

A TEI Project

Interview of Gifford Phillips

Contents

1. Transcript

- 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (JUNE 14, 1979)
- 1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (JUNE 14, 1979)
- 1.3. TAPE NUMBER II, Side One (DECEMBER 14, 1979)
- 1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (DECEMBER 14, 1979)
- 1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (DECEMBER 17, 1979)
- 1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (DECEMBER 17, 1979)
- 1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (DECEMBER 17, 1979)
- 1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (DECEMBER 17, 1979)

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (JUNE 14, 1979)

GOODWIN:

Mr. Phillips, I'd like for us to discuss your family background.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

Can you tell me about your family history, please?

PHILLIPS:

Yes. I was born in Washington, D.C., in 1918, and—

GOODWIN:

What was the date, precisely?

PHILLIPS:

June 30, June 30. My father was one of two brothers, James Laughlin Phillips and Duncan Phillips, and they were both then in their early thirties, and they had come from a very well-to-do family. Their mother was a daughter of a founder of the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company. It was during the time of the war and my father had been exempted from the armed service and was working for the Red Cross and he developed the Spanish influenza, in the flu epidemic of 1918, and died when I was about a year old. My mother and father had been living in Washington. [Later] my mother was on a vacation in Florida and she met a man who was twenty-five years her senior, who'd been married twice

before, who although originally from Boston, Massachusetts, had as a young man moved to Denver, Colorado and had been involved in mining. So about a year later when she married Mr. Johnson—his name was Charles A. Johnson—we all moved to Denver, and actually I grew up in Colorado, although I went to school in the East, and college in the East, and frequently used to visit my uncle Duncan Phillips, because I was the only son of his only brother, and the two brothers had been extremely close. They'd both been at Yale University at the same time and even in fact had, I think, roomed together one or two years. And after they got out of college they both lived together in New York City for several years. This would have been somewhere around 1910, '12. My uncle was an editor for *Vanity Fair* magazine at the time and became quite a well-known art writer. This was really before he started to collect. Anyhow, I really, as I say, really grew up in the West, but from the time I was a small boy, probably five or six, old enough to travel by myself—of course in those days the train trip from Colorado back to the East was a two- or three-day affair—I used to visit Duncan and Marjorie, his wife, almost every year.

GOODWIN:

Christmas, or summer?

PHILLIPS:

Frequently, the early summer, early part of the summer, as I remember. I'm not too clear about that, but it must have been, because otherwise it would have interfered with school. Duncan had started to collect by this time. In fact, the twenties was probably his heaviest collecting period. He started off, really, with American art. He had great hopes for American art, and he'd start off with a number of the so-called Ash Can School, John Sloan and Robert Henri; and then he went in quite heavily for American impressionists, [Alden] Weir and Childe Hassam, and those were really the artists he started with. Then he, rather reluctantly, started collecting the French artists, but once he got into that, I think he recognized their superiority, and so by the early thirties he had a considerable collection of Braque, and Bonnard (a particular favorite), as well as Monet and Manet and a number of the earlier impressionists and post impressionists. But I really grew up in this atmosphere, at least to the extent of having a yearly visit, and I was always very close to my uncle and aunt; they were really like a second family.

GOODWIN:

Let's talk some more about Duncan Phillips. How do you account for his foresight?

PHILLIPS:

It's really hard to say. He became interested in it kind of progressively. He was editor of the literary magazine at Yale, and his principal interest really for a long time was more in writing and he was both a literary and an art critic and

then as I say became an editor of *Vanity Fair*, which at that time was a magazine that—it was edited then by George Jean Nathan and H.L. Mencken. It was a magazine that was probably a good deal like the *New Yorker*; it went in for good writing, both critical writing and literary writing, and covered quite a wide range. Duncan had always had some interest in art, but it simply evolved, and his taste became more adventurous as he went along. His original reaction to the Armory Show, for example, was that he disliked a number of works. He wrote in a number of his articles he didn't care too much for the cubist painting. He felt it was rather dehumanizing. It was somewhat the same reaction that many critics had to the abstract expressionists. I remember that term "they're dehumanized"—because they didn't seem to deal with experience and with people and with subjects. Duncan expressed this view. He didn't even care much for Cezanne at that time. But by about the mid-twenties his views were changing. He became a great deal more receptive to abstract art.

GOODWIN:

Was he travelling frequently to Europe?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, he travelled a great deal. Bought most of his art in Paris, I think, although some in New York. He acquired the most famous picture in the collection, Renoir's *Lunch of the Boatmen*, and he acquired that in about the mid-twenties. He paid what was then a record price of \$100,000 for it, which was considered an enormous price at that time, but of course it was already a very celebrated picture. He got it from Durand-Ruel in Paris. But he did most of his purchasing in New York. Then the Depression came along, and like everybody else he was quite hard hit; in fact, [he] really stopped collecting during that period and even felt it necessary to sell a certain number of pictures. Then, after the Depression, things picked up and I think he resumed. But the bulk of the collection came in the twenties and the very early thirties.

GOODWIN:

Did he enjoy being close to artists?

PHILLIPS:

Yes. Very much so. He had a long friendship with Bonnard. Bonnard, whenever he came to the United States, he always stayed with Duncan and Marjorie. He knew John Marin very well. He told one very funny story that on World War II D-Day, John Marin was visiting; Duncan was listening to the radio, the accounts of the Normandy landing, and was very, very excited about it. And he came into the other room and asked John Marin if he would like to come in and hear the news, and John Marin said, "I've never had anything to do with generals and I don't intend to start now." [laughter] And he was very friendly with Arthur Dove, to whom he became the artist's principal patron. He bought several Dove paintings every year as really a way of supporting and

patronizing Dove. And I can remember—oh, artists that are fairly obscure now—a fellow named Harold Weston, although he was president of an artists union group, and a very lively talker and quite a good painter. And I can remember Harold Weston visiting. They had a large house, and they ran it in those days almost like a small hotel. I mean there were constantly people visiting. Karl Knaths was an artist that he liked very much; I remember Karl Knaths frequently there. Gertrude Stein visited with them. Gertrude Stein could be very perverse, and she said to Duncan that she was very disappointed with the collection because it was so European and she said she'd expected to see American Indian art. [laughter] But whether she really meant that or not, or was just being perversely witty, Duncan was rather upset by it, I remember. [laughter]

GOODWIN:

Why was Duncan Phillips living in Washington?

PHILLIPS:

The family had come from Pittsburgh, and his mother, who'd been a Laughlin, married Major Phillips, who was a retired Civil War officer, and they both had health problems and they felt that the Washington climate would be less severe than Pittsburgh. I think both my father and Duncan really grew up in Pittsburgh, but they moved to Washington around 1908, or approximately around there, and built the house which is now the basis of the Phillips Gallery. It's an old brownstone Victorian house, a very large house with three stories. It's down on Massachusetts Avenue, not far from what's now an area where there are a lot of embassies. And then in the mid-fifties—no, actually it was in the sixties, they added on a new wing because the insurance rates were becoming exorbitant in the old wing because it's not fireproof, and so the more valuable pictures are actually now in the new wing.

GOODWIN:

Well, the Phillips Collection was the first museum of modern art in this country.

PHILLIPS:

It really was the first museum of modern art in this country. It opened and started before the New York Museum of Modern Art. I think the Phillips started in the mid-twenties and the Museum of Modern Art in the late-twenties, and so it was the first museum of modern art in the country. Of course on a very small scale, but nevertheless it is true.

GOODWIN:

What are some of the pictures you remember most vividly from your childhood visits?

PHILLIPS:

I remember the Renoir, of course, and there was a large Daumier that Duncan was very fond of called *The Uprising*. I don't know if you know that picture?

GOODWIN:

Yes.

PHILLIPS:

It's kind of a mob scene. It has a very strong—there's this one [man], as Duncan used to say, he was sort of half visionary and half fanatic, who is the leader, with his arm raised, and it creates this very strong diagonal across the picture with a mob scene in the background brushed in, sketched in. That picture was one of the largest paintings that Daumier painted, and it was always a great favorite of Duncan's. And then I remember there's a Manet, *Spanish Dancers*, an early Manet, in his Spanish period with lots of elegant darks and lights. I remember that picture as one of my favorites. Then I—they were already acquiring a number of the Bonnards, and I have always loved them. I think my current favorite is Matisse's *Studio*, which is a large picture from about 1917, an elegant picture with chocolate browns and light pinks and a very strong structure. Matisse was never cubist, but he was influenced by cubism in the pictures of around 1916 to '18 in that they had a very strong rectilinear structure and were quite flat, but very elegantly brushed. This is a wonderful picture. I am especially fond of it.

GOODWIN:

Are there certain pictures you didn't like at all, that bothered you?

PHILLIPS:

Well, as a child I didn't particularly like the abstract work, the Braques for example. I don't remember responding very much to them? the Klees I remember having difficulty with. But I don't remember really having any violent dislike. It was more of a puzzlement, not quite understanding what they were all about. They didn't conform to the kind of art that I was familiar with, and I was really puzzled by them. But I don't remember being deeply disturbed by them.

GOODWIN:

Did your uncle like to talk about art?

PHILLIPS:

Oh, yes, he was a wonderful talker. He was very verbal and had a much more romantic approach to art than I think is fashionable today. I think we're living in an almost anti-romantic period. But his approach was much more nineteenth century in that sense, very poetic. He was especially moved by color. He loved color. I think that was the thing that moved him the most. He had a very poetic response to color in paintings. I think it was a period where all art was seen as deriving from nature; even abstract art derived from nature because it was simply abstracted to a further stage, but behind all of this was nature, was

landscape, was still life. And Duncan, in a very poetic way, responded to the forms and the colors in the paintings, which were the same ones, I think, that he responded to in nature. But pictures spoke to him in a very personal sort of way. He had very personal feelings about them, and he could wax very eloquent in describing how he responded to the particular colors, or sometimes to the personalities—what the pictures meant to him. He was quite willing to go out on a limb in very private interpretations. And he did a lot of interesting things with hangings. For example he had two pictures of Saint Peter, one by Goya and one by El Greco, and he would always hang these pictures close together because they were such contrasting versions of Saint Peter. Greco saw him as a very ethereal person in ecstatic postures, with his hands folded, ascetic, emaciated. Goya saw him as a rugged fisherman, with gnarled hands and a weather-beaten face and homely features. This was the kind of thing that Duncan loved to point out. It was, I suppose you would say, a much more literary approach, one that even extended into abstract paintings; whereas the trend, especially in the post-war period, has been to see pictures in a very analytical, formalistic way, and the literary approach is quite out of fashion today. But he nevertheless did also respond very much to the formal elements in the picture, especially color. He loved [Mark] Rothko, for example, and started to collect Rothko in the early sixties.

GOODWIN:

I read that the Phillips Collection was the first American museum to acquire a Rothko.

PHILLIPS:

I'm quite sure that's the case. And they have five of them now. Currently there's a Rothko exhibition on, and there are two of their pictures there; but ordinarily they hang all five of them together in a room. Duncan always dramatized the effect. He had the lights shining on the Rothko and it was rather like going into a cathedral, with the stained glass and the color radiating, almost bombarding you. Actually Rothko didn't particularly like the hanging. He was very pleased that Duncan had been sufficiently interested to acquire a number of his pictures and Rothko was very pleased that they were all hanging together, because Rothko always felt that his pictures worked much better in groups. But he felt that they were over lit. He always preferred very soft lighting on his pictures so that they would vibrate in the dark. Duncan had very different tastes. I mean he loved the impressionists, he loved Cezanne, he loved Arthur Dove. He responded very strongly to color. So it's quite interesting that when it came to the abstract expressionists of the New York School it was Rothko that he was attracted to rather than [Jackson] Pollock or [Willem] de Kooning. And I think that's very consistent, again, with his taste and his approach.

GOODWIN:

How was Duncan Phillips regarded by his contemporaries and his peers?

PHILLIPS:

Well, he really was considered quite far out. Now of course, I get a big kick out of this, because the collection now is very acceptable and people go in and tell me how marvelous it is. In fact they will make some disparaging comparisons, comparing the kind of art that the Phillips [Collection] has with contemporary art, with abstract expressionism or minimal art. I always could chuckle at this because Duncan always considered himself an avant-gardist. And in the twenties and thirties, I can remember very well talking to people who'd been to the museum and [their] saying, "Well, isn't Duncan and some of his tastes a little extreme? Isn't this a terrible waste of money?" In fact my mother had heard one rumor that he was really crazy. Duncan was eccentric and he rather liked to cultivate this whole notion of eccentricity.

GOODWIN:

What were some of his idiosyncrasies?

PHILLIPS:

Well, he had this very wry sense of humor. He was a great baseball fan and used to go regularly to the games. He played baseball when he was younger. He had a postcard of an Egyptian head and he used to send suggestions to the manager; he'd say, "Take so-and-so out." He never signed it, but the suggestions always went on the postcard of the Egyptian head. So the team was—in the mid-thirties—was having some financial difficulties and they were looking for some additional investors, and, as Duncan describes this, a delegation of players came to see him (I guess some players and the front-office person, the general manager). Duncan describes them coming into the gallery and looking around and, sort of, you know, making twirling motions with their heads and rolling their eyes around. They came in to see Duncan and they were talking about the hard times that the Washington Senators had fallen on. Duncan sat there for about ten minutes and didn't say anything, and all of a sudden—he was a little man with a big head—he banged his fist down on the table and he said, "All right," he said, "I'll buy the team." [laughter] And he said that they were all a little bit taken aback by that. But he said, "There's one condition, I want to manage the team." [laughter] And they said, "Well, Mr. Phillips, I don't know if that's possible; you know we have a manager under contract." He said, "There's another condition. I'm a playing manager. My position is shortstop." [laughter] And he said with that they all got up and shook their heads and immediately terminated the conversation and went out. He was a real practical joker, you know. It was a funny part of his personality, and he kind of cultivated this. [laughter] I think he felt that people thought he was sort of eccentric anyway, so he might as well live out the role, [laughter] which he did. But to people who really understood and were sympathetic with

the art, well, then he was very serious. [laughter] But he was given to practical jokes. I remember another story: He hated department stores and always avoided them. Finally his wife took him to do some Christmas shopping, and it was very crowded. And so they were going home. He was loaded up with bundles, and his wife said, "Well, we've got a little more to do. We'll go up the escalator." I think all of the noise and everything bothered him; so he got on the escalator and he laid all the packages down, knelt on the escalator, put his hands up, and in a loud tone of voice said, "Hallelujah!" as the escalator went up. [laughter] There are numbers of stories about him. Although he was very Victorian in lots of ways, a rather formal personality, he was surprisingly free. It was probably the same kind of thing that enabled him to collect paintings. He was very independent.

GOODWIN:

Well, I'm fascinated by the phenomenon of the growth and popularization of modern art. And it's amazing to me that a very small number of people at an earlier time had some insight that allowed them to accept and love modern art.

PHILLIPS:

Right.

GOODWIN:

And I don't know how to explain it.

PHILLIPS:

And there were very few: There was my uncle; Chester Dale came later? Dr. [Albert C.] Barnes, who had made a lot of money in Argirol, that awful looking brown stuff that you put in your eyes, but it was very popular at that time. Barnes and my uncle never got along. Barnes was a very difficult man. Have you ever visited the Barnes Collection? It's marvelous. But a little bit like Joe Hirshhorn, he bought things in large numbers; whereas Duncan had a kind of jewel-box approach, every picture had to be perfectly hung, and he was very sensitive about the juxtaposition of pictures and the relationships, particularly visual relationships. Barnes would just hang them up, sort of up on the walls like he was hanging calendars, you know, or—

GOODWIN:

That's what I understand.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah.

GOODWIN:

It's still that way.

PHILLIPS:

It's still that way. You go in, and there's a fantastic Seurat and it's so high—it's a circus scene—you have to crane your neck and then underneath it he has a lot of little pictures, a lot of them by unknown American artists. It's all very

random, it's very random. It's kind of like an antique shop, you know, where everything is thrown together. But it has a fascination of its own, when you go in there and you look around and you say, "My goodness, look at that marvelous Cezanne way up there in that corner." But Duncan and Barnes they were so different temperamentally that you could understand how they never really hit it off very well. But there weren't more—I don't think there were more than a half-a-dozen modern collectors in the whole country in the twenties and thirties. A very small number. And it also involved an interest in European art. I think we have to remember that in those days this country was a lot more cut off culturally from Europe. Before jet communication, before television, before electronic communication, Paris and France and all those things were far away. I mean, they were way across the ocean and seven days on the boat to get there, and I think that had something to do with it. There were a number of American collectors who bought old master art, but not modern art. It's difficult to say why some people got interested in this. As I say, I think Duncan really started off with kind of a commitment to American art, which he retained all of his life, but the interest in American art led him then to explore contemporary art in Paris. And he used to go to Paris a lot, and I think that's how it developed. But it's hard to say, really.

GOODWIN:

Is it possible to determine specifically what impact your uncle had on your own art interest?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I'm sure a great deal. I think my interest was best described as latent. I took a few art history courses in college. I went to Stanford for two years and to Yale for two years, and I took art history courses at both universities. But it wasn't my major interest; it was a kind of peripheral interest, and I never thought about being a collector. When Joann and I were married in the early fifties, we started visiting some of the galleries really just to buy some pictures for the house. The first picture we bought was from the [Felix] Landau Gallery, and it was a rather conventional still life by an artist by the name of Keith Finch. A nice picture, but it would look quite academic today. And then, later on, somebody had mentioned that they had interesting work at the Paul Kantor Gallery.

GOODWIN:

I want to save this—

PHILLIPS:

Save this discussion for later on.

GOODWIN:

—discussion for a little later, right. I want to go back to your childhood.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I'm getting a little ahead of the story.

GOODWIN:

Right. You grew up in Colorado.

PHILLIPS:

Grew up in Colorado. We lived in Denver until I was about ten, and then we moved to the country. My stepfather was then about sixty and was semi-retired. My mother was twenty-five years younger. Then I had a half brother who was a Johnson, who was three and a half years younger. And they were interested in their weekend house in the foothills of Denver, the foothills of the mountains south of Denver, about thirty miles south of Denver. It's foothills country with rocky hills and scrub oak and pines and marvelous views. They became so enamored with this setting that the house grew and grew, and they had a number of local artisans who worked on it, stonecutters. It was a sort of a nondescript architecture; it's kind of a hunting lodge, but it has some Tudor features—I'll show you a couple of pictures of it so you'll have an idea. But it grew and grew, and it was on top of the hill and it had an almost castlelike feeling. And finally they decided they would simply move out there. So I grew up in this house, which was really quite isolated. Neither of my parents had an interest in art. They (that is my mother and my stepfather) had paintings around, but they were all pretty bad. They had other art objects. My stepfather had bought a suit of armor and a number of spears. They had a few Italian antique pieces, Italian antique furniture, but it was a very romantic house to grow up in. And we lived out there in isolation. We used to drive in to school in the morning, into Denver, and I always arrived about an hour late [laughter] and so did my brother. As I said, my father was semi-retired, and the Colorado winters were fairly severe, so we used to usually travel for about two or three months in the winter, and so my schooling was very broken up. We'd have two or three months of the year where we would either go to schools in Florida or just not have any schooling at all.

GOODWIN:

Where were you travelling?

PHILLIPS:

We travelled—we went to Florida mainly, but also several times to Europe. My stepfather was very enamored with the island of Madeira, which is a small island just on the mouth of the Mediterranean, off the coast of Africa. He had English friends in Madeira, so we used to go to Madeira for several months. We did this several times, and in those instances my brother and I had a nurse-governess who went along with us and would tutor us so we wouldn't get too far behind, although it was very spotty. But it was a life with a good bit of isolation. We didn't really have too many friends because life was very broken up. But it was a life where we did a great deal of walking and exploring of the

countryside, and we had our favorite caves and places that we used to go to. It was very much of a country life. But then, at fourteen, I went off to boarding school in the East, where I was not particularly happy.

GOODWIN:

What school did you attend?

PHILLIPS:

Hill School, which was a traditional school in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, which is an ugly, very old, ugly town. There is some kind of a manufacturing plant there. But we used to sing songs about "our city on the hill," which is the anthem, and our city on the hill was in the pre-smog days. I guess it was really smoke, but smoke from this plant used to drift up to our city on the hill. It was very dreary, although quite a good school academically; it was a very dreary atmosphere, and I never liked it. Finally I transferred to a school in Colorado, another boarding school, which was known as the Fountain Valley School, which was outside of Colorado Springs, where I was a good deal happier. During this period, while my brother and I were away at boarding school, we were in Colorado in the summers.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (JUNE 14, 1979)

GOODWIN:

You're describing your secondary school education.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes.

GOODWIN:

Were there certain subjects you enjoyed in school?

PHILLIPS:

My principal interest was in English. I used to like to write, and wrote some for the school magazines. I took one art course at the Fountain Valley School under Boardman Robinson. He is quite a well-known painter. He was a charming man but not a very good teacher. He was rather impatient. We used to do still lifes and things like that and he was very much kind of by the book, you know. He used the grid method, and we stared it up here. Even though he'd been a great cartoonist—he was a very stimulating man, although, as I say, not really a good teacher. But I had a great English teacher at Fountain Valley who went on to teach at college—he left Fountain Valley and taught at—I think it was Bowdoin College in New England. He was just superb, and the small classes were wonderful. At the same time, I found many aspects of boarding school dreary and cut off from other aspects of life and I had very mixed feelings about it, but I think I got a very good education there. But at the time I really wasn't very happy or very enthusiastic about it.

GOODWIN:

Were you thinking of becoming a writer?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I was thinking of being a writer, or I had some notion, some vague notion then, of perhaps going into book publishing, which is something that had interested me, although none of these ideas were terribly well formulated.

GOODWIN:

How did you happen to go to Stanford?

PHILLIPS:

I went to Stanford primarily because I had had this bad experience with an eastern boarding school. My image of the East was of a rather dreary, rather formal sort of place, and I thought that Stanford would be kind of livelier, closer to the cultural milieu that I'd been familiar with growing up in Colorado, and to some extent that was true. I really liked it in lots of ways, interestingly enough, I was dissatisfied with the English department. I was going to major in English and I was dissatisfied with the English department there. This was in the late thirties at Stanford, and the English department was comparatively weak. Stanford was very strong at that time in engineering and math and psychology, and not so strong in the so-called humanities.

GOODWIN:

It's still that way.

PHILLIPS:

Is it still that way?

GOODWIN:

Well, it seems lopsided, particularly strong in the sciences and engineering.

PHILLIPS:

Still that way? But it certainly was at that time. I mean, there were a few good English teachers, but I also had some bad ones. Also, there were very few boys who took English. It was sort of considered something more appropriate for girl students, and I would get to the point where I would feel a little bit sensitive about going to classes where there would be two boys and twenty girls. It was kind of a variety of things, but anyway—although I was quite happy in the environment, which I in many ways liked. It was very free, and the climate was marvelous. I can remember some wonderful beach picnics and all that aspect. The social life I enjoyed, but I didn't feel, particularly after having gone to this very good private school and really had this awfully good teacher, I was disappointed at what I got at Stanford. It didn't seem to be in the fields that really interested me the most, so I transferred to Yale. I got back to Yale and I had to go back a year because I didn't have the right requisites for an English major. They demanded a tremendous amount of poetry. You had to take courses, starting with Chaucer and going on down from Milton, I mean a whole

course list, and I have to confess that I got into that and really didn't like that very much either, because that wasn't really what interested me. My interest was much more in contemporary, or at least nineteenth-century literature. But that was really the reason that I transferred.

GOODWIN:

Were you involved in any literary activities outside of your coursework?

PHILLIPS:

No, no. At Stanford I was invited to become a special student in writing. This was an outgrowth of the English course that I had taken, I didn't have any regular classes but just wrote and met with the teacher. And that was quite interesting. I did primarily book reviews and book commentaries and did a lot of that kind of writing, but that really was all. I didn't do any writing for any of the school publications at that time.

GOODWIN:

What about politics?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I started to become interested in politics really in my last year or two at Yale. I had some good teachers. I took a course from [Alfred] Whitney Griswold, who subsequently became the president of Yale, and he was a very stimulating teacher and was an ardent New Dealer. This was a course really on politics. I became quite excited by the whole New Deal and the Roosevelt administration and decided that I was quite sympathetic with this, even though my family was Republican. I suppose there was an element of rebelliousness going on there, but it was really about that time that I started to become interested in politics.

GOODWIN:

Was there any specific catalyst that led to this?

PHILLIPS:

I can't really think that there was. It seemed to be more of a gradually developing thing. Of course I had a couple of years in the army and I didn't really do very much about it until about the mid-forties in Colorado, and then I started to become active.

GOODWIN:

When were you in the army?

PHILLIPS:

I was in the army from, let's see, it was about '41, early '41 to late '42, about two years [actually 1942-43], It was a very inconsequential period in my life, really.

GOODWIN:

Where were you?

PHILLIPS:

I was in the continental United States. I had flat feet. I don't think they make so much nut of flat feet anymore, but it disqualified me from any of the officer-training programs, I was put on the limited service, in the Quartermaster Corps, and ended up sort of doing very dull, uneventful things at various camps around the United States. I finally got hepatitis, and so in late '42 I got a medical discharge after I had been in the hospital for three months. So that was the end of an inglorious career. It was an interesting experience, socially. I was in a company at Fort Warren, Cheyenne, Wyoming, where about half the company were illiterate. They were illiterate and they were from the Appalachians. It was an incredible experience because I had never had any idea that people like this really existed. I mean I heard about it, but it was something else coming face-to-face with it. One time we were lined up at five o'clock in the morning—we always got up when it was still dark—in company formation. I remember the captain saying all of those who signed up to take the basic reading course fall out, and about half the company fell out. I was just astonished to know that they didn't even know how to read. It was just incredible. The army felt that they could train them, I guess, and bring them up to a certain adequate level. They would sit around and swap yarns and sing these country songs Country music at that time wasn't particularly popular. This is still in the era of romantic ballads.

GOODWIN:

It was really country music.

PHILLIPS:

They were really twanging with the guitars, and I would awaken every morning to several of these guitar players and w-r-a-n-g, w-r-a-n-g, w-r-a-n-g. The songs were always very lugubrious and morose. But it was an interesting experience socially. Intellectually I don't think that I got very much out of it.

GOODWIN:

Did you ever feel disadvantaged, in some sense, by your background?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I think so. I think so to the extent that both my brother and I grew up feeling we had lived this rather isolated life, and that socially we were kind of underdeveloped, because we had spent so much of our life with adults. We had sort of missed a community life because we had gone right from this isolation of living in the country to boarding school, and we really hadn't had the experience of living in a community, and I think that in that sense that we did feel kind of disadvantaged. And my brother reacted to it by getting married very early. He was only twenty-two or twenty-three, and living this really very, I suppose, very middle-class kind of life. He was really reacting very strongly; and while I had some of these same feelings, I didn't seem to be motivated

exactly in that direction. But I think you can say that there was some feeling of being disadvantaged.

GOODWIN:

Did you feel any particular responsibility, or, you know, did you have any social concern as a result of your upbringing?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I think so. I think so, very definitely, and I had the feeling when I got back to Yale, for example, that a lot of these boys had lived this very privileged life and felt that they were special. They seemed to be so untouched by world problems. They lived in this very insulated life where they were just interested in their own kind of small social activities and position and sort of a society of manners, very much, at that time. I remember I reacted quite negatively to this, feeling that this rather privileged group who had fine educations and so forth should have more social interests and take more interest in what was going on outside of their own kind of very narrow circle of activities. I had some feeling that this was something that I wanted to do, that I didn't want to just concern myself with my own kind of small world and small social circle and a kind of privileged position. I think it really was a motivating force with me, and it started, I think, as an adverse reaction, especially to my Yale experience. That was a factor, I think, in some of the things I did later on and led me into other things.

GOODWIN:

While you were a Yale student, were you aware of places like the Museum of Modern Art?

PHILLIPS:

Oh, yes. I used to visit the Museum of Modern Art, not frequently, but every so often. I remember seeing a Miro show there and several others. Because of my experience with the Phillips, there was always some interest there, some interest. I mean it wasn't a passionate interest yet, but certainly some interest. And I used to go to galleries occasionally, but not often.

GOODWIN:

Of course, Yale has an art gallery.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. At the time I was there it wasn't a very good one. Most of the good bequests came later; the Katherine Drier bequest came later. It didn't have too much when I was there. It wasn't really all that interesting.

GOODWIN:

The [John] Trumbulls.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes. That's right. That's the truth, that's the truth. But I used to love to go down to New York. I was a great jazz fan at that time, and we used to go to

Harlem (in those days it was safe to go to Harlem). And we used to go down to the Village. I used to go to New York practically every weekend, which I just loved. I loved that proximity. But the art interest was still rather secondary, rather latent really, and hadn't developed yet.

GOODWIN:

What did you do following your graduation?

PHILLIPS:

Almost immediately I was drafted. I think I had one summer in Colorado, the summer I worked for a newspaper. I worked as a cub reporter on the *Denver Post* for one summer. No, I guess it was the summer before the summer I was drafted. The summer I was drafted I didn't do much of anything and then was drafted.

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

Because, as I said, I couldn't qualify for any of the officer's programs, but the draft was willing to take me. [laughter] I probably could have gotten a medical exemption. My feet were—they measured flat feet in three [ways]: first degree, second degree, and third degree; and I had one foot that's first degree and one foot that's third degree, and it's possible that I could have gotten a medical exemption altogether. I wasn't an enthusiastic soldier by any means, but I didn't feel quite right about trying to get that sort of exemption. So I sort of went ahead and did it and went in on limited service. But I had to take the same—the training program, the basic training was just the same for general and limited service; so it was fairly arduous for me, the long hikes, and. I was usually sort of limp inn by the time I got to the end of it. I jog now and play tennis, and my feet never really bothered me that much, [laughter] If I have to stand in line for a long time that's when I start to feel it. My feet really start to ache.

GOODWIN:

Did you get back into the newspaper business?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I did. I acquired a weekly newspaper in Golden, Colorado, which is best known as where the Coors beer plant is. It was called the *Jefferson County Republican*. I was still a registered Republican at that period, but growing increasingly dissatisfied with the Republican party's views. But we dealt mainly with local issues, and I used to write editorials. Then I acquired another paper (that was in another small town around there) and merged the two of them. And I ran these papers for about six or seven years and really enjoyed it a lot.

GOODWIN:

What was the name of it?

PHILLIPS:

The other was called the *East Jefferson Sentinel*, and I merged the two of them into the *Jefferson Sentinel*. They were weeklies, and of course, like all weekly newspapers, there's a lot of gossip. But I got a very good, managed to get ahold of a real crusading editor, and he went after the corruption in the local water company. We uncovered quite a bit of hanky-panky. The water officials were also part of the political apparatus. The bankers, the water officials and the—they weren't the county supervisors. What were they called? It amounted to the same thing as what would be a county supervisor. They were all interlocking. Water was very scarce, but all of the favorites, all of the political favorites, had no trouble getting water and, in fact, had water mains built up to their houses. But there were other people who applied and they couldn't get any water at all. So we did a series of articles, and I was eventually sued for libel for one of these, but we won the suit. We turned them into good, lively papers. I tended to tire of the local issues after a while. I used to have to go out every—I joined the Kiwanis Club so I wouldn't be thought of as an outsider. I lived in Denver and everybody said, "You know, we expect our publisher to live out here." I said, "I'm not going to move." And they said, "Well, you better join the Kiwanis Club then, the Golden Kiwanis Club." So I joined the Kiwanis Club and used to go out there for their weekly meetings. [laughter]

GOODWIN:

There wasn't any art news?

PHILLIPS:

No art news, none whatsoever. None whatsoever. Nothing to do with art at all. But I look back on it as kind of a lively period and one that I really enjoyed a lot. I changed party registrations in about the mid-forties and became quite active in a number of congressional campaigns in Colorado and was active in a number of civil rights groups. . At that time there was a move on to deprive Japanese-Americans of their property because of the alien thing. This is in 1944 and the war with Japan was still going on. And I was very active lobbying against this, and knew several legislators. And we finally defeated it by about two votes in the senate. It came that close to passage. It was really a horrendous measure. It was based on the California act. It didn't provide for internment camps, but it dispossessed all of the Japanese living in Colorado of their property.

GOODWIN:

I can't imagine there were very many.

PHILLIPS:

Well, more than you would think.

GOODWIN:

Really?

PHILLIPS:

Yes. More than you would think. There were a number of truck farmers who lived in eastern Colorado around Greeley and Fort Collins and areas like that. But that was a big [issue] and very controversial. And those, and then active, as I say, in a number of congressional campaigns and legislative campaigns and that kind of thing. But it fitted well with my writing interests and in of us who objected to that, you know, were considered very radical, if you can imagine, since it would be a rather elementary civil rights thing now. But the war was still going on and there was a great deal of phobia about the Japanese.

GOODWIN:

Were you in the ACLU?

PHILLIPS:

No, I wasn't at that time. Later, subsequently, I was very active in Southern California in the ACLU, but I was in the Urban League. There was a group called the Denver Unity Council, which was this group made up of various ethnic and religious groups, and I was on the executive board of that group. And the Denver Urban League fact I continued that combination, even with the magazine.

GOODWIN:

When did you come to California to live?

PHILLIPS:

1949.

GOODWIN:

And what prompted the move?

PHILLIPS:

Well, you'll never believe this, but an uncle of a very close friend of mine from Denver had done wartime service and was stationed in California and his wife's best friend was Dolly Roach, who was Hal Roach Jr's wife, and they were looking for investors in the Hal Roach Studios (this was in the late forties) which was interested in going into television. They had had quite a large studio. You'll remember that they used to make shorts; they did the Laurel and Hardy pictures. They did—

GOODWIN:

Our Gang.

PHILLIPS:

The *Our Gangs*; but in the postwar period, with the emergence of the double features and less interest in short subjects, they had this big studio and it was underutilized. They were really the first of the big studios to go into television. It was not. very large, but it was a good-sized studio—to explore the possibility of television films. And I became interested in this and decided to involve myself in it as an investor, and also get into the production side of it. And I made several visits to California before I actually moved. And when I moved

out here we didn't go into the deal with the Roaches because it involved investing more money than I wanted to invest in something I really didn't know anything about, instead I set up our own production company, which was on a very modest scale.

GOODWIN:

What was it called?

PHILLIPS:

It was called The Tee Vee Company. And we ended up doing some stories that were patterned after the O. Henry short stories, that only ran fifteen minutes, and we sold this—and I remember I was so pleased—we sold it to Gaines Dog Food. At that time, you sold, instead of to a network, you sold to an advertising sponsor; they were using the radio pattern. We sold them to Gaines Dog Food, who bought them for the West Coast and that enabled us to get back our cost of production, so we then made another series, and we ended up making about five or six series of these, and never really made any money on them, but always got back enough to make another series, and then we syndicated them, and made a little money on reruns. But after about five years of this it didn't seem to be getting anywhere. The networks were starting to play a bigger role, and the bigger studios were getting into it, and it would have involved, at that point, taking larger financial risks than I really wanted to take, so I got out of it. In the meantime, I had started the magazine.

GOODWIN:

What year? *Frontier* magazine?

PHILLIPS:

I started *Frontier* in 1950.

GOODWIN:

You started from scratch?

PHILLIPS:

We started from scratch. I think I carried on with the television until about '54, and then terminated the company about then. Oh, I omitted to say that I published a magazine called *Rocky Mountain Life*, which was a kind of state magazine in Colorado, and the editor of *Rocky Mountain Life* was a fellow that had been a newscaster at a radio station that I had an interest in, and he'd been a reporter for the *Denver Post* and for a paper in Montana. But he was always very politically oriented, and so when I got out here, I knew Carey McWilliams. Do you know who Carey McWilliams is? I met Carey McWilliams in Colorado. I think he came to talk to the Denver Unity Council; you know, we had an annual banquet. As a result of conversations with Carey McWilliams, I developed the notion that there was a real need out here for a liberal politically oriented monthly, because at that time the *Los Angeles Times*, which was then a very conservative, quite reactionary paper, and the Hearst

papers, of course, absolutely dominated the Southern California area. There was one Democratic paper called the *Daily News*; it was a tabloid and it was a rather spotty operation. They couldn't go into any of the issues in real depth. So there was a real news vacuum, kind of interpretive news vacuum. And as really a result of these conversations with Carey, I decided to take a flyer at this and I persuaded our editor, who was a fellow by the name of Phil Kerby, who, subsequently, after *Frontier* merged with the *Nation*, went on to work for the *Los Angeles Times*, where he still works and has done very well down there, in fact, won a Pulitzer prize for his editorial writing. But I persuaded Phil to leave the *Rocky Mountain Life*, and come out and become the editor of this magazine. I had a lot of confidence in his abilities and that was one reason that I was, you know, willing to do this, because I had a person who I was convinced would be a good editor, and he turned out to be a very good one. And we spent about six months talking to various groups around town; you know, some of the organized minorities, some of the labor unions, some of the Democratic party groups, and the civil liberties groups. We got all of their lists and support and so forth, and so we laid a pretty good foundation for it, and started publication in the fifties and it ran to 19—well, we were in our eighteenth year of publication when we merged with *Nation*, and I became associate publisher of the *Nation* for seven years, until about, let's see, until about the early seventies, I think I quit.

GOODWIN:

What was the circulation of *Frontier*?

PHILLIPS:

Frontier never had a big circulation. It never got up to more than about eight or ten thousand. But we did surveys and we found that we averaged about five or six readers a copy. So you might say we had forty or fifty thousand readers, and they were really loyal. We did some studies, and it reached a lot of the intellectuals and the people who were active in politics and in the universities and the arts out here. And we had writers—most of our writers were either university people or they were reporters for the big dailies, who often wrote for us under a pseudonym, because they were writing things that they didn't want their bosses on the regular newspapers to see. But we had a really fine backlog of writers. Because we weren't really able to pay very much for research, we had to rely rather heavily on people who already were quite knowledgeable in their fields. In other words, we'd get reporters who had done research on stories for their papers, or professors who were knowledgeable in their fields. We broke the blacklisting story in Hollywood, and we had a very good writer—she was actually Phil Kerby's wife, Betty Kerby. She had been a researcher for *Time* and *Life*, and she was a Columbia University graduate. She worked on this story for six months. This was in the mid-fifties, and at that time, the

studios were saying that there wasn't any blacklist. They were stoutly maintaining that it was all fiction; there was no blacklist. And she went around and interviewed not only the writers and directors who had been blacklisted, but some studio executives who told her, oh yes, there was a blacklist, and she identified what the blacklist was. It came essentially from the American Legion—the local Legion post kept a list of actors and writers and so forth that had been associated with so-called communist-leaning groups. This list actually was replicated and all the studios had it. When we published this story we were all on pins and needles, but it was very well documented, and we were expecting lawsuits and so forth. The only threatened lawsuit we had was one we never expected. On the front page of the magazine we had a picture of the Oscar, with a black mark running through it, and the Academy of Motion Picture [Arts and Sciences] called us up and said they were going to sue us for libel. And we talked to our attorney, who was Bob [Robert W.] Kenny, who was a former [California] attorney general, later became a judge, and he said, "You have nothing to worry about." He said, "It's obviously a political cartoon, and you have a perfect license." I mean Kenny had one conversation with the academy's attorney and they dropped the suit, so it never came to court. There was no publicity on this story in the local papers; the *Los Angeles Times* completely ignored it. But the *New York Times* picked it up, and they carried a two-column story on it in their Sunday Arts and Leisure Section, and that was very gratifying to us. And then it also stimulated the study of the Fund for the Republic of the Center [for the Study of Democratic Institutions] in Santa Barbara, which did a study of blacklisting. It filled up several volumes, but it was really based on our story. So that was one of the interesting things that we did. Of course the whole civil liberties issue received much attention—though this wasn't what we had in mind when we started out. I mean, I think my original conception of it was that we would deal with western issues—conservation and water problems, and so forth, population problems. But as it worked out, the civil liberties issues in the fifties were so intense that they became our main focus of interest.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER II, Side One (DECEMBER 14, 1979)

GOODWIN:

When we were together in June, we discussed Mr. Phillips's family background and education, his business activities, and we led up to the time of his coming to Southern California, which was in 1949, I believe.

PHILLIPS:

That's correct.

GOODWIN:

Today we're going to discuss the building of the Phillips Collection, and how it has evolved over the years. Is it appropriate to mention Joann at this point?

PHILLIPS:

Absolutely. We were married in 1953, and she shared my incipient interest in art. I'd have to say it was more incipient at this juncture than actual, because it really hadn't been actualized. There hadn't been very much opportunity for it to have been actualized, except perhaps in a very academic sense of having seen exhibitions and read art books; but as a collector, I had been moving around too much, really, to do very much, and didn't really live in a permanent home for any length of time until 1953, when we moved into a large house on La Mesa Drive.

GOODWIN:

How did you meet Mrs. Phillips?

PHILLIPS:

I was active in Democratic politics at that time and met her, as I remember, first at a party. It seemed to me it was in Santa Barbara. She had gone to college at UC Santa Barbara and had graduated, and it seemed to me that it was at a fundraising benefit for some candidate. How I happened to be in Santa Barbara, I can't really remember, but that was my recollection of the first time that I met her. Then we saw one another subsequently over the next year and were married in February 1954—no, excuse me, '53.

GOODWIN:

What was the extent of her art interest before your marriage?

GOODWIN:

She had attended Chouinard's [Art School] and had actually taken drawing and painting courses. In a sense I think hers was perhaps in some ways more developed than mine was, except I did have the background of [Duncan] Phillips. But my interest had been really quite dormant. I'd been involved in other things—in publishing, in politics, and in business—and art had been really up to that time a very secondary thing with me. So we almost started from scratch. I don't think we had any idea originally of building a collection; we had a large house with a lot of wall space to fill up. We visited a home of some friends who lived in the Silver Lake district—I can't think of their names; it'll come back to me in a minute—but they had a number of rather small but nice paintings they had acquired at the Felix Landau Gallery and the Paul Kantor Gallery (this was in 1954). We were both quite taken with these pictures, and they were very inexpensive at that time, and we liked some of the artists. This led us to visit both of these galleries and explore in more detail the artists that they had, and sooner or later, why, we made our first purchase, which I remember I think was a gouache by Ynez Johnston called *Spanish Steps*. Ynez Johnston's are pictures essentially soft or architectural fantasies. At

that time she painted in a very delicate, almost embroidery-like fashion. We purchased this picture from the Kantor Gallery, and shortly after that we heard about the abstract expressionist movement in the East. I've forgotten, I think Paul Kantor told us about it; in fact I think he was really the first person who introduced us to this school or movement. And we bought a book by Thomas [R.] Hess, which is I think simply called *Abstract Art*; it was I think the first book on the New York School that was ever published, and it came out in the early fifties. Two artists that had been mentioned in the book were Robert Motherwell and William Baziotes, and of all places, we went to the Los Angeles County Fair at Pomona, and it was that year they had an art exhibition, an historical exhibition of American painting, which had been curated by Millard Sheets. And Sheets is not an artist who was really interested in abstract art, but kind of as an afterthought, as almost an appendage to the exhibition, there was a little room with about four or five current New York School artists. There was a [Hans] Hofmann, and there was a Motherwell, and there was a Baziotes, and there were one or two others; and we were just fascinated. So we bought the Motherwell and the Baziotes out of the show. The Motherwell is called the *Black Still Life*; it's a painting he painted in 1948. It features a kind of almost sinister-looking plantlike shapes, which some interpreters have construed as male and female, one of them being more jagged and the other being softer and rounder, and they also bear quite a bit of resemblance to the lobe shapes of Motherwell's famous *Elegy of the Spanish Republic* series. The Baziotes is called *Eclipse*, and it has this rather ghostlike figure with kind of a moon shape up above, from which I guess the title derives. But these were really the first two contemporary abstract expressionist pictures that we acquired.

GOODWIN:

Where did you put them?

PHILLIPS:

By this time we had moved into our house on La Mesa, we moved in there in 1954, and I think the Motherwell went into the dining room, as I remember, and I think the Baziotes in the living room. Then we started to become very interested in the work of Richard Diebenkorn. Paul and Jo [Josephine] Kantor were great Diebenkorn enthusiasts—this was in 1954—and I think they were the only gallery in the United States at that time that was showing his work, and the only collector that I know who had purchased one at that time was Vincent Price, who had a very nice picture from the Berkeley series that was painted, I would imagine, in the early fifties. Vincent Price was at that time head of the UCLA Art Council, and Fred [Frederick] Wight was the director of the gallery, and we got to know Fred very well and through him met Vincent Price, and Vincent Price also put us on to Diebenkorn. The net result is that we purchased

two Diebenkorns from the Paul Kantor Gallery in 1954, one called *The Beach Town* (it's actually called I think *Urbana*, with a number after it; it's a picture he did at the University of Illinois), and the other one is *Berkeley*, which is the first of the Berkeley series. And they're both abstract expressionist pictures with some landscape reference, but totally abstract. One of the pictures has some calligraphy in it, almost de Kooning type of biomorphic or anthropomorphic kind of calligraphy, but essentially the works as a whole compose themselves as kind of abstract landscapes, although they are essentially, really totally abstract pictures. We hung these in the house, and they were the butt of many philistine comments. They were not at all popular, in fact, outside of the Kantors and Vincent Price, I can't say anybody liked them. It's incredible now to think of that, but it's true.

GOODWIN:

Do you know how Paul Kantor became aware of Diebenkorn's work?

PHILLIPS:

I'm not sure. His wife, Jo Kantor, who was his then wife (he has been subsequently divorced), was the one I think of the two who was especially interested in Diebenkorn. I think that the first time they saw [his work]—James Byrnes, who was then the curator of contemporary art at the County Museum, put on an exhibition in the early fifties that contained one of the Diebenkorn pictures painted in Albuquerque. The Kantors saw the exhibition and were very enamored with it, and I think went up to Berkeley to look him up (he was then living in Berkeley). I remember Paul telling me that Jo was so enthusiastic that she said that they should buy up all the Diebenkorns they could get their hands on. But they owned about four or five pictures, personally, at that time, quite apart from their dealership, and they were very enthusiastic boosters of Diebenkorn's work.

GOODWIN:

What kind of person was Kantor in those days?

PHILLIPS:

Well, to be quite frank, I thought he was a much nicer person than subsequently. He was working for a labor union [Seafarers' International Union]; he did public relations for the union. He commuted every day to Long Beach, and his wife ran the gallery most of the time, although I think he made the important business decisions, and they were both of them—there's no question that at this period this was the most avant-garde gallery in Los Angeles. They were very committed to the vanguard artists and the so-called abstract expressionist artists in California and the New York School artists. They had done some reading, they had seen exhibitions, works of these artists, and they were I think really totally committed. Gradually Kantor changed as a dealer, especially I think after his divorce. I don't know whether the divorce

was the cause or the result of his change in attitude; perhaps he wanted the change and that's why he changed wives too! But in any case, somewhere around the early 1960s, after he was divorced from Jo, he became much more commercially oriented and much more interested in dealing with pictures of high prices and much less interested in representing contemporary artists. I think in the last ten or fifteen years he's been out of that field altogether. He trades in pictures. There are kind of two types of dealers: there's the picture dealer, and then there's the artist-representative type of dealer. The picture dealers deal in the resale trade, preferably with works as expensive as the market will bear, which usually today means, rather I think generally it meant, School of Paris pictures, up until the last couple of decades, and now it includes the more celebrated of the New York School of painters—de Kooning, Pollock, Gorky, on down into Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg—all bring high prices today. But in the period that we're talking about, the early and mid-fifties, the Kantors were really the leading avant-garde dealers here in town, and I give them a lot of credit for stimulating the interest of a lot of collectors, including ourselves. I think this is a role that dealers can play for the contemporary collector because they are a link between the collector and the artist. Unless one just happened to know a particular artist and see his work at his studio, there's really no other way of being exposed to an artist's work except through a dealer and perhaps an occasional museum show, but the County Museum really didn't do very much, as you recall, in the contemporary field at that time. So the role of the dealer was very important, I think.

GOODWIN:

I would agree; that's a role comparable to the role of an educator.

PHILLIPS:

Absolutely, absolutely, really an educator, and the dealer's taste and the dealer's eye and the dealer's sense of history and all that was extremely important, and it's still true. It's true in New York City today, where I've been spending quite a lot of time. Today's period of art, it's a period of transition and change, often referred to as a very pluralistic period, because there's so many different types and styles of art on the market, and the dealer's role is no less important today than it was twenty-five years ago, in kind of sorting these things out.

PHILLIPS:

What was the next step in forming a collection?

GOODWIN:

Well, I think the next step was really just—you kind of follow the lead. From Diebenkorn it went to Hassel Smith, who was another one of the San Francisco abstract expressionist artists, who had been influenced by Clyfford Still and Rothko when they taught at the [California] School of Fine Arts in the late forties, and Hassel Smith was a very underrated, still is today, a very underrated

artist, a very fine artist I think. And we acquired two or three Hassel Smiths in the fifties. Hassel Smith was a good friend of the Dick Dienbenkorns; we came to know both of these artists quite well, even though at that time they were both living in San Francisco. We also became interested in the works of Lee Mullican, who was another artist that was exhibited at the Kantor Gallery, and Lee Mullican's a fascinating artist, who really comes out of a certain kind of surrealism, Miro-like or Miro-type of surrealism. It's hardly—well, I don't know if one should even call it surrealist, because it seems to have so little to do with either the Freudian school of surrealism, as represented by artists like [Salvador] Dali, or the Jungian, as represented by [Joan] Miro and [Andre] Masson [Roberto] and Matta [Echaurren]. But it really is related I think to the Jungian school of surrealism; he uses symbols that are very close to some of Jung's archetypes. Mullican grew up in Oklahoma and was very influenced by Indian art, and he uses a lot of these archetypal signs and symbols in his work. In any case, he was another one of the artists that interested us very much. We have a large white painting, which is currently hanging in our home in New Mexico, which we acquired in the mid-fifties, I think in 1955, but I still think it's a very beautiful picture. It has some of the characteristics of a Navajo sand painting; it's very delicate, and it has a kind of very faint anthropomorphic image in the middle of it. And then Ynez Johnston we continued to be interested in, we acquired a number of her works.

GOODWIN:

It seems, excuse me, that right from the start your collection assumed character.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. I think that our interest was in abstract art. [phone rings; tape recorder turned off] I remember we did buy one representational picture by Keith Finch; it was a still life from the Landau Gallery, but it really wasn't—it was well painted, but in a short time it came to seem rather academic to us, and we didn't keep it. I think we gave it away. I think that we had some kind of a sense that the abstract expressionist movement, as represented by both the New York group and the San Francisco group, really represented an important new development in art. I think we sensed this intuitively, more than we reasoned it out in a historical way, because neither of us were really that conversant with recent art history. I think later on as we did more reading, there was more explicating of the origins of abstract expressionism. We came to see the relationship of this work to European modern movements, such as cubism, expressionism, surrealism, and we heard the story about how a number of these artists came to New York during the war, thereby exposing themselves to the American culture, especially, particularly the very urban culture in New York, and influencing a number of the New York artists who adapted many of the forms and styles of European modernism to a rougher, more brutal, more direct

kind of American painting. But at the time it would be inaccurate to say that we were really aware of this kind of historical development. It was rather a sense that this was an important emergent style of painting that we became increasingly interested in, and I think that quite early on, certainly by the mid-fifties, we decided that this was the kind of work we wanted to collect.

GOODWIN:

You didn't have any interest in collecting older art?

PHILLIPS:

No, we didn't really. Cost was a factor for us; the older art that interested us was by this time very expensive. We did acquire a Picasso; it's a picture that was painted in 1953 of a man sitting on the beach, it's maybe a self-portrait. We acquired it over a—I think we paid for it over a three- or four-year period, and then in the late fifties we acquired a very early Matisse, a pre-Fauve picture, it's a nude. We also were able to acquire that on very favorable terms. But generally we didn't feel that we could really afford the kind of artists that we admired: most of the established artists.

GOODWIN:

But you weren't particularly interested in prints or drawings.

PHILLIPS:

We weren't particularly interested in prints or drawings, and we weren't particularly interested in buying—oh, I don't know—the sort of second- or third-string artists of the School of Paris or the European artists. I think by the mid-fifties collecting the abstract expressionist painters had really become kind of an adventure for us; we had that sense of, a real sense of kind of participating along with the artists in the new movement.

GOODWIN:

Did you perceive yourselves as collectors?

PHILLIPS:

I think at a particular point we had acquired enough pictures to fill up seven or eight large rooms, and other people would start referring to our collection in quotes; and when one of the curators from the County Museum—as a matter of fact it was Jim Elliott, who is now the director of the museum at Berkeley—came over and referred to it as a collection, we decided perhaps it was. But certainly this is something that we grew into, and I think that by the end of—well, I suppose by the late fifties we were willing to admit that we had become collectors.

GOODWIN:

I'm personally interested in the concept of when a person become a collector.

PHILLIPS:

Well, we did acquire pictures at quite a rapid rate, I think by—we started in '53 and by 1960 there were probably seventy-five or eighty paintings in the

collection. I mean not all large ones; in fact many of them were smaller watercolors or drawings.

GOODWIN:

I know one dealer who—

PHILLIPS:

It went very fast.

GOODWIN:

—who defines a collector as a person who sells his first work.

PHILLIPS:

Oh, yes.

GOODWIN:

From his collection.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes, yes. Does some trading. But I think that certainly in the early years we were simply acquiring pictures we liked for the house, that we liked to have around. But I would say that by the late fifties we had accumulated enough pictures, they were of sufficient quality, and they are acknowledged by outside sources to be of sufficient quality and character, that we were willing to concur in the definition that it was a collection. And I suppose at that point one starts to take it more seriously, which is both good and bad. You become at times a little more uptight about what you acquire, and your standards become perhaps a little more rigid, and that's not entirely good. I think there's something about the early stages of collecting, before collectors become "collectors" but are just acquiring pictures, when there is a certain looseness in the approach, willing to be more adventurous and to try something out and take chances, which is very good. But becoming more critical with more rigid standards I think is an inevitable development of collecting over a period of time. In the first place the collection itself starts to exercise a certain force on the collector, magnetic force perhaps, and become a factor in his or her choice. You don't want to add something that is out of character with what you already have. Now people, however, do vary, as I'm sure you've encountered, widely in the kind of collection that they build. There's the kind of collection that my uncle used to refer to a bit contemptuously as the "postage stamp" type of collection, which is kind of one of a kind, or if you have two of a kind, it could be the "Noah's Ark" type of collection. But there is that type of collector that, almost like a page in a stamp album, there are certain vacancies, and they want to fill in every spot. They in effect have a list of artists that they've decided are important, and they have to fill in, they've got to get one of everything in. If these artists happen to vary a great deal stylistically in this kind of collection it doesn't matter so much because it's really a collection bounded by sort of historical boundaries. Take a collection like Norton Simon's, it's like the whole of Western art history up to

1930. Most collections are more restricted in time than that; but there are a number of contemporary collectors who collect every important artist, let's say, of the forties, fifties and sixties, whether they're figurative or abstract makes no difference. Then there's the kind of collection, that type of collectors that we came to identify with, which is the type of collector who is interested in forming a very organic kind of collection, a cohesive type of collection, where everything seems to relate.

GOODWIN:

Even the styles of the paintings seem to fit an organic framework.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes. They relate stylistically, they relate visually, they relate in a very broad sense ideologically, using that term in the sense of kind of the broad idea content within the work. And there are all of these different kind of relationships—stylistic, visual, ideological—and that's what makes a cohesive, coherent kind of collection in my opinion. I don't happen to particularly care much for the very diverse one-of-a-kind type of collection. I think there are certain kinds of museums that by necessity have to collect in that way, because they're catering to a public that expects it. I mean they expect to see a pop artist hanging alongside or at least not far away from a geometric abstraction or an abstract expressionist artist or a primitive artist or what have you. But I think especially for a private collector to vary so widely creates a kind of discordant, disjunctive kind of collection, and it's something that neither my wife nor I have ever been interested in. In fact, if we have something that doesn't really seem to fit, we usually get rid of it, it just doesn't look like our collection, and we sell it or give it away.

GOODWIN:

Over the years, you've been particularly fond of certain artists.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

Including Diebenkorn and—

PHILLIPS:

Motherwell.

GOODWIN:

Motherwell.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

[Emerson] Woelffer.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

Mullican.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. And I think one can see a similarity in those artists. They all came out of abstract surrealism into abstract expressionism; they all are very painterly. The way that the picture is painted, the way that it's brushed, the character of the brush strokes is very important in all of these artists. They're all very involved with color; I mean even Motherwell, who uses a great deal of black and white, but when he does use color, an ochre or a blue, the colors are extremely important to his work. And most of the time, I think, are involved with what I would call Jungian archetypes, with signs and or symbols. A painter like Woelffer, for example, comes out of abstract surrealism, and although his work is very abstract, the kind of shapes he uses have a definite kind of archetypal significance, and they relate to primitive forms and signs and hieroglyphs. It's true of Mullican, it's true of Motherwell. Adolph Gottlieb is another one of the New York painters that paints in this fashion; he's an artist whose work we've collected to quite a large extent.

GOODWIN:

It seems that most of those artists, too, have roots in the West.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes, many of them have. Hassel Smith also, I think, is very concerned with many of these kinds of symbols. We range fairly widely, but still, on the whole, within a fairly restricted orbit. I think that people can look at our collection and tell why we're interested in the artists we are interested in. Of course we've also been very interested in color as I suggested, and in the sixties I think color became almost the main determinant for our choice, because the sixties artists, as you know, discarded a good many of the expressionistic devices. They reacted against action painting, so-called, and gestural painting, and became more interested in a certain kind of formal abstraction—and I'm thinking of artists like [Ellsworth] Kelly and [Frank] Stella, and [Kenneth] Noland, [Morris] Louis. We don't have all of these artists in our collection. We have Louis and Noland. We have Ad Reinhardt; although he was a painter that's more associated with the fifties, he had this interest in color. And we have Rothko, we have two Rothkos, both of which we bought, incidentally, in the fifties from Rothko personally.

GOODWIN:

How did that happen?

PHILLIPS:

Well, one thing leads to another. Well, I'll relate the whole story. I referred to Jimmy Byrnes, who had been the curator of modern art at the County Museum. He left the County Museum in 1954 to become director of the museum at

Colorado Springs [Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center], and as you recall, I had formerly lived in Denver, and was still going back to Colorado in the summer for both business and family reasons. So this particular summer, which was the summer of either '54 or '55—'54, I believe—we went down to Colorado Springs to visit Jimmy Byrnes and met the head of the painting department, who was Emerson Woelffer, who subsequently—that is, within the next two years—came to Los Angeles; and we met Robert Motherwell, who was the visiting artist for the summer. We had acquired a Motherwell—actually we acquired the painting by Motherwell, as I recounted, from the Los Angeles County Fair, and I think it was probably the first painting that Motherwell had ever sold west of the Mississippi, and so he was quite interested in us, I think, as collectors, and we struck up a friendship. We looked him up in New York, and his closest friend at that time was Mark Rothko. He took us over to Mark Rothko's studio, he told us that Rothko was in his opinion the most important of all the abstract expressionist artists; I don't think that opinion was generally shared by many critics at that time, but it was Motherwell's view. We acquired our first Rothko in the fall of 1954, a large green painting. (which was just in the recent Guggenheim exhibition) which we saw hanging in his studio, a beautiful green and blue picture. So our interest in color really also went back to the fifties, but it continued on. It almost flowered more in the sixties because at that point some of the abstract expressionist type of painting had, at least for the time being, died out to a certain extent. But in the seventies we have acquired work that relates both to our abstract expressionist interest and to our color-field interest.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (DECEMBER 14, 1979)

GOODWIN:

You were mentioning the additions to your collection in the seventies.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, interestingly enough, in the seventies both of these kind of dominant interests of ours, one in the kind of painterly gestural painting and in color-field painting, have kind of coincided; and we have acquired artists like Joan Snyder and Ray [Raymond] Parker, who is an older painter but typifies both of these interests. So, as I was saying, I think our collection has the characteristics, really, the interesting kind of painterly abstraction, painterly abstraction often deriving from primitive signs and symbols, and painting that deals very primitive signs and symbols, and painting that deals very much with color as an important element in and of itself, not simply as an element that modifies or inflects objects or images, but which can constitute an image by itself. Both of these characteristics of our collection I think developed quite early and without

any kind of pre-meditation. It came out of the actual doing it, and in the process of making selections and living with the pictures our taste developed and our predilections developed. And that I think is instructive about how one progresses as a collector of contemporary art—that is, you don't start off necessarily with a number of preconceived notions, or criteria, but the criteria and the taste develops in the process of collecting. There is almost a kind of dialogue that goes on between the collector and what he collects, the outcome of which determines the ultimate direction that the collection will take; and it's one that changes somewhat, but I think in the case of most collectors not radically.

GOODWIN:

In recent years have you maintained your interest in the earlier artists like Diebenkorn and Motherwell?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, indeed we have. We've acquired, I'm sorry to say, only one of the recent Ocean Park series; they are becoming very expensive, they're up around \$50,000 now, and that limits us in what we can do. But we have one I think very beautiful Ocean Park painting. Some of the artists like Emerson Woelffer and Lee Mullican, whose work is still not very expensive, we continue to collect. Motherwell's work, again, we are kind of priced out of that; we've been talking, we want to get one of the Open series, which is kind of his minimal linear series, which is interesting because it—I think it's a painting that we must get because it relates both to the color field and to the kind of automatist kind of writing, which was an important element in abstract expressionism. So it would fit very well, but these paintings are up around \$40,000 or \$50,000, too, and that makes one pause.

GOODWIN:

It seems that your favorite artists also relate strongly to Matisse.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I think that's very true.

GOODWIN:

That he's as much a source of—

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

—colorism as—

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

—surrealism or abstraction.

PHILLIPS:

I think that's true, that again Matisse went through a number of different phases and was always a great colorist. There's the Matisse of the late cutouts, where he worked with those kind of floral shapes; that type of Matisse had a great deal of influence on Motherwell. Then there's the Matisse of the pictures of the middle teens, from about 1915 through about 1918, where Matisse adapted cubist structure to his compositions, but without ever really going entirely into cubism. A painting like *The Piano Lesson* at the Museum of Modern Art, or a more recent picture that was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, called *The View of Notre Dame*, and there's a picture at the Phillips called *The Studio*, which Dick Diebenkorn admits having influenced his work a great deal. But Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series has been influenced more by this particular type of Matisse, which I think is generally thought of as Matisse's cubist pictures, although as I say they are not really orthodox cubism. But the kind of the architecture, the very structural form of the Ocean Park series comes out of the structure of the Matisses of that time.

GOODWIN:

The Matisse you own is even earlier.

PHILLIPS:

It's even earlier; it relates quite a bit, though, to Diebenkorn's figurative period, which came in between the early abstractions and the Ocean Park series. He painted the figurative pictures from about '55 to '65, so from that ten-year period. We don't have any of those pictures; we really should have one that would kind of go with the Matisse.

GOODWIN:

When did you acquire the Matisse?

PHILLIPS:

We acquired the Matisse in the late fifties, from Marlborough Gallery. Marlborough at that time didn't have a New York office. Frank Lloyd, the head of it, was in Los Angeles. At that time I was chairman of the Contemporary Art Council, and the museum purchased the [Kurt] Schwitters. But he had a whole group of slides on the table, and I kind of fumbled through them and happened to come across this 1901 Matisse nude, which is a marvelously colored picture, wonderful purples and yellows and oranges and greens. It's just remarkable, and I was extremely taken with it. I took the slide back and showed it to Joann, and she liked it very much too. So we were able to persuade Mr. Lloyd to sell it to us over about a four-year period, which I think at that time there wasn't a great deal of demand for a Matisse that early—it wouldn't be true today—so we were able to really get good terms on it.

GOODWIN:

How does Picasso relate to the character of your collection?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I'm not sure—that's a very good question—I'm not sure that it does relate in any very specific way. It's really a question that Picasso is kind of the father of all modern painting, in a sense. Picasso and Matisse are I think two great twentieth century figures, and we always refer to them as kind of the godfathers of our collection. But I don't think, except as a terribly important figure in modernist art history who has generally influenced the development and direction of modernist art in general, I don't think there's a specific relationship between the Picasso, really, and the other pictures we have. It's rather different.

GOODWIN:

How big is the Picasso?

PHILLIPS:

It must be about four feet by three feet. It's a good-sized picture. It's Picasso sitting on the beach, with a very jaunty pose, with his legs crossed and kind of an African striped jacket and a very jaunty red-and-yellow cap, and he's smoking a little cigarette.

GOODWIN:

In my observations I think that Picasso relates to some of the abstract expressionists, simply in terms of his scale.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. Well, I think that's a fair observation.

GOODWIN:

That seems to be his gift to the abstract painters.

PHILLIPS:

Picasso in the late thirties and forties went through a surrealist-picture phase, and of course most of the abstract expressionists came out of abstract surrealism, so there is that kind of historical relationship, as well as the one that you mentioned, which is the sense of scale. And there are a number of art historians, like Clement Greenberg, who feel that all contemporary painting, even abstract expressionism, has been influenced by cubism. That a painter like de Kooning, for example, the early de Koonings, especially [Claes] the de Koonings of the late forties and early fifties, if you really look at the forms, they grow out of cubism, there's still very much the sense of the cubist grid, and the sense of the overlapping geometric shapes. It's just that de Kooning took more liberties, and his shapes are freer forms. A painter who perhaps broke most strongly with cubism was Clyfford Still, who used jagged edges and really got away from the grid and the rectilinear overlapping forms, and painted very two-dimensional kind of tunnel paintings with, as I say—have these kind of jagged interlocking sections. But a painter like Dick Diebenkorn, who still uses geometric forms, is indebted to cubism really, except not in a strict sense, a much freer sense.

GOODWIN:

You stayed away from pop.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. I admit to never having particularly cared for pop art. I think it's entertaining and I think some of the so-called pop artists have gone on to do some quite interesting work, especially Oldenburg, who is an artist whose work I admire a good bit. But as a school and type of art it never really interested us very much, and it certainly didn't relate in any way to the work that we had collected. So we didn't feel it would be consistent with the character of our collection to include pop art. In fact we haven't any figurative art at all. We have a painting by Milton Avery, which is a semi-abstract painting. I'm leaving out now the Picasso and Matisse, which are earlier—the Milton Avery is a seascape. It was done in, oh, I think '59, and it's a painting that has very much the same pictorial format as a Rothko. It has two large square areas, flat areas, in two shades of purple. It is called *Moon Trough*, and the moon makes a reflection on the ocean. It's so simplified it can be very easily read as an abstract picture. But generally our interest really has been in abstract art, which is I think another reason why, even if we had liked pop art better than we did, I doubt if we would have collected it.

GOODWIN:

Sounds to me that you're most attracted to highly complex pictures, very profound statements, as opposed to—

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I think so; I would accept that. Of course there is a basic difference I think between profundity in literature and profundity in the more formal abstract art forms like music and abstract painting. Painting, really the visual arts, encompass both the literary and representational modes and the abstract modes. But if we limit ourselves to considering for the moment abstract painting, and we relate it to music, and I think there is a very close relationship. Profundity or complexity doesn't consist entirely of representational ideas. It consists rather of the way formal elements are deployed and the way symbolic ideas are worked into the formal structure of the painting. And a painting that to an untutored eye may look very simple is really very complex. We have a painting by Ad Reinhardt, and it's a tall ten-foot painting of red squares, and the squares are so close in value that the painting almost works more as a color-field painting than it does as a geometric painting and as a single-field color. Then there are other optical elements in it: there's a crossbar in the middle, three across squares that are painted in a hue that's slightly different from most of the rest of the picture, and they're slightly less colorful, and as you look at the picture you impute to that middle bar the colors that are in the two top bars, and it creates a sort of blinking effect. Well, you could say all of this, as critics of abstract painting have maintained, all this has very little to do with content; it

really only has to do with formal manipulations. But the fact of the matter is that this painting is a very metaphysical painting. As you look at it, it has a tremendous—it has a kind of intensity that approaches the stained-glass windows in Chartres. It's a very sublime picture, it has a metaphysical content, just as a great piece of chamber music by Bach has, and you don't have to relate it to anything specific to have this experience. That doesn't mean this experience, of course, that all abstract art necessarily has it, because there's a good deal of it can be quite superficial.

GOODWIN:

Well, I was about to say, perhaps a self-contradiction.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

That there's a strong element of decorativeness to your preferences.

PHILLIPS:

Sure, sure. Well, I accept that, and I think that, to me, abstract art reaches us through its formal arrangements, just as music does, but there's got to be an idea content behind that. In the great Rothkos, there's enormous sense of what the gestalt psychologists refer to as the tertiary characteristics, which are things we sense when we say: it's graceful, it's awkward, it's sad. They're interpretations, in a way, that one makes, and yet they're interpretations that one is led to make, perhaps both by the formal arrangements of the abstract parts and, I think, to a certain extent by associations that one has with certain shapes and colors. A good many of Rothko's pictures, although they're totally abstract, and Dienbenkorn's paintings have associations with landscapes, with floral compositions, the sea and the sky, and colors that one finds in nature. So one brings these associations to the pictures, and they, along with the formal structure of the painting, are responsible I think for the emotional reaction we have to the painting and how we interpret the painting. So it's very hard really to separate the decorative elements from elements that we think of as being more profound.

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

They work together, really.

GOODWIN:

Right, the decorativeness leads to the profundity or complexity.

PHILLIPS:

That's right, that's right.

GOODWIN:

You've been attracted to a painter like [Franz] Kline.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, we have a large Kline, which is one of my very favorite paintings, and Kline really comes out of—more so than any others—comes out of representational painting. He deals with—his images really are more closely related to architectural structures, to bridges, to the skeletons of modern buildings. But, again, you can have traced the origin and the derivation of these forms, and you can say they come out of bridge forms or they come out of building structures, they come out of the look of city streets and blocks, and all that, but what gives them their emotional poignancy is something else. It's his choice of colors, it's the way the forms are brushed onto the canvas, that give them an enormously dramatic, dynamic character. So again, I think separating form and content is something one does simply for methodological reasons. In order to talk about a picture, or describe a picture, you make the separation between the form and the content, but in the actual work itself they are so closely bound that they are not separated. The artist doesn't really make that separation. Particularly in abstract painting the form is the content, and the content to a large extent suggests the form. The separation is really artificial, but it is necessary I think as part of a critical discourse to make that separation.

GOODWIN:

Well, now Kline does seem generally less decorative than many of the others.

PHILLIPS:

Less decorative, less decorative than some of the other things that are in our collection.

GOODWIN:

And less colorful.

PHILLIPS:

Less colorful, less colorful. Kline did do some color pictures; as a matter of fact, the Phillips just had an exhibition last year of color Klines.

GOODWIN:

Which did come to the County Museum.

PHILLIPS:

Which came to the County Museum, that's right. But his most celebrated work is in black and white, and I think even in a color work he is interested, still seems to be more interested in shapes than he is in color. It's the way color somehow relates to shape, as opposed to somebody like Rothko who is interested in color for the sake of color, or color as measure. Rothko used to say his pictures were really about measure, and I think there you have a kind of analogy to music: there is a similarity between the measure in a Rothko and a measure in a piece of classical music.

GOODWIN:

To what extent have you been interested in sculpture?

PHILLIPS:

Really a good deal less interested in sculpture. I think that painting and sculpture are concurrent developments, and even though a collector's interest may be mainly in one or the other, that it's a good idea to have some of the other. If one is a collector of sculpture, there should be some painting in the collection, and vice versa, because painting incorporates sculptural forms, and sculptural forms, particularly in the twentieth century, have become increasingly pictorial and frequently two-dimensional. So our interest in sculpture has really been as a kind of—how will I say it—almost an appendage of the painting collection, a way of rounding out the painting collection, rounding out the meaning of the painting collection. We have two David Smiths, a [Richard] Stankiewicz, a [John] Chamberlain, and a [Ibram] Lassaw; we had a Louise Nevelson for a while, and we traded that; a couple of works by Richard Hunt. We have some sculpture in the collection, but as I say it's not our principal interest.

GOODWIN:

Again, these sound like the gutsier sculptors, as opposed to a [Alexander] Calder or a [George] Rickey or a—

PHILLIPS:

Well, that's right. David Smith, who I think is the most important sculptor really of our era, was very much a part of the New York School movement.

GOODWIN:

Very close to Motherwell.

PHILLIPS:

Close to Motherwell, and was really influenced by—he incorporated found objects into his work and, in that sense, related to both dada and surrealism.

GOODWIN:

And Picasso.

PHILLIPS:

And Picasso. So I think more than any of the sculptors he seemed an appropriate sculptor for our collection.

GOODWIN:

What is the nature of his sculptures in your collection?

PHILLIPS:

Well, we have two: one that belongs to the Albany series, which is a vertical iron pipe that seems to be derived perhaps from farm instruments; and then we have another one that's called *Bouquet of Concaves*, and it's almost like two wings set on a pole, but the wing forms are made up of, constructed of small pieces of concave components that, are strung together. Metaphorically it relates to feathers on a bird's wing, although it's a very abstract piece at the same time; but it can be seen that way. I think David Smith is an extremely

important sculptor for anyone who has collected the painting of the last twenty-five years or so. I don't think that, I'm not sure, looking back on the sculpture of the last twenty-five years, that there are very many of them that are going to survive, that are going to be considered important in another twenty-five or thirty years; I have some doubts about that. They don't seem to be of the stature of the painters. David Smith, for one, Calder probably; there are maybe one or two others, but I have reservations.

GOODWIN:

What has been your orientation toward a younger generation of Southern California artists, say, of the sixties?

PHILLIPS:

We have acquired quite a number of them, not really in any depth, but acquired at least one work or so by the ones that we like.

GOODWIN:

Who are they?

PHILLIPS:

We have, I think, a very handsome painting by Ron Davis from his plastic period, a plastic object picture. It's essentially geometric, but it also is illusionistic, illusionistic from a distance but up close very flat and very object-like. He's a painter I have a very high regard for; I would like to have [some] of his work. Then a group of younger painters, artists like Tom Wudl and Alan McCollum, and I'm trying to think of some of the others; Greg Card we have, and we have two paintings by John Altoon, who was in-between generations, who I think is a fascinating artist. One [painting] is a rather [Arshile] Gorky-like, biomorphic forms, which is a rather large pastel. The other one is one that has very strange shapes that are surreal. It's kind of a quirky surrealism that they did. They look like characters out of a Dr. Seuss book; one of them looks like an airplane engine that's flying around in space all by itself. He's been quite a fascinating artist. And I'm trying to think of some of the others, but we have a number of younger artists, although we haven't collected them in any depth.

GOODWIN:

They represent a different sensibility.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, they represent a—we have several paintings by Ed Moses; we have one of the large canvases where he did the edges in [plastic], he made his own edges in plastic. Then we have a couple of smaller works, of paper cutouts, and so we're quite well-represented there. We've tried to keep a balance between western and eastern artists; I don't know how much of that's been conscious and how much has been unconscious. But I think we've always felt that the California artists were underrated nationally, and particularly in recent years we've been spending quite a bit of time in New York and we always take

western artists back there with us to show in our apartment. At the same time, we've never wanted to collect exclusively western artists, because then there may be a little sense of provinciality, you know, or regional partisanship, and that's not what our collection is about either. And so it's been important to us to really have this mix, for whatever reason, this mix of western and eastern.

GOODWIN:

Which represents your own life.

PHILLIPS:

Which really represents our own life. I hadn't thought of it in that way, but in fact it does, since we have strains of both western and eastern influence, and in fact, particularly in recent years, have divided our time, to a large extent, between the East and the West.

GOODWIN:

Going over the earlier tape, I've found a theme in your remarks that accentuates your enjoyment of western living.

PHILLIPS:

Oh yes, oh yes.

GOODWIN:

You seem very self-consciously fond of the West.

PHILLIPS:

Oh yes, it's very true, very true. Well, I think that—I never regretted coming to Los Angeles, and I don't think there's any community in a way that offers the freedom that Los Angeles does; it's kind of a creative freedom, it's a community where one is free to put a lot of things into motion, whether they're organizational or whether they're cultural or artistic or educational—all of those things. It's not so tradition-bound that there is an inhibiting sense that you can't do this because it doesn't conform in some particular way to certain institutional standards that have been shaped in a traditional way. [tape recorder turned off] Let's see, where were we?

GOODWIN:

Yeah, we were talking about the West as a factor—

PHILLIPS:

Oh, yes, yes, yes.

GOODWIN:

—in your thinking.

PHILLIPS:

I don't think there's any question that the West gives one, offers a kind of a creative freedom, and enables one to develop one's own particular ideas that are not as tradition-bound, not as institutionally bound, and that was—I don't think I ever could have started the magazine [*Frontier*], run the [Tee Vee] business,

even collected modern art in as uninhibited a fashion if I'd been living in the East; I really, really attribute that, to a very large extent, to living in the West.

GOODWIN:

Well, I'd probably go a step further and regard many of the abstract expressionists as essentially products of the West.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. A great many of them were, really. That part of the story has not really been told. Most of the books on abstract expressionism really don't give enough emphasis, especially to the part that was played by the [California] School of Fine Arts in San Francisco in the late forties, where Clyfford Still taught, where Rothko taught, and artists like Diebenkorn and Sam Francis, and a number of others.

GOODWIN:

[Hans] Hofmann.

PHILLIPS:

Hofmann, Hofmann came out of—

GOODWIN:

Yeah, and then there are others who grew up in the West, even if they never taught here.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, that's right.

GOODWIN:

It seems to me that there's kind of a fascinating coincidence in that you and Paul Kantor made an initial commitment to abstract painting at a time, an unusual time, because you didn't have an extensive involvement in art collecting before that time, and neither did Kantor.

PHILLIPS:

No.

GOODWIN:

In the same sense, the American abstract painters were not deeply schooled in either an older European tradition or a tradition of modern art. They were making kind of an initial breakthrough.

PHILLIPS:

Very true.

GOODWIN:

So that the artists and collectors were almost making a joint investment.

PHILLIPS:

That's true, that's true.

GOODWIN:

Maybe not precisely at the same time, but around the same time.

PHILLIPS:

It's absolutely true, and I was surprised really how few New Yorkers collected New York artists in any large degree. Ben Heller was one of the exceptions, who put together a marvelous collection, but there were really very few, very few in the fifties. It's almost the same—there are very few French collectors who collected Matisse and Picasso; they were generally collected by Americans and Russians. There's that same kind of conservatism among the New York collectors; I think a lot of the New York School artists were collected by people outside of New York. Although I think that the importance of New York City as kind of the developmental ground for abstract expressionism is extremely important, because it did bring together European and American painters in a way that probably couldn't have been possible in any other community. New York has also been referred to as kind of a "pressure cooker." In its relatively narrow confines it has such great density, and it brings people together, sometimes in annoying and irritating proximity, but out of this frequently comes a good deal of creative interplay. I think that's an important factor in establishing New York as an important cultural center. Of course it is above all the market, and it's the leading market, and it's also the place where critical judgements are made, more than they're made anyplace else. But it is also an important creative center, and I think this "pressure cooker" concept is very important. But for our own part, I think that we simply wouldn't have done a great many things that we have done almost anyplace else except Southern [California].

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (DECEMBER 17, 1979)

GOODWIN:

Before moving on to some other topics, I'd like to ask a further question about collecting, and that is, how do you and Joann interact as collectors?

PHILLIPS:

Well, it has always been a fifty-fifty thing with us. We almost always go see something together, a new possible acquisition, and then if one shows some interest in it, enthusiasm for it, then the other responds. And unless we are both equally enthusiastic, we usually drop it, unless one feels very passionate about it, senses that this is something rather exceptional. Then he or she states the case a little more emphatically; and usually with that kind of really intense interest, the other one usually says ok, even though he or she may not feel as strongly about it as the other one. And that's kind of the way we do it. What's more apt to happen is that one or the other is quite lukewarm about it, and then we usually pass it up. And that's becoming the case, of course, as our space has filled up, and the new picture will replace something really treasured, and as prices have become higher. There's no question that we've become more

selective. We're really at a point where we both have to have quite a bit of enthusiasm for it, or one has to have a great deal of enthusiasm and the other has to have at least a modest amount. It has to kind of balance? but it's always been a joint proposition with us, and I think that—I don't know, I guess collectors seem to vary, but there are a number of families where one or the other has the interest. It's more often the wife, most of the families I know, more often the wife, and frequently the wife is the person, and the husband, his role is to kind of say, "Well, we can only afford so much." But with us it's very much of a joint venture, and it had always been that way with uncle and aunt [the Duncan Phillips].

GOODWIN:

But have you preferred certain artists, others preferred by Joann?

PHILLIPS:

No, I think if anything it's happening perhaps a little more than it formerly did, but it's usually not very intense. I mean we'll go out and one of us will be a bit more enthusiastic than the other; that does seem to be happening a little more, and again I attribute it to the fact that we're both being a little choosier about it. But over a period of time our tastes have co-developed, and they've very much developed in the same direction, so I have usually a very good idea of how she's going to react and vice versa. We both like the same kind of work; we have very little, I suppose you might say, very little generic difference. In other words it's very unlikely that I'm going to say I want a figurative landscape and she's going to say she wants hard-edged abstraction, because we both know one another's tastes so well and share tastes so that that kind of generic or categorical difference never comes up. But within the parameters of the kind of art that we both like, there may be different assessments of how good it is and how original it is. Originality in the seventies is a great problem, because art is very eclectic, an almost kind of repetitious period; there's kind of a sense of going back and redoing some of the styles that were prevalent in both the fifties and the sixties, sometimes with what seems to be almost a conscious intention on the part of the artist to amalgamate the styles of the two decades. And so a lot of these works, they don't engage you as original works the way the works of the fifties and sixties did. That makes it more difficult when you see work that is so obviously derivative, and that forces you to compare it with the work that it derives from and sometimes, or frequently, you might say, to the prototypes. It's usually to the disadvantage of the new work; it's usually the earlier work that looks better. I find the same thing goes on at the acquisitions committee of the Museum of Modern Art; these works come up, and even the curators are not very enthusiastic about them. I mean they recommend getting them because they feel the museum should continue to collect, but they don't really have a strong conviction that they're important, original works. There's

always a sense, in most instances today, a sense that they're derivative, and that they are even a bit academic, in the sense that the artist has chosen to blend and amalgamate certain styles in a rather self-conscious fashion. And that's a real problem today. I think, as a result, with Joann and myself we start off frequently with some sense that we're not going to find work that we like, and that in a way makes it more difficult. And one or the other seems more likely than formerly to feel that this particular work we're looking at doesn't quite measure up. But by and large over the years we've meshed very well and without any—we've never had a kind of program of his and hers, or it's your turn now and it's my turn. We've always had a meeting of minds about it.

GOODWIN:

Where are you inclined to look for art?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I think we have always—our collection has been almost exclusively American; I sometimes think that American [art], particularly American abstract art, has really blossomed in the post-war era, and I think Americans have become even a little chauvinistic about the superiority of American art. I myself think that it's superior, and I think European art, especially French art, dominated the art world for almost a century, but since World War II it certainly has given away its superior position, and that now I think resides in the American art. So we've done almost all of our acquisitions in either New York or Los Angeles. In recent years perhaps a bit more in New York because we've been spending more time [there], but if you averaged it out it would come very close to fifty-fifty, especially among the younger painters. We really find as many interesting, promising young painters in Los Angeles as we do in New York? I don't see very much to choose between them. So we continue to acquire in both places.

GOODWIN:

Is there any gallery scene in New Mexico?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, there is some gallery scene there, and New Mexico went through a very strong period in the twenties, when a number of the so-called Taos, first generation of Taos, artists were flourishing, like Blumenthal and Bert Phillips, and a number of others. Then there were a number of well-known painters from the East—like John Sloan spent a good deal of time in New Mexico? John Marion came out; Georgia O'Keeffe came out from the East and indeed settled in New Mexico and has I think been New Mexico's outstanding, certainly best-known, artist ever since. I'm trying to think of the other artist that's—

GOODWIN:

Hartley?

PHILLIPS:

Hartley, exactly. Mardsen Hartley was in New Mexico and painted some very strong works. But then after that they left, and the quality of the art has diminished, it's really gone down, and it's just within the last—in the seven years that we've been going to New Mexico, we're seeing a marked improvement, with younger artists coming in. You don't see of course as much regionalism as you used to, and by that I mean artists that one would tend to designate or denote as regional painters, largely because of their subject matter and, to a certain extent, their style? painters that tend to paint cowboys, and Indians, and Indians making pots, and rather straight academic landscapes of the mountains, and that kind of thing, which most people identify as regional art. The good artists, I think very fortunately, have moved away from that type of art and are really doing work that's in the sophisticated mainstream. If you didn't know the artist came from New Mexico and you looked at his work, you couldn't tell? in most instances they might be from anywhere. This is especially true of the abstract painters, but even the—there's one very good landscapist there by the name of Forrest [K.] Moses, who shows now in New York also, and although he paints New Mexico hillsides and ravines and washes, he does it in what I would call an updated post impressionist style, but it's sufficiently abstract that the scene might not be New Mexico, it might be New Hampshire; you know, it isn't that specific. And so there's less regionalism in the pejorative, provincial sense, at least, and a number of artists who are very cognizant of the new styles that are popular in New York and Los Angeles and so forth. I've been very encouraged with the development I've seen there, particularly in the last five years. I'd say there are half a dozen artists who stand up very well alongside the best younger artists in New York and Los Angeles, and I certainly wouldn't have said that even three or four years ago. So there is sort of a renaissance going on there.

GOODWIN:

I was just reminded that you have a collection of Kachina dolls.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes. In fact, we have a Southwest Indian collection, although it's very modest and we don't claim to be authorities on it at all. In fact the best period to have collected Southwest Indian art certainly would have been twenty-five, thirty, or forty years ago, rather than the present time, because a lot of the best works—the Navajo blankets and the old Kachinas and the old pots—are very hard to find at all. Most of them are in museums and private collections, and what little does come on the market is quite expensive.

GOODWIN:

Where is it available? Where do you acquire it?

PHILLIPS:

Well, you acquire it at the so-called trading posts, Indian trading posts, which are really galleries in a sense. They're almost like antique shops, but they continue to call them trading posts because they do trade with the Indians. The Indians will come in, often with their blankets and their jewelry, and instead of paying them in cash the dealers frequently will pay them in, or will trade for, usually some practical things that the Indians need, I mean hardware perhaps, or food items, that kind of thing. The Indians apparently like that, trading is sort of in their tradition. So they still refer to them as Indian trading posts, although from the standpoint of the collector or the tourist, they're really just stores that sell quality Indian material. One finds them. There are half a dozen very good trading posts in Santa Fe; about the same number in Albuquerque; there's also a number in Gallup (the prices in Gallup are lower, the quality is a little more uneven).

GOODWIN:

It would seem that the Indian material relates well to the avant-garde painting, at least certain artists.

PHILLIPS:

Well, I think so; certain artists certainly do. It's especially true of a number of the so-called abstract surrealists, who were the most prominent in the late forties and the early fifties. A number of the abstract expressionists in New York, like Pollock and Rothko [Barnett] and Newman and Gottlieb, before they went into their so-called abstract expressionist stage, really painted Indian symbols, primitive icons, primitive signs, and there's still elements of that even in their mature work. So there is this relationship, and it fits well; but in another sense it's a separate collecting interest I think that we've developed as a result of having lived in New Mexico. Of course in this present period of rather high prices for painting and sculpture, Indian material is relatively less expensive. Even the most expensive, things you can buy would be the Navajo blankets that were woven in the 1860s to 1890, that period, where they used natural dyes. A very superior blanket might cost \$10,000. But for \$10,000 today, you can't acquire an established artist for that price; it's really rather ridiculous. And then the Kachina dolls have gone down a great deal in quality; you really have to— if you know about the Kachina dolls, they were originally made as dolls that were given to the Hopi Indian children to give them an idea of what the Kachina gods looked like. The Kachina gods are all animal and spirit representations, and the Kachina dancers dress up to imitate the Kachinas, so like they are bear dancers and they are wolf dancers and they are cow dancers. The dolls, then, are copied from the dancers, and they were given to the children. In the earlier Kachinas, from around the turn of the century up through the twenties and thirties, they made them out of a very light cottonwood and they used vegetable dyes, so they're very soft and they're very

light. They have a rather primitive quality about them; they usually carve them out of a single piece of wood, and they're rather blockish in form. But recently they now make them in a lot of very animated poses, and they use bright commercial paint, and they've lost a good deal of their character. Occasionally you see a good one, but they're not what the old ones used to be. But good pottery is still available; there's several of the tribes that are making good pottery. And good weaving is available, although the Navajo rugs of about the twenties or thirties are really the best buy today, because they sell for less than the quality rugs do today, because it often takes one weaver six months to do a rug, and so she has to charge \$5,000 or \$6,000 for it or she won't come out on it. It's been great fun, we've enjoyed it; but I don't feel that it's the best period to collect it. I think almost all kinds of collectibles have their optimum time when quality work is available and fairly plentiful at a reasonable price. This optimum period usually doesn't last for too long; either the quality of the work goes down, or the demand and the prices go up, and then it's not so much fun anymore.

GOODWIN:

Right. Let's mention one other aspect of collecting before going on to museums. You've enjoyed socializing with the artists over the years, I understand.

PHILLIPS:

Oh yes, yes.

GOODWIN:

And you're close to the Woelffers and the Mullicans.

PHILLIPS:

Diebenkorns.

GOODWIN:

Diebenkorns.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

Is it ever a problem in evaluating the artist's work?

PHILLIPS:

Well, in our case, it hasn't been because we became interested in the work first, and then subsequently became acquainted with the artist. If an artist lives close by, and if one has acquired a fair amount of his or her work and is very enthusiastic about it, there's a natural interest in meeting the artist, and the artist also has an equally strong interest in meeting the collectors. Artists are, and I say this as a collector, I think artists to a large extent are too dependent on collectors. I don't know—I suppose unless one went into some kind of a socialized art market where the government bought on behalf of museums, or

some sort of arrangement like that, that this will always necessarily be the case, but artists are very dependent on collectors, and therefore they tend to have kind of ambivalent feelings about collectors, which I think arise in almost any circumstance where one person is dependent on somebody else; frequently a kind of love-hate thing develops. There are several artists that we have not only gotten to know very well, but I think we number among our very closest friends. We have had an extremely nice relationship with these artists, and I feel very close to them. Artists are strange, though; they have very demanding egos, and an artist will come into one's house, into the collection, and if the collection doesn't contain any of their work, they often act very crestfallen and very uninterested in everything else that's on the wall. On the other hand, if the collection contains one or more of their work, then they tend to be very enthusiastic. They say, "This is a wonderful collection!" And you know, you hate to think that egos are that delicate, but it's really true in most instances. I've hardly ever had an artist come in to the house in instances where that artist was not represented in the collection, where they really expressed any, really, enthusiasm for—I mean they don't necessarily pan it, especially if the work is well-established, but they just ignore it. They come in, and there may be a smashing Rothko in the background, and they don't pay any more attention to it than if it were, you know, a piece of furniture. But if one of their works hangs in the room, then they're just very enthusiastic. I'd say further about friendships: again, it depends, you're most apt to develop a friendship with an artist where you share an interest in a certain kind of art, and there's got to be a kind of mutuality of taste, so you can sit around and chat about it, even gossip about it, and if there's too much of a diversion it doesn't work.

GOODWIN:

Are you still close to Motherwell?

PHILLIPS:

Yes. We don't see him very often. We've been living right in New York City, and we moved to New York about the same time that he moved out. He lived in Greenwich, and he doesn't come into town very much. We're very fond of him, and he's very stimulating company, very interesting person. But we don't see that much of him because he just doesn't come into town that much anymore.

GOODWIN:

I would imagine that you have a lot in common, that you both have a very theoretical and historical interest in contemporary art.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. That's right, and Motherwell also has a degree in philosophy, and he has a very philosophical approach to art. He's one of the few artists I ever met who really is interested in aesthetics and in art values and in philosophical issues. Most artists, curiously enough, really aren't. They're intuitive, they are

interested in external stylistic characteristics of work and in quality. Most artists can certainly recognize quality, but when you start talking to them about "what is art," and are art values fixed, or do they change as society changes—all those kind of basic but quite interesting questions, most artists are not terribly interested in them. That's been my experience, in any case. So when you find one [an artist] like Motherwell who is, then it's very gratifying and very enjoyable to talk about it with them. Dick Diebenkorn has some philosophical interest in art, too, what one might call sort of formal aesthetic interest; but it's fairly unusual, most artists don't.

GOODWIN:

That's interesting. I just found out for the first time that both those artists were Stanford students.

PHILLIPS:

That's right, I don't know if it's—I think it's probably just coincidental, but it does happen, it is true in both of their cases. Motherwell of course went on to take the Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard, after Stanford. Dick didn't do anything like that, but Dick has a very great deal of curiosity about art, and where it comes from and where it's going, and wherein its quality resides, and is interested in all of this, once you draw him out, is very interested in exploring these questions with you. But as I say, that's rather unusual in my experience. Most of the other artists I know, their interest in it is very minimal. Artists also go through different periods of being more or less verbal. The abstract expressionists, on the whole, were rather nonverbal. Motherwell was a great exception, but artists like de Kooning and Kline and Pollock and so forth tended to be rather nonverbal. They could articulate on occasion, but they weren't terribly interested in it. Even Rothko was more intuitive in a sense. They had strong opinions, but their opinions were usually kind of in defense of their own work, very much shaped by their own work. They were rationalizations of their own work. They were rationalizations of their own work more than they were well-thought-out, philosophic statements about art. The next generation that came along tended to be more articulate, I think—the Johns, Rauschenberg group—and I think that's true of many of the artists of the seventies. One of the switches that's taken place, which I can observe over a thirty-year period of collecting and watching, the artists in the forties in this country, by and large the younger artists and particularly the avant-garde artists, the abstract artists, really felt that they hadn't been accepted into the academy, so to speak, and into highbrow art circles because, they felt, that most of the museum curators and most of the serious collectors preferred the European work and felt that American work, particularly the avant-garde work, was rather second-rate; and so they almost, in terms of the social personalities, they almost were apologetic about being artists. In fact if you were to meet

them, you wouldn't know they were artists. They didn't dress in an eccentric fashion, they were frequently very conventional. Some of them assumed a rather tough demeanor, so people wouldn't think they were oversensitive, frail creatures, and that was very true of the people like Pollock and Kline and de Kooning. The next generation, largely because the first generation had become so successful, really the Andy Warhols and the Jasper Johns and the [Robert] Rauschenbergs and Frank Stellas—that whole group—they all want to be taken as artists. The way they dress, their whole demeanor sets them aside; you could look at them, you'd know that they didn't belong to some conventional occupation. They don't wear berets, but they wear the equivalent of berets, and I think this kind of thing changes depending on how the artists sees his role in society and how he imagines other people are reacting to him.

GOODWIN:

You know, I would agree with that observation, and I think that the change toward artists seeking recognition has accelerated, almost to the extent that—

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

—the art matters less than the personality.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. Dick Diebenkorn told me something very interesting in that respect, which he'd observed in his twenty-five years of teaching. He said that twenty-five years ago his students, most of his students, didn't think of themselves as artists. They were people who wanted to learn, who liked to draw and who liked to paint, and who wanted to become better at it because it was fun, it was enjoyable. And then a number of them, probably a small percentage, but a significant number, who stayed with it and developed and became a lot better at a certain point, decided, yes, they were artists, and that was going to be their career, and they were serious about it, and so forth. They were professing artists, I guess you'd say. Today, he says that it's just turned around. The students decide very early that they're going to be artists, and then they spend a great deal of time deciding what they're going to do, because they're rather self-conscious about it and they want to do something that's original and that's going to establish them as brilliant and creative and innovative very quickly. They frequently don't do much of anything for a while, because they can't latch on to this great innovative style that they're looking for. But I've had a number of other artists making similar observations of that sort, and it does seem to be a real change.

GOODWIN:

Well, unfortunately, I think it seems that many people who don't fit anywhere in society end up being artists.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes.

GOODWIN:

It's a socially acceptable form of social nonconformity.

GOODWIN:

Yes, yes, yes. I think there's a good deal of truth in that. And it's become socially acceptable. It wasn't always. Of course, one of the things that's been a great boon to artists is the fact that universities now hire them. And that's relatively new; that's definitely a development since World War II. Prior to World War II most universities didn't give degrees in art—they gave degrees in art history, but not in art itself—you had to go to an art school to get that. That's changing, and as the universities start to teach art—studio art, so-called—teach studio art and give degrees in studio art, they have to find accomplished teachers. And most of the accomplished teachers tend to be the most accomplished artists, at least there is a close correlation. So they have, in the last twenty years, employed a great many of the artists, which has been economically very helpful for the artists, because they're not as dependent as they used to be on having always to sell their work. So there's no question that the number of artists in our society has enormously proliferated. You probably have a better idea than I would how many artists there are in Southern California, but the number is—

GOODWIN:

Hundreds and hundreds.

PHILLIPS:

—well up in the hundreds. And all of them at least professing to be serious artists and hopeful of getting their works into museums and private collections.

GOODWIN:

Well, I think the absurdity of the situation is exemplified by Chris Burden.

PHILLIPS:

Oh yes.

GOODWIN:

Who teaches at UCLA.

PHILLIPS:

Oh yes, exactly, exactly.

GOODWIN:

What does he teach [laughter]?

PHILLIPS:

Exactly, it's impossible to tell. Somebody who goes out and [whose] art consists of bedding down in the County Museum for a month or crawling through spiked pieces of cut glass—very masochistic—what do they teach? I don't imagine he teaches his students to do things like this, [laughter] Well, it is a

curious development. And there's another thing; the universities have something now they call the "artists-in-residence" program. About ten years ago some foundation put up the money for Dick Diebenkorn to become the first Stanford graduate artist-in-residence at Stanford. So he moved back there for a year, and he asked the head of the art department what he was supposed to do as an artist-in-residence, and they were a little vague about it, and they finally said, "Well, just paint as you ordinarily would, but for a couple of hours a day open up your studio and let the students come in and watch you, and then you can answer some of their questions." And so that's what he did, and since he's a very private person and used to working in a solitary fashion, he found this very distracting. The students would come in and watch him paint, and he really found it quite unnerving. Then they'd start asking him questions, and he'd find it very hard to concentrate on his work. And finally I think he gave up trying to do anything very important? he just dabbled around while he was in the studio, and answered questions. Though all sorts of things like that haven't really been worked out, it's good that the universities are incorporating studio art and art training into their curricula and are employing a number of the vanguard artists, but it doesn't seem to me that they've really quite worked out how it should be done, how it can be done effectively.

GOODWIN:

One more question on collecting.

PHILLIPS:

Right.

GOODWIN:

Have you ever commissioned a work directly from an artist?

PHILLIPS:

We commissioned Oliver Andrews at UCLA to do a piece of cement sculpture for our children. Which he did, and it was quite successful. It was an enclosed form that they could crawl into, and then it had another section that looked like the bridge of a model boat they could climb up to, kind of a mast, and it was fun. But that I think is about the only time we've ever done that. Frequently, commissioned art in our times doesn't seem to be too successful. I don't know what the reason for that is, but it doesn't often result in the artists doing their best work. Maybe they're under too many constraints. They feel they have to do it the way the patron wants it. Most of the commissioned work is usually sculpture for a building, and in my observation a lot of this is not the best work.

GOODWIN:

It was in 1962, I think, that—

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

—your collection was exhibited at UCLA.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, it was.

GOODWIN:

And I think there were about 130 pieces in that show.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, that's right. I just found a catalog, I meant to bring it down.

GOODWIN:

How large is your collection today?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I think that it's about the same size; it may be a little larger, but in the last fifteen years we haven't collected nearly as rapidly, let's say, as we did in the first ten years. We've acquired some new works, but then we've also given some away. So I would imagine there's maybe around 150 pieces today. I haven't counted them, so I'm not absolutely sure.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (DECEMBER 17, 1979)

GOODWIN:

Now we will begin a discussion of museums.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

How did your involvement with the Contemporary Art Council of the County Museum begin?

PHILLIPS:

Well, that's an interesting story. The general feeling in the late fifties and early sixties among contemporary collectors in this community was that the museum had cold-shouldered them, that it really had shown very little interest in contemporary art and very little interest in getting to know the collectors of contemporary art. And I think that in fact really was the case. Since I didn't arrive in Los Angeles until the late forties, I'm uncertain why this is so and somewhat uncertain about the background, except that partly, of course, the County Museum in those days, as you remember, was part of a larger unit that was also a natural history museum. It covered such a wide spectrum of collectibles between natural history and all periods of art that modern art, I guess, seemed to them to be a very small, insignificant area. In any case there was a very minimal interest, and I think that the prevailing conventional wisdom at the County Museum as of, say, the late fifties was that there really weren't any important contemporary artists in California, and that most of the people who collected art of this kind were doing it because they didn't know

any better, or couldn't afford to buy more significant work. Then when Jim Elliott came to town (he succeeded Jimmy Byrnes as curator of modern art), in the late fifties he became interested in trying to improve the relationship between the museum and the contemporary art community, a relationship which at that time was practically nonexistent I would say.

GOODWIN:

Was there any organization within the collectors of contemporary art?

PHILLIPS:

Nothing, there was nothing at all. So he initiated some discussions between himself and a half a dozen of the contemporary art collectors, and out of this came a plan to form a contemporary art 1; in fact that became the name of the organization, the Contemporary Art Council of the Los Angeles County Museum. It was thought that in this group each member would contribute a significant amount of money in dues, and that money then would be used to finance acquisitions and exhibitions of contemporary art at the museum, and in return for this beneficence the members of the Contemporary Art Council would be treated to a certain number of lectures and parties and openings and so forth that would be exclusive to them. The plan was set into operation, and I was elected the first chairman of the group.

GOODWIN:

Was the council modeled after any specific group elsewhere?

PHILLIPS:

I belonged at that time to the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, and there was some similarity of the two organizations. In both instances they paid in rather large dues, the feeling being that this wasn't going to be, this was never going to be a very large group. It really wasn't so much that it wanted to be exclusive per se, but since we did anticipate that we would 'have a number of small discussion groups at private homes, we really didn't want it to get too large. And yet we wanted to raise a significant amount of money, so it was rather geared toward the fairly affluent collectors. We asked for \$500 contributions, which at that time seemed like quite a lot, but it did give the museum a significant amount of money. I think the first year we raised \$15,000 or \$20,000, and this was a significant amount of money, more money than the museum had ever had before with which to buy contemporary art.

GOODWIN:

What year would this be?

PHILLIPS:

This would have been about around 1960, '59 or '60, '58—the late fifties or early sixties.

GOODWIN:

It was before plans for an independent art museum were formulated?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes, it was. It was before the plans were formulated. Although I think they were kind of in the air, they were in the offing, but they hadn't been realized yet. Well, we acquired some California and some New York [art]. One of the best pictures we got, I remember, was a painting by Philip Guston, from the Dwan Gallery, we acquired an early Frank Stella, one of those black and white Frank Stellas [*Getty Tomb*], which was a very handsome picture. I'm trying to think what else we acquired—a Hassel Smith, as I recall; but over the years the council has really acquired a number of very good things for the museum. I don't honestly think they're terribly well displayed down there, but the Museum has the nucleus of quite a strong collection now which I don't think it would ever have had if it had not been for the Contemporary Council. I haven't been active in the council for the last five or six years, but I always had the feeling the board of trustees regarded it as a kind of a stepchild; they never really seemed to accept it as an important component of the museum operation. I always felt we were sort of out in left field.

GOODWIN:

That's because nobody on the board was particularly interested in contemporary art?

PHILLIPS:

That's right, no one on the board was particularly interested in contemporary art.

GOODWIN:

Nobody on the board was a member of the council.

PHILLIPS:

That's right, that's right. In later years Michael Blankfort, who was one of our members, was put on the board. That's been fairly recently.

GOODWIN:

Who were some of the earlier members of the council?

PHILLIPS:

Well, the nucleus of the founding members, besides Joann and myself, were the Weismans, Marcia and Fred Weisman; the two sets of Sherwoods, the Harry Sherwoods, and the Dick Sherwoods; the Hirsches, Pauli and Mel Hirsch; Betty Freeman; the Gershes, Phil and Bea Gersh there were about six or seven. I think Vincent Price was member for a short time, but he was never very active. In some ways, the council was at its very best during that early period, because everybody who was in it at that time was already a serious collector, and they were really interested in trying to stimulate the museum into doing more. My sense about it now is that they're getting a different type of member; they're getting younger members who are not yet collectors, who are joining the organization because they want to learn something about contemporary art. The

meetings aren't as interesting as they used to be because the level of knowledge isn't as high as it used to be. You get, frankly, a lot of rather dumb questions that are asked of the speakers, but I guess this sort of thing is inevitable. But it has been I think, from the museum's standpoint, a very successful organization and now has I think around eighty members, you probably know better than I do.

GOODWIN:

That sounds about right.

PHILLIPS:

They've always had husband-and-wife memberships. I don't think it has ever been entirely successful, for reasons you've just noted: I don't think the museum trustees and top staff members really accepted the Contemporary Art Council as an important component of the museum organization. I think they have ten or twelve councils down there: the Costume Council, this council, and there's a sort of Women's Auxiliary Council, kind of a junior League type, and I always regarded the Contemporary Art Council as having a much more important function than these other councils. But I think the museum board tended to feel that this was just another council. I can remember trying to persuade some of the trustees who I knew that it was really important because Los Angeles had become such a very important art center, with so many artists living out here, there were a number of dealers, and there were a number of collectors, and that the whole contemporary scene was one that the museum shouldn't ignore and really should take more seriously; but I never felt that I was at all successful in putting over this point of view.

GOODWIN:

What do you think the founding members of the council had in common that made them collectors?

PHILLIPS:

Well, they had an interest in contemporary art, and I suppose what goes along with that is a sort of adventurous spirit, a willingness to take chances, because even as late as the late fifties, collecting American abstract art was still kind of a risky business. I mean, it involved making a personal statement and saying, "I think this work is important, and I'm going to stake whatever reputation I may have as a collector on this kind of work, that it is important, that it's going to last." I think that the collectors of that period were an adventurous kind of people and were willing to go out on a limb in behalf of the commitments that they made, and I think that drew everybody together. Plus it was a very exciting period in art. That was right at the zenith of the first generation of New York School painters, and I think that everyone in it felt that excitement at that time.

GOODWIN:

There had been a group called the Modern Institute of Art in Beverly Hills.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, that was before my time, but I've heard something about that. They were trying to interest Edward G. Robinson in that. Didn't he have something to do with that?

GOODWIN:

And Vincent Price.

PHILLIPS:

Vincent Price, yes.

GOODWIN:

Walter Arensberg.

PHILLIPS:

Walter Arensberg, yes, yes. Well, of course the museum struck out on both the Robinson and the Arensberg collections. And that was one of the ways Jim Elliott was even able to persuade the board of trustees. When he went to the board about this idea of the Contemporary Art Council, they were very lukewarm about it, and the argument he used to finally persuade them was that they had let the Arensberg and the Robinson collections slip away, and that it was quite possible that there would be some very important collections in the making which they would try to keep.

GOODWIN:

He was right.

PHILLIPS:

That's right. And that they shouldn't let this happen again. And I guess enough of them agreed with him that they were willing to try it. I think the first time they voted it down, and then he managed to persuade them for rather materialistic reasons, I think, that they had made a mistake. I've forgotten what happened with that proposal in Beverly Hills, but it apparently never really got off the ground.

GOODWIN:

Well, I think it lasted a year or so.

PHILLIPS:

Did it?

GOODWIN:

And then folded. But it was an older generation of collectors.

PHILLIPS:

It was an older generation; yes, that's right. That's right, probably just a little too soon for it. You really can't tell.

GOODWIN:

Was there any competition between the Contemporary Art Council and the Pasadena Museum?

PHILLIPS:

There was some.

GOODWIN:

In its early stages of the council?

PHILLIPS:

I'm trying to think of the sequence of events. My recollection is that the Contemporary Art Council got under way in the late fifties and at that, time the Pasadena Museum hadn't really yet gone into its all-out contemporary phase. They were acquiring some contemporary pictures, and they had an occasional, but usually rather modest, contemporary exhibition. It started to accelerate, it seems to me, by the early sixties, if I remember correctly. You may have an even better hold on these dates than I do.

GOODWIN:

I have a few dates in mind.

PHILLIPS:

But I think at the time the Contemporary Art Council was formed, there wasn't really all that much activity in Pasadena? that was to come later, but not all that much later.

GOODWIN:

Why wasn't there interest in collecting contemporary art or twentieth-century art in Pasadena, as opposed to the west side of Los Angeles?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I think the whole Pasadena story is a very strange one. There really was never very much interest in it over there, let's say it was never very widespread, and yet it became one of the most prestigious, important avant-garde museums, really not only in California, but in the country. And that this anomaly should really have developed in Pasadena under the most unlikely circumstances is one of those quirks of history.

GOODWIN:

It really seems like a fluke.

PHILLIPS:

It's a fluke, it's really a fluke. Somewhere along the line the museum had decided that it should specialize in contemporary art. I don't think the trustees, who again were rather a conservative group, quite understood the significance of it, but I think that two or three people who were interested in contemporary art—certainly Bob [Robert A.] and Carolyn Rowan were almost singlehandedly the only really dedicated collectors over there, and so I think they were always very influential, in the early phases particularly. But the trustees became convinced that since the County Museum was so all over the map and was trying to be the Metropolitan of the West, and so forth, that the role for the Pasadena Museum was to focus on contemporary art. It was more a division-of-labor kind of thing than it was a sign of any real burning interest in

contemporary art among the trustees or in the community. Which in fact never existed.

GOODWIN:

Why were the Rowans sympathetic to contemporary art?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I had something to do with getting them started? I would say Paul Kantor and Joann and I really got them started on it, although they were art collectors, but they had School of Paris and pre-Columbian. Their interest grew very rapidly, and they were well-to-do. I had a feeling that they were always a bit alienated from the County Museum. I don't think it entirely had to do with art questions? I think it had to do a little bit with the rivalry between communities. I think there was a feeling that Pasadena represented the old culture, and it is a separate city from Los Angeles, and they just never really wanted to become part of the County Museum. I think they were looking for reasons to establish something separate. By the mid-sixties or so, the Rowans and one or two others over there—the Terbells, Tom and Melinda Terbell, and I'm trying to think who else, there were just a handful of them—had become important contemporary collectors, and they felt that Pasadena would be the place to do it; I think for the reasons, as I say, [that] there was this sort of separatism from the County Museum, and there was the fact that the Pasadena Museum had decided to become a contemporary museum, more for almost methodological reasons than out of any great conviction. Because the County Museum was, as I say, encompassing a much wider area, they had decided to specialize and anyway, if you put these two tendencies together, what came out was something rather extraordinary, which was this rapidly growing, very avant-garde museum in this very conservative community. And it was aided and abetted by the fact that the County Museum at the board level or at its top administrative level never really full-heartedly got behind a contemporary program. They always rather equivocated on how serious they were about it, and that gave Pasadena an opportunity to get out in front, which they did.
[laughter]

GOODWIN:

What was the atmosphere in Los Angeles, and I suppose, Pasadena around the time of the opening of the new County Museum? Was that a great period of optimism?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes, that was a great period of optimism. That was in the mid-sixties, and of course there was a great deal of prosperity in the country at large. The stock market was booming, and it was a relatively easy period to raise large amounts of money.

GOODWIN:

There was a kind of a culture boom throughout the country.

PHILLIPS:

There was a culture boom throughout the country. Museums all over the country were building new buildings or adding lavish new wings, and it was going on all over the country. The boom frequently took a rather materialistic shape; I mean more money was usually spent on buildings than on either paintings or personnel.

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

But there was no question that those were the cultural boom years, and I can remember the gallery scene in Los Angeles was booming. I think in fact there were more galleries then than there are now, and more successful ones. The whole atmosphere, was charged with optimism at that point.

GOODWIN:

Is there one event that symbolized the mood of the time, of the mid-sixties?

PHILLIPS:

I remember the museum had a very large opening. Actually we were in Washington that year and we didn't come to it, but we read about it. It got a great deal of coverage in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, and there were glowing accounts of the new museum. Then I remember coming back and being very disappointed in the building because I had read these glowing accounts and architecturally, it didn't live up to what we had hoped and expected it would be.

GOODWIN:

Can you think of a party, or—

PHILLIPS:

No. I can't.

GOODWIN:

—a gallery opening?

PHILLIPS:

I can't think of any one event except perhaps the opening of the new building, where they invited celebrities from all over the country, critics and artists and collectors to attend. That would come the closest, I think, to what you're referring to.

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

But a lot of the galleries had openings. Frequently every artist had a cocktail party before the opening, and wine and liquor flowed very freely. It was a very

lively, upbeat period, and it lasted about, oh, five years, I think, and then a recession seemed to set in. [tape recorder turned off]

GOODWIN:

Was there a plan as far as the development of the modern art department once the museum opened?

PHILLIPS:

Well, there had been. One of the plans was to employ a contemporary curator, and Maurice Tuchman, who is the present curator, was employed in the mid-sixties, and Jim Elliott was promoted to I think assistant director. But in effect it really didn't change the situation all that much because Elliott just became less active and was replaced by Tuchman. But about five or six years ago the budget was increased to an extent that enabled Tuchman to employ an assistant. That's about all the plan consisted of, I think, some expansion of staff. Of course for years there's been hope entertained that a new wing would be built on the museum that would house just contemporary art, because the exhibition facilities of the museum are extremely inadequate. They're right now divided into two places on the third floor of the—what's the name of the oil man?

GOODWIN:

[Armand] Hammer.

PHILLIPS:

The Hammer Gallery, and on the third floor of the Ahmanson Gallery. Neither exhibition space is really adequate, and it's very bad to have the contemporary collection split up like that.

GOODWIN:

Was there a dream, at least, that the museum could build a comprehensive collection of twentieth-century art? Highlights of a comprehensive collection.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I think there has been a slow growth; I think that a number of the Los Angeles collectors would have gotten behind the museum program if the space were better, and they still would. I think that it's been very inhibiting to donors because of the very inadequate exhibition space. And I think they've also felt that that was kind of symbolic of the lack of interest down there, of an unwillingness to give contemporary art any real priority. Right now, as you probably know, there's been a gift of \$3 million from Atlantic Richfield Company, with of course the condition attached that it be matched, and there seems to be a good deal of optimism that the other \$3 million will be raised, and I haven't been close enough to it recently to know whether that optimism is really warranted or not. In the past, efforts to raise that kind of money haven't been awfully successful, but a so-called—what do they call it?—a challenge grant sometimes does stimulate donors to give in circumstances where they

wouldn't ordinarily do so, so perhaps this is going to be the lucky time for them.

GOODWIN:

It seems that the County Museum has emphasized major exhibitions.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

Almost at the expense of building a permanent collection.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I think so. I think they've tried to build a permanent collection; but they really have to rely to a large extent on gifts, they don't have the acquisition funds. Now this is not unusual; there are not very many museums in the country that have really abundant acquisition funds. Cleveland Museum, the Metropolitan, the National Gallery—that's about it. I guess perhaps the Chicago Art Institute; I don't know that situation too well. But it's surprising that with even the largest museums, inflation has taken such a toll that, by the time the overhead is paid, there's very little money left over for acquisitions, and so there's an increasing tendency to depend on gifts, which is unfortunate I think because it means the museums miss a lot of opportunities in collecting contemporary works; they're not positioned to move in and buy work at the most propitious time. They end up having to pay more for it than they would otherwise. But again I think the main reason for the lack of success at the County has been the failure of the board to make a really important financial commitment for space, because I think with more space that it would be then much more possible to get gifts from local collectors. Now we'll see what happens with this current program and if that proves to be the case. But I think there's been a reluctance on the part of the collectors to commit their collections to the museum because of the very inadequate exhibition facilities.

GOODWIN:

Was the Contemporary Art Council responsible for hiring Maurice Tuchman?

PHILLIPS:

It was—that's a good question. It was certainly responsible for the idea of hiring Maurice Tuchman, but it had very little to do with the actual selection of Tuchman or with the job description or anything else. That's partly because of the civil service that pertains at the museum; everything has to go through a bureaucracy down there and has to be fitted into the civil service system. And they have to take exams, and so forth, and so on. The result is that the Contemporary Council really didn't play very much of a part in the actual retention of Tuchman, although it was a strong promoter of the idea of a contemporary [curator].

GOODWIN:

Did you interview candidates for the job?

PHILLIPS:

I never interviewed anyone, but I think that by that time I was no longer chairman; I was chairman for, I think, five, six years, from about '59 to '64. Well, I quit in about '64, and I think I'd been chairman for five years, so the council must have started in '59. But I think there were some other members of the council who did—I think Betty Freeman perhaps interviewed several people, and I have a feeling that Harry Sherwood, who was my successor as president, may have interviewed some people; I think perhaps the Weismans did. I'm not sure whether they were formal interviews or whether they were just a case of certain people touting certain candidates. Tuchman was not one of them; he was a rather junior curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and I don't think anyone knew him. So his selection, I believe, was made entirely by the then director, Richard Brown. I don't know whether the county supervisors participate in these kind of decisions or not.

GOODWIN:

Well, how would you evaluate Tuchman's tenure at the museum?

PHILLIPS:

Well, he has some strong points and some not-so-strong points.

GOODWIN:

That's a diplomatic answer.

PHILLIPS:

I'm afraid it's not really a diplomatic response, but I think it is the truth. He's energetic, he has put on some good shows, he put on the New York School show, he put on that rather interesting "Art and Technology" show. Frankly I have the feeling that he worked harder at his job during the early years than he has recently; that he's kind of lost interest in it, that he's perhaps become discouraged by the lack of support on the trustee level, and I don't think, frankly, he found the leadership provided by Kenneth Donahue (who has been the director during this period and has just retired, as you know) very inspiring. I have a sense of Tuchman that he has done a good bit of travelling. Incidentally, the Contemporary Art Council puts up a good deal of this travel money, and there's been some grumbling among some of the members that this wasn't really the purpose of their putting up the money, for him to travel as much as he does.

GOODWIN:

Doesn't the council also pay a supplement?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes, it quite liberally supplements his salary, because again under the civil service there's a ceiling, and it supplements it quite significantly. Then the second thing is that his personality rubs a number of people the wrong way;

they feel that he's abrasive. Some people I think feel that he's too political. He kind of glad-hands the people he thinks are important and rather ignores the people that he doesn't think are important, and I think there's some truth to these allegations. But at the same time, he is quite bright, he's quite gifted, he's very articulate. I have a feeling that he wouldn't be such a bad curator if he had better direction than he's getting. He came in as a very young man, I think he was still in his twenties, and he was used to working in a much more structured situation, the Guggenheim, where he had very able people helping him with development. I don't think he's ever had this in Los Angeles; he's always been kind of cut adrift and it's been unfortunate for him, I think, and as a result I don't think he's developed nearly as well as he might have. And I think that particularly among the older members of the council, who have seen him in action, that there's a good deal of dissatisfaction; I think some of the younger members who, I'm tempted to say, don't know him as well, don't know him quite so well, are more impressed with him. He's also extremely combative; his tactics with the board and with Donahue have been to oppose them and to be contentious. Some of that has been justified because certainly, as I say, their interest in contemporary art has been lukewarm, and I think he has sensed that. But a more diplomatic approach might have been more successful. At least his approach doesn't seem to have yielded very much in the way of results, other than making himself rather unpopular? he's apparently very unpopular with the board now.

GOODWIN:

The board of the County Museum?

PHILLIPS:

Yes. This is obviously in my case secondhand information, since I'm not a member of the board. But I certainly get that strong impression.

GOODWIN:

Well, it seems that there's been a general turnover in the membership of the council. The founders are no longer active.

PHILLIPS:

The founders are no longer active, that's right. The current president is a very nice fellow named Gil Alkire, who is a professor of Russian language at Occidental, and I don't think he really knows anything about contemporary art at all, not a collector, or if he's a collector it's on a very small scale.

GOODWIN:

I know the Weismans, that's true, they're—

PHILLIPS:

The Weismans, yes. I think that I could make the flat statement that there aren't any important collectors that are active in it anymore. And I think the reason

for it is that they don't feel that the council has had the influence with the museum that they had hoped for.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (DECEMBER 17, 1979)

GOODWIN:

I was going to comment that unfortunately it seems that the story of the County Museum is ultimately discouraging.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. Ultimately discouraging, although in the long run I am inclined to think that the situation will improve, simply for the reason that there's so much interest in contemporary art in Los Angeles, there's so many collectors, there's so many dealers, there's so many artists, that it's bound to be reflected in the museum sooner or later. [laughter] But I look back, and it's almost twenty years now since the founding of the Contemporary Art Council, and considering that Los Angeles I think is second only to New York City in the number of collectors, artists, dealers, galleries, et cetera, in the contemporary field, there really hasn't been as much progress made as there should have been. Now it looks to me like the museum may be right on the verge of some important expansion program in the field. But I think one would have to say, and I think that there would be a consensus of agreement on this point, not only among the collectors but among the artists and the dealers and the writers and so forth, that up to now the performance down there has been quite disappointing, considering the potential in the community. It indicates when you have the wrong kind of direction how a program can be stymied or held back.

GOODWIN:

At this moment the County Museum seems to be at its crossroads; it will have a new director, hopefully.

PHILLIPS:

That's right, it's very much at that. I think just as we are recording this, it's very much at its crossroads, and you should ten years from now make another tape, if not with myself then with somebody else, and see what the situation is.

GOODWIN:

OK. [laughter] Well, let's shift gears and talk about Pasadena in more depth. How did you initially become involved with that museum?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I really rather resisted it, becoming involved, because I did have the involvement with the Los Angeles Contemporary Art Council of the Los Angeles [County] Museum, and really had reservations about the viability of a contemporary avant-garde-oriented museum in Pasadena. I also felt that the base of support over there was really too thin, but I guess I say that I ultimately

succumbed. [laughter] That's the right word in more ways than one, too—succumbed somewhere around the early seventies, because I was so discouraged with the lack of progress at the County Museum and I was impressed with what the Pasadena Museum had been able to do. They had mounted a very impressive program, and they had several excellent directors. They had Tom Leavitt, they had Walter Hopps, and then Bill Agee—I think all of very high caliber. Tom Leavitt went on to be director of the gallery at Cornell, where he is now, which is a very important gallery, and for two years he was head of the National Endowment's Museum Program. Walter Hopps is with the Smithsonian's art operation, has an important position. So they had high-caliber people; they seemed to have a real commitment. They built a new building which, though somewhat controversial, nevertheless had very adequate space, very commodious space for art, I mean, far exceeding anything that the County Museum was able to provide. There were, over a period of years, starting in the mid-sixties and on, a series of very important exhibitions: [Marcel] Duchamp, and Jasper Johns, and a number of others. I think one could not help but be impressed with what was going on. And at the same time if one were discouraged with what was going on at the County Museum, I guess it was inevitable to be drawn into the Pasadena orbit, and that's what happened to me. After having said no about six times, I finally said yes, and went on the board. First I became chairman of the acquisitions committee, and then from there—

GOODWIN:

Excuse me, when did you first go on the board?

PHILLIPS:

This would have been about '72, I think.

GOODWIN:

Weren't you on the board—

PHILLIPS:

That's right, I was on for a short time earlier, in the early sixties, I'd forgotten about that. I was really very inactive at that time. Eudora Moore was the president, and that was before there was a freeway connection all the way from Santa Monica to Pasadena, and it was really quite onerous getting over there. Again I had allowed myself to be persuaded to go on the board against somewhat my better judgement, and in this case, in the first instance, it was just a matter of logistics, it was so difficult getting over there. But I was on the board for—I think I served one term, during which I was very inactive, and then I got off. But the second go-round was quite different. I was very active, ultimately becoming president of the museum, and starting out as chairman of the Art Committee.

GOODWIN:

What were your duties in that capacity?

PHILLIPS:

The Art Committee functioned very much, I think, as it does at most museums. The procedure at most museums is that the staff selects pictures that it would like to acquire, and also presents the gifts that have been offered, and then a trustee committee passes on it, usually following the advice of the professional staff people. The significance of the trustee judgement is frequently an either-or or a monetary thing; in other words we've only got so much money, do we take this or do we take that, we can't do both of them, and that kind of thing. The trustees under the law—it's something that many trustees really aren't aware of—the trustees are really trustees of the collection. They hold the collection in trust for the public, and that is under the law the main function of the trustees. Of course that does lead to a concern with the building because you have to have a building to house the collection properly, and it does lead to concern with budgets because you've got to be able to afford to keep it up, and so forth. But what's basic to the trustee responsibility to the museum is their responsibility to the collection, and they can't really delegate it. It's really important, in my mind, that trustees keep very close track of what's happening to the collection, what's being de-accessioned, what's being acquired, and so forth. And it's a responsibility that I think most trustees don't take seriously enough; that they tend to be much too involved with the purely administrative side of the museum. Anyhow, that's essentially what the Art Committee did at Pasadena.

GOODWIN:

Except you had very little money to spend.

PHILLIPS:

We had very little money to spend? we passed, mainly, on gifts, and frankly you usually don't turn down gifts unless they're very, very bad. Occasionally you turn down gifts if there's a sense that sometimes artists or, more frequently, patrons of certain artists will try to improve the status of an artist by giving a gift. Sometimes artists do it themselves, because they can say this artist is represented in such important museums? you'll find out that not infrequently, particularly with some rather minor artists, that the museum hasn't in effect purchased their works. The reason they're represented is because the museums have had these gifts offered to them, which of course they've accepted. And I think that since this is becoming a bit of a ploy on the part of some artists and some patrons of certain artists, trustees are becoming a little more wary of it, and staffs also. But on the whole, if gifts are offered there's a tendency to accept them.

GOODWIN:

Were you involved in the planning of the new facility?

PHILLIPS:

No, I wasn't involved in it, and rather to my regret, because I think that some things could have been done better. You're familiar with the building over there, it has certain controversial features? it's rather spread out. The charge has been made that it's an expensive building to operate, and I think it is relatively expensive. Some of the walls are slightly curved, and some of the curators have objected to that, the feeling being that valuable space was lost, and so forth. But my own opinion of the building is that (although I've never been crazy about the exterior of it? the exterior as you remember is tiled, and it always looked a little to me like a research laboratory) I've always rather liked the interior space, I think it opens up nice and has a certain elegance to it. But the really bad mistake that was made was that the building cost too much in comparison to the amount of money that was raised. They fell half a million dollars or more short, I guess almost close to a million dollars short and it ended up, by the time I became president, in—when was it?—'73, '74, somewhere around there, the museum had a negative endowment of about \$700,000. It owed \$800,000 on the building, and it had I think \$200,000 of endowment, so it ended up with a negative endowment of \$600,000. So you just put together all the components of this picture: first, a museum that's paying interest and is amortizing an \$800,000 loan? secondly, a museum that is under-endowed, in fact has a negative endowment, and therefore is totally dependent on the amount of money that it takes in? thirdly, a museum that doesn't take in very much money because it's in a community where it was very difficult to find patrons and very difficult to build an audience. It was also a museum, unlike the County Museum, that received no county support, so it was totally dependent, one might say, on the box office, on the attendance and membership receipts, and the attendance was so bad that I can remember, you know, in the mid-seventies, going over there and being the only one in the gallery. I remember going over to a show by [Jules] Olitski, which I think was in '75, and I was literally the only person in the gallery. I heard somebody walking and I thought, there's another patron, and I looked around and it was the guard. [laughter] Which was a shame. One of the anomalies of the Pasadena Museum is they always had these smash openings. All of the artists came, and in the sixties, as you remember, was a time when everyone dressed up in costumes. It was very affluent, and everyone wore these rather bizarre opening-night costumes, and the artists got dressed up in these costumes, and it was the period of hot pants and miniskirts and pop art, and it was very colorful. We had these marvelous openings and everyone would get very excited about the exhibition, and then you'd go over a few days later and there'd be nobody there. So it was really a sad situation.

GOODWIN:

Why was it so difficult to raise funds in a community that is very prosperous?
PHILLIPS:

I think the answer was entirely the character of the museum; there was never—yes, there was never a commitment to contemporary art on the part of the community, but most people in the community didn't equate contemporary art with avant-garde art. I mean contemporary art would be by just anybody who was painting or drawing in whatever manner at the present time, and I think that was how the policy was construed in the community, but was not the way it was being construed by the administration of the museum and the curators of the museum. And I can remember during my presidency there was an exhibition—what's the name of the artist?—Richard Serra, and it consisted of some very large logs, huge redwood logs that were piled up inside. [telephone rings; tape recorder turned off] It actually was a rather effective piece of what was known at that time as process art. Process art is an anti-formal type of art where objects, frequently "found" objects, whether man-made or natural, are removed from their original context and placed in a random fashion, letting the relationships between the various components accidentally appear. But it's the kind of sculpture—I should say, art concept—that's very advanced. I can remember somebody took me to a club, I think it was Bob Rowan, to the Valley Hunt Club (which is one of the bastions of the old Pasadena society) for lunch. It goes back to the days when they used to have fox hunting over there; of course they don't any more, no place to hunt, but it's a luncheon club, and it's still known as the Valley Hunt Club. As we were going up the elevator one of the businessmen turned around to Bob Rowan and said, "Can't you show anything in this museum other than those goddamned logs?" So that was I think somewhat typical of the kind of attitude the museum had to contend with, and it was really—I think it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say there was really a hostile—it went beyond apathetic—it was really a rather hostile attitude on the part of a lot of the people in the community toward the kind of exhibitions the museum was doing. So, as you know, this doesn't create the most receptive atmosphere for a fundraising drive.

GOODWIN:

In retrospect, do you think it was a mistake to plan to build either a lavish new facility or one at all?

PHILLIPS:

I have thought about that often and long since it was really under my tenure, as it turned out, that the museum changed directions, which was really never my intent but was an emergency measure to save what we had. I can't answer that question simply because I think that the museum had about ten years of presenting marvelous programs, and I think any institution that does that has performed a significant role in art history. We see that with art galleries, they

come and go, and they're not too many of them that last that long. It's rather different when you get a huge museum that has a large and diverse collection and it's well established; it doesn't play the same kind of role that a museum does that's very oriented toward the present. And institutions that are very oriented toward present events have a certain tendency to come and go. I think you have to say that the Pasadena Museum put on some marvelous exhibitions in the ten years it was active and performed an important educational role in the West, especially in the Los Angeles area, during a period when the Los Angeles County Museum was doing relatively little. It really did fill that void, and though it didn't reach a large audience, the audience that it did reach was a knowing, important audience. I mean it reached the audience that was devoted to contemporary art because nobody who wasn't devoted would make that trek over there. That's one side of the story, that's the positive side. The negative side is that it does seem a shame that with as much money and talent that was invested in the enterprise that it wasn't a little better thought out in the first place. It should have either been located in an area where it could reach a sympathetic audience, and that would have been on the west side of town, Beverly Hills or West Los Angeles, or it should have had a sufficiently large endowment so it wasn't dependent on the audience. But the combination of the two—the combination of being dependent on the audience and being in a part of the town that didn't have a sympathetic audience—was a fatal combination. The only thing that would have saved the museum would have been one of those windfalls that occasionally happens; I mean some millionaire appearing from left field suddenly and leaving the museum a couple of million dollars, but no such person appeared.

GOODWIN:

To what extent was Robert Rowan responsible for helping the museum survive?

PHILLIPS:

Well, a—I don't know if you ever saw that piece that *Artforum* ran on the Pasadena Museum at the time that it was in effect turned over to Norton Simon, but the writer, John Coplans, who had previously been a curator at the museum, rather cast Bob Rowan in the villain's role, rather said in effect that he hadn't supported it to the extent of his abilities. But I don't think that's entirely fair. I think that in the early days of the museum, certainly prior to the time that it moved into the new building, Bob and Carolyn Rowan were very generous in their support; and I think actually they continued to be quite generous in their support, but it was beyond their capacities. The deficit was \$200,000 or \$300,000 a year, this is without the interest and the amortization of the loan, and I think toward the end they did withdraw a bit, because I think they saw it as a kind of a hopeless situation. I don't think they did do quite as much there at

the end as they had been doing formerly, but no one I think can say over a period of time that they weren't very generous. The reason for the museum, or the blame for the museum getting itself into the financial hole that it did, as I have been able to reconstruct what happened, it was really more the bad judgement of the building committee. They had originally planned to build the building for \$3 million and raise a \$3 million endowment, and then when the building ran over budget, they simply forgot about the endowment and put all the money they raised into the building. And then they ran short a couple of hundred thousand dollars. Then one of the principal donors, a fellow whose name I can't remember, who had promised \$500,000, reneged because he didn't like the building, and they had neglected to get any real pledge from him in writing. Instead of a \$3 million building with \$3 million in endowment, which was the original plan and which, if attained, would have been a more viable situation, they ended up with a \$5 million building and an \$800,000 deficit, and that wasn't viable at all.

GOODWIN:

Can Rowan be faulted for not donating a large part of his collection to the museum, as far as setting an example for local collectors?

PHILLIPS:

Well, there isn't any question in my mind that he was prepared to donate a large part of his collection to the museum. I think when he saw that the museum had a somewhat precarious life, I think he pulled back, but never to the extent of committing his collection to anyplace else. I think it was always his hope and intention to give it to Pasadena, but I don't think he can be faulted for not actually signing anything on the dotted line when it became apparent that the museum's condition, economic state, was so precarious. It really would have been too much to have expected of one under those circumstances.

GOODWIN:

There was an effort to get the County of Los Angeles to bail out the museum.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, yes, my predecessor as president, Alfred Esberg, who was a Pasadena businessman, and a very able man—he was the president between Rowan and myself—initiated a campaign in the early seventies and the then supervisor for the Pasadena area was Warren Dorn, who had been a former mayor of Pasadena. He had some enthusiasm for the museum because it was a Pasadena museum. I don't think he knew anything about the kind of art they were showing, but I think his wife had worked as a docent over there at one time, and he did, to give him credit, he did undertake to get the support of the—well, he got the support of one other supervisor, I can't remember who that was, and so there were two supervisors for and two against. Ernest Debs's was the swing vote, and Debs and Dorn at that time used to collaborate rather closely, and so

Dorn thought he had Debs's vote, and it turned out he didn't. This came as a terrible blow to the museum because we really thought we had the votes. Frankly, there's always been some question as to why Debs changed his mind, and there have even been some threads that have led to none other than Mrs. [Norman (Dorothy)] Chandler. Debs had been Mrs. Chandler's principal support on the board of supervisors for the funds for the Music Center [of Los Angeles County], and the speculation—it's a little more than speculation I think, really, because we, Bob Rowan and I, talked to a Pasadena lawyer who had some connections with the Chandlers and was in the position to know, and he told us flatly that Mrs. Chandler had killed it. Not because she disliked the museum—I don't think she had any strong feelings about it one way or the other—but because she felt that it would take funds away from the Music Center, which also has an enormous deficit and gets most of its money from the county. She foresaw, and probably quite correctly, a reduced cultural budget on the part of the county. This was before Proposition 13, etcetera, but she was intuitively fore-sighted. I'm rather prepared to believe this story, because Franklin Murphy, who was then the president of the County Museum (as you know, former chancellor at UCLA), was for this plan, and he told Esberg he was for it, and I have no reason to think he was prevaricating, because he's a person who always liked neat tables of organization, and he saw Pasadena becoming the County Museum's modern wing. And indeed it would have made quite a bit of sense; the building was already built. His plan was to transfer Tuchman over to Pasadena and to simply close down the contemporary art program at the County Museum, which would have given them more space.

GOODWIN:

Right, it would have worked well at both places.

PHILLIPS:

That's right. And Murphy was very enthusiastic about it, and Murphy was close to Debs and—

GOODWIN:

And Debs represented the district in which the County Museum was located.

PHILLIPS:

That's right. Let's see, we had, I've forgotten the names—we had Dorn and we had one other supervisor who was very close to Dorn, he wasn't in our district, but he was in an adjoining district. It was sort of an outlying district, like the Newport district, one end of which is closer to Pasadena than it is to the County Museum, so he felt that some of his constituents would be interested in going over there. And so we had two votes. But then I remember Kenneth Hahn was very—he's sort of anti-art, and he thinks people can get along without art, and he was the main opponent. There was another one of the other supervisors who was definitely lined up with him, so it was a two-and-two situation. But

anyhow, without making too much of this, it did come as a real blow to us because we thought we had it and if we'd had it, the whole story would have ended very differently than it did.

GOODWIN:

Especially for Norton Simon, [laughter]

PHILLIPS:

Especially for Norton Simon, and everyone would have thrown garlands of roses around our necks instead of saying that we'd sold out to the nefarious Norton. But this wasn't to be,

GOODWIN:

Well, you had another idea about saving the museum, and that was an affiliation with the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. That was really a long shot. I had gone on the board of the Modern in 1966, so I had that contact, and Bob Rowan had been a member of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, so he knew a number of the people, and together we dreamed up this idea, at least to the extent of giving it a try. But this time, unfortunately, the Museum of Modern Art had already a rather substantial annual deficit, and they could only see this as adding to the deficit. They liked the idea, liked the idea very much. The Pasadena [Museum] would become the Museum of Modern Art of the West, and there would be some interchange of collections and of exhibitions. If the Museum of Modern Art had itself been in a stronger position, then I think there's a real possibility that, again, this plan might have worked. But the Museum of Modern Art was in a shaky financial position, and the trustees I think quite understandably didn't feel that they could undertake an expansion at that particular time. So with those two possibilities eliminated, it then became a mad hunt for angels and patrons, and the closest we found was an old lady by the name of Mrs. Crossett, who came from Boston, a sweet old lady, and gave us a couple of hundred thousand dollars every year. Due to Mrs. Crossett we were able to buy time, and we bought time, and with a little luck one of these other schemes might have worked, but Mrs. Crossett wasn't in a position to do this indefinitely. She was an Orientalist; I mean she wasn't really interested in the kind of thing we were doing. She was just doing it out of the kindness of her heart, because she had been a patron of the museum for many years. It was a very sweet, generous thing for her to have done, but we all knew that couldn't go on; it wasn't any permanent solution. We never did find any other patrons; we tried to lure some people over from the West Side—the Gershes and the [Stanley] Grinsteins and the Hirsches and several others that joined one of the support groups over there, and came to the opening and so forth—but I don't think they felt they were in a position, either, to give large sums of money. They weren't Pasadenans, and it

wasn't their principal interest, and it just didn't seem to be any solution. Finally it got down to the point where we had a couple of nibbles around the edges on the part of Norton, but it was very hard to know how to interpret it because he would indicate that, yes, he had some interest, and then the next day, no, he no longer had any interest, it wasn't going to work for him.

GOODWIN:

Was the Pasadena board approaching him?

PHILLIPS:

I think yes. I think the first overture may have come through Freddie Weisman. I think it did, I think it came through Fred Weisman that Norton might be interested. Fred Weisman, as you know, is a brother-in-law, and he was still quite active in the Pasadena Museum at that time. And so we approached him and—

GOODWIN:

What kind of a proposal?

PHILLIPS:

Just a straight financial proposal; you know, to come in and help out.

GOODWIN:

Help pay the bill.

PHILLIPS:

Help pay the bills, and of course he wasn't interested in that, he wanted to take over the whole museum, and that didn't appeal to us; so we were kind of at loggerheads. Then he decided he didn't want to do it at all, and there was about a year there where we had no contact at all. And then of course as the situation got worse and worse we were more ready to seek some kind of a compromise with him, and the main reason for that was that we were afraid that—I say "we," I'm really referring to Bob Rowan, Alfie Esberg, and myself—we were afraid that if the museum went bankrupt, the creditors would move directly and use the collection as collateral, and in fact we were so advised by attorneys that they could do this. And there was a real possibility you see, [because] we had no way of paying back that \$800,000; that was a point that a lot of outsiders never quite understood. I think if it had just been a matter of having to pay the operating deficit, that at least I, for one, would have voted for cutting way down, just opening three days a week and cutting out exhibitions, and just sort of hanging on.

GOODWIN:

Was there some thought of de-accessioning parts of the collection? Henry Seldis wrote an article about that.

PHILLIPS:

Not seriously, no. The only parts of the collection that were de-accessioned were in areas where the museum had some Oriental art, dating back to a period

when it was thought that it might have an Oriental wing; but by the time I became president, the decision had been made that the museum would be wholly devoted to contemporary art, so it was not unreasonable to de-accession the Oriental art.

GOODWIN:

In fact the title of the museum was changed under your administration.

PHILLIPS:

That's right; it was changed under my administration. There was a suggestion made by one of the trustees, not Rowan, Esberg, or myself, that there was a Picasso that was part of the Galka Scheyer Collection, but in a sense not an integral part of it because the Galka Scheyer collection was essentially a German expressionist collection. This collection had been left to us in trust, so we couldn't have sold the Picasso without the permission of the court. We would have had to have petitioned the court under whose jurisdiction the trust was, but as I say, the suggestion was made by a trustee that we petition the court to sell the Picasso.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (DECEMBER 17, 1979)

PHILLIPS:

Continuing on with our conversation, the suggestion had been made that the museum might petition the court to sell this Picasso out of the Galka Scheyer Collection. It was estimated at that time that we could sell it for well over a million dollars, and that would have eliminated our deficit. I gave it some serious thought and finally decided against it, because I felt that the publicity would be so damaging to the museum, that everyone would feel that we were de-accessioning art to pay for this white elephant building, and it would only compound our problem. But it would have—I'm not sure it would have saved the museum—it would have eliminated the deficit, and I think it would have enabled us if we had gone ahead with that plan, it would have enabled us to operate on sort of a shoestring basis for a while, until maybe at a later date the county came along. I think we could have held on if the county would have perhaps come along at some particular time and helped us out. But anyway that was another scheme that was ultimately voted down. I'm not sure it ever came to a vote? I think it was just discussed informally as a possibility. But the decision really to try to work out a deal with Norton came because we were really concerned about that \$800,000. We couldn't see how we were going to pay it off, and the specter of the museum going bankrupt, and the Union Bank—I've forgotten which one it was, but whichever bank it was—coming in and seizing the pictures and selling them at auction to pay the debt was just a horrible thought, you know. The museum, of course, would have lost the Galka

Scheyer Collection because the court would have taken it away under those circumstances, and it would have really dealt the museum a body blow. I think we all knew it was going to be the end of the contemporary program, that Simon would cut it way back. But he had an extremely distinguished collection. When I would discuss this plan confidentially with some of my contemporary collector friends, and they were horrified at the thought of it, and I would say, "You know, I share your sorrow and sadness that we can't somehow find some solution that would enable the museum to continue as a contemporary museum but," I said, "there is the other side of it, and that is that the San Gabriel Valley and the San Fernando Valley, which this museum is very close to, plus the Pasadena and South Pasadena area, where there are several million people living in an absolute cultural wasteland. I mean there's nothing out there, there are no cultural facilities in the San Fernando Valley, there are none in the San Gabriel Valley except a little gallery at Pomona, and there are literally hundreds of thousands of people living in little tract houses out there, with no cultural facilities, and the Simon Museum will be a wonderful resource for them." And that has proved to be the case; they really are patronizing the museum, and they love it. So, I mean, there is some loss, but there is also some gain.

GOODWIN:

Did you personally negotiate with Norton?

PHILLIPS:

No, I negotiated with a fellow by the name of Robbie MacFarlane, who was Norton's chief of staff, and I never saw Norton at all. He's a very strange man, refused to see us. I did most of the negotiating, but then I would go back to the executive committee for my instructions. Basically we were holding out for the best deal we could get in terms of, first, getting Norton to agree to commit to stay in Pasadena (there was a great deal of worry that he might go in there and pull out), and, secondly, that he would agree to take over the deficit, and, thirdly, we were trying to negotiate the best deal we could that he would agree to show and devote a certain amount of space to the permanent collection. And the best we were able to do was that he agreed for five years to devote 25 percent of his space to the permanent collection, which he has done. But now that the five years are up I think that's the end of it, except he shows the Galka Scheyer Collection, which is part of the permanent collection.

GOODWIN:

Well, what are his long-term commitments to using the facility of the former Pasadena Museum?

PHILLIPS:

Well, one thing you have to understand about this is that a lot of people think that he bought the museum, and that's not true. The museum was, before his

takeover, and still is after it, a public museum, and really all he did is he simply took over control of the board of directors, and he took over control of the board of directors by asking for the resignation of the old board and appointing a new board that is in effect a satellite board. That's really all it amounts to; he controlled it through the board, but as you know there are lots of—the model for this is the way a lot of corporations are controlled; you know corporations are controlled, publicly-held corporations, if somebody has, let's say, owns one percent of the stock in General Electric, he or she has a dominant position on the board of that corporation because most people don't own that much. They then use that dominant position to appoint other trustees who will be responsive to their leadership, and that's really what control amounts to, and Norton was simply using this corporate model, which is really what he did, to gain control of the Pasadena Museum. [tape recorder turned off] The board of which I was president was perfectly aware of this ploy, but we resigned because we felt that Norton could remove the museum from the threat of bankruptcy and could singlehandedly meet the deficit, which in fact has proved to be the case. So in answer to your question, he controls the museum. It's almost—what's that expression?—the tiger by the tail. You can see as a practical matter it would be very difficult for him to pull out. If he resigned, he'd leave a board of directors of his own choosing—

GOODWIN:

Including his wife.

PHILLIPS:

Including his wife, who would not be in a position to carry on, and it would reflect so badly on him that I don't think there's any chance of that. In the first place, it's a fine deal for him. I mean he has—what did it cost [J. Paul] Getty to build his museum? Seventeen million or something, and Norton has gained control of a museum without having to build a museum. No, he has spent a lot of money in fixing it up, he's put in a couple of million refurbishing that museum, so I mean he has money invested in it, but it's nothing like what it would cost him to build. But the public, on the other side of the coin, the public are benefiting from it too, and after all, museums are set up for the public.

GOODWIN:

Well, you remained a trustee in the Simon Museum for a few years.

PHILLIPS:

For about four years, and then I resigned.

GOODWIN:

What did you do, or what were you required to do as a trustee?

PHILLIPS:

Nothing; it was a rubber-stamp board completely controlled by Norton, and the board meetings were sort of ceremonial. We never made any important

decisions, we'd usually go over and we'd hear a little talk from Norton on some of the new acquisitions, and sometimes we'd end up with a couple of drinks, or he'd take us on a little tour of the museum. A couple of times we had a lecture; he had a fellow from Pomona that he liked very much who would come in and lecture on some aspect of the collection. But it wasn't a policy-making board at all, and that was one of the main reasons that Rowan, Esberg, and J. resigned, because we felt so foolish on the board. It wasn't policymaking; we were just a satellite board. The other seven members on the board were all close associates or sycophants of Norton, so they didn't object to this role, but we felt very foolish. Then there were a few other things that happened. We objected to the change in name. He changed the name from the Pasadena Museum to the Norton Simon Museum. I suppose in one sense that that even further ensures his staying there; however, Norton Simon doesn't own the Norton Simon Museum. We felt that the museum had been going for fifty a years under the title of the Pasadena Museum, and we voted against it, the three of us. Then we were disturbed about his loan policies; he refuses to loan out any of the pictures from the permanent collection, and still refuses, and his reason for this, his given reason, is that he's negotiating loan agreements with other museums and that he wants a quid pro quo, he doesn't want to loan these pictures out unless the other museums agree to loan him masterworks back, and that he hasn't found any museum yet that will give him the kind of reciprocity that he's looking for. But we—Rowan, Esberg, and I—were very critical of this policy, and on numerous occasions we brought the subject up with the board and were critical of the. very restrictive loan polio that the board was pursuing, but to no effect.

GOODWIN:

Did the Simon interests have any legitimate claim to the Galka Scheyer Collection, could it theoretically be withdrawn and given to another museum to oversee?

PHILLIPS:

Well, it probably could, it's an interesting point, because under the terms of the donation, the court has jurisdiction over it, and Galka Scheyer specified in the will that she wanted it left to a museum of contemporary art in California or the East, but California was her first choice, and it was given to Pasadena because Pasadena—let me substitute the word twentieth-century art for contemporary—she wanted it left to a museum of twentieth-century art, which ruled out the County Museum, and the court gave it to Pasadena because it was a museum of twentieth-century art. Now it no longer is a museum of twentieth-century art? it no longer has the title of the Pasadena Museum, it has the title of the Norton Simon Museum, so I think it would probably be within the jurisdiction of the court to take the collection away if they wanted to, but it seems unlikely that

they will. I mean it's being beautifully displayed, it fits in very well with Norton's twentieth-century works, and so I think it's unlikely, and he actually shows it more regularly than the old museum did, because in the old museum, most of the space was usually commandeered for contemporary art, and the Scheyer collection was shown sporadically, whereas Norton has it up all the time.

GOODWIN:

Why did Simon appoint himself director?

PHILLIPS:

Well, that's a good question; I think that he felt that he's very interested in how pictures are displayed, and which ones are hanging at a particular time, and he spends a lot of time changing them around, taking some down and putting others up, and that's really about all he does, and they don't have any other kind of program going over there, so he probably felt that as director he'd just do it, you know, he wouldn't have to go and say to somebody else, "I think you should do this," he could just give instructions to take certain things off the wall and have others put up, and he probably felt it would simplify his administrative problem, and that's the only reason I can think of. I don't think at this stage of the game the title means anything to him particularly.

GOODWIN:

How deep is his personal interest in art?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I think he's got a good eye, and I think he's really quite sincere. He's not my type of collector; I mean he's like a Frick or a Morgan, he wants to assemble masterpieces from the past, and there's a great deal of prestige, being rich enough to be able to buy them, and that's sort of in the Frick-Morgan tradition, but to give him credit, I think he's got a good eye and good knowledge.

GOODWIN:

I think he's got a good eye.

PHILLIPS:

I do too, and I think he's quite knowledgeable. I've walked around the museum with him a number of times, and he admires the right things, he is sensitive to how pictures look on the wall, he has ideas on how hangings can be improved, and as I say, he's very knowledgeable about the works of art, and he knows where they come from, and their provenance, and their histories.

GOODWIN:

Is art his major activity?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, he's inactive in the Norton Simon Company, has been for about the last six or seven years; he turned the active management over to a fellow named [David

Joseph] Mahoney, who is the present chairman. I'm sure he's still the majority stockholder, so he could probably reenter any time he wanted to, but I think he's voluntarily withdrawn.

GOODWIN:

Well, where do the funds come from to subsidize the museum?

PHILLIPS:

Well, from his foundations and from the Norton Simon Company.

GOODWIN:

Well, how is he able to do that, to take profits from the company and channel them into the museum?

PHILLIPS:

Well, for one thing, the company has a foundation, and so he can take funds out of the Norton Simon, Inc., Foundation. The Norton Simon Company is, I assume, quite profitable and so a lot of those profits go into the foundation.

GOODWIN:

It would seem to me, if I were a stockholder, that I was subsidizing a museum, rather than earning profits on my investments that were going directly to me.

PHILLIPS:

Well, I'm not quite sure how it works; I mean he may have set it up in such a way that the foundation may own stock in the corporation.

GOODWIN:

Oh, oh.

PHILLIPS:

You see, so the money comes directly into the foundation. I think that's what he did, I think he just turned some of his stock over to the foundation, so the foundation itself is a big stockholder. That's the way the Ford Foundation works; they own a big block of the Ford Company stock. Although they've diversified now, but that's how it started out. And then he has a number of other foundations, and he's endowed all of them, and so I don't think there's any problem with funding, there doesn't seem to be.

GOODWIN:

To what extent does he have a personal collection, say in his home?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, he has a personal collection. It's very complex; the pictures are owned by about three foundations, one of them being the company foundation, the other two being two that Norton set up outside the company, and Norton personally. As far as I know, nothing has been given to the Pasadena Museum.

GOODWIN:

That's what I thought.

PHILLIPS:

Everything's on loan, and that was one of the arguments that we used, one of the arguments that Rowan, Esberg, and I used as to why he should show more of the permanent collection, because we argued that it wasn't really proper to keep so much of the permanent collection in the basement and then to fill it up with loans from his company, and that if he gave these pictures to the museum, then they would be, in effect, part of the permanent collection, but they're not, now. And the answer was, which I got from Robbie MacFarlane because Norton didn't deign to give us an answer himself, was that there were tax complications to giving the pictures. I don't know what they are; it worked out better tax-wise, and that it didn't make any difference to the museum because they were on permanent loan there anyway, and it didn't make any difference to the public, who didn't know the status one way or the other.

GOODWIN:

You anticipate, though, that he will give the company collection, or the foundation collection, to the museum building, to the board?

PHILLIPS:

I think it's reasonable at this point to look beyond the point where Norton is no longer on the scene.

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

He's in his seventies, and he's truthfully not in the best of health. Of course he'll probably go on for years; [laughter] they always do.

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

But when Norton is out of the picture, the museum will be in the hands of the trustees of his foundations in effect. Right now he tells each of his foundations' trustees what he wants. Well, right now they're just rubber stamps, but once Norton's out of the picture then the trustees of these foundations will be calling the tune, and I think that the chances are they'll be persuaded that this isn't a very good way to run a museum indefinitely, but we'll have to wait and see.

GOODWIN:

Sounds like it'll be a mess.

PHILLIPS:

Well, the [state] attorney general, you know, has jurisdiction over, under the state laws, he has jurisdiction over all museums because they come under foundations and trusts and all fiduciary activities, and if the attorney general's office feels that the museum's being improperly run, the trustees aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing, they can step in and make some demands for some changes. So if you had an attorney general in there who was hostile to

Norton, it's quite possible that he could come in and say, "Look, this isn't right, you've got to show this permanent collection, or if you don't show it at least you should loan it out." But right now that's not the way it is. I think some of the artists are trying to interest the attorney general in it, but it's way down on his list of concerns; there are other things that he's more concerned about than that.

GOODWIN:

Well, I find it even strange that the Simon Museum is open so few hours a week.

PHILLIPS:

That's right, it's open a few hours a week.

GOODWIN:

I think it's unfair.

PHILLIPS:

That's right, that's right, it's open for a very short time.

GOODWIN:

Well, a new institution, LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art], was created—

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

—in the wake of the changeover at Pasadena. In fact I think Joann was an officer.

PHILLIPS:

She was the first president.

GOODWIN:

President.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

Is she still involved?

PHILLIPS:

She's not involved, but she was the first president and she was on the board for some time. The only reason she's not involved is that we've been living part of the year in New York, and she's not here all of the time. LAICA has become what's known as an alternative space, and there are a number of these now, scattered across the country. I think LAICA's one of the first. The conception behind this type of operation is that there are a number of new and emerging forms that haven't developed to the point where museums are interested in showing them. New modes, younger artists, and the idea of the alternative space is that the artists, some of these younger, more innovative artists are

themselves given a voice in the policies of the museum—of the institution, I should say—and that as a result the institution will be more interested in showing that kind of work, you might say very innovative work, or work that's still in process, that hasn't crystallized yet. GOODWIN; Do you take these alternative spaces very seriously?

PHILLIPS:

Well, I think they're an important contribution to the total art scene. I happen to have some personal reservations about some of the directions that just at the moment avant-garde art is taking, but these are to a certain extent my own reservations. I'm talking now about so-called conceptual art, intermedia art, art that kind of combines the performing arts with the visual arts. Perhaps the best-known examples are these so-called video programs, some of which are very interesting, but they seem to me to be a fairly radical departure from the traditions of painting and sculpture, and I'm not sure how well they fit into an art museum. I have reservations about that. They do performances; there's one place in New York called The Kitchen. The Kitchen is totally funded by government grants, and it's totally devoted to conceptual art, and one artist friend of my daughter's put on a performance there where all the actors were hypnotized, [laughter] And he went around whispering in the ear of the hypnotist to tell him how to hypnotize the actors. It was, you know, not an unassuming work in a way, but it was theater. I mean I couldn't—maybe I'm old-fashioned and think in these old categories which are perhaps passe, but it didn't seem to me to have anything at all to do with painting and sculpture or the rather traditional visual arts,

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

And that, of course, I think when Joann and I were originally interested in LAICA, we didn't quite conceive that it would go off in this direction. But the reason that it's gone off in this direction is that this is the shape of arts of the present avant-garde, I don't deny that, because these alternative spaces all over are showing performances and video and verbal art and so forth, but I think that there's a very small audience for this kind of work, and I don't think it solved the problem, really, of making modernist art, in the sense that we've been discussing on these tapes, more available to people, because it's so different, it seems to be such a departure from people who paint on canvas or sculpt.

GOODWIN:

It's much more esoteric than modern art.

PHILLIPS:

It's much more esoteric than modern art. Modern art, no matter even the wildest sort of abstractions of the last twenty, thirty years can be related to the art movements that came before them—

GOODWIN:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

—for their antecedents. Whereas this sort of intermediate work really isn't related at all. I mean it relates more to movies and to theater than it does to visual art. So it seems like very much of a departure. But LAICA doesn't show exclusively conceptual art; they do show some more traditional art too. And I think it's helped to round out the scene, but it's not a real substitute, in my mind, for a bona fide modern art museum.

GOODWIN:

Well, there are only a few minutes left on this tape, and I'd rather not get into the Museum of Modern Art.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

GOODWIN:

Maybe we could save it for—

PHILLIPS:

Maybe we can save it.

GOODWIN:

—the next time you're out here.

PHILLIPS:

I'm going to try to get out in February, maybe we could do it then.

GOODWIN:

That sounds good. We have about five minutes. Is that enough time to talk about the [Mark] Rothko Foundation? I understand you're involved with it.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I'd be glad to—

GOODWIN:

Describe your involvement.

PHILLIPS:

Describe it, yes. I had known Rothko, I think I had described on one of the earlier tapes that I had met him through Bob Motherwell; he was an extremely interesting person, caustic, cynical, but beneath this front very much of an idealist, and I always loved his work. We own two of his paintings. As you know, like many artists, he left his estate in terrible shape. The result was Marlborough Gallery was able to exercise a detrimental influence on the estate through its manipulation of some of the executors, to purchase a large number of the choicest pictures out of the estate for a very inferior price, and the result

was that the heirs brought suit, and it was a long protracted suit which the heirs eventually won, the heirs and the foundation. The foundation was represented by the attorney general of New York, and after the suit was won by the heirs and the foundation, the foundation board was reconstituted, and Marlborough was forced to return the paintings that they had acquired, and pay rather heavy damages. And the new board was concerned with two things Rothko wanted his foundation to do: first, he wanted the foundation to loan or give his pictures in coherent groups; he always felt that his pictures were more effective shown as a group rather than spotted around individually; and his second thing is he wanted to provide for artists, middle-aged artists particularly, who had fallen on hard times. So those are the two things that we're going to be doing.

GOODWIN:

Who are the current trustees?

PHILLIPS:

The current trustees are—Donald [M.] Blinken is the president, he's a financier, collector, and a Rothko collector; Dorothy Miller, who's a former curator of the Museum of Modern Art; Emily Rauh Pulitzer, who is a former curator from the St. Louis Museum; William Scharf, who is an artist, who was a close friend of Rothko's and also worked as his assistant for a number of years; and David Praeger, who is a lawyer and former president of the American Federation of the Arts and also a collector. There are just five trustees right now, but we're going to add to the board. And we're really just getting started because the litigation dragged on and on and on. We've just now divided up the pictures. Half to the estate and half to the foundation. And we did it in the simplest sort of way, which is that Kate Rothko, representing the heirs, and William Scharf, representing the foundation, got in a room and she chose one, then we chose one. And it turned out that, even though it sounds sort of simple-minded, it turned out to be the easiest and most effective way of doing it. Of course both sides had to do a good deal of research to start out with, so we'd know which pictures we wanted, if we could get them. But anyway it went quite amicably, and we now own half the pictures.

GOODWIN:

How many pictures are there?

PHILLIPS:

There were seven hundred altogether, so we have about three hundred and fifty, I guess. And the interesting part of it is just starting. The interesting part of it will be loaning these works out on permanent loan to museums. And then we'll probably sell a few to raise some money for gifts to artists who have fallen on hard times.

GOODWIN:

How long is your term of office?

PHILLIPS:

That's a very good question; I'm not sure. I can't say it's indefinite. That's a good question; I'll have to find out. I don't remember.

GOODWIN:

I think I've held you long enough.

Parent Institution | TEI | Search | Feedback

Date:

This page is copyrighted