, so. I threw out here in the last couple of months, I've thrown out, you know, ten big garbage bags full of all this stuff, this old junk, you know.

I don't know, I manage to keep busy, I've never been a good draftsman, but I like to draw, you know make drawings. I make some things, some of the things that I've made recently are totally different. I'm trying a machinist over here and machine some pieces. I don't know Jonathan, I don't, I try to keep, say busy, I don't know.

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JB: It doesn't sound like try is word, it just seems like you keep busy period.

JP: Yeah, yeah, I try, it's not, it doesn't always lead to anything substantial but, I don't know, again we do what we do.

Cut.

End of tape 2 Side 1