PAT O'NEILL: AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviewed by Jane Collings

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CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Pat O'Neill is an influential Californian experimental filmmaker. After receiving his Bachelor's and Master's in Art from UCLA in 1962 and 1964 respectively, O'Neill taught at Mt. St. Mary's College and UCLA before becoming a founding faculty member and Associate Dean at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1970. His films have received worldwide acclaim, earning awards from the Ann Arbor Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, Los Angeles Outfest Film Festival, Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the American Film Institute, and Film Arts Foundation. He has received major grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. The United States National Film Preservation Board selected his film "Water and Power" for the Library of Congress National Film Registry.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER: Jane Collings, Series Coordinator and Principal Editor, UCLA Center for Oral History Research. B.A., Communications, Antioch College; M.A., Communications, University of Iowa; Ph.D., Critical Studies, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: O'Neill's home in Pasadena

Total number of recorded hours: 8

Persons present during interview: O'Neill and Collings

CONDUCT AND PROCESSING OF INTERVIEW:

Collings prepared for the interviews by viewing O'Neill's films, video work and paintings and reviewing material on the history and criticism of the avant-garde film movement in the United States.

Patrick Keilty, editorial assistant, compiled the table of contents. Collings assembled the interview history and supplied the spellings of proper nouns and the complete names entered in brackets in the text. O' Neill did not review the transcript and consequently some proper names remain unverified.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Library's Center for Oral History Research.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

November 19, 2004

COLLINGS: This is Jane Collings interviewing Pat O'Neill at his home in Pasadena on November 19th, 2004.

Good afternoon. Why don't we get started just where and when you were born.

O'NEILL: Oh, born, yes. I was born in Los Angeles Children's Hospital June 28th, 1939.

COLLINGS: Okay. Just a little after the Depression.

O'NEILL: Yes, ten years after.

COLLINGS: Do you have brothers and sisters?

O'NEILL: No, I was the only one.

COLLINGS: Oh, you were an only child.

O'NEILL: Yes, one kid in the sandbox. My folks— Well, my father would have been forty when I was born, and my mother was eight years younger; thirty-three, I guess.

COLLINGS: So your parents were mature grown-ups when you were born.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, I'll give you a little background about them. My father was born in Canada, in Manitoba, in 1900. His parents moved to Vancouver, British Columbia in 1907, I think it was. My grandfather [Thomas O'Neill] was a builder. Well, he started out as a wheat farmer. He was a prosperous wheat farmer in Manitoba and then he sold out there and moved to British Columbia as a builder. I don't know how he learned his trade, but as I understand, he was pretty adept at every

aspect of building. I don't know whether he was the architect, but he was a contractor, and they built big Craftsman, big wood houses in Vancouver, which was in sort of the best part of town. I have a picture of one of his houses, one that he built for his family that they lived in. They've all been torn down. As a matter of fact, Vancouver has grown so that the houses not only were torn down, but they were replaced with other houses and they've been torn down by the third generation.

I never knew him. He came to a sad end and became sort of— His later history was sort of blocked out, and it wasn't until my father was very old that I tried to get more information about— Thomas O'Neill was my grandfather's name. My grandmother was Maude. They divorced in about 1924, I think, and my grandmother came to Los Angeles and brought the family.

COLLINGS: Very unusual at that time.

O'NEILL: Yes, although I understand that he did come and visit a few times. They were not close. I think he was probably drinking very heavily. The only time I ever saw him was when I was about seven. We used to go up to Vancouver to visit aunts and friends and so on.

COLLINGS: That's quite a trek.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. Well, the whole family was used to sort of migrating back and forth. There were three children in my father's family, and he was the oldest, and his sister Doris [O'Neill] and his brother Graham [O'Neill], they all went to Normal School, which is teacher training school, and they all got teaching jobs. My father taught in a couple of one-room schoolhouses up in the far north of British Columbia, where I guess he was the single teacher for the whole community, he was it, at the age

of about twenty, I think. He also loved to fish and he loved to hunt, and he worked as a trapper in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Well, Prince Rupert was where he was fishing, but at other sites up there he was active.

COLLINGS: Did he make his own traps?

O'NEILL: Don't know. Probably not. Probably not. That was commercial stuff. But he had a boat and he had a partner and they fished for salmon. He loved that life and he always wanted to get back to it, but it was like he was always sort of bowing to practicality and so he went for the jobs that would benefit the best way. He and his sister went to UCLA when they came down here. In fact, it was kind of interesting, UCLA moved from—

COLLINGS: Vermont Avenue.

O'NEILL: —Vermont, from what's now the City College, they moved out to Westwood in 1930, '31, and my father was a student then and he got part-time employment during the move, so he helped on the trucks moving the library and things, which I guess '39 or so they opened.

COLLINGS: A founding member of the student body.

O'NEILL: Yes. There's interesting pictures of the place, a few of them.

COLLINGS: Yes, we had some interviews of people who talk about digging holes for the palm trees that are on Sunset Boulevard.

O'NEILL: Oh, really?

COLLINGS: Yes. The real early days.

O'NEILL: Yes. That's when there was a bridge that went in between where Moore Hall is and where the law building is. There was a huge ravine there.

COLLINGS: Right, right.

O'NEILL: Which apparently still exists and apparently there's an underground chamber.

COLLINGS: Yes, I think that there's some kind of underground tunnel that runs there.

O'NEILL: Something.

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: So anyway, he was busy doing that. The Depression was just a huge influence on him particularly, because I think probably that was sort of what wiped out his father ultimately. I think he was pretty leveraged and probably lost everything he had. My father was always anticipating another one of those events, he always felt it was going to happen that year, so he was very conservative, was very conservative in every way, but particularly financially. He didn't really believe in the money and was always hedging. And he did well, I mean he managed on— He was always either a teacher or later on he got to be an attendant supervisor. He got to be the guy that checked up on the kids that didn't show up at school. He did that for about twenty years. And he saved his money and finally when he retired, my parents built a house near the ocean, down near San Pedro, Palos Verdes.

COLLINGS: Oh, that's nice down there. I love it down there.

O'NEILL: Yes, it's a little overpopulated now, but—

COLLINGS: Well, it's nice because it's by the ocean, but it's not all glitzed up, you know, you feel like it's a real seaside—

O'NEILL: San Pedro is that way, yes. Palos Verdes is a little—

COLLINGS: Oh, Palos Verdes, did you say?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, it's near San Pedro. I identify more with San Pedro than with Palos Verdes.

So that was my father. My mother had a very interesting younger life. My grandfather on her side was a missionary for the Quaker church. Later he became a Methodist minister. But he got into the ministry sort of late in life, I guess, and he loved to travel and he saw this as a way to live in other places. My mother was born in 1908. They were in Mexico, in the town of Matewala, which I've never been to, but I understand it's a high-elevation mining town.

COLLINGS: That must have been interesting.

O'NEILL: They were in Mexico at the time of the revolution and had to leave rather suddenly because there was fighting going on in their town.

So my mother was one of five. She was a twin, had a twin brother.

COLLINGS: Oh, identical or fraternal?

O'NEILL: No, fraternal. She had a twin brother, an older sister, and two younger brothers. They left Mexico in 1915 and then subsequently they came back to the States. It's interesting how it happened. Apparently, my grandfather was already in the States for some reason, during some kind of church business or something, I imagine, and the borders were closed, and the family was there and there was fighting going on. And apparently my grandmother got everybody rounded up and onto a train. They came out to Veracruz on a flatcar, which is quite an adventure.

COLLINGS: Two very enterprising grandmothers, it sounds like.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. My grandmother, their family name was Holding, Raymond Holding, and Minnie Holding. My grandmother was just a very, very hard-working woman. She took care of these kids.

The next step was that they got a mission in Cuba, Oriente Province in Cuba, the town of Banes. They went there in about, well, I guess 1913 or '14, and they were there for another seven or eight years.

COLLINGS: Oh, so your mom really kind of grew up in Cuba, then.

O'NEILL: Yes, she grew up in Cuba. Well, she had Spanish from birth, so she was fluent in Spanish and in English. Then they left Cuba and came back, and they were in Indiana for a while and then in Oregon, and then in California they had a church up near Bakersfield in the little town of Goshen.

COLLINGS: Oh yes, I've driven past it up there, yes. That's where the Cristo [and Jean-Claude] installation on the hills was a while back, do you remember?

O'NEILL: Oh, really?

COLLINGS: In Goshen, yes.

O'NEILL: I didn't know that.

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: Then they were in Orange. My grandparents also broke up. It's curious, I never even thought about it [unclear].

COLLINGS: That's curious, isn't it?

O'NEILL: Yes. Apparently, Raymond was having an affair and my grandmother threw him out. He died in 1938, so I never met him. But he was very well liked.

My aunt, who is the elder of the family, her daughter has keep an archive of his letters and so forth, so I've learned a little bit about him through that.

COLLINGS: Yes, the letters that sort of document the work of the mission?

O'NEILL: No, mostly personal stuff.

COLLINGS: Personal stuff, oh, I see.

O'NEILL: Yes. It's during the period they were in, I guess that was '26 to '34 or something, they were in California.

COLLINGS: Did your mother raise you as a Quaker?

O'NEILL: No, my mother was completely agnostic. It's interesting. I mean, I asked her a number of times about that, and she said she didn't think that her father believed it either, just that it was like— She was very moral, but she was not religious. When I was ten or so, I remember going to a few Sunday schools, but I wasn't that interested and she didn't really press it.

COLLINGS: And it wasn't an issue for your father either?

O'NEILL: No. No. My mother always just said— Well, she was modern, she was practical. She said, "It's mythology." I think she valued the Quakers as a social institution and she had various charities that she did on her own, and one of them was taking goods down to Mexico. Well, my family loved to camp, and one of the places they camped was about a hundred miles south of Ensenada, and every time we would go down, the car would be packed with used clothes and cooking utensils, everything she had collected from her neighbors and things that she didn't want anymore, it all went to Mexico. She would just go to a town and go to a church or just look for

people that looked like they could use something, and they would talk and they would get distributed. So that was her sort of little private charity.

COLLINGS: What sort of political viewpoints did your parents hold?

O'NEILL: My father was very conservative, very Republican. He always voted for Republicans. He was very racist, I think. Well, I know. Well, his teaching experience took him in— One of his teaching assignments was at the juvenile hall in the jail downtown, and it was pretty tough surroundings, and he was very disciplinarian. He was very much into absolute power. He didn't want to discuss anything; he would lay it down. I got seriously beaten repeatedly for resisting.

But I think being in the jail, I think the culture was basically white guys who saw themselves being surrounded by brown guys and black guys, and they were very defensive, although it's curious, I mean, he was so stubborn and so racist and so opposed to ever seeing the value in somebody that was not like him, but I had also seen him dealing with people of other races and being quite civilized. But you never could tell. Sometimes he'd just go off. And there was never any discussion with him. What he said had to be what it was.

COLLINGS: It had to be what it was?

O'NEILL: Yes. I mean, in other words, if he said it, then it was true.

COLLINGS: Oh, I see. Okay.

O'NEILL: Yes, we didn't discuss it. There was no kind of— It became very adversarial between him and me, and my mother took the other side. She was much softer, and she would get very annoyed with him and there would be fights that would last a few days and they'd get back together. He loved to camp and she did, too, and

that was when everything would sort of get mended. They both were teaching and so they both had the whole summer off, so the three of us would go up in the Rockies, up in the Canadian Rockies. In fact, one year he took a sabbatical and he got a permit for me to be home-schooled. I would have been thirteen. And we traveled for a whole year.

COLLINGS: Wow, that's a long time.

O'NEILL: A long time. We went all over the United States. We went to Cuba. We went to eastern Canada. We went all the way across Canada.

COLLINGS: That's a lifetime at that age.

O'NEILL: Yes. It was wonderful and it was also very strange. It was sort of like I started— Well, I was thirteen, and I came back and I was fourteen, I was becoming extremely anxious and I thought that I was sick, I thought something was wrong because I felt very strange, having a nervous breakdown, I guess, although it was never called that.

COLLINGS: Would you worry about stuff or feel panicky?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, I would get sort of blank and then I would start to realize that I was feeling very blank and withdrawn, and it frightened me. Actually the situation really never went away. It started then and it might have started whether I was locked up with my parents or whenever I was in school, but it kind of disconnected me socially and it took a long time to become reintegrated.

COLLINGS: Yes. I took my son on a four-day trip the other weekend, and it was like the bomb dropped and all the other kids died or something. He was really traumatized.

O'NEILL: Four days?

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: Well, I've always been a very solitary kid and I'd gotten very good at sort of organizing my own time and being in a sort of world of fantasy. I mean, I was very good at creating alternate realities and sort of taking myself into that reality and being there for a long time. I used to do things like, well, when I was eight, nine, ten, eleven, I would find where there was water, where there was a stream or there was a lake or something, and I would begin working with a shovel and a pick and reshaping the shoreline or damming up the water or doing something like that, and I would do it for hours and hours, making these kind of— It was as though one were looking at a big model of a larger place.

COLLINGS: Right. You were doing earth sculpture at that time.

O'NEILL: I was doing earth sculpture, yes. My favorite of all was to be someplace where it was very flat and sandy with water moving and then you could route it and you could make it do work for you. I would go off into these places and forget about everything else, and I guess I was doing art. I didn't know what it was; it was transitory.

COLLINGS: That's an interesting point that it was transitory.

O'NEILL: Yes. And I was drawing and so forth. I started school and one thing that I was really pretty good at was drawing and painting, and I would get rewarded for that.

COLLINGS: Was this sort of like realistic drawing?

O'NEILL: Yes, attempted realism. Yes. It's funny, I tended to draw industrial sites and empty buildings, ghost towns. I was always fascinated with depopulated towns.

COLLINGS: How old were you during the Hiroshima, Nagasaki—

O'NEILL: I was five.

COLLINGS: You don't have any memories of that, do you?

O'NEILL: No. I have a memory— Well, yes, there's a number of things I remember about the war. Probably the earliest one was when I remember— And I must have been about three or four, because my parents bought a car from a Japanese family that was being deported to Manzanar, and he had a 1941 Plymouth which would have been about a year old, and I guess people were taking advantage of the fact that these people had to leave right away, so they were probably selling everything desperately cheap. Yes, that was the car that we drove all the way up to the sixties. That was the car I learned to drive on. I remember going to down to— Somewhere down near USC [University of Southern California], and these people were moving out, a whole block of people moving out. The moving trucks were there, there were garage sales, and I had no idea what it was, of course.

COLLINGS: Did your parents talk about that at all?

O'NEILL: Not really, no.

COLLINGS: It seems like something that would have upset your mother, from what you've said.

O'NEILL: It's curious, we never talked about that. No, I think they just assumed that that was probably all right, I guess.

So yes, camping. And the other thing, I got very interested in cars when I was very young and drawing pictures of cars.

COLLINGS: Where do you think that you started with that interest? Was that something that—

O'NEILL: Well, my father was, he wasn't really— I mean, he was a practical guy. He did his own mechanics.

COLLINGS: Did he have a workshop?

O'NEILL: He did. He had a garage. He was a person who would do everything.

COLLINGS: Yes, he'd fix his own car?

O'NEILL: He could overhaul an engine or do a brake job or change a tire, and he also could fix the roof and do the plumbing.

COLLINGS: Yes, my dad is like that.

O'NEILL: Is that right?

COLLINGS: Oh yes. Yes, he's in and out of cars.

O'NEILL: Yes. That's so uncommon.

COLLINGS: I know, these days it's very rare, but at that time it was more common, wasn't it?

O'NEILL: Yes. I don't think I knew anybody— Well, I knew one other father who was a machinist and worked on cars, but most people in the neighborhood didn't. It was a funny neighborhood. We lived in the same house from when I was about a year old, 82nd Street and St. Andrews Place, which is near Western [Avenue], a little stucco house on the street that was all stucco houses built in 1925 or so. All white neighborhood, a lot of retired people.

I was encouraged to earn money as soon as I could, so when I was about ten I started cutting lawns. I never had a paper route, but I collected newspapers for the

school paper drive and I got so into that that I would collect just mountains of newspaper. I love these kind of sort of low-yield high-labor jobs.

COLLINGS: That's interesting.

O'NEILL: Yes. I mean, just sort of filling in the blanks, just like going out and asking people for newspapers and piling them up, and then getting the prize for having all these newspapers. Well, it was something you could do by yourself.

COLLINGS: Yes. Was getting the prize important?

O'NEILL: I think so. Yes, I think I took some pride in that.

COLLINGS: Did you maintain the lawnmower yourself?

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. I bought a couple of power lawn mowers, and I continued doing that until I was in high school.

COLLINGS: Were there other kids on the street?

O'NEILL: There were a few that were nearby. The kids that I became friends with were a mile or so away. Yes, I did a certain amount of hanging out in the later elementary school. But things were not going well at school. They were going well academically. I never had any trouble learning, reading and arithmetic, I seemed to be able to do that, but I didn't do sports and my father never was interested in doing any of that, so I never learned the basic skills, and by the time I had to do it I was sort of hopelessly behind the curve in terms of skills. I wasn't naturally very well suited to throwing balls or running or doing anything, basically.

I was just thinking the other day, I hadn't thought of it for years, but the grammar school had this big asphalt playground and it was all marked out with ball diamonds and a tetherball court and dodge ball boards, and everyone was expected to

go to their assigned area and do their assigned thing, but I never did. I always just sort of walked all the way around the outside of the fence. I just kept moving all the time. I was in my own world, basically, and from time to time I'd get busted for that. It's curious, I hadn't thought about that for years, but that was the sort of adaptation that I made.

COLLINGS: As long as you keep moving, they're not going to really notice that you're not—

O'NEILL: That you're not anywhere particular, right. I got very good at figuring out how to keep cover, which by the time I got to junior high was really a problem.

COLLINGS: Junior high, oooph.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. I was very interested in girls when I got to be about twelve, I guess, and I just fell in love with a girl that— She moved to our school and I thought she was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen. Her name was Star.

COLLINGS: Star. That's very unusual.

O'NEILL: Star [unclear]. Yes. She looked like Gina Lollobrigida. But anyway, it's like that didn't work out. There were some group events. We went to square dancing, square dancing and ballroom dancing, and it was sort of coming along and trying to become acculturated and so on, and having this heavy fantasy life that involved cars. Every aspect of cars was fascinating.

COLLINGS: I wonder if, like, do you think it might have started when you were driving on those long trips that—

O'NEILL: Well, yes, yes. Yes. I don't know exactly.

COLLINGS: Were you interested in car engines and everything to do with cars or was it their shape?

O'NEILL: Yes, the shape, the history. I remember, you know, this was a time when there was still the last of the early thirties' classics were still on the road, and I remember my father had a teacher friend that lived out on Bunker Hill and he had these two about 1930 Cadillacs that he had in this carriage house.

COLLINGS: That must have been huge.

O'NEILL: Yes, big twelve-cylinder limousines and they were very weather-beaten, but he was taking care of them. I remember going for a ride in one of those and thinking this is really cool. I loved the sound and loved the way we were sitting way up off the ground.

COLLINGS: Yes, that must have been great.

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: Did they have the little vases for flowers? Because I know that some of the thirties-era cars had vases.

O'NEILL: Yes, they may have had at one time, but by this time they'd been through a half a dozen owners. So I never really thought of the classics as being the cars of the wealthy. I always thought of them as being sort of the cars of poor people who had bought them and re-bought them and so on.

But I remember my father took us to a couple of horseless carriage club meets.

COLLINGS: Oh, I see. So this was an interest that he had, as well.

O'NEILL: Yes, he was sort of peripheral. I mean, he never collected anything. But I guess I was interested and wanting to do that, so we did that. Then later it was the

early days of sports car road racing by the time I was junior high or so. We'd go up to Santa Barbara to the airport races or to Palm Springs. They had a Palm Springs road race. I really thought I wanted to get into that. At the time it seemed to be the sort of thing that one— You know, racing cars weren't huge corporate entities like they are now.

COLLINGS: You were planning to be a driver?

O'NEILL: Yes, I would have been an owner/driver. I bought all the car magazines and read about it and thought about it, and then decided I wanted to be a body designer. There was an organization that General Motors sponsored called the Fisher Body Craftsman Guild, and it had been in operation I think since right after the war, where boys from all over the country could enter— They'd send you a kit with all of the specifications, and you could design something, build the model, and ship it to them and—

COLLINGS: Oh, I was wondering, because I see in various things that you built your own car, and I was thinking how in the heck—

O'NEILL: Yes, the early ones. I think when I was fourteen I did the first one. They were quarter-inch-to-the-foot scale, about so big, made of carved balsawood and metal parts.

COLLINGS: Now, they sent you the specifications and you had to craft the actual balsawood and metal pieces yourself?

O'NEILL: Yes, they sent you the scale, blueprints for what the size parameters were and the rubber wheels that were the right scale. They had state competitions and then— Well, I guess the competition all took place in Detroit, but there were state

prizes. I once got a third place prize. It's curious, I never knew anybody else who did it.

COLLINGS: Yes, I was going to ask you that, whether there was kind of a group of kids from around the neighborhood or the region who were doing that with you.

O'NEILL: No. No. I had friends who were interested in cars, but none of them ever did that.

COLLINGS: Did your father tinker in the evenings in his workshop?

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: So maybe that felt like a natural thing to be doing.

O'NEILL: Yes, I think so. I mean, he would do carpentry things. In fact, I even have a wooden ladder that he made from scratch that I was going to try and save it.

COLLINGS: A ladder?

O'NEILL: A ladder with dowel rungs. I think he took— Well, I know he took night school classes in the forties in a high school where they had a woodshop so he could have access to equipment. For a time he did that.

COLLINGS: Oh, I see. So this was a real interest of his.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. He built an addition to the house; put a new back porch on. He and his brother worked together. My uncle built houses and he was also a teacher, but he lost the hearing in one ear and he found he couldn't handle a classroom anymore, so he retired, I guess in his late forties, and speculated in real estate and building houses and so forth. Graham [O'Neill], I really liked Graham. He was very different from my father. He was the youngest of the three and he was the only one who ever

sort of treated me like an equal. It was sort of straight across with Graham, you know, that sort of dominant parent—

COLLINGS: Your father was the eldest?

O'NEILL: He was the eldest, yes. Graham died in his late sixties or so. So anyway—

COLLINGS: You have such an interesting textbook and mechanical drawings in your own work. Were there a lot of those kinds of manuals and books around the house when you were growing up, things that you might sit and leaf through, perhaps?

O'NEILL: Not much like that. There was *Life* magazine and *Time* magazine and *Garden* magazine and so on. Not many books. I think my parents maybe had five books.

COLLINGS: What were they? [laughs]

O'NEILL: Well, I remember there was Samuel Pepys diaries, which is something I never read, but I remember seeing it on the shelf, and *Readers Digest* compilations and this and that. My folks were not—

COLLINGS: They were more hands-on people?

O'NEILL: Yes. They often thought about travel. But, yes, the textbooks and stuff, I sort of was introduced to that gradually. I mean, it was really at school, and with UCLA it was sort of like exploring the library just very randomly was something I really got into at that point.

I had an instructor in design, John [A.] Neuhart, who had everybody look closely at the various ways of image-making and begin to determine what's the difference between a steel engraving and an ink drawing and a halftone picture of a black and white piece of art, and that kind of got me thinking about that.

Well, we're sort of getting ahead of ourselves, but I was the T.A. to Tom at UCLA, and one of my jobs was to run the letterpress. He had a letterpress, which was pretty unusual, but he'd gotten it for the school.

COLLINGS: You mean one of the old newspaper letterpresses?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, it was a small scale, but you could set type and set blocks.

COLLINGS: Right, you take the individual letters and—

O'NEILL: Take it out of a case and set it all up on this thing and then lock it up with what they call furniture that holds it in.

COLLINGS: Actually, when I was in China years back I saw a typewriter like that, because you'd have to have a block for each character.

O'NEILL: Right.

COLLINGS: You see? Rather than having twenty-six letters you'd have to have drawer after drawer filled with all of these characters.

O'NEILL: Because there's so many of them.

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: And then what, somebody would set that?

COLLINGS: Yes, somebody would just sit there picking them out and popping them in, picking them out popping them in very rapidly, and that was typing.

O'NEILL: And that was typing?

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: Wow. And then they'd put it in the press and ink it and print it?

COLLINGS: I think that the stamps they had— I don't remember that being a step. I think it was something that happened more— I don't think that there was a second

step like that. I don't know exactly how they did it, and I don't want to take up your interview talking about it. I just thought you'd be interested to hear about it.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, yes, I sort of naturally got into the sort of mechanical reproduction and I got into photography. I had a camera when I was a kid, but I'd probably only taken a handful of pictures.

COLLINGS: Oh, you did have a camera?

O'NEILL: Yes, it was a Box Brownie. I even have a picture of Star Schneider that I snapped, all out of focus.

COLLINGS: Did your parents take photographs of their travels?

O'NEILL: They did, yes. They got into taking pictures and making slides in the fifties.

COLLINGS: Is that something that you all would sort of look at as a group, as a family?

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes, they're showing slides. Yes, that was the kind of thing that went on socially, and a lot of pictures of rows of people standing in front of houses. And my father was into— I mean, he really did love nature, so he took a lot of scenic pictures.

COLLINGS: Let me just flip this.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

November 19, 2004

COLLINGS: How often do you think these slide-showing events took place? Was this a regular thing?

O'NEILL: Whenever there were relatives in town.

COLLINGS: Whenever there were relatives. Was that like the central thing that you would do when there were relatives?

O'NEILL: Yes, it was, it was one of the things. There was a little screen, a little radiant screen that rolled up, which I still have, and my job was to set up the screen and the projector.

COLLINGS: Oh, really.

O'NEILL: Yes, and I became this sort of audiovisual kid. And the screen itself has this very pungent smell from the plastic backing, and even now you unroll it and it fills the room with this sort of chemical smell. So I've always associated that with a presentation.

COLLINGS: Right. Now, along the lines of the cars, you had run into this famous car striper, right?

O'NEILL: Oh yes.

COLLINGS: Von Dutch?

O'NEILL: Von Dutch.

COLLINGS: I even brought a photograph of him. I got it off the Internet.

O'NEILL: Oh, I never actually saw him.

COLLINGS: Oh, okay, because I saw in one of the interviews with you that you had encountered him, so I wondered what that meant.

O'NEILL: I'd encountered his work.

COLLINGS: I see. Okay. You can keep that. You can keep that if you want it.

O'NEILL: Oh, I'd love to. I guess it would be— I'm trying to put a year to it. It would be about '55 or so. We'd go to car shows and hot rod shows and drag race events and road races early on, and reading about European racing.

COLLINGS: Grand Prix.

O'NEILL: Yes, [unclear]. But this guy, he's doing this amazing painting on cars with these incredibly precise lines, and I remember I tried to learn how to do that in watercolor on paper and found that sort of symmetrical. He invented a whole style that was his own. It looked a little bit like some African art, but it really didn't look like anything else. It just basically came through elaborating on the striping that was done on cars back to the carriages.

COLLINGS: You know that sort of racing stripe down the side.

O'NEILL: Well, the early stuff was basically sort of outlining windows or there'd be a stripe down the side. It was back, I guess, into carriage culture; the striping was a kind of decoration. And then fire engines were always often striped with gold leaf. It was sort of a handcraft tradition.

So, yes, anyway, in high school, at that time you could learn to drive, get a learner's permit when you were fourteen and a half, and when you were fifteen you could drive. I bought a car when I was fourteen before I could even drive and

completely took it apart and eventually more or less restored it as best I could at that age, seventeen, sixteen.

But it was curious, I mean, I was gradually going more and more underground. I didn't date after— I dated a little bit when I was in junior high. Dating, it was group dating. But I became sort of withdrawn and I started feeling stranger and stranger and more isolated, and I just couldn't relate to most of what was going on in high school. I was into doing car things and—

COLLINGS: Yes, it seems like that would be something that would translate to other people pretty readily.

O'NEILL: Yes. I had a group of friends, and I guess I was sort of one of the more knowledgeable kids by then in terms of mechanics, so I had something to offer there.

COLLINGS: Were there shop classes?

O'NEILL: There were, but I was on an academic track and didn't take any. But I had like a shop at home and tools and learned to weld. I was sort of a jack-of-all-trades. I spent a lot of time going to junkyards and haggling over parts.

COLLINGS: Your parents must have been so pleased to have such an industrious child.

O'NEILL: I guess so. I think that's what they had in mind for me, and it was always sort of like, you know, I was shown how to do things and I seemed to pick it up pretty readily, I guess.

COLLINGS: But at some point you also kind of developed an interest in poetry in your early years, is that right, that you kind of drift over to Venice to the—

O'NEILL: Yes. Later on—this is probably toward the end of high school—I began to learn about the Beats in San Francisco and began to see that maybe that was another kind of society that might be welcoming or so. I never really was the participant in any of that. I would always be doing long bicycle rides from when I was, well, early high school. I spent a lot of time riding around, just cruising, and sometimes looking for stuff to steal. So I don't know where I was going with that, but anyway, yes, I would go out to Venice. That was kind of a long ride, about twenty miles.

COLLINGS: Yes, I was kind of wondering, I was trying to picture in my mind how somebody your age got from Inglewood to Venice.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, I figured it out.

COLLINGS: It's like an ocean voyage.

O'NEILL: I was used to driving down or riding down to Gardena in the other direction, because that's where junkyards were. So Venice was pretty far. I mean, that was kind of a big day's ride, but I did do it occasionally. I was kind of fascinated with that community. Then later, maybe four or five years later, I was just getting into photography and my favorite subject for a time was the oil field in Venice, which was from about Windward south to where the marina is, you know, Playa del Rey, was all filled with oil wells that had been built in the twenties when they had a oil boom. See, before that, Venice was subdivided and canals were made and the bridges were put in, and then apparently it failed as a real estate venture and sort of became kind of down on its luck, and then oil wells came in. And so people bought lots and put wells on them and they ran for twenty-five or thirty years, and then a lot of them were defunct by the time I was there.

I just loved it. It sort of smelled like crude oil and I always sort of liked the smell, and sand and saltwater and tide coming in and out of these channels. And there was this wonderful music that the wheels made, because they had these long leather belts and this huge wheel made of wood, a diesel engine turning this wheel which would then have this pump head going up and down and they would make these creaking sounds.

COLLINGS: Yes, I think I've heard that.

O'NEILL: Yes. The newer ones are a lot of quieter, but I found that kind of a wonderland.

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: And I had an instructor, Don Chipperfield, who was really instrumental in sort of kind of forcing one to make a single image and really explore what it meant and what you meant by taking it, you know, how you could get more out of it. His idea was that you would spend maybe a day or two researching a place or putting a person in a place or whatever, but you were just concentrating on making one negative. He was trying to get people to lean from the notion of snapshots and sort of thoughtless photography. So you might spend a day somewhere and look at the place in a number of different ways and then make a negative or a handful of negatives and come back and process them and then print it.

COLLINGS: This sounds like it sort of leads into the way that you did the photography— You've done so much of the time-release photography and the photography of the Ambassador Hotel.

O'NEILL: Yes, that was sort of where that started. It was interesting, I made a lot of negatives and many of them had never been printed. So when this show was in the talking stages, I pulled out a lot of those that I shot, which I then realized they were forty years old and they were talking about an area that doesn't even exist anymore.

COLLINGS: Right, so they have this documentary importance.

O'NEILL: Yes. And so we put some in the show. It's curious that they didn't seem to get much interest, but I would have thought that would be maybe the most accessible to people in the area. So that was kind of like, you know, I sort of see it connected to what I was doing as a kid with all this messing around in the clay.

COLLINGS: Exactly. Yes. And all of the time that you— I mean, time seems to almost be a material that you use. You put time into the pieces and into these early projects and into these photographs.

O'NEILL: Yes. I always was getting involved in these long-duration projects, like collecting all the newspapers. Then there was the Fisher body thing, and then by the time I was seventeen I wanted to build a car from scratch and I wanted to do my own design work and create it. At the time there was the beginning of the fiberglass— Well, the technology of polyester resin emerged, and, of course, the first Corvettes were fiberglass. They still are. So I was trying to figure out how to build a full-sized car and I talked to various people who were in the process of making cars and met a couple of guys who were building their own cars around shortened passenger car chasses.

COLLINGS: Were they building them as prototypes for later production or were these just pet projects?

O'NEILL: Well, yes, these were just sort of one-offs. I mean, some of them were involved in making a line of bodies that were made to fit a particular dimension then that they would sell. I wound up getting one of these sort of— You know, the whole idea was to build it from scratch, but one day I'm driving down in Long Beach and I see this fiberglass body sitting up on the roof of a shop with a for sale sign on it. I thought, god, this looks pretty good. I looked at it and I thought this is as good as I could have thought of to do, and somebody was eager to get rid of it, so I bought it. It had been made as a prototype for a car that later at least a few of them were made. But this one had a few defects. This was like their first try at it, I guess, and there were some problems that I had to solve.

So I spent the last year in high year, the first year at UCLA making this car. I did essentially— Well, I mean, I had a chassis and I had an engine and I had a body, solving all the problems of bringing it together and the instrumentation.

COLLINGS: Yes, that's quite a project.

O'NEILL: Yes. You know, I learned a lot. I could have been spending my time in a lot better ways, but that was what I picked out to do. And I was doing some sculpture. I was beginning to do some welded iron pieces when I was in my first year of college.

COLLINGS: What year did you graduate from high school, just to sort of get—

O'NEILL: 1957. June of '57.

COLLINGS: And how did your neighborhood change during the time that you were living there? Or was there—

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, as I said, it was a white working-class neighborhood. The black neighborhood started about three-quarters of a mile east, and the white kids were afraid of the black kids. The school was all white, Washington High School.

COLLINGS: Was that because there was a boundary and everybody from north of—

O'NEILL: Everybody east of Broadway, essentially Broadway, Main, Central, was the black part of town, and very few black people came west of there. But there was a growing black middle-class that was looking for housing, and in 1958, '57 or '58, black people started buying in the neighborhood where I lived. You know, everybody was sort of appalled, it was like such a bad thing.

COLLINGS: Were people talking about this amongst themselves on the street?

O'NEILL: Oh yes, the neighbors were talking about it. I remember a black family moved in right next door to us, and my father, in fact my mother, too, would never have anything to do them. As far as I know, they never spoke. Well, I never did either. And they were very careful. They stayed completely out of sight. And within a year, year and a half, almost every house in the neighborhood was sold.

COLLINGS: This was something you witnessed in the space of a year and half?

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes, and my folks sold in '59, made a good profit on their house. It was sort of like it was seen as a conspiracy or seen as some kind of something. There was something bad about it. It was like they'd taken away our neighborhood. There was never any— I mean, there wasn't any bad impact from it that I know of at the time, but I mean it wasn't as if— Although it's curious, there were burglaries and small— I remember my mother once, she had this awful event that she never wanted anyone to know about. But it would be about '56 or '57, I guess I was at school and

my mother was out working in her yard, which is what she really loved to do, work in the yard, and some people came by and they were very polite. They were black people and apparently they said that they found some money on the sidewalk. They found this big envelope of money and somehow or another they were going to share it with her.

COLLINGS: It's like these e-mails that you get about the—I don't know if you know about these. I'll tell you about them later.

O'NEILL: About the people in Africa?

COLLINGS: Yes, exactly.

O'NEILL: I get dozens of those.

COLLINGS: Yes, okay. [laughs]

O'NEILL: But I don't know how it happened, but somehow or other she was to post her wedding, her diamond ring as security, and she went along with it.

COLLINGS: Oh, my goodness.

O'NEILL: And she lost the ring, and of course there was no money, and she was just incredibly ashamed. She didn't want my father to know about it. Yes, that was sort of part of how they felt the neighborhood was going.

COLLINGS: It's almost like something that echoes with the Manzanar evacuation, but it's a—

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: But you're saying that people got good prices rather than selling off at a lower rate.

O'NEILL: Sure, there was a demand for housing. There wasn't enough housing in the areas that had been all black areas before and people wanted to move to a better place and it was natural.

COLLINGS: So where did the people from that street tend to move to after that?

O'NEILL: I don't know. Well, some of them tended to move out to outer suburbs, Orange County.

COLLINGS: Out to the Valley and so on.

O'NEILL: Yes. A good friend of mine, his parents bought in Garden Grove, and some I don't really— I didn't keep track of them.

COLLINGS: No, I was just sort of wondering if there was a kind of logical spot that all of those people went to.

O'NEILL: It probably would be the San Fernando Valley or it'd be Orange County, just as it still is.

COLLINGS: Right.

O'NEILL: It's just sort of an expanding ring.

COLLINGS: Did you go to movies as a child? Did you go to like Saturday morning matinees and see serials and newsreels?

O'NEILL: Yes, some. I didn't go to a lot of movies. I would go with my folks early on. I think actually the first film that I remember ever seeing was shown at the school, and it was a reward for the paper drive.

COLLINGS: Oh, the paper drive again.

O'NEILL: Yes. In first grade or second they showed Walt Disney's *Skeleton Dance*. Did you ever see *Skeleton Dance*?

COLLINGS: Oh, man, and it's so frightening, too.

O'NEILL: Yes. And I was just fried. I'd never seen animation. I didn't know, I thought it was real, and all those bones playing on one another. It's a great piece.

COLLINGS: Yes, it is, it's fabulous.

O'NEILL: Yes. And I remember after that, I guess it was after that, for a long time what I was interested in drawing were ghosts and bones and macabre things.

COLLINGS: Oh, interesting.

O'NEILL: Well, and then there were radio serials.

COLLINGS: Yes, I was going to ask you about that. I know Chick [Strand] used to listen to those all the time, and I wanted to ask you about it, too.

O'NEILL: Yes, I listened to— My favorite was *Shandu the Magician*, which had a lot of Egyptology thrown into it and people becoming invisible. Let's see, there was a whole string of them. They were all fifteen minutes long. *Captain Midnight* was one. *Captain Midnight* was one that had the kids sort of organized in little fan clubs and you'd get a decoder ring and they'd give you a code and you could look it up and it would tell you what was going to happen tomorrow.

COLLINGS: *Who Loves a Mystery?* was one that Chick mentioned.

O'NEILL: I don't remember that one.

COLLINGS: So would you listen to these religiously, like every night?

O'NEILL: Yes, it was a before-dinner thing. I think they came on at five, five to six, something like that, for a time. In fact, I remember the radio was a console radio that sat on the floor and I would sit right next to it, because they wanted to keep it turned

down. I remember I would grip the edges of this thing and dig my fingernails into the wood, and I sort of marred it with this kind of intense concentration.

COLLINGS: That's a fascinating image.

O'NEILL: I always had busy fingers. I'd always find something to do with my hands.

COLLINGS: Was there much music on in your house, speaking of the radio?

O'NEILL: I remember, well, Sunday mornings the Mormon Tabernacle Choir would always be on and my mother would be making waffles. My mother, in fact, her whole family, had been very musical. She and her sister, her sister and one of her brothers had a little orchestra and did chamber music. Yes, my mom was a violin player. She had given up on it by the time I was a kid.

COLLINGS: Did you take up an instrument at any point?

O'NEILL: I never did, no. I never found the interest, and I've regretted it because I realize—

COLLINGS: Music is so— The sound, and it's so important with your films.

O'NEILL: Yes. No, I never learned to play an instrument and I never learned to sing or do anything like that. I remember the first time I heard Mexican mariachi music I just loved it. It's funny how you remember things. I was just sitting in my parents' car and it was raining, the market, my mother was in the market, and the little radio down— This was a 1930 Oldsmobile and the radio was down by the floor, and I remember being able to tune that thing and get this amazing band with accordions and horns. "What is this?" I'd never heard it before and I just loved it. Also occasionally you'd hear some New Orleans Dixieland jazz. There was a program on Saturday afternoons that would do that, and I remember listening to this. This went on way on

into college. And then, of course, the first rock-and-roll I remember hearing at first, Elvis [Presley] in '53 or so. And Fats Domino, I loved Fats Domino. So I was sort of building this eclectic— I always liked music that had a certain kind of hard edge to it. I never was really into really hard rock-and-roll so much as more into a little bit earlier period than that.

COLLINGS: Well, it sounds like you like that kind of brassy—

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: That sort of, the edge, the notes with a sort of a cutting edge. I mean, that's what mariachi music sounds like to me. It just slices through the air.

O'NEILL: Yes, and it's usually just too assertive. But it's curious that some of the older band records from the thirties and the forties have a sweet quality that's really kind of hard to find anymore. But I was into that.

There was a record player and there were a handful of records. Oh yes, then there was my grandmother's records. My grandmother had a wind-up Victrola and she had a big pile of 78s, and so whenever we'd go over to her house I could put on some of her records, and among them were some Scottish bagpipe tunes. I really got into that. I remember my mother just hated the bagpipes. In fact, she hated all my musical tastes. [mutual laughter] But I really loved those old brown 78s. After my grandmother died in '51, I had carefully rounded up all the records, and then sometime after, my father destroyed them.

COLLINGS: Oh! Inadvertently or—

O'NEILL: No, he just didn't want them around. He destroyed everything that—

COLLINGS: This was his mother?

O'NEILL: His mother.

COLLINGS: Oh, his mother's stuff.

O'NEILL: There was a lot of stuff that just vanished. I remember those records, and I was very hurt by that, but it was like somehow or another it bothered him to hear them, I guess. Maybe it made him—

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: Sad. I did save a few things from her. I have an 1850 newspaper that she had tucked inside of a suitcase.

COLLINGS: That's interesting.

O'NEILL: Yes, really old crumbling stuff. She was very tall, my grandmother, and she was very— She was always good to me. I think she was stern to my father.

COLLINGS: This was an Irish family or Scottish?

O'NEILL: Well, back a ways, yes. I'm not sure if it's my great-great-grandparents' father or earlier, had came from Ireland at the famine sometime in 1815.

COLLINGS: Very tough time.

O'NEILL: Yes. Came to Canada. I know so little about which generation that was or where they came from, because I've been to Ireland and there's O'Neills everywhere. Somebody told me once they were from County Tyrone, which is north. My grandmother was Church of England, Protestant. But the early history is really gone. I remember there's a story about how there were two brothers and that they had gotten separated in the course of—

COLLINGS: The travel?

O'NEILL: Yes, or getting settled or something, and that they'd never been able to contact one another. I guess maybe one was in the States and one was in Canada.

COLLINGS: It'd be interesting to find out what happened to that other branch.

O'NEILL: Yes. I do have a Bible of my grandmother's. I've had it boxed up and I haven't gotten into it, but I think there may be some hints in there. Curious, I looked at it and I realized my grandmother always went by the name of Maude, but it turns out that her real name was Clarissa, and no one had ever said that, but that's her birth certificate.

COLLINGS: Weirdly my mother is like that, she has a real name, but she's always gone by this other name.

O'NEILL: Sure. Well—

COLLINGS: I think sometimes they do it like for the family they name the child one thing, but they actually really wanted to name it another, so that's the one they go with.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. Bev [Beverly O'Neill] has three names give by various people. And I always hated my— There was nobody called Patrick when I was in school. Now it's become a much more common name.

COLLINGS: Yes, I think those names are more popular again now.

O'NEILL: But I always felt that it was effeminate and I was— Well, yes, to go back to the school, I mean, the whole thing about the schoolyard was that there were the dominant males and then there were the others, and I remember being very envious of the dominant guys who could do it, who would predominate in a fight. I got in a lot of fights and I don't think I ever won one.

COLLINGS: I remember when I was a child—of course I'm younger than you—how rough the schoolyard was. It's not like that anymore. They don't allow that anymore. There's no fighting. But, of course, I'm sure it's all gone underground, but it's interesting to remember how rough it really was.

O'NEILL: Oh yes.

COLLINGS: Even in my time.

O'NEILL: Yes. I mean, I had this protected childhood where I was just, you know, sitting on my little cushion and all of a sudden I was in school, you know, and the cruelty that went on between kids was just amazing, and I realized there were some that I could prevail against, but there were others that I couldn't. The dominant ones would gang up and they'd pick a target, and you knew that as soon as you were going to walk around the corner where they couldn't see you, that they were going to come after you. And so I was always into worrying about that.

COLLINGS: It's like you have to think of yourself as prey.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. Well, I mean, I guess it wasn't all that bad, because I mean I did have my own friends and we did manage to— By high school it was pretty much over, but junior high was really an animal cage.

COLLINGS: Were you aware in the fifties at all of any of the House of Un-American Activities [Committee] stuff that was going on there?

O'NEILL: No. I remember hearing about it, but I didn't know what it meant. It wasn't really until I got to UCLA that people were really talking about it.

COLLINGS: Because that kind of thing really wasn't a focus in your family, it sounds like.

O'NEILL: No. My parents were so conservative politically, they probably thought that it was all right, you know, although I never really heard any anti-Communist talk particularly. But I remember when my father's teacher friends would get together, they would deride [Franklin D.] Roosevelt and deride the WPA, the Works Projects Administration, and they were doing all these public works, construction projects, and they would just deride that, to make work and that for every job there's three people standing around watching one person work. It was always kind of like, "Well, you know, we did it the hard way. Why are they giving our tax money away to people that really didn't deserve it?" So they were always coming from the point of view of the employer rather than the employee. They were suspicious of unions and suspicious of any kind of social planning on the part of the government.

COLLINGS: And your mother was a teacher, too, right?

O'NEILL: Yes, she got her teaching credential at [University of California] Berkeley and she also went to UCLA for a while. She got a teaching job in Orange County, I think in about '31 or '32, before she— My parents were married in '35 and I was born in '39. So she taught up until when I was born, and then she stayed home with me and got pretty bored, I think. Then I guess when I was eleven she went back and she started teaching, and she taught up until she was sixty-five.

COLLINGS: I see, so she had a full career then.

O'NEILL: Yes. She taught in Gardena. She taught first and second grade. And she really did love it. She loved her classes and she spent a lot of time preparing stuff for them, like everybody else does, and really liked a lot of the kids. I think she

particularly liked a lot of her Japanese kids. She was in Gardena, which had a big Japanese population.

COLLINGS: So would she be preparing that audiovisual stuff at home when you were—

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes, she'd be making charts and she taught music. She had an autoharp, a harmonium that she would play and sing along with them. So, yes, that was a big thing in her life. She loved teaching and she loved gardening, and she was very active with plants and that whole thing, so I learned that from her.

COLLINGS: Pat, I think we're almost at the end of the tape.

[End of November 19, 2004 interview]

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

December 10, 2004

COLLINGS: Good morning. I just had one or two little follow-up questions from last time. You were talking about your mom growing up in Cuba, and it just made me want to ask something about like what the décor of your home was like when you were growing up, perhaps like objects and things that she might have kept around and maybe her color sensibility, that kind of thing.

O'NEILL: Ah, my mother. Well, I grew up in a 1925-era stucco house in a whole neighborhood of similar houses, all built the same time. My parents bought the house in 1940, and in 1948 my father built a fireplace for the living room that wasn't there before. The following year he built a back porch and extended the house a little bit back there. They did various little things to try to modernize the kitchen. I remember they put a dropped ceiling in the kitchen. So there's a certain kind of attention to style, a little bit.

They read *Sunset* magazine, *Better Homes and Gardens*. My mother did, at least. The house, inside it was very plain, really, overstuffed furniture and green carpet. There was a dining room that got dined in usually twice a year, but my mother used the table to sew on. There was a heater in the floor that we used to stand over in the morning to get warm. The furniture always stayed pretty much the same. The television came in in about 1954. We had a long cable with a remote on the end of it.

COLLINGS: With a remote?

O'NEILL: Yes. The early remotes were wired in.

COLLINGS: Oh, I didn't know they even had remotes.

O'NEILL: Yes. That was sort of a big deal at the time. Didn't watch a lot of television. I never was that much into it, really, but watched [*The*] *Ed Sullivan* [*Show*], watched the news.

COLLINGS: Did your parents watch a lot of television?

O'NEILL: Not very much, no, I don't think so. Even later I don't think— I remember my mother used to like to watch people playing music, concerts and that sort of thing. She even got into Lawrence Welk for a long time. That was sort of surprising, because she was more sophisticated musically than he. My mother had a couple of— She had one friend, a woman who was a painter, sort of. She took lessons and she made seascapes, and there was one hanging over the sofa for years. I think that was the only real contact with art that I had through the family.

COLLINGS: Did she collect things? You were saying that you and she collected shells sometimes.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, she was teaching school, and so she liked to have things to talk about in class, and shells were about the only thing that she— When we went on that long trip, we collected quite a lot of stuff, and she used it in her teaching.

My father was always making things. He would do all the repairs. He started various projects for her, really, like making lathe-turned picture frames, which apparently weren't successful for some reason or other, and I found a whole stash of them after they were gone. He tried making a lot of things, but he never really got into making furniture. Furniture was all from the department store.

I had a room that I guess was a sort of— It had a lot of windows around it up high, and I remember there was wallpaper put up during the war sometime that had airplanes and a lot of war planes and stuff flying around on it. It was a pleasant room, and I spent a lot of time in it because I had a lot of colds when I was a kid. I was always getting sick. I was thinking about that, how, in a way, getting sick meant that you didn't have to go to school so you didn't have to have the inevitable playground conflict and you could do something quietly at home, and I really liked that. So I was probably sick a lot intentionally. My mother bought into it. I remember the doctor would be called, and the doctor would actually come to the house with his doctor bag, and he would take your temperature and see if you needed an antibiotic or something. There was a fair amount of that when I was, I don't know, seven, eight, nine, I guess.

COLLINGS: You're the second filmmaker I've interviewed this year who was home sick a lot as a child.

O'NEILL: Is that right?

COLLINGS: Yes. It's interesting.

O'NEILL: There's an interesting thing, the house was built up with a crawlspace under it, and in some places the crawlspace was, oh, maybe four feet, not enough to stand up, but almost. It had one entrance that you could climb through. You had to sort of wiggle through, like on your belly. Then you got into this sort of empty cavern, and that became a sort of play space some of the time.

COLLINGS: Gosh. I can't imagine wiggling through there. That's very claustrophobic.

O'NEILL: Full of spider webs. Yes, yes, it was, but once you got in there, it was completely terra incognito. It was a place that wasn't on the map.

COLLINGS: Was it pitch black?

O'NEILL: No. It was dark, but there were little vent holes all the way around. There was also a good-sized backyard. I remember during the war they tilled the whole yard up for a vegetable garden.

COLLINGS: Yes, a Victory Garden.

O'NEILL: The Victory Garden thing, yes.

COLLINGS: Were your parents worried about the war? Did they think that California might be invaded or anything like that?

O'NEILL: Well, if they did, they kept it from me. No, I think my father sort of thought the war was kind of a manipulation of the people by the government in some way.

COLLINGS: Oh, he did?

O'NEILL: Yes. I'm not exactly sure how he came down on the war, except that he didn't want to be in it himself, and he would have been— He was born in 1900, so in '41 he was forty-one years old. Of course, there was a draft, and he went back to school to— Well, he was teaching, but going back to school, I think, was primarily a way of trying to get a deferment. His brother was still a Canadian citizen. My father had become an American citizen, but his brother was— They were constantly going back and forth to Vancouver to sort of maintain roots there. He had missed the First World War because he was just about a half a year too young.

COLLINGS: That was lucky.

O'NEILL: Yes. He'd seen the results of that, and he just said that he didn't think anything was worth going to war. He wasn't idealistic about it, he was just sort of like, "Let some other people do that."

COLLINGS: He was a history teacher, right?

O'NEILL: No. Well, he was a general teacher. He taught everything. He taught math, he taught— Well, it was high school reform school.

COLLINGS: It's usually historians who have a sort of better sense of where all this will lead.

O'NEILL: Yes. I don't know that he read history so much, but sort of from his own conversations with other people and his family. The whole family, the O'Neill side of the family, was pretty opposed to any kind of patriotic activity.

COLLINGS: Your mother, too, I imagine.

O'NEILL: Well, I think she was less that way, but she was very much in his orbit all the time. Politically, at least, I don't think she ever disagreed with him.

COLLINGS: What kinds of things did you have conflict with your father about? Because you mentioned that. It just struck me later, because it sounded like you were always so busy doing these projects and things. You sounded sort of like the ideal child.

O'NEILL: Well, I was very privileged. There was only one of me, so I didn't have to contest anything with siblings. Various times other people came to live there. I had two cousins. One was my mother's younger brother's son, and he came to stay for a time because of a divorce. I think he did about a year with us. Then later, my father's sister's son, who's two years older than me, during junior high he stayed in one of

the— He was in the third bedroom of the house. We were never very close, really, but they lived up in northern California and it was a very moist climate and he was getting asthma. So he would come down to southern California and he could breathe better.

Conflict. Well, my father wanted to be absolutely in charge of everything. His word was the last word, and there was no argument, and if you presented an argument, you probably got whacked or just not listened to, and my mother included. He would get silent, and she would storm around and then ultimately get over it.

COLLINGS: So there weren't any particular issues, like political issues or issues of career or anything like that? It was just more of a mood thing?

O'NEILL: Yes. He was just impatient. He hated his work, and when he retired finally, when he was sixty-five, he gradually lightened up until, when he was about seventy-five, he was actually not really hostile anymore. Well, yes, it was just sort of like the usual thing, like playing the radio too loud or you came back too late, which I didn't really do that much. I was mostly there. But he just didn't like any contestation of any of his ideas.

COLLINGS: In terms of like daily routine?

O'NEILL: Yes. It would start over something small. Eventually I sort of realized that that was what was going to happen there, so I'd sort of give him a wide berth. He would lighten up when he was out of town, too, because he loved to be in a natural setting, and that seemed to help him a lot. I think he really always wanted to be up north and wanted to be fishing, and instead he was here and living in the city. He was dealing with a lot of people and problems that he just really wasn't attracted to.

I think probably my presence, which I don't really know that it was particularly planned, and there certainly was never any thought of there being another child, I think he was resentful that that was keeping him in the saddle all the time. He may have never said that, but I think my mother referred to it a few times. Later, when he was way on in his eighties and nineties, he kind of had some self-realization about how tyrannical he had been with my mother and with me, and he actually said it, which was surprising.

COLLINGS: Yes, because often that doesn't happen.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. But it was hard to get close to him because he was a very guarded man. He'd sort of treat you on one channel. You couldn't get behind that. He was the oldest of three, and I guess he was sort of in charge of them, and I guess he'd kind of gotten this role of being the patriarch.

COLLINGS: It was just a habit.

O'NEILL: Yes. And my mom was submissive, although she would fight for her own issues, like, well, she didn't like to be on the road all that much, and she would fight to come back. She was the one who wanted to redo the yard or paint the house, and she would pitch in and do all of that. She was small, but she was quite strong, and she wasn't afraid to get up on a ladder and paint. She was always working. Working was sort of the thing that they did. They even worked at playing. It was always sort of goal oriented.

O'NEILL: Yes, my parents are like that, actually.

O'NEILL: Really?

COLLINGS: Yes, constantly renovating and painting and redoing and—

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes.

COLLINGS: Did you do any drawing as a child when you were growing up?

O'NEILL: Yes. I started drawing cars when I was five, six, and the one thing I was really drawn to doing at school was painting. They'd set up easels and you'd get four colors of calcimine and the big brush. My stuff was a little more recognizable than most people's, and I'd get some recognition for that.

COLLINGS: So did you ever think at that time about being an artist?

O'NEILL: Yes, I think I was, sort of. Yes, without really knowing what it was. My world of art extended to sort of watercolor painting, and I was not exposed to art at all.

I remember when I was at UCLA I would sometimes go to the stacks and just browse through the collections and find things. I got into *Life* magazine. I found a 1944 issue of *Life* magazine, a page that just rang a bell. I knew I'd seen it before. *Life* magazine had been in the house, *Life* and *Time* and *Saturday Evening Post.* I think that was about it. *Life* magazine ran a little piece on Salvador Dali and reproduced *The Persistence of—*

COLLINGS: *Memory*?

O'NEILL: Is *The Persistence of Memory* the one with the clock? I don't know if that's the right title.

COLLINGS: Yes, the "soft clock".

O'NEILL: Yes, the soft clock.

COLLINGS: I don't know if that's the title of it.

O'NEILL: I think it's *The Persistence of Time Remembered.* Anyway, I remember so vividly seeing that, and I realized that it would have been in *Life* in my parents' house

and that I had been fascinated by it. Of course, I was too young to read, so it was interesting to me then to realize that that had been planted. It was one of the very few— I'm sure it's in other paintings in those magazines.

COLLINGS: So you went to UCLA. You were going to do industrial design, and that's what you started out with first, right?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, I went there out of high school. I went there as— I think I just had a general major, and at the time I was being strongly urged to do engineering, but I wasn't very good with mathematics at all and I wasn't very attracted to the whole thing. In high school I had a good friend that I studied with, and it turned out that I could do algebraic equations as long as Max was there, but as soon as he wasn't, something would go wrong. I thought I was doing it right, but I couldn't, and I wasn't interested enough to bear down on it. It's just like I wasn't really interested enough in baseball or basketball or football to really learn how to do it right, and so I was always on the outside of that. I liked to read, and I read a lot when I was young. I always did well with language skills.

COLLINGS: What were some of the books that you enjoyed reading?

O'NEILL: Well, I remember starting out with Mark Twain and I read a lot of William Faulkner pretty early on in high school. I was just remembering the other day that when I was sixteen, fifteen or sixteen, I found a copy of a book called *A Generation of Vipers*, which was a political critique by Phillip Wylie. I hadn't thought about that book for ages.

COLLINGS: The name is familiar to me. What is that about?

O'NEILL: Well, it was written in 1942, and I came across a paperback in '55 or '56. It was basically a critique of American society and consumerism and the effect of capitalism on the mind and how— I don't know that it was early, but it was a sort of a flamboyant essay, a series of essays, about our political life, really.

COLLINGS: That sounds really significant to [inaudible] process.

O'NEILL: Yes. I ran across that, and I noticed— I looked it up on line last week, and there seems to be a little group of people who are reading that again, and so I'm going to get a copy of it.

O'NEILL: So you just kind of ran across that in the school library?

O'NEILL: I ran across it on a newsstand, actually. I would buy paperbacks, mysteries and adventure stories, most of which I can't remember what they were, but— Yes, I read in bed a lot. I started reading automotive magazines when I was about ten. I would go to the newsstand and get it each month, *Motor Trend*, *Hot Rod*, *Road and Track* and saving them all, and just sort of hanging out, looking at cars and thinking about cars. It was like a sort of erotic— It was an aesthetic experience. It had more to do with looking than— Well, of course, at first one couldn't touch, but as soon as I could buy a car—I guess I was fourteen—I bought a car that had been in the family before but had been sold and was for sale again. It was a '38 Chevy coupe, and I got that for seventy-five bucks, and I had to have my mother drive it home. But I went right to work on it. I watched my father and helped him, so I had some idea of what one did, and I just got into that every waking hour.

COLLINGS: That seemed like a natural thing to do as a [inaudible] thing.

O'NEILL: Sure. Sure. Yes. I knew about Art Center College and their design program, and when I was driving, I would go over there and look at the displays in the lobby and so forth and that sort of thing.

COLLINGS: So why didn't you go there for—

O'NEILL: It was too expensive. It was quite costly. My parents, wisely so, said, "You know, you really need to get a general education, and the university system is good, and you have good grades so you can get in," so I got in, and I did it that way.

Very sort of rapidly— Well, the first two years was all general, pretty much general education courses. Then the industrial design degree was a five-year program at that time, and you started taking classes in the third year. I was quite involved with that for a few years. That was sort of my group. It was a very— I don't know if it was selective. You did have to interview to get in. Of course, you had to be in UCLA to start with. I don't know if there was much selection involved, but I did get in. Funny, I remember my first encounter with John Maguire, who was the head of it at the time. I came by to drop off something. I met him and he said, "So you want to be an industrial designer?"

I said, "Well, yes, I think so."

He said, "Well," he said, "your hands are dirty. The first thing you've got to do is you've got to take care of your appearance."

I said, "Oh, yes. I had trouble getting my car started this morning and I got a little grease under my fingernails."

He said, "Well, this is a profession, so you can't look like that."

They were very professionally— They were very much into professional training and very aware of the sort of client relationship.

COLLINGS: Right. Right. So it wasn't just sort of about being an eccentric genius coming up with new prototypes.

O'NEILL: Not at all. Not at all.

COLLINGS: There was very much the market—

O'NEILL: It was problem solving. Yes, it was market-driven, but it was about making things better for people by making solutions that were more efficient. It was very rational and very— It's curious, because I was more interested in— I came to it from an interest in form, and quite a few of the people who were there were not particularly interested in form but more in sort of political— Political in the sense of it being a sort of way of arranging resources in a more rational way than—

COLLINGS: Sort of better living through chemistry.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. You'd do a lot of research about every aspect of what you were doing so you were completely knowledgeable about it and you could overcome stereotypes about how things should be.

Are you getting hot?

COLLINGS: I'm not, but if you want to—

O'NEILL: You're all right? Well—

COLLINGS: Do you want me to turn off—

[tape recorder off]

O'NEILL: So anyway, there was a shop, there was a model shop that was part of that, and if you were part of the program, you could use it. Of course, since I'd had a little

more experience in making things and making models than most people, so I was able to take advantage of that and sort of be helpful and sort of be proud of the fact that I knew how to do some of these things, and most of the kids were having to figure it out from scratch.

The other thing that was funny about design was that there was this sort of— Well, design was a part of the art school. The art school at that time was fine arts, which included painting and sculpture and print making, and then there was design, which was industrial design, graphic design, interior design, and ceramics.

COLLINGS: Was architecture part of that?

O'NEILL: No, there wasn't any architecture yet. There was art history, which was separate. There was this sort of bantering competition between design and fine arts, which were held in sort of mutual suspicion in terms of the politics of the art school. It was generally considered a sort of stable situation that was more sort of bantering and wisecracking about— Well, on the part of the designers, I remember Simon Steiner saying once that he thought if things went the way they were, that they'd be putting easels in the design room. Of course, that meant that the painters were in ascendance and the designers felt that the fine arts were pretty impractical.

COLLINGS: Sort of a pre-war kind of thing.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. Sort of a holdover kind of American suspicion. It wasn't a really vital suspicion, but it was just a sort of "them" and "we" thing. It worked the other way, too, that people who were serious about art were suspicious of the designers, felt that the designers were coopted or were basically doing— Well, it was industrial. You were either cooperating with that or you weren't.

COLLINGS: So cooperating in the sense of colluding with capitalism or—

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes.

COLLINGS: Okay, cooperating in the sense that you were not following your own artistic vision.

O'NEILL: Yes. You were in harness, rather than that you were free, which, of course, was—

COLLINGS: So there was a political discourse.

O'NEILL: Oh, yes. Yes. It was a sort of— Yes. Sort of my history of being there was that I sort of gradually moved from one camp to the other. I did design almost exclusively as an undergraduate. I think it was the last year of undergraduate that I took Don Tripplefield's class in photography. I'd never been interested in photography before, I'd never taken pictures seriously, but I started looking at the things on the walls in there, and I realized I really liked some of this work. I found *Aperture* magazine, and I started reading in that, reading photo criticism and looking at reproductions. It had a strong attraction to me, and I started doing picture-taking. The critiques were interesting because they were very much involved in drawing people out, using an image to sort of ask questions about why this image, why is it done this way, and have you thought about doing it this other way?

COLLINGS: Were you primarily doing these kind of documentary photographs like the ones that were in your show?

O'NEILL: The ones from Venice and— Although I never really thought of them as documentaries. I was basically thinking of the subject matter entirely as form, although I was photographing things I was attracted to. I think some of it was a kind

of apocalyptic vision. I was hearing Allen Ginsburg. I remember having a recording of *Howl*, playing that over and over again and thinking about— Just sort of getting initiated into Left politics in a very tentative way, and the imagery seemed to be kind of coming out of that. It was coming out of a sort of self-pity or trying to make pictures that really were ambiguous in some way, that you couldn't really— And it's the same thing I'm still doing. It's like trying to find a way to balance A and B and C and D and find an interesting equation.

COLLINGS: One of the things that's interesting about the Venice photographs is that in some of them you'll have this kind of almost like a timeless image, in that it's an iconic advertising image. It's been sitting there for a long time, and it's very weather-beaten, but it's still there with all of its stark outlines. At the same time, you'll have like a person just sort of walking down the streets and they suggest just sort of a moment in time. So that's just, to me, the [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Oh, you're thinking about a film, one of the films?

COLLINGS: No. I was thinking of, actually, one photograph. It's got like almost like a clown?

O'NEILL: Oh, right. Right. He's painted on the wall, yes. Yes. I was interested in the way meaning gets into— The way language gets into advertising and labeling and graffiti and how signs change their meaning over time. I realized that you make a good negative very rarely. You just have to be out there looking and thinking about it and be open to something coming your way, and it comes very rarely.

COLLINGS: Now, would you tend to shoot a lot and then choose judiciously, or would you—

O'NEILL: Well, my early training was not to do that. I think Don Tripplefield was confronted with people who brought in masses of negatives and didn't concentrate on any of them. So he would say, you know, spend the day or however long it takes and make one negative or make two. As a result, I didn't make a lot of exposures. Later I realized that, no, I'd really rather cover that with some other slightly different shots, just in case one of them gets damaged. Later I regretted that I never did the sort of documentary establishing shots. I worked in Venice for like two years, but I never made any general shots. Oh, I did a couple, but the oil field was just fascinating, and I just stumbled onto it on a bike ride, and it was like Windward all the way down to Ballona Creek and from the ocean over to Lincoln Boulevard. It was the old subdivision of Venice, which had the canals, which had pretty much filled up and were full of tar and oil waste, and the concrete bridges, which duplicated some bridges in Venice. So it had this kind of horizontal kind of elegance, with the occasional house that was mostly pretty run down and then oil fields everywhere, oil wells. It suited my temperament. I liked hanging out there.

COLLINGS: Well, in your sort of burgeoning political consciousness, was this a vision of social breakdown and decay, or was it a vision of remaking a new kind of society with different kinds of values and implications?

O'NEILL: Well, it was sort of the world at its end point before whatever was to follow, I think, before it began to renew.

COLLINGS: Yes, which would be more in the seventies.

O'NEILL: Well, I don't know that I ever— I always was fascinated with that sort of point of change where things get to the point where they must change. I guess, in a

way, that was part of my problem in design, is that I was not sufficiently hopeful or Utopian about the future, and design was a very—

COLLINGS: You really hate to be that in design, don't you?

O'NEILL: Yes. The other thing was you have to be a very good communicator and you have to be able to work with a client and somehow or other align your needs and theirs.

There was a man who founded the program there. His name was Henry Drefuss, and he's a very distinguished designer. He sort of invented the field, in a way, although people were always designing things, but for it to be a profession and to be defined as a medium was Henry Drefuss' invention. He would come out and give a talk every so often, and he pretty much personified what — His whole thrust was professionalism, was like trying to make it as meaningful as it could be as a profession.

I remember when he had a studio visit once. He had a studio here in Pasadena somewhere, an estate, really. It was a big modern house, had a big front door that was like eighteen feet high. It was all very grand. A number of UCLA people worked for him. He came to sad end, though. I guess he was probably in his sixties then, and a few years later, he and his wife committed suicide together. They gassed themselves in their Mercedes. I guess they were both sick. I don't know. But it was quite a shock. This would have been pretty much after I was there, so I wasn't currently there.

COLLINGS: So that didn't influence your decision.

O'NEILL: No, no, no. But it was quite startling.

COLLINGS: I'm sure it was.

O'NEILL: So I was doing industrial design, and then I was also beginning to do graphic work, and this is where I studied with [Robert] Bob Heinecken.

COLLINGS: Yes. We have an interview with him.

O'NEILL: Do you? Oh, yes, I'm sure you would. Yes. Well, Bob was— He'd come from design and he was very interested in photography. Well, basically, I guess I studied with him, and then I was his—

COLLINGS: As one of his first students in the photography program.

O'NEILL: Right. Then he was in the act of lobbying to set up photography as a discipline within the fine arts, which it hadn't been before, and he got that done, I guess about the first year I was a graduate student. So the first person to graduate in that was Darryl Kerr, and I was the second or maybe the third. I think I was the second. So I left design behind, but I was in this new program, and it was in the fine arts, but not entirely accepted by all of the faculty.

COLLINGS: Why was that?

O'NEILL: Well, there was some suspicion of photography as being an actual art form, and there was particular suspicion of people who came to it through design. So I did that, and then I was— It's curious, at the time, my work was well received and it was sort of— Bob Heinecken did me the honor of giving me his job for a year, like a year, when I was two years out of school, because he went to Europe for a year. I think he was in Europe. I took over and taught. I mean, it's unbelievable. It's not something I would even do today. But I guess I was twenty-five, twenty-seven or something. It was fine with Bob. I guess the other ally I had was Oliver Andrews,

who was teaching sculpture, although I don't think Oliver particularly liked what I was doing. But it turned out he was an ally.

The faculty would meet every week and have these group crits [critiques]. The students were not present, but the work was there. So there would be these back-and-forth discussions between various people about the merits or demerits of the work. They sort of became a soapbox for diatribes more or less aimed at one another. It was a very tense group.

COLLINGS: It sounds like academia, yes.

O'NEILL: Yes. I was very much in the minority, and I would open my mouth once in a while and realize that nobody was listening. Then I began to realize that I didn't really have the art historical or the theoretical background to do this. It was sort of like I couldn't marshal my facts clearly to say why I thought this was so and this wasn't. I began feeling excluded and somewhat bitter.

I remember Bill Brice was very— He was kind of the senior. He wasn't the chairman, but he'd been the chairman. I remember he was very well spoken. He could explain himself very well. If you offered a rebuttal, he would come over and he would get very close to you. He was very tall. He was about six foot six, and he'd be standing there, and you'd discover there was a very tall man standing right next to you. So when he addressed you, he was talking right down to you. This happened a number of times, and I realized it was not an accident; it was a technique.

COLLINGS: Now, was this art historians and artists and studio art—

O'NEILL: No, this was all studio artists, yes. The art history was an entirely separate forum.

COLLINGS: Often studio artists don't feel that it's not really their job to marshal all of this stuff.

O'NEILL: Well, right, but at that time and in that circle, that was very much a thing, that you had your students who you were sponsoring, and you had to defend them to the rest of the faculty. This was in '66 by now, and we were involved with Pop [art], and I was involved with Junk art and Funk and industrial processes, art made by photo silkscreen. The painters did not want to participate in this, and they would dismiss all of this.

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O'NEILL: —that these new techniques were suspect. These people were— Their lives were on the line, too. They were committed to a tradition of painting that was somewhat romantic and it was very much rooted in the late nineteenth century. It was sort of sad in a way, because most of these people were not represented and they were not written about, but they had their lives and their careers and their students.

COLLINGS: I suppose the students were also sort of rebelling against them, too, at that point.

O'NEILL: Well, some did and some didn't. I guess I was in the group that was for moving on from abstraction to more social commentary. [Andy] Warhol was known then and [Robert] Raushenburg. I remember going down to Westwood Village, going to the Dewain Gallery, and I don't believe I'd ever been in the gallery before. There were maybe— Well, there was the Dewain. Then there was Ferus [Gallery] and there was — Oh, golly, I can't think of the names. But by '65, I guess there were maybe four galleries, five, that handled contemporary work. I remember going to the Ferus, which was a small space and they did very beautiful installations, and being very impressed with the sort of seriousness of this and how there was such possibility beyond what we sort of knew about. It was a really good time to be entering into the art world, because it was expanding. Work was being seen that was really quite new, although you could find roots for it back a ways.

COLLINGS: Well, it's a very exciting period.

O'NEILL: So anyway, I did that one year of teaching, and—

COLLINGS: Was Judy Chicago there?

O'NEILL: She was.

COLLINGS: Do you have any particular memory of her?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes, yes. We were contemporaries, and she was Judy Cohen, and she was a very dominant character. She was very outspoken and very dynamic. She annoyed a lot of people. She frightened me. She was overt and physical and—

COLLINGS: Physical in terms of gestures?

O'NEILL: Yes, and just walking up and shoving somebody.

COLLINGS: Really?

O'NEILL: Or she'd come into the room, and if she thought you were in her space, she'd just shovel your stuff on the floor. Oh, yes. She was quite a trip in those early days. I think she got her— She graduated the same year I did, or a year sooner. Yes, I even developed a pretty sophisticated imitation of her walk, which I could do. [mutual laughter]

COLLINGS: It's interesting that you would even bother to do that.

O'NEILL: Well, no. She was a well-known character and I think generally well liked, but, you know, I was kind of— I was sort of at the other pole of expressiveness. I was a sort of a recessive character. It's curious. We eventually— Well, I haven't seen her in years, but we became friends and we recognized one another.

There was another guy there by the name of Richard Matthews, with whom I got to be a good friend. He was in sculpture and he was doing things with materials that I found really interesting. He was somebody who was very productive and came

out with really interesting work, a whole range of work over a period of years. He had a very tragic life. We stayed in touch. He went back to Kansas City to teach. He was one of the people who got shut out of the academic system. He was completely geared to doing it. He was like a department chair at Kansas City Art Institute and did a lot of photographic work, did film work, got into film, really had ambitions to do film about— He did a film about Ricky— I'm trying to think of his first name, but the sculptor, and he was an installer. George Ricky, who did kinetic pieces. Anyway, so we had a long career and friendship, and Richard started falling apart. He died in '82, I think. He hanged himself. Bev [Beverly O'Neill] and a friend of his found him. Yes, we had worked together on a lot of things, but he was doing a lot of alcohol.

COLLINGS: Were there a lot of people doing drugs and whatnot at the art program at that time?

O'NEILL: No, I wasn't aware of that much at school, no, not at all. No. I was several years out of school before I— Well, I had smoked grass a bit with— It never had any effect on me at the time. My friend Bruce Houston was, I think, the first pot smoker. I think that was all that he was doing, never a trace of any other kind of drug. There was a fair amount of drinking.

But I didn't much go to parties, and I didn't really— I was always sort of doing my own thing. I always had a job, for one thing, and then later, in about— Well, when my parents sold their house, I had to find another place to live, and I found a little hole-in-the-wall store that I rented down in Culver City. I thought, well, it's time to have a studio, and there was this little store. It had been a storeroom behind a liquor store that had burned down, so there was just this little derelict building. It had

flooded. This was down near where the [Marina del Rey] marina was put in. So I corresponded with some people, and they were out of state. They were circus people, and they said, "You could rent it. It would be fifty cents a day."

I said, "Fine, fifteen dollars a month." I borrowed my parents' house trailer, and we just had it next to it. So I ended up living in it, and I had a studio.

COLLINGS: Oh, this was the trailer in Venice that you lived in. [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Yes. It was just across the line in Culver City. I was there for a couple of years. Then the place sold and I had to move out of there. Then I shared a place in Beverly Glen with [Robert] Bob Abel, with whom I had done a film.

COLLINGS: [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Yes. We got together about '61. He was a few years ahead of me. He was, I'd say, a pretty successful design student. He was moving from industrial design to film. He really wanted to do film.

COLLINGS: He went into advertising, didn't he?

O'NEILL: He eventually started the company with his own name that became probably the most successful commercial graphics, motion graphics, house at the time that was around. It had about a fifteen-year lifespan. They became so dominant that they essentially won all the awards that you could win. The Cleo Awards were given for commercial graphics. Bob had done one animated film and wanted to do a live action film, and we were originally going to do a film about design, really about industrial design and sort of tracing it back into earlier manufacturing techniques and so forth.

COLLINGS: Oh, that sounds like a great topic.

O'NEILL: Yes. This was to be a master's project for us both. We never did it. Neither of us had done production classes, so we were sort of self-taught. We decided to make this film at the beach because it would be real easy to do and—

COLLINGS: You mean because of the lighting and everything?

O'NEILL: Well, because the subject matter was so available and you could spend time on the beach with a camera and you would find things that were interesting.

COLLINGS: And people wouldn't notice you, really.

COLLINGS: Yes, and Muscle Beach especially was a real performance area, so people really sort of got off on being filmed. There wasn't any hesitation. And the merry-go-round had always fascinated me, and we decided to make this film. It sort of conflated the dynamic, the dynamo, of the merry-go-round and the frantic activity on the beach. I'm trying to think of what we had seen by then that would have been models for that.

COLLINGS: By that time you had started going to the avant-garde screenings at the Cinema Theater and the Coronet.

O'NEILL: Yes. That was contemporary with that, yes. Well, it was towards the end of that I had met up with Robert Franks' photography in his first book called *The Americans*, and that was pretty influential, yes. In terms of documentary films, we were sort of hungrily looking at everything we could find. I was doing photography, and I was doing a particular project in photography that involved using lithographic film to print on, which compresses the tonal range and allows you to— It's somewhat abstract from a live-action negative, and I wanted to try and do that in film.

Bob was a great— He was a good producer. We shared just about every function in it, but he was particularly good at making phone calls and setting things up. His uncle had a Bolex, so we were able to borrow the Bolex.

COLLINGS: Good old Bolex.

O'NEILL: Oh, yes. We shot for a time, and then for a while we had a little editing room in the Motion Picture Division. Then we got into a whole long drawn-out thing about printing on this special film stock, which we had to obtain through various— Well, anyway, it's a long story. So on the weekends we would set up this crude lab and try to print, which—

COLLINGS: Would this be army surplus?

O'NEILL: That was later. This was before we had— If we'd had a contact printer then, it would have made it much easier, but I didn't know about that. We tried printing using a camera as a printer, which you can sort of do, but it's very, very crude. We found an optical house who said they would do it, and then they found out there was a lot more work to it. For one thing, I was having thirty-five-millimeter film re-slit to sixteen, and their slitting process wasn't very accurate, so the film wouldn't necessarily hold registration. It was a learning experience. If we had asked the proper questions, we could have done it all a lot easier. But anyway, we got that film done, and it played a part in both of our master's degrees.

COLLINGS: Well, you say—and I think it was maybe in the catalog—that "The carousel takes the documentary footage and shifts it to a world of stark light and shadow, an unreferenced place where all is motion and steel." I just thought that was interesting because so many of your films take— I don't know if you want to call

them documentary or veritative-type footage, and sort of re-mix it, re-contextualize it, so that the referent is stripped away. Here in your first film, there it is. It seems like a really important concern.

O'NEILL: Yes. It seemed to be about eliminating the particulars of personality and style and place so that you were forced to just deal with motion and with form. Yes, it was something that was very attractive to me from the beginning, and in a way, I think it was sort of perhaps a gimmick in the sense that it took away responsibility for solving other problems within the film, because you were doing that. In other words, I could have made perhaps a more incisive film about that place another way. But anyway, that was the slant that we took on it. We collaborated well and shared our resources and basically learned what we knew about filmmaking by doing that.

Then Bob went on to— He did a documentary about a guy who was in drag racing, and I did a little camera work for him on it, but I didn't really work that much on it. He was always taking on projects that were a little too big, but he managed to pull them off and borrow money. He leveraged it into doing— He was influenced by John Whitney's work and some other people who were inventing the slit scan, which was a technology for essentially moving graphics while a shutter is recording. So you take a dot and turn it into a line. By precisely moving that and varying the way you move it, you can generate forms.

I realized after a year or two after our film that we couldn't really work together because he was completely committed to the idea of selling his ideas to clients, and he got his satisfaction out of being able to push it a little further each time, but always within the framework of sales.

COLLINGS: Which is what he went on to do professionally.

O'NEILL: Which is what he went on to do. He was always incredibly ambitious and incredibly optimistic, and he would get big contracts, and then he would figure out how to solve the problems. He wound up with about two hundred employees and a big building in Hollywood and a really frantic kind of life. I would job out things to their studio that would need optical printing done, so I was working on their project. I didn't have much contact other than just the sort of job that I had to do. I was sort of well satisfied to be out of there. On several occasions we had meetings where he said, "If you want to be a part of this, you could," and I always found it just a little too high pressure, and I always had something else I wanted to do.

COLLINGS: You also shared a studio with Carl Cheng at one time. Is that right?

O'NEILL: Yes. Carl was also in industrial design, and we were— I'm trying to think where we started. When I was teaching that one year for Bob Heinecken, Carl was in the process of setting up a studio, and we— Or was it that year? Maybe it was a little before that. He found a whole building on Pico Boulevard in Santa Monica that was— Well, a portion of it was for rent. It was a whole building that was all art studios. It was a great phenomenon. It was a place that had been a moving and storage warehouse and in real bad shape, belonged to a guy who lived out of state. There some artists had part of his space, and I guess the part that we were in had been a store. Carl rapidly became the master lease-holder and the sort of manager of the building.

I was only there sharing that space for about two, maybe three years. It was a wonderful space. It was up on the second floor and had windows all the way around.

Or no, windows on the street, it was very— Sort of a lot of breeze, a nice place to work. I was doing fiberglass stuff. I was mixing these molds out of plaster. This is really strange, because I got into film and I got into sculpture sort of simultaneously, and it was kind of like one or the other had to go, but I hadn't decided which.

COLLINGS: The films are sort of like sculptures in time, assemblage pieces, you might say.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. A lot of the same energy went into them. In a way it was sort of nice— I've always found it enjoyable to have more than one medium going because they draw on different parts of your nervous system. One becomes a kind of a vacation from the other.

COLLINGS: You never did any writing.

O'NEILL: I never did any writing seriously, no. Well, Carl was behind— Okay. That's right. I remember now. I was actually Carl's— I turned out to be his advisor because I had gotten my degree, and you had to have three advisors. [Robert] Bob Heinecken was one and I was one. I think Tom Jennings was the third. He got his degree a couple of years after I did.

There was some other people there that were sort of interesting. There was Tom Jennings, who taught graphic design, and he had been there for quite a while. He was real interested in printing and in teaching the technology of letterpress printing. For a time I was involved with that, helping run the print lab, where people would set type and make up the print at the press and actually print a run. So I was kind of the TA for that. Then I was doing photography silkscreen. I believe that was Tom Jennings' class.

Also there was John [A.] Neuhart who was there. He came in '63, I think, and did a summer session. John was really an interesting guy. He was working at the Charles Eames studio. He's a guy who knew more about sort of every aspect of graphic image-making and could explain it with such clarity and such enthusiasm. He was a little wiry guy. He must have weighed about 110 pounds, and he was just almost bursting out of his— He was just so enthusiastic and people really loved him. He would give these exhaustive lectures that were like three hours of solid discourse. He opened my eyes to a lot of the sort of peculiarities of graphics in different cultures and various ways that images have been made. He was one of the first collectors of early toys that I knew about, and specimens of all kinds. He was just an enthusiastic packrat, and he introduced me to Parke—

COLLINGS: That's interesting, because I felt like you had been exposed to a packrat somewhere along the line. I thought maybe it was your mom, but it sounds like it was him.

O'NEILL: No. My mother was just the opposite. She'd throw out anything that hadn't been touched for a couple of days. [laughs]

COLLINGS: Okay. Because the way these images have marched through your work—

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes.

COLLINGS: Planes and trains and silhouettes and [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Yes, it's all a way of trying to draw all these things into an image and hold them together in balance. I think, yes, Neuhart was— I believe John Neuhart, as far as

I know, he's still alive. He hasn't taught for a few years. He had his own graphic studio.

There was Mitz Kataoko was another one, who recently retired. I was Mitz's TA for a while. I remember doing photographic projects for clients of his when I was a graduate student, a set of products and photographs.

COLLINGS: But under the auspices of the art department itself?

O'NEILL: No, this was kind of using the art department's facilities on weekends, late at night.

Another designer, Larry Purcell, had a job over in the Business Administration, GBA, Building, up on the seventh floor, I think it was, doing graphics for a magazine called *California Management Review*, and it was a great little job because you'd get an assignment to do, and then you'd generally have a few weeks to do it, and you did it on your own time. It was always design graduates that sort of passed this job along. So I got it. Allen Miller, another designer who was there, did it, and then Carl did it. It was just enough money that along with the TA salary you could live. One could live reasonably well and have a car and so forth for about four hundred a month.

COLLINGS: This was setting up the magazine?

O'NEILL: Yes, this was doing graphic design for the magazine and, yes, doing all the type—

COLLINGS: The type, the print, the illustrations, everything. It sounds like a great job.

O'NEILL: So Carl and I were on that together. Then he went off to Germany for a year, studying at the Design School of Essen. Then he came back with a German

girlfriend. He didn't meet her over there, but she was here for at least a month already, and we've all been friends ever since.

COLLINGS: I just saw his big stone—

O'NEILL: The roller?

COLLINGS: Roller, yes, on Sunday down at the [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Yes. They hadn't rolled it for a long time, but it sits down there.

COLLINGS: Yes. I don't go down there that often. I know I saw it rolled once, but that was a while ago.

You met Chick Strand at that time, didn't you?

O'NEILL: Yes. Chick Strand came to L.A. in 1966.

COLLINGS: Did you and she ever talk much about your work, share ideas?

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. We worked together, too, doing—

COLLINGS: Oh, yes, the Sears commercial.

O'NEILL: We did the Sears commercial, and Marty [Martin Muller] and I became good friends. We collaborated on some film projects besides the— Well, the Sears one was sort of the first one. We hooked up with a man by the name of Reg Child. Reg Child had started a company called Genesis, and I believe he was in the film school at UCLA, or he knew people who were, and they were interested in doing a distribution of short films to colleges. So each year they would go to the Ann Arbor Film Festival and various places to look at films and select an hour-and-a-half package. Then there'd be trailers or publicity pieces that— I don't know quite where the idea came from, but we decided to— I guess Reg suggested it. He knew what I was doing with stock filmage and so on, and said, "Why don't you do us a piece that

we can play as a teaser, trailer, and use a shot or two out of each of the nine or ten films that were used." That was pretty successful. I think I did the first one, and then there were like three subsequent ones, and Marty Muller, who was Neon Park, his painting name, did work on each of those.

COLLINGS: It seems to me that there's a shot in one of your films that also appears in one of Chick's films. Is that at all possible?

O'NEILL: It is.

COLLINGS: It's a curtain that's on fire.

O'NEILL: Oh, I don't know that that's in any of Chick's films.

COLLINGS: Well, maybe not the exact same one, but I remember—

O'NEILL: Something like that.

COLLINGS: —that she's got a sequence where the camera pans along a room—and it's stock footage—and a curtain, a gauzy curtain, catches on fire at the top. Or maybe the fire starts at the top.

O'NEILL: She found it separately, because the one I had was an educational film about fire prevention, I guess. That film was—

COLLINGS: Which one is that?

O'NEILL: That's *Runs Good*. *Runs Good* was a couple of years out of school. Well, yes, *7362*, really the third film I did, that was started, really, when I was teaching there. This institution that the state operates called the state warehouse for surplus property, if you work for any non-profit in the state, you're accredited to go there and shop for stuff that's been moved off of some other institution, the military, hospitals, and prisons. Tom Jennings, the guy I mentioned, the printer guy, he had gotten all of

these printing presses for the school through that place at about maybe 10 percent of their value.

COLLINGS: Was this military surplus?

O'NEILL: A lot of it was military, yes. In fact, the contact printer that I mentioned was used by the navy because their fighter planes during the Second World War and the Korean War had sixteen-millimeter cameras that fired along with the guns so they could see what they'd hit. They would process them on shipboard and make a print using these beautiful contact printers. Then they became obsolete or they weren't doing that anymore, or they were doing it with— This was sort of pre-video, so I don't know why they were selling them, but for a time you could get one of these printers that had cost probably fifteen thousand dollars, you could get for three or four hundred bucks.

COLLINGS: Our tax dollars at work. [laughs]

O'NEILL: That's right. That's right, the gravy train. The gravy train out there was just amazing. You could get pallets full of shoot lead. You could get wonderful glassware from chemistry classes. It was always a grab bag. Carl and I used to go out there and just sort of go crazy buying stuff. This stuff is still following me around, boxes full of stuff, and some of it got pretty well used.

There was also processing tanks. This is how I met Chickie, was that I had this set up in one of the darkrooms in the photo lab, and a number of people learned about it and I'd show them how to use it. You could essentially make a film very cheaply that way, or obviously you could do a lot of things you couldn't do any other way. I

was eager to sort of bridge the gap between film and photography, and that was one way to do it.

COLLINGS: Using the stock footage?

O'NEILL: No, using the equipment. I also got a number of the little cameras and these little special magazine loads of sixteen, and I'd check them out to students and say, "Shoot a sequence and then use that as a negative." A few people got the hang of it, started realizing the beauty of this thing. You could take one frame, or you could take a sequence. Later I had a teaching job over at Mt. St. Mary's College, and there was a nun who I did this with, and she did just extraordinary stuff. So I was doing this kind of hands-on thing. It appealed to some students and not to others. There were people from the sculpture area who were doing a first film. It was satisfying that way.

COLLINGS: So how were you explaining your work to people at that time?

O'NEILL: Oh, golly, that's a good question. I wasn't very historically grounded, although I was— We had one teacher, Hugh Gray, in film, who showed— His was an early Russian cinema class where he went through Eisenstein and Potemkin and Dziga Vertov. So I was beginning to get a background in that. There was also a French surrealist film; I don't think it was a whole semester but a few classes.

COLLINGS: What about the French pure cinema movement of the—

O'NEILL: You mean the New Wave?

COLLINGS: Germaine Dulac and things of the twenties. It was this idea that cinema should be its own art form, it should not follow theater or literature.

O'NEILL: Sure. Right. Right.

COLLINGS: If it could be compared to anything, it would be compared to music.

O'NEILL: And there was all of that abstraction that came out of Hans Richter and, of course, Oskar Fischinger, who I wasn't aware of at the time. There was Len Lye, who was Australian, who made interesting experimental work in England in the thirties.

I had an animation class with Bill Schull, who had been there for years. He was a great teacher. He was Dan McLaughlin's teacher, who has been there ever since.

COLLINGS: The reason I asked you how you explained your work at the time is because one of the things that seems like— When you're talking about it, you're talking about the experimental techniques—

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: —but then one of the other things that I've sort of seen in your other interviews or writing is that— Well, for example, with *7362*, I guess it's in your catalog, you say, "Bilateral symmetry came to be a dominant metaphor for consciousness." So there are these themes about world views and how to see the world. I was just wondering how these ideas evolved while you were making your films and while you were starting to work with these technologies.

O'NEILL: Well, some of the thoughts really came later, kind of reflecting on what had already been done.

COLLINGS: Yes, that's so often the case.

O'NEILL: Yes. It just seemed like there were these possibilities that you could glimpse in the medium that were unexplored, or at least unexplored to my knowledge.

Sort of being kind of technically inclined, I wasn't afraid to try pushing the equipment to do something it wasn't meant to do, really.

COLLINGS: Were there any kind of structuralist premises underlying the making of that film in particular?

O'NEILL: No. This was sort of before any of that was even thought of.

COLLINGS: Okay. Because I was just wondering how you were using this symmetry, if there was some sort of equation underneath it all.

O'NEILL: No, there wasn't, really. It was basically one of many things that I would try and suddenly it seemed to be working. Then it was like, how far can we go with this? It's curious, I never went back to that until fairly recently, in graphic work. I felt I had to leave it because it was such a sort of pervasive— The esthetic was so powerful in itself that it was very hard to blend it with anything else. It was like you had to be entirely within that or else forget about it. People have tried to put a symmetrical shot in a movie, and it always just broke the movie in half.

COLLINGS: The colors are fantastic, too.

O'NEILL: Yes. Some of that color came from— Well, one of the things I was doing with the processing was to do the old Man Ray solarization technique, which involved exposing a piece of film and then partially developing it. Development normally would take, oh, five minutes. So we'd develop it for maybe one minute and then wash it off so it was latent but you couldn't see anything. Then you would stretch it out and expose it to a little bit of light, a light bulb that's flashing on and off. Then that would begin to develop the undeveloped areas, and so you'd get something that was neither a

negative nor a positive, and you'd get these kind of lines that were between the two areas, the first development and the second one.

Then one looked for emulsions that would handle this well, and some emulsions were— If it was too fast, of course, the flashing would just burn it out. It turned out that sound recording stock had a very heavy emulsion and a very slow, very low light sensitivity, and it was very good for doing this with. Coincidentally, it was also available through the surplus warehouse, because at that time there was lots of sixteen-millimeter outdated military film you could buy. So I was doing that and—

COLLINGS: It sounds like fun.

O'NEILL: It was fun. Yes. It was a great time. There was a guy there by the name of Burt Gershfield when I was teaching there, and then afterwards— He was coming from back East, and he was a very charismatic guy, and he was probably the most exotic character among all of those people. He was very much into rock and roll and being a kind of— This was '66, so this was getting along in time. He was a guy who was always going to do the feature about the Rolling Stones or do some really big project. Anyway, he wound up making one film, and he made that on that same contact printer. He had to be very good at solarizing. He met somebody in a lab who— I guess they were processing Kodachrome. In the Kodachrome processing, you have developers that also have the color, that are color couplers. There's yellow, cyan, and magenta. Burt would go over and get a gallon bottle of each from his friend at the lab, and we could process in that. So he'd process black and white film, and it would infuse it with that color coupler. So you'd have a magenta pass, and then you could process another piece and have essentially a yellow strip of film. The black of

the emulsion was replaced by the color. Then you could take layers of this and superimpose them onto another piece of film. The branches are just endless in this, and you wind up with just piles of film. So that was where some of those colors came from. Some of them were also just color filters, sending things through Deluxe general lab with the color filter and having them just say, well, you know, I could—At that time—

COLLINGS: [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Yes, like saying, "Use this filter, and just print this roll red and print this roll blue." They were remarkably patient with me, and they came out with some pretty good results.

COLLINGS: Well, let me just—

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COLLINGS: —regard to that film is that it seemed like a time when consciousness itself might undergo an evolutionary leap, and I was wondering how, at that time, you felt that these experiments with film might facilitate that.

O'NEILL: Well, this is a time when psychedelics were just being explored and we were all reading *Adventures of Don Juan.* Carlos Castaneda was a UCLA anthropoly [inaudible]. So he would give lectures and so on. I didn't really know him personally, but I'd met him.

COLLINGS: Was he on campus at that time?

O'NEILL: He was. Actually he worked at the map room, I think.

COLLINGS: Oh my god, that's right where our office is.

O'NEILL: Is that right?

COLLINGS: Yes, if it was where the map room used to be.

O'NEILL: Yes. I don't remember him actually going there, but he was a map librarian and he was writing. Of course, all of the— I think he was into his third novel before all of the debunking started to happen.

But by the late sixties, it was a time when a lot of people thought that filmmaking as a culture would evolve in a different way than it did, that it would be less verbal and that it would be more open to the individual, in essence to the author. French New Wave was well established by then. Then films that were coming along a

few years later would be *Easy Rider*, although *Easy Rider* was a pretty conventional film.

COLLINGS: But at the time it seemed—

O'NEILL: The content was different, yes. There were sort of people sniffing around from various peripheral studios, places, looking for someone to do something that they couldn't get anywhere else, which is pretty much how I got in the film business, was by hooking up with some people that were making commercials.

Also, I mentioned Genesis, the distribution company. They wanted to produce, and the distribution was sort of a way to get started making some money at that. And it never happened. And my friend Burt Gershfield, who was also a part of that group, was always flying off to London to try to get Beatle money or trying to hook in somehow or other. *Yellow Submarine* came along in '63, I think.

COLLINGS: I'm not sure of the exact date, yes.

O'NEILL: Maybe it was a little later.

COLLINGS: I think it might have been a bit later, yes.

O'NEILL: It seemed like the industry was opening up. There were new people coming in. It was changing. It didn't change enough, basically. I suppose the audience numbers just really weren't there.

COLLINGS: Yes, for non-narrative kinds of things. That's a hard sell.

O'NEILL: Well, part of it was sort of like it was driven by the music, and this was before MTV, a long time before. It was sort of like the music could drive the project, and the videos could follow, but it never quite jelled, and it was sort of disappointing

because it often seemed like we were so close. Maybe it was just because we didn't know what we were doing. We thought it was going to be easier than we—

COLLINGS: Well, you were in a subculture, really, at the time.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. That seemed to be what it was, and it really didn't represent the numbers that would make it into an industry.

Where were we?

O'NEILL: Do you want to take a break for a second?

O'NEILL: Okay.

COLLINGS: Or not.

O'NEILL: It's all right. I could use a drink of water.

[tape recorder off]

O'NEILL: Yes, my parents would be subscribers to a series of travelogues at the— I think they were all at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre, and there would be somebody who would be lecturing, and then they'd show a film.

COLLINGS: Reminds me a little bit of *Runs Good.* You'd hear the snake charmer and—

O'NEILL: Right. Right. Yes, that comes from a film called *Outposts Unknown*, which was made by the military in 1942 basically for training people in the services about what to expect in other countries. That's an interesting film, and I looked for it for years. I've never been able to find it. I recorded it off of TV. I just happened to have a tape recorder sitting in front of the television.

COLLINGS: Why were you looking for it? How were you aware of it?

O'NEILL: Just by chance, I think. I was looking for soundtrack material, and this appeared, and I fortunately got it. So, yes, that's an interesting kind of influence, sitting and looking at places that are contextualized by an authoritative voice, either live or on the track.

COLLINGS: Do you remember being interested at these events, or was it sort of tortuously boring?

O'NEILL: No, I was engaged with it, though I could see it being in a kind of framework of people in the teaching profession who were encouraged to learn about other places almost as a part of their profession and sort of the identity of the teacher grew as being special in a certain way. It was in my family, and it was sort of— Well, I think it was even something that was encouraged to the extent that you had to do cultural things in order to maintain your standing professionally. You would either take Extension classes, or you would go to movies, or you would do courses of study, and everybody seemed to do a certain amount of this every year to get credits towards advancement, I think. It's like adult education. So it was kind of culturally isolated, in a way, although when I was quite young, that was the culture I was in. It was sort of traveling and having a certain kind of — Well, it was always sort of like we white people looking at these other people who may be a little bit less advanced than we, but being somewhat respectful. Although it was still an era when primitive art was called primitive art. It was a very sort of top-down kind of approach to other cultures.

From that then you bring in the Beats, the Beat poets. This would be '55 or so, when I was still in high school. Suddenly you began hearing voices of a very different kind. I remember about the time when I was riding my bike to Venice on the

weekends, I would encounter the Gas House. The Gas House was the first poetry sort of Beatnik establishment in Venice, right on the boardwalk at Windward. It was one of the old Bingo parlors. Remember Bingo parlors?

COLLINGS: I never played. I heard about them.

O'NEILL: It was a phenomenon. All along Venice there were these big rooms, and they had been— I guess gambling had been outlawed in the late thirties. There had been gambling on boats for a time, offshore, and then that was also eliminated. But there had been Bingo palaces, and there was a promoter from San Francisco called Eric Nord, who bought a Bingo parlor right next to the old St. Mark's Hotel. I remember they painted it black on the outside, and there was a lot of writing and artists around. There was a bathtub inside that had flames painted all over the outside of it. There would be sort of collage art shows, things sort of permanently in there. I only remember going to one reading there. I don't remember who it was. It was short-lived. It only existed for about a year, and I think there was some kind of a drug problem or something, and they got shut down. But it was fascinating to me at the time. It was sort of like the only kind of window into this sort of monolithic suburban culture that I couldn't get a handle on, I was so alienated from. Suddenly here were some people that seemed to share that. There were also girls in black tights around. That was nice. I was just looking.

This was kind of the same time I started taking pictures in Venice a little after that. So Venice was always kind of— It had a special place. It was like a little bit of a tear in the fabric, where there was some questioning going on.

COLLINGS: Did you see those travelogues as being a tear in the fabric also, because they were presenting such different ways of living?

O'NEILL: Well, they were mostly pretty tied in. A lot of them were basically centered on Europe, although I do remember that— Yes, there was an Amazon piece or two, and there were a couple of African pieces, but not really engaging very much with the issues in these places. It was basically—

COLLINGS: They probably weren't really presented very well.

O'NEILL: It was very seamless in a way. This sort of notion of the First World and the Third World was not really— It was kind of assumed, but it wasn't really talked about.

COLLINGS: How were you using images? For example, in *Runs Good*, you've got a lot of stock footage shots of like forties- and fifties-era people. One sequence in particular sticks in my mind, all of those women with the veiled hats. Is that like a group wedding or something?

O'NEILL: A group wedding, yes.

COLLINGS: There you are in, I guess, 1970, and you're a part of this, like, visionary new, brave new world of a sort. How are those images of people of a certain generation, a certain race, a certain class, being used?

O'NEILL: Well, it's to kind of look at material that originally had one meaning and now it's being excavated and somehow constructed in a different way, perhaps with the notion implied that one had evolved beyond this and it could become farce. It was mainly more, really, a kind of film about— And they all are, to some extent, about the sort of absurdity of our daily lives, in a way. If you look around, you see a world that's

kind of— Well, it's dysfunctional, really. There's nature on one hand, which is often so exquisite that you can hardly look at it, and then there's human activity, which is sort of pitted against nature. They're all sort of films about impossibility, I guess. Well, you can't look at that film without looking at Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, which I had seen a few years before, again and again, and I had taught, shown it in classes. By this time, I was renting films from Canyon Cinema to show to classes, and that became very much a favorite, that and the early [Luis] Bunel-Dali *Andalusian Dog*. If there's any film that really changed my mind about my life, it was that one. It's one of those pieces that I'd seen it probably hundreds of times, and it had always changed, and I realized that it was acting in a way that only the finest kind of art does, that it really engages you on so many different levels and can be interpreted in a lot of different ways. So I sort of really knew that that was where I was aiming to be, and if experience didn't at least try to do that, it wasn't really very interesting. I guess it's sort of realizing how image-saturated culture is and how much imagery there is and how persuasive it is and sort of like saying, well, if you— And I think Bob Heinecken's class was really influential in this, to an extent, looking at advertising and thinking about other ways you could experience it.

COLLINGS: Do you think that if you had not been going into art at such an important time, in terms of cultural change, that you would have been impelled into the arts? The way that you're talking about using these images of society, if you were going into the arts now, for example, would you have needed to be an artist now?

O'NEILL: I don't know.

COLLINGS: Was formulating that message an important, a signal part of what you were doing?

O'NEILL: Well, I think if I developed the way that I did, I probably would do it again, yes.

COLLINGS: But at that time, that was an important new message.

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: Was imparting those perspectives on society the important thing, or was that more of a material for your own individual vision?

O'NEILL: I think doing the work was what was important in letting all of this content loose in the work. In a way, I've sort of become somewhat repetitive in doing that, although in later films I've tended to refine a lot of that out for a while, in some of the films from the seventies, to doing more— Well, a more formal thing. The sort of social current that followed by the late sixties, that the discourse of structuralism had emerged, and even by the time *7362* was finished, it was beginning to be— There had come to be this discussion about what was a serious filmmaker doing, that one had to begin by rejecting entertainment completely, and that filmmaking really— The problem that one dealt with was self-reflexivity, was the film's reflection, not its own processes and so forth. That was an immensely persuasive argument.

I had gotten all the way to teaching at CalArts in 1970 and met Gene Youngblood and sat in on his lectures and was first introduced to Michael Snow and to Hollis Frampton and to Ken Jacobs and others in those classes, and realized that I was not really on board then, although I was fascinated by it, and I tried to figure out what the underpinnings of it were and tried to figure out, well, where do you position

yourself with regard to this? That seemed to be the most sort of vital— At least in academia that was basically what was being talked about. It was a short— Maybe it was a five-year period. Essentially there was that strain of filmmaking, and then there was the diarist or the self-revelatory trend, and then there was Jack Smith and ecstatic perversity and all that sort of testing of First Amendment rights and the police closing theaters and so on, and early Warhol films, which didn't have much explicit content, but the suggestion was that it was. I didn't really see that what I was doing fitted, really, any of those categories. It was more sort of deliberately cranky—

COLLINGS: Cranky. [laughs]

O'NEILL: Cranky, funny in a way, and sinister in a way. It's like there's a certain kind of very ambivalent eroticism going on. As I see it, sort of bitter, sort of— I don't know, just kind of a report from within, I guess. Every time I would bear down on really trying to figure out what I was doing, I'd stop working because I couldn't figure it out. Then if I'd relax a little bit, I'd discover that I had another idea.

COLLINGS: It's interesting you should say that, because when I went to your show in Santa Monica, I went in there with my notepad, and I'm trying to get some good questions and figure it all out. I would get really tied in knots, and I just felt like the walls were frowning at me.

O'NEILL: Oh, no.

COLLINGS: There was nothing I could write down. Then I would, like, turn away in discouragement and walk. Then I would turn around, and I felt like if I turned around and I just looked at everything and didn't try to analyze it, everything seemed sort of rosy in a funny way. It's sort of hard to explain. It's probably not relevant to what

you were saying, but I think the point that you were making was that if you tried to explain what you were doing, it just sort of stopped the process of being able to do it.

O'NEILL: Yes. I remember meeting Hollis Frampton in about '72, and he was giving a lecture about a Stan Brakhage film in Philadelphia. He's a man of just amazing intelligence, and his reading was just amazing, the sources he could draw upon. I realized this is really what— This is what a real—

COLLINGS: I know, but that's kind of what that period was about anyway. Those were theory-based films.

O'NEILL: A lot of them were, and the ones that were the most theory-based ultimately were unwatchable.

COLLINGS: Right. Exactly. But the writing about them was fascinating.

O'NEILL: The writing was interesting. Often one would see a film and you couldn't penetrate it until you heard someone talking about it or you read something, and then it became quite— It revealed itself, that the structure of the thing was established from the beginning and it's going to play itself out in a certain way.

I think one of my favorite of them all was a Hollis Frampton film called *Zorn's Lemma*, because it is very imagistic, and it's probably the most enjoyable, the most sort of lyrical of his films, but it's organized along a very metered, very logical path, and you gradually figure out what it is that's going on. Then you can tell what's going to happen, and it happens.

COLLINGS: Well, that's reassuring. [laughs]

O'NEILL: But I never had an idea like that. Well, I had one idea like that.

COLLINGS: Well, how do you make your transitions in these long pieces where you go from abstract passage to sort of stock footage, image manipulation? You've got very complex soundtracks. You don't have a structuralist premise. So how are you composing?

O'NEILL: It's very intuitive, and it's by having the material and experiencing it a lot to see— To try— It sounds stupid in a way, but it's sort of true that you begin to experience the balance between things, and it seems to shape itself. This is the kind of explanation that leads to all sorts of really stupid art, but it's like it ultimately winds up being a very nonverbal kind of—

COLLINGS: Yes, definitely, particularly there's one shot, the opening shot of *Easy Out*, with the gloved hand and the freeway in the background and then the two—

O'NEILL: The two fingers?

COLLINGS: That shot, it just jams your mind. There's nothing you can say about that shot. [O'Neill laughs.] It's such a conundrum. It just is what it is.

O'NEILL: Yes. It's the announcer. I forget his name. Bradshaw. I think he's a football player and he's this big burly guy, and he sort of does stuff with his shoulders and he's gesturing. This is a piece of footage I got working on a commercial. He was sort of the epitome of kind of type-A male explaining—

COLLINGS: Would he have been recognizable to an audience at that time?

O'NEILL: Nobody ever mentioned that he was, but it wasn't that old when I got it. It was new when I got it. Then to put him in a natural surrounding that was penetrated by a highway seemed to be important. It's only because there are people driving through it that he's there. It's sort of broken nature in a way. The hand is like a—

COLLINGS: It's so mute.

O'NEILL: Yes. That's from my friend Marty [Muller], who's just incredibly funny about everything. He was a teacher. He's Chickie's [Chick Strand] husband.

COLLINGS: He was a teacher?

O'NEILL: Well, no, he never taught, but he was a teacher of me, because when we worked together, he would— And he was a monologist. He would say a hundred times more than I would. I always wondered why he was tolerating me, because I didn't seem to have much to offer. He was so far into hallucinogenics and inner experience that he was sort of only partly in the world, in a way. His sort of ecstasy and the intensity that he lived this inner life was very influential. I always felt that I could only follow him part way, but what I came away with was good.

Let me see. You figure there's Marty, and then there's Carlos Castaneda and *Don Juan*, and there's Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, and it begins to outline a territory in a way. It's like, well, the shots are all— Whether you find it or whether you shoot it, it sort of puts a marker in your experience that has all the associations that you have with it, but of course, when you show it to somebody, they have other associations. I've never written poetry, but I suppose it has to do with shading the word and the meter and the density of language in such a way that, almost despite itself, it comes to have a certain quality. It mostly had to do with letting go of intention, rather than with conceiving it ahead of time, because if I tried to conceive it ahead of time, it wasn't satisfactory. I didn't have the tool to lay it out on paper and then go back and fill it in, but if I just worked and accumulated things and kept my feelers out for where something might be, that things would come together and occasionally be interesting.

I remember going to London in '73 for an Experimental Film Congress that was held by the London Filmmakers Coop, and being really quite overwhelmed by the sort of monolithic English experimental scene that was very much involved in theory and totally rejected any kind of eccentric—

[phone interruption]

O'NEILL: So it was another kind of experience of antithesis or rejection or feeling to be on the outside of something. I was coming out of UCLA and being on the outside of that thing.

COLLINGS: Especially coming from California rather than New York.

O'NEILL: Coming from California and going to Schofield in New York, although I did shows there that were quite successful. But you know the sort of center of gravity was around anthology and the Museum of Modern Art and so on. I think even to this day that people that don't do time in New York— Well, now it's so fragmented it hardly matters, but there's a regionalist thing. Then there's L.A. versus San Francisco, where San Francisco, to some extent, didn't appreciate Los Angeles. Los Angeles was the crass, commercial, ambitious antithesis of a more culturally advanced society. So it gradually came to me that if you lived in Los Angeles, you could feel inferior to almost everyone if you have a need to do that. And it's like, well, maybe it's time to leave. And why didn't I ever leave? Well, Bev and I were married in '65, and she would have a job or I would have a job. We just sort of gravitated into never leaving.

COLLINGS: Is she from Los Angeles also?

O'NEILL: Yes, she was born in San Francisco, grew up in L.A. and really didn't like New York. I don't know that I would have done well there over time, although for a

while I visited a lot and began to feel it a sort of a second home, where art was given a much larger place at the table and was much more respectable. There were people who really had been making art all their lives and had made a living out of it and were established. It was reassuring to sort of experience that, even from the outside. Bev was doing some of her thesis work on Mark Rothko, and we went once to Mark Rothko's studio. That was quite interesting.

COLLINGS: I've been to the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

O'NEILL: I've never actually been there. I think he had just finished that then. He died a few years later.

COLLINGS: I like very much in the beginning of *Runs Good* that sequence, the shot of going through the tunnel with the lights. To me, it's like going straight to hell. [mutual laughter]

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. The Lincoln Tunnel.

COLLINGS: Oh, it that what that is?

O'NEILL: Yes, or the birth canal. You emerge into the complexity of civilization. In there I stole the use of the— I don't know whether Bruce Conner was the first person to use the Academy leader within a film.

COLLINGS: I don't know either.

O'NEILL: But *A Movie* does use it insistently. That seemed to really just pinpoint the whole question of whether you're looking at projected light or whether you're looking at a representation of something, because that sort of reference says this is the object of films, it's an object that has this thing on it that has to do with getting your projector in the right configuration.

Then I went— Can't think of the time of it now. Can't think of the time, but I'll come up with it. But anyway, I did a film in which I made an animated component to a whole lot of essentially documentary shots of various social phenomena, like men judging a cat show.

COLLINGS: Oh, is that *Easy Out*?

O'NEILL: No. It's the one right after.

COLLINGS: *Downwind*?

O'NEILL: It's *Downwind*, right. I couldn't think of the title. Through all these shots there moves this little rectangle. It starts up on the upper left and moves down to the lower right and casts a little shadow behind it. This is definitely a structuralist influence, in a way, where I was saying this is something that's the screen and the other thing is behind the screen. It became an obsession, in a way. This is the structuralist influence, because that's one of the things they were interested in, is the material. But I never was interested in taking everything out. I was interested in having the material and also having the mythology, the content, and having them reverberate against each other in some way.

COLLINGS: Yes, the mythology of the popular culture images.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, that film was sort of a travelogue. A lot of it was shot in Europe.

COLLINGS: That one has more of your own footage in it than any of the ones that precede it.

O'NEILL: Yes. Not entirely, but almost all, yes. Yes, I carried the Bolex around, and we were in Europe for a couple of months. It was always a sort of, how do you

take a picture of something? What's the meaning of it? Are you going to ground it in formal considerations or in sort of the constraints of a diary, saying, this is personal experience, this is what happened this day, and this is what happened that day, which is sort of what it finally wound up being. I never was completely satisfied with the material, but I just at some point had this body of stuff and said, well, some shots among this are going to connect with one another. I had Bev walk cross a bridge in Amsterdam and then projected the image frame by frame and traced her body out and replaced it with sky.

COLLINGS: Was that her?

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: Oh, I didn't know that.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, there was no way you'd know.

COLLINGS: Because I just thought that was a passing stranger, just the way that that's—

O'NEILL: It could have been, yes, but, no, I had her actually do it. I don't know, in a way it's sort of— Well, it was more interesting at the time than it is now. It's curious. A lot of these things are sort of— I suppose they're influential, in a way, because— I never really thought about it this way, but you realize that a lot of these things became just sort of the currency of commercial image-making.

COLLINGS: I know. I know. You can flip on the TV and you see it today.

O'NEILL: Yes. I don't know whether I had any responsibility for that or whether this was just the way things were coming together, the way technology developed. Maybe

I was trying to get at certain things that people making commercials were trying to get at, in the sense of spectacle or of sort of—

COLLINGS: Well, I think that people making commercials today face an enormous burden in that they know that the audience is inherently skeptical, and the promise of the new world made better through technology has been debunked. So they've got to be ironic to be believed.

O'NEILL: Yes, more and more. Right. Right.

COLLINGS: It's sort of like, yes, you know you need that toilet product, but it's also not the most important thing in your life. It also shows how these concerns are kind of ridiculous, but at the same time, let's make it as jazzy as possible.

O'NEILL: Make it as entertaining as you can, yes.

COLLINGS: So it's an insidious cooption of precisely these techniques which were supposed to debunk the currency of the—

O'NEILL: But it was entirely in parallel, working back and forth, feeding on one another.

I remember seeing— There's an old effects guy by the name of Lynwood Dunn, who was really one of the inventors of optical printing and special effects. He would go around and do this electric— This was when he was in his probably mid-seventies. It would be 1972 or '73. He showed reels of original shots and then the final shot, and then they would show the parts that he made it up with, the mattes, the animations, the wipes. I saw that show about four times, I think. I would be in various cities where he'd be. He was a great lecturer. I realized that a lot of what I was doing in my own films was showing those behind-the-scenes bits, where

everything was abstracted from the scene except an outline, say, or that you could see what's behind the stage as well as what's on it, which, in a way, is sort of talking about being in that activity, in a way, that you're privy to what's in back and you could never quite believe the composite, because you worked on it and you know where the pieces are. I got into the industry because of that, so it isn't like it was any surprise, but it's like—

COLLINGS: Because of what?

O'NEILL: Because of being able to disassemble an image and look at it—

COLLINGS: Because you have the ability to do it.

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: But you didn't have an intellectual or social agenda. This was just purely a business decision?

O'NEILL: Well, no. The first decision was that I wanted to make films and I wanted to use this technology to make films, because I wanted to come up with—

COLLINGS: When you got into commercials, though.

O'NEILL: Well, then the commercial, that sort of followed, because I had gotten some equipment and I had begun to know how to do it. Then people would say, "Well, would you be interested in doing this project that I have?" So I'd figure out how to do that, and that seemed to go reasonably well. For a while I was teaching at CalArts, and then I was doing projects for people on the CalArts equipment at night or on the weekends.

COLLINGS: Commercial projects.

O'NEILL: Yes. I would do a title sequence or I would do a piece of a commercial that somebody wanted a particular effect and couldn't get anybody else to do it and I would do it. Well, this was even before CalArts. Before CalArts, I hooked up with a guy by the name of Bob Beck, who—

Are you running out of tape?

COLLINGS: Yes. Let me flip—

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O'NEILL: I had done *7362*. By the way, the title of that is just a Kodak stock number.

COLLINGS: Film stock.

O'NEILL: Right. Right. It's the stock number that is used for making titles and making mattes. It was more than just saying this is just a physical object, it's not about any mythology or anything. That film was— I didn't say anything about it, but it's basically one human body, which is Bev, and a lot of objects that I filmed in various ways, using turntables and pendulums and so on.

COLLINGS: Yes, there's an opposition between the human form and those machine forms.

O'NEILL: Yes, a lot of oil well forms, which goes back to Venice. Yes, that one was— I suppose I was trying to see God, in a way, or I was trying to somehow or other push vision into a place that it hadn't been before and, I think, in a couple of places it hasn't been since.

COLLINGS: Well, definitely, I find that, for example, when I would go down to the Santa Monica show and I when I would sit in the screening room and watch the films, then walk out on the street afterward—

O'NEILL: Oh, yes.

COLLINGS: —oh, boy.

O'NEILL: That happens with any kind of film, but it's true.

COLLINGS: It's like the graffiti, the billboard, the stop sign, everything just starts to flow together.

O'NEILL: Starts to behave, right.

COLLINGS: You're unable to see it all, whereas before you went in, you would just, "Oh, there's the stop sign. There's the graffiti. There's the bus." They're like separate objects. Whereas after you've been trained by the films to see more seamlessly—

O'NEILL: Yes, it's structures things. It's almost like if I'm really convinced by an actor's performance, I feel like I'm that actor. I can hear his— Like I'm speaking through his voice.

Also I didn't mention the second film I did, which is called *Bump City*, which is very much into the assault of advertising.

COLLINGS: But you sort of hinted at this in the catalog, the irony of that film is that forty years later, that film is so fascinating as a documentary.

O'NEILL: Documentary, right. Oh, yes, yes. Yes, I hadn't actually looked at that film for about twenty-five years, and I thought, oh— I hadn't figured out a clue about how to edit the film, but there's certain images in there that I'm glad I— Like Lawrence Welk's baton over the Palladium. There used to be a billboard on the side of the Palladium for years, that was Lawrence Welk with his hand going up and down like this. Then there was the girl who was advertising one of the Vegas casinos that used to be on Sunset. It later became the Marlboro Man corner.

COLLINGS: Those images, which seemed so overwhelming and inexorable at the time, they're all gone now.

O'NEILL: They're all gone. They've been replaced with a much more sophisticated version. Yes, you just wish you'd stood back and shot a little more of the surroundings. That's the next thing. I've got a lot of the original material from that period stuffed away in boxes somewhere. There might even be something worth saving there.

COLLINGS: While we're talking a bit about the sixties, and later on we'll talk about your film *Decay of Fiction*, what are your memories of the RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] shooting?

O'NEILL: Oh. Well, I remember very specifically. I was working at a commercial house and watching television. It was a hot night in June, and I happened to be watching. Was I watching? I was listening. No, I was listening. I was listening to the radio or hearing a TV over— Not seeing the picture. No, I guess there was a radio, because I didn't have an image of it, and just being so appalled at another assassination. I remember the first Kennedy assassination, I was at UCLA. Then this was five years later, and the Martin Luther King [Jr.] had been just before. It was very ominous. It was really sort of bringing about a different version of who we were as a people, that this sort of thing happened. And then the investigation that went on and on and all the conspiracy theories about what had actually happened and how it diverged from the official view. It was sort of, I guess maybe the second conspiracy theory. Well, the first conspiracy theory was JFK [President John F. Kennedy]. These things have still never been solved, really.

COLLINGS: Was it followed quite a bit in the local press and television, perhaps more than in other parts of the country?

O'NEILL: I think it was, yes. Oh, yes. The aftermath, it was right on the foreground for weeks and weeks after that, yes. I was never really politically active until much later. Well, never really that active, but sort of feeling those around who I knew were active, working on the campaign and so on, and the sort of confusion and frustration that was felt when it seemed that everyone who spoke out was dying. Then [Richard M.] Nixon was elected, of course, right after that. It seems a lot like today to remember it. Yes, it seems a lot like it. We've had all these periods when it was just unthinkable how things could have gone. But they went that way, so you sort of become a little passive, maybe, a little sort of focused on things that are much closer to home.

COLLINGS: I think that precisely what you deal with in so many of your films, the culture of the overwhelming spectacle, the bombardment of the images and advertising images take up so much of people's time and attention.

O'NEILL: It's a lot of our environment, yes.

COLLINGS: And it's a very interrupted kind of attention.

O'NEILL: Yes. We're forced to process a lot of information. Ken Jacobs' film, which I've never actually seen, he recently finished it, but the title sort of says it all, *Star Spangled to Death.*

COLLINGS: That's a great title.

O'NEILL: Yes. He shot it, I believe, during the Vietnam War years and only recently edited it. No, I think he shot it before then. I think it was actually back to the early sixties.

Yes, the whole culture is one of opposition, but never to the point of really getting organized and really putting one's life and resources on the line to try to change it. It's more a case of kind of reflecting on what a mess it is.

COLLINGS: It was sort of a time of putting the mainstream people, like the people at the cat show, for example, at an anthropological distance and examining them from a distance and noting the strangeness of their customs and mores.

O'NEILL: Yes, and sort of the implication being that it extends to all of us in some way, that we're looking at some other expression of ourselves, I guess.

COLLINGS: You did some work with the Oasis Film Collective.

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: That sounds like— I think in one of your interviews with David James you say that the screenings were kind of like a group— It was like a family event and an attempt to build a community. Was that something that was sort of trying to move on from the critique that you expressed?

O'NEILL: Well, I was trying to make an establishment where various voices could be heard. This was later. This was like '76.

COLLINGS: Oh, I'm sorry. We're jumping ahead again.

O'NEILL: That's all right. At this point, from the late sixties and seventies, independent filmmakers could travel, and there was quite an institutional support for screenings and lectures. There was enough of this going on that there was even a newsletter for a number of years that came out of Pittsburgh at one point, Pittsburgh Filmmakers, NAMAC, which was the National Association of Media Arts [and

Culture] Collections, I believe. So, in essence, people were available and subsidized to go and do screenings.

COLLINGS: This was the period of the visiting artist in universities.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. Well, the Canyon Cinema Coop[erative], of course, was established in about 1960 or so, and the New York Filmmakers Coop[erative] was about the same time. There was some discussion about could you do a Los Angeles Filmmakers Coop. In fact, [William] Bill Moritz actually made an attempt to start such a thing in about 1962 or so for a while. It was very small. There was a discussion about whether the aims of a collective would be to own equipment which could be shared or rented. That didn't seem practical, because nobody had the resources. Or to have a space that was one's own space that one could work in, like Millenium [Film Journal] in New York. That wasn't really practical. What we could do is offer a screen and some publicity and getting notices in the press and so on. There was actually an amazing amount of work involved in doing it.

So we started in '76. This was sort of when I was just out of CalArts. Graham Weinbren and Roberta Friedman and David Wilson and Amy Halpern and Morgan Fisher, and a number of others. There was quite a number of people who were interested in doing it. At least for a while we were able to spread the labor around, and everybody got to contribute their ideas in exchange for doing work. It was good. It's a shame it— I mean, after five or six years, fatigue set in. We never had gotten a permanent home, so we were constantly bargaining for a space and constantly having to move our equipment around. People got tired out. Also, the money for traveling people was less.

COLLINGS: So why wouldn't something like that have been hooked in with CalArts, for example?

O'NEILL: Well, it's a good question. The art school at CalArts did have its own visiting artists program, but they had a somewhat different agenda. I guess at the time we didn't really need an institution, and no institution was stepping up to offer its— We rented one night a week from LAICA, the Los Angeles Institution for something.

COLLINGS: [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Yes, they were down in Robertson, and my friend Bob Smith was running it. Bob Smith had been in industrial design. So we had a room down there. It was a small room. Generally it was a small audience, but sometimes there was a very big audience, especially for the Warhol films. They would pack it in. Jack Smith films were always very popular.

COLLINGS: So were these serious audiences or was it kind of more of a social thing?

O'NEILL: Well, I guess it was both, but, yes, there was a core audience that came to many things, not unlike Filmforum today. Most everybody was connected with some institution or other, either as a student or as a faculty person. It never got to be a huge event, as the Movies Around Midnight series at the Cinema Theater was earlier—this was '62, '63, '64—where a regular theater was taken over once a week, at midnight on Saturday. Later it became twice a week because the audiences overflowed.

COLLINGS: Was that the same group of people, people connected with education?

O'NEILL: Well, it was much bigger. This was much more of a sort of general entertainment— It's curious who they were. There were poets there. Jack Hirschmann was very prominent and Ruth Hirschmann, who became Ruth Seymour at

KCRW, was a fixture there. She was very beautiful. She used to wear these big hats. It was a little bit risqué in the sense that you might see content that— Well, you would see content that you couldn't see— It was amazing how constrained the regular theaters were even as recently as that. So a lot of people were there for titillation, and some were there for socializing. The menu was varied. It reached back into the avant-garde in Paris and showed directors like Bunuel. The French New Wave directors were pretty much in the main screenings there, like Truffaut and Godard were shown in the regular bill. For about three years they ran every weekend. Eventually it got closed down. I think there were some drug raids or something or other. There was some fear of subversion or something. I remember the Berkeley group called the Newsreel, whose goal was to show the real news, or the alternative news, about political events, so there were nights of their work.

Where was I? You asked me a question, and I forgot what it was.

COLLINGS: I was asking about the audiences, because you had been talking about how so much of the social commentary was sort of like contra the prevailing mainstream. Then I asked you were these sort of pockets of resistance, these communities that were coming up around film screenings, perhaps, you said that there was no attempt to create new kinds of social institutions, it was just critique. I said, well, what about these screening circles? Were these a small form of social institution, perhaps, that was embodying the new kinds of social values that—

O'NEILL: I'm sure it turned out to be largely the same population that was active against the war a few years later. It seemed to coincide with that. I think when the

structuralist films came along, they'd lost a lot of that audience, that that became more—

COLLINGS: Yes, that's interesting. The structuralist films would have been a big wet blanket on that, wouldn't they?

O'NEILL: Those audiences would not—

COLLINGS: No. They wouldn't tolerate that. That's interesting.

O'NEILL: There was another curious thing. Filmex was founded, I think, in '71. I remember having films—they were short film programs—having films in those. The house would be full, but the audience would be very impatient with anything that seemed to be lasting too long, and there was a lot of booing and hissing and carrying on. They were not respectful if they were not entertained at Filmex.

COLLINGS: If you were a real conspiracy theorist, you could say that structuralist film was invented by the CIA. [mutual laughter]

O'NEILL: They were worried about other people that were a lot more dangerous than they were.

COLLINGS: I mean, that just sort of put the kibosh on these burgeoning societies of people seeing politically motivated films.

O'NEILL: Yes. It took a whole other leap in— You had to give those films permission to come in in a way that— It was bold, in a way, to make such a film, realizing that you really were going to lose just about everybody.

COLLINGS: Yes, that is bold.

O'NEILL: Yes. The best example, for me, is Michael Snow's *The Central Region*, which is all shot from a single camera. It's actually sort of the first computer-operated

motion-controlled system, in '68. It's a long film. It's three and a half hours long. Gene Youngblood showed it, and I didn't sit through it the first time. I thought, well, I've got all I can get from this. I was puzzled and angry— Not angry, but just dismissive. Then I saw it a second time, and I knew what it was. This time I decided I was really going to give it a chance, and I realized that it needed that time. It worked through these variations. You stumbled out of there rubbing your eyes, and you really were different for a while. It really was—

COLLINGS: Do you feel like you needed to see that film with your undivided attention? Could we have it on in this room here and be cooking or something at the same time as [inaudible]?

O'NEILL: No, I think you've really got to give yourself over to it. Otherwise, it just becomes noise.

COLLINGS: Now, when you would show your films— You were talking about audience reaction. How would people react to some of the stock footage shots, like, in one of the films, the woman with the bizarre earrings?

O'NEILL: The strawberry on her ear?

COLLINGS: Yes. Would people sort of stamp their feet and react to these?

O'NEILL: Oh, there'd be a little chuckling, I think, but people generally weren't that demonstrative.

COLLINGS: I was just wondering.

O'NEILL: But people seemed to be satisfied with the experience. It's curious, in those years I was sending those films to Ann Arbor [Film Festival], which is a film festival that's been going on at the University of Michigan [Ann Arbor] since the early

sixties, I guess, and those audiences, those judges, really liked those films and I got prizes for— The first film I sent was *By the Sea*, and there was no— Or, no, did I send them that? Maybe the first film I sent them was— Well, I think *7362* got a first prize, so that must have been the second film I sent.

Ann Arbor, if you've ever gone— I went there as a judge, I think twice, and it gets a huge number of entries and still does. So you have to settle back and look at films for maybe ten hours a days for five days in a row.

COLLINGS: That's grueling.

O'NEILL: It's grueling if you're conscientious about it. It's quite an experience. But it is a way of sort of seeing what people are doing out there. So they were very supportive and I got some prizes. Then got films showed at the Whitney because David Beinstock, who directed the film program, would go to Ann Arbor, and that led to some traveling and showing films.

I remember when I got *7362*, just finished it, it would have been June of '66, and Bev and I went to New York for the first time. I had an appointment with Larry Kardish at the Museum of Modern Art, who I guess had heard about the film. No, he hadn't heard about the film; it didn't exist yet. I had just got it from the lab the day I left. I didn't have time to screen it. So I had this brand-new film in a can. Of course, I'd had the work print, so I knew what it was. I hadn't screened it. We went to New York, we drove back, and I went to the— Or maybe I had it sent there. I guess I had it sent there—that's what it was—from the lab, so there's no way I could have seen it. We went into the screening room and the lights went down, the track went on, the film came on, but there was no picture, just black screen.

COLLINGS: Very conceptual. [laughter]

O'NEILL: I said, no, this isn't it. But they were very friendly. It's curious, over the years, the Museum of Modern Art has just eventually gone thumbs down on me. I can't get the door open. But they did— They still do, they call them the Cineprobe series there once a week. I don't know where it is now, the new museum, but it used to be in the basement in a nice auditorium.

COLLINGS: Oh, in a nice little theater. Yes. I've been there.

O'NEILL: It ran all the time, and there was lots of people that just sort of came and saw whatever was there. The subway ran by outside. It was in the ground near the subway, so every so often you get these rumbling things.

I remember being concerned about whether Jonas Mekas came or not, because he was writing his film column for the [*Village*] *Voice*. I remember seeing his face come in the back door, but then afterwards he was gone, so I didn't know how much he'd seen.

COLLINGS: Do you want to take a break?

O'NEILL: Yes.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

February 25, 2005

COLLINGS: This is Jane Collings interviewing Pat O'Neill at his home in Pasadena on February 25th, 2005. I believe this is tape four, and if that's what it says on the tape, go with it.

[tape recorder off]

COLLINGS: Good afternoon. I just wanted to sort of backtrack with a couple of things that you had said in the earlier interview. One of them, I think I had interrupted you or something. You were talking about Hollis Frampton, and you said, "Hollis Frampton gave an impressive reading, and I realized that this is what a real—," interruption. I was wondering, do you have any idea of what it was that you might have been wanting to say?

O'NEILL: Hollis.

COLLINGS: Yes. "This is what a real—."

O'NEILL: I think I was talking about an event where Hollis Frampton gave a talk about one of his films and one of Stan Brakhage's films in Philadelphia. He stood up and talked about philosophy and talked about art history and film history for about an hour and a half. Hollis was an introduction to a real intellectual who had done a lot of study and who had synthesized it and remembered what he had learned. It was very impressive. I came to Film Oasis, did a couple of shows later. I think that the thing that was impressive was that, in a way, the discourse was as valuable as the film. Or maybe the discourse was the point and the film was the kind of residue of what this

knowledge caused someone to do. I was just very impressed with the synthesis that he had come up with and with the sort of lineage that he was a part of and sort of aware of. I had not really encountered anyone like that.

I'd read Stan Brakhage's material, and he was sort of similarly succinct, although much more rambling. Stan Brakhage put out a book in 1963 called *The Art of Vision* that was a sort of a manifesto, a series of articles about film, not just his own but from history. So the two of them, they were very different approaches. I haven't read the Brakhage thing in many, many years, but Frampton was very impressive and daunting in a way. It's sort of like you realize that he has his fingertips on a lot more of culture than I could even begin to imagine. He also would smoke about a pack of cigarettes in the course of the lecture. He was a smokestack, and everywhere he went there was a stream of butts on the floor. He'd fill up your car, up to the ceiling, if he sat there very long.

COLLINGS: So would you consider him to be an influence for you in the way that—You also mentioned Marty Muller and [Carlos] Castaneda and Bruce Conner. Would Hollis Frampton also fall into that—

O'NEILL: Yes, inevitably. Sure. All the really strong people that you come in contact with, if nothing else, they sort of set a standard that you feel obligated to somehow deal with or you realize that you can't deal with.

Hollis Frampton's film called *Zorn's Lemma*, which was made in '72, is my favorite of them, and it's probably the most accessible, in a way. Most of his work happens very much under the surface. *Zorn's Lemma* presents a series of puzzles. It's about an hour-long film or a little more. It presents images in series that make you

aware of a structure that's beneath the surface. The images themselves are just simply sort of placeholders for the structure, and as you watch it, you start figuring out what the structure is. The images themselves are quite satisfying in themselves. They're landscapes and they're evidence of language in the landscapes, signs and graffiti. They're words in pictures, and some of the pictures don't have words. It's been a long time since I've seen it and I'm not remembering it all. Because the imagery is so engaging, you're sort of eating it up and enjoying the material, but you realize that the material, instead of trying to tell you a story about a place or about a person or something, it's basically he's doing a mathematical thing in representing each of the integers with a picture.

Later he got into doing the Magellan Cycle, which was a series of new movies that was to be one twenty-four-hour period of solid watching which could be presented as a cycle. He only got partway through it by the time he died.

COLLINGS: A circumnavigation of the day.

O'NEILL: Yes, around the world, around the day. And its allusions were much more obscure, and the pictures were often very long and very repetitive. Unfortunately, it never came to be. That's sort of one of the things that many filmmakers have thought of doing, is these very long projects that are obviously much longer than one watching it— Bruce Elder, up in Toronto, is another one who's done, or attempted at least to do, some twenty-four-hour films. It's kind of an interesting ambition, because it means that it lasts longer than your attention. You can't possible get it all.

COLLINGS: Exactly. It sounds like you're attracted to this idea where the film is almost the residue, or the artifact, of the idea. That's what the whole theory-based film movement was.

O'NEILL: Yes. It certainly was something to make a person sit up and pay attention in 1975 or so, although right from the beginning I sort of had the suspicion that— Well, a lot of work that was done at that time which tended to rely on ideas that so outshadowed the work that they weren't engaging enough to stay with.

COLLINGS: Or the work itself was not engaging enough.

O'NEILL: Yes. The whole thing was a structure that was figured out in advance, and then something was done to enact the structure, but that was all there was. There were any number of people making structures. It was a way to get past the trap of narrative, in a way. It was interesting in that regard, in that there were a lot of filmmakers that sort of suddenly had to be on one side or the other, supposedly, like are the films made to show a certain subject matter or to demonstrate a kind of documentary approach or were they narrative or were they neither? If they're neither, then what strategy do you use to put it together? But right away, as soon as you realize about these strategies, you think, well, how many such strategies are there and how long can your work be sustained by this? It's still interesting. It got over-represented, I think, and the audiences just weren't there.

COLLINGS: There's something that you say at some point where— You were very interested in the tenets of structuralist film, but I think you also said that you didn't want to let go of exploring some of the mythologies of the images.

O'NEILL: Did I say mythology?

COLLINGS: Maybe not, but that the images themselves had to have some kind of— There had to be some kind of affective power there.

O'NEILL: Yes. This is sort of where the divide was in Frampton's work. *Zorn's Lemma* had a lot of history and sort of local color in it. Some of the later ones, once you've seen the first ten seconds, you've basically seen the imagery, you were just going to see it rearranged. I don't know. I found if I looked at something three or four times and I didn't learn something new every time, then it probably wasn't really dense enough to be interesting. I've rather it not give you all it had right away, that it's a little more compressed or condensed than that. I don't know. I guess it's maybe a kind of a tendency to say that you're asking people for an hour of their time, you're asking someone, some person, that you hold in your mind as an audience that's interested and intelligent enough to put up with this, you don't want to shove it in their face. It would be good to make it not terribly easy to enjoy it or get into it, but not to slam the door and make it obscure for its own sake.

COLLINGS: So why shouldn't it be terribly easy to get into it?

O'NEILL: Well, that's a good question. I guess because all of industrial film is that way. It's first of all that it's sort of talking to some particular audience in a way that your first intent is to persuade or to entertain, and because of that, you hold back contradictory impulses maybe, or you don't show everything because you're editing a little bit too much. It's a balancing act, and you go too far one way or too far the other way, I mean, if you think about structure, you think about Takamura, a Japanese filmmaker who worked in this country, still does, would do a film called *To See Film, Not to See Film*, and it was basically— There were various versions. It was a half an

hour of— Clearly, you're in a half an hour of black, and the structure was completely clear and completely didactic in a way. If you just walk into it and you get it and you see this, then you do start to reflect on what you're doing there and what the light's doing there. You wouldn't be apt to go back for a second helping, and you probably could just sort of imagine it as well as actually being there. I don't know.

COLLINGS: So in your opinion, are these films made in a sort of a tension with the specter of the traditional Hollywood film, that that's always a kind of an unspoken counterpoint?

O'NEILL: Sure. Yes. You have to know what the medium was invented for. I guess the way I'd see it—I'm a little different from that—is that I tend to work in sort of spurts of clarity, or at least energy, and they don't always head in the same direction. So the films often wind up very scattered and sort of tugging at whatever it is that puts them together, holds them together. I guess because I think that way and I sort of relate to the idea of having very disparate influences that are seen in a work, some are to do with a particular sense of time and others may have to do with a recognition of some memory or even a sense of history and sort of how history isn't— Without making an essay out it, it somehow or other embodies the kind of ferment that you live in. Its pieces may not all add up to a recognizable shape, it may have irregularities, and the irregularities and mistakes can be interesting.

COLLINGS: I have a couple of sort of general questions along those lines. What would you say are your viewer prerequisites? What does a viewer need to know to appreciate the work?

O'NEILL: Aha. Well, I guess maybe a certain dissatisfaction with sort of the accepted normative viewing experience, maybe, someone who is— I suppose you would hope for a certain familiarity with art history for the last century. And patience. I guess what it is, is if an audience really goes bad on you, then you have the feeling that you're presenting something that— Well, obviously they don't want it. Maybe you seem to be either too indulgent or too insistent or too quirky. So in a sense, I guess a certain tolerance is necessary and a seeking for something unfamiliar, that you may leave the theater puzzled or may not completely figure out what you've seen, but you sort of put it together afterwards and maybe you seek it out again. That's what's really interesting, is sort of a return viewer.

COLLINGS: Have you ever viewed your films amongst an audience?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes.

COLLINGS: Can you kind of feel the way it's going?

O'NEILL: Oh, sure. Oh, yes. It's so different from one audience to another that, particularly the longer film, people will see little things and you'll hear a little response. Other times an audience is very, very quiet, and you have no idea. I haven't watched any of my films in audiences for a long time, but I used to travel and do screenings, sometimes four or five in a row. Sometimes the audience is so small that they're just sort of swallowed up in the space, and there's just sort of a sense of there being a small audience that, in a way, makes a person feel defensive, sort of like, why aren't there any more people in all those seats? Then, well, you can't complain to the people that did come. So you just make the best of it.

There's a story that Larry G____ told, a filmmaker, and I had similar experiences. He said he'd gone to a screening in a little town in Germany, and they'd taken him to the theater and he'd taken his films to the booth, and there was nobody there— Or there was a couple of people there. So he sat in the audience, and the films were running. Then the two or three who were there got up and left. So he decided he might as well stop the show, so he went back to the projection booth, and the projectionist was asleep. [mutual laughter] That's when you really wonder why am I doing this. The culture is somewhere else. What could I do that would be more effective or somehow more a part of what people are thinking of?

COLLINGS: What year was this that he was talking about?

O'NEILL: This would be in the late seventies.

COLLINGS: It might have just been a rainy night.

O'NEILL: Oh, yes, yes. It could happen to anybody. Then sometimes you have a show that's got an overflow crowd and people you know and you want to know. It's pretty unpredictable. It's curious, the last three or four years, there've been more artists doing projected work in gallery spaces than ever before, usually projecting through data projectors. I haven't seen all that much. I've read about some. But they often tend to be very simple ideas that— Well, I guess maybe the difference I'm trying to get at is that you rarely see work that shows— Well, how to say this? Sort of the struggle about making it, which isn't really true, because the struggle probably happened before it was made. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I do this stuff that's very sort of handmade and has a sort of craft side to it, and that sort of stands in opposition or difference from work that's a single take on video or a single— Which is

not to denigrate that at all, but when you tend to handle the stuff a lot, it looks different and it signals a different— It may be that it seems to be closer to special effects entertainment and thereby associated with that.

We were sort of straying over into another question, the notion of the work that you do to make a living and how is that any different from what you're doing privately. Well, for one thing, it's that the jobs that you're working on often have budgets that are way beyond what you could spend on a film in five years, let alone one. But that's not enough of a reason to explain it. I guess what it comes down to is that when you're following your own instincts and you're making something that you can't really predict and isn't written down, you're making assertions all the way along the line that nobody's going to be able to authenticate or evaluate, even, it leads you into places that are not accessible, I think, in a story that's been calmed and tamed and [inaudible]. I don't know if that's necessarily true. Maybe it's just that we have this sort of failure of not being able to— You think, well, what would happen if a studio did say, "Well, why don't you just do one of these"? I don't know how I would respond to that.

COLLINGS: Even if like Lucas Films or something said—

O'NEILL: "Do a project."

COLLINGS: — "Here the *Star Wars* budget. Go do a project."

O'NEILL: Yes. What would you do, having been trained to do it on practically nothing? I don't know, but you'd adapt. I guess that's the answer.

COLLINGS: You were talking about how your films don't necessarily—just a couple of minutes ago—how they don't necessarily have one overarching shape, that there

might be like little odds and ends sticking out here and there, and I was wondering if when you do your special effects kinds of work, you take your shots, you do your editing, are you wholly satisfied with every single shot that goes into a film? Or sort of in the narrative sense, do you sometimes have to include shots that you're not completely satisfied with because you feel that they're establishing shots, in a sense?

O'NEILL: Aha. Well, it's true that things are sometimes compromised. I guess part of it is that if the working process is open-ended enough, then you're bound to be surprised by something, and it may not be what you started out to get. But if, after *x* number of viewings, you still find it interesting and sustaining, like an establishing shot would imply that there is a narrative thread that has to be supported, and I never have really worked that way. It's more like you're working for a certain period of time, working around some idea and generating such an amount of material, and as you see the parts in relation to one another, they start to be satisfactory somehow.

COLLINGS: So each shot must work on its own merits, or it's not included?

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. Well, that's sort of the way an editor always is. You have so much material, and you get to draw from it and reject some of it. But it's curious, the whole approach is— Well, the thing that underlies the whole structural thing, I believe, is a kind of distrust of the intuition, because you know that the amateur artist is always trusting his or her intuition and doing things that may or may not be interesting. So you try to come up with an overriding structure that sort of cuts you out of the process. Intuition is fine, but education and mathematics and history are more reliable, more interesting. Put your intuitions aside a bit and— Minimalism in art generally tends to take the artist out of the picture, that there's less and less to see

that is the hand or the symbol, taking out the extraneous and trying to distill it way back. When you sort of think about it, it's a wonderful impulse, but it may not suit your own nervous system [inaudible] some people.

I mean, the sort of imperative in every medium is how to empty the canvas or the frame of the picture of the unnecessary or the stuff that's sort of assumed from the last decade or the last century, the sort of assumptions, the shadows of other artists and all the stuff that you've experienced. Is that good to be there or not? I guess I have to come down on the side of saying that I've never really been able to get rid of all that. I've always found it necessary to drag some of that back in and to do things that are very personal, that are very sort of — I say that without saying that I thought that through and thought that was smart or necessary, but you just find— It's curious, if you just stop working and don't do anything for a while and then gradually just see what leaks back in again, the stuff that comes back and asks for attention is probably kind of important. It's always been sort of like jabbing at conventional bourgeois consumerist society, a sort of trying to nudge your viewer into seeing some of the absurdity that we all live with. But you can't make a text out of it, because everybody's heard that text.

COLLINGS: It has to be something more visceral.

O'NEILL: Yes, it's something or other— There's something that you have seen or have brought back or talked about that might convince— I guess you're always trying to sell people. [inaudible]. If your artwork is a new Cadillac that you've designed, then that's one thing. If it's some grubby little smudgy drawing nailed onto the wall, it's something else. They're sort of in opposition, and I guess you're saying

something like this is a way that might make us all happier, even, or at least getting at the problems. Having the problems on the table is probably better than not.

COLLINGS: So when you say that sometimes things just kind of like keep coming back at you and you realize that you must include them, the shots in something like *Saugus Series* or *Foregrounds*, these have some kind of affective unconscious kind of meaning for you personally?

O'NEILL: Yes, I think so, that I've somehow or other found things that— I hate to use the work *instinct*, because it isn't. It's an awful sort of excuse for a lot of bad art. It isn't really instinct; it's just personal history in a way that leads you to find— For instance, that I tend to find curved lines more interesting than straight, I tend to make shapes that are in some way shapes that are inclusive, that are like solids, rather than that are completely open. Or maybe I do both, but I'm always aware of the difference between forms that are completely geometric and completely rational and ones that are more like nature; bodies, plants, broken rocks, trees. I don't know why. I suppose another polarity of that would be to say that what you do is to make a diary which is a journal of your life, and you make it in some way that might not be necessarily in words or chronological. It's stuff that you've found along the way that seems resonant somehow.

Of course, the thing is, if you approach an unknown audience, particularly an educated audience, and you're seeing all these things, in a way it's like you're cutting yourself adrift from a body of art history that doesn't support that. Yet there are always artists who do break that continuity.

COLLINGS: So you would say that these films have a diaristic component?

O'NEILL: Well, in a sense yes. I've described some in some of those episodic films, like *Foregrounds* and *Easy Out*. Yes, I mean, they—

COLLINGS: Do you think that people who know you would have any different take on the films than those who don't?

O'NEILL: Well, yes, I guess inevitably as soon as you know the maker, you start to— You read things in. So in a way, it makes it easier if you're only showing work to your friends or your acquaintances.

COLLINGS: Did you ever make a film that was directed toward your circle of friends and acquaintances?

O'NEILL: No, I never have, really. They seem to be diaries in the sense that they're made over a period of time, and whatever changes happened to you while you were making them are incorporated in some way. But I've never thought my own life was interesting enough to portray.

COLLINGS: [laughs] Yes. I don't think anyone does.

O'NEILL: Some people have really interesting lives and talk about them. The only time I ever actually— I think it's the only time I ever really appeared in a film was where Bev [Beverly O'Neill] and I and Martha [inaudible], and people seemed to like that, I guess because it's sort of like the magician coming out from behind the curtain. It's just all of these years of sort of being constantly in sort of opposition to the culture and realizing that what you've done really doesn't really make any difference to very many people is a sobering thing. It's like it makes you— Then you say, well, why do you it? Then you do it because you enjoy doing it and it's somehow a sort of life-giving thing. It's a gift. It's the thing that I got, that sort of knowledge, and you try

to— You don't know. Other people would say, "Well, why don't you stop working?" or, "Why do you work at a job doing film when you know you can actually make a film?" Most people wouldn't want to do that, and whether it's like they don't want to take the chance or they just don't think it's worth doing or it's more important to sustain my standard of living— It makes you odd in a sort of broad cultural sense that you do this thing. I can't explain to my neighbor what it is that I do. I can just sort of say a few words about it. But you realize that those of us that do this stuff are in this little subgroup of a subgroup of another subgroup, and your ideal audience is some of those other people in that subgroup. It's gratifying when some one of us compliments another one or shows up. [mutual laughter]

COLLINGS: Let me flip the tape.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

February 25, 2005

COLLINGS: Okay. Well, here we are again. Let's see. Let me ask you a question about something you said in the interview with John Hanhardt. You were talking about *Easy Out*, and you said, quote, "I've come to kind of regret the editing of those films in the seventies, in the sense that it throws you into this place and takes you out of it so rapidly. At the time it sort of seemed like something I had to do." I wonder why you felt like you had to do that then and what has twenty, thirty years done that you feel like you're questioning that now, if that's a reasonable sort of question. Maybe you just threw that out; you don't want to respond to it.

O'NEILL: No, I think what it is, is that *Easy Out* and *Downwind* were films that I edited in a somewhat cinematic way. I connected films to one another, connected shots to one another with cuts [inaudible]. Later ones, I retreated from the cuts and just made long single shots that were separated. Then later than that, projections that lasted for a given amount of time and then repeated.

The problem I came to have with it is that the progression through cuts from shot to shot seemed more and more arbitrary after a while. I felt even at the time that I didn't quite know where the cuts should be, even, that I had made pieces, and I felt—There's always this sort of internal argument about what the final shape ought to be. Well, this would have been 1973, '74. I would do a thing like having a somewhat narrative sequence and a shot of someone in a car driving, the landscape outside, and then there was a very rapid transition where a hand pulls back off of the lens and

reveals this completely flat field of repetitive shapes. In *Easy Out*, it was a shot from Chinatown. There was a picture of the Buddha in neon, and he was clapping his hands. Was he clapping his hands? He was making a gesture, and he was throwing his hands up and then clapping. I recorded it, and then repeated it over and over again, and through their shapes there came this sort of avalanche of tumbling forms. Well, it was somewhat drug-induced, I suppose.

COLLINGS: [laughs] I was wondering, with the mushroom [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Yes. There was the mushroom that turned into a bagel and went back. It was more like a sort of yearning for release, in a way, from an everyday vision of the world into something different. It wasn't so much a matter of having had that experience and trying to recreate it, but sort of implying that there were two parallel consciousness streams that one could move in and out of. At the time that seemed interesting, but then it seemed sort of obvious. Later I wouldn't have combined those parts in quite that way, although later on I went back in *Trouble in the Image*, years later, and did a film that was similarly episodic, although I had a totally different idea of how to edit it, which relied much more on chance and not on— I guess the earlier ones became unsatisfying because it seemed like a sort of tricky solution, too easy. I've never gone back and re-cut anything, I mean once it's really finished. I think, oh, that's kind of a wincer, but that's where I was then.

That's part of why it's so— Still I get offers to teach, and I think it might be a good thing to teach again. It would sort of force me into thinking about a lot of things that I don't, and it would sort of broaden the horizon, but in a way, it kind of frightens me because I don't feel that I have answers to give anybody anymore. When I was

twenty-five, I'd prepare material and I'd go in and I'd teach, and I'd think I was doing a good job. Now I just can't imagine doing it because I feel so really kind of unsure of what should be imparted. Maybe I just get too hung up on it when I'm not doing it, and if I'd do it, I would just do it.

COLLINGS: Well, I think with studio classes, the professor is just kind of a catalyst for—

O'NEILL: Sure. You wind up having relationships with individuals and, hopefully, helping them along.

Where were we? Oh, we were talking about those— Yes, those films, what happened in *Easy Out*, for instance, was that the most vibrant and process part of the films wound up becoming a separate film within. It was like having a play within a movie. It's like you go into this other place and then you come back. It would have been more interesting to have more coming and going, I suppose.

COLLINGS: At one point, somewhere, you write—I think it's about *Downwind.* You say, "I exposed several rolls of film which have since become the basis of a number of pieces." That made me kind of curious about the relationship between the shooting and the editing. It sounds like they're entirely separate practices.

O'NEILL: Yes. I don't know what material I was talking about, but because of the fact that you keep duplicating material to change it, the previous generation still exists, and I've tended to save most of it in the thought that those seeds might lead in another direction. It might be interesting to see them reworked in a different way, which creates quite an archival problem of trying to figure out how to find it.

COLLINGS: Yes, really. That's the worst.

O'NEILL: Yes. It's interesting, with forty years having gone by, that now there's stuff there that captures things that are simply gone. So they have this other— There's a film called *Bump City* that has a lot of neon in it that I shot in '63 or '64, which is completely gone.

COLLINGS: Right. At the time it seemed like sort of the apogee of modern civilization, and now it's gone.

O'NEILL: A lot of it is gone with things like Lawrence Welk's animated billboard on the Palladium and the rotating female figure that predated the Marlboro Man on Sunset [Boulevard] for many, many years.

COLLINGS: It's like a skater?

O'NEILL: She was a skater.

COLLINGS: Holding a tray? I don't remember. She's got kind of like a skating skirt on.

O'NEILL: Yes. I think it was the Sahara Hotel that it was from, and she was a showgirl. For a while, she just had her hand up. She was just doing a twirl. Then she got a cowboy hat and a different outfit. She was a cowgirl for a while. So it's sort of an inadvertent thing that if you've got your lens cap off, you bring in a little history, and it winds up being a clock.

Where were we?

COLLINGS: In terms of a chronological thing, we kind of got into talking about *Downwind* and *Easy Out*. But is that when you first started really developing your soundtracks? How did that evolution of your soundwork come to be?

O'NEILL: Before that, *7362* was done— This was in the era of reel-to-reel quarter-inch tape and finding sound sources.

COLLINGS: So you would go out like with a Nagra or something?

O'NEILL: Yes. I would record local stuff. I would record stuff over broadcast. There was a man that I worked with when I was at UCLA who was very influential; his name was Joseph Byrd. He's best know— He headed up a band for a few years called The United States of America. It's curious. That was just a very short part of his career, and he's since vanished into— I assume he still lives and he does commercial soundwork, but has completely backed out of doing artistic work. But for a time, he was doing events on stage that involved music and action and lighting that were way ahead of their time. You could compare it a bit with Robert Wilson much later. His pieces were shorter and done with far fewer resources, and a lot of people in the art school helped out over a period of pieces.

COLLINGS: Was this the Silver Wing Turquoise Bird work?

O'NEILL: No. This was parallel, but this was earlier. This would have been way back in '61, '62, '63, maybe '65. Then he did United States of America. I think it was in '65 and '66. I did a— Well, it was an early music video for them done on film. Then they disbanded. Anyway, Joseph Byrd was doing electronic music, was doing composing for electronic devices, early synthesizer work, and he did the tract for *7362* in a session. He basically showed up with a synthesizer that he had built, and we made sounds for a night and recorded and edited the mix. So that was '67.

Then *Runs Good* was a whole mixture of stuff grabbed off of broadcast and loops, square-inch-tape loops to make rhythm sections out of words and so on, which

was as simple as just making a splice in the tape and re-recording and laying recordings over one another. Actually, it was Joseph Byrd that turned me on to Terry Riley and, oh, "Come Out to Show Them" ["Come Out"]. I can't think of his name now, but the minimalist composers who were using tape sources and using overlays. Steve Reich. Steve Reich was just a huge impact when he did a piece called "Come Out to Show Them" and "It's Gonna Rain." So Joseph Byrd said, "Here, listen to this," and I began to realize that here you had music that had a beat, it had natural beats that were built into the loops, but they were constantly changing because there was like one tape running at this speed and another one running a half of 1 percent faster, so that the beats combined with one another and constantly changed. So it would got for ten minutes and never be the same, that and John Cage talking in *Indeterminacy* [*New Aspect of Form in Instrumental and Electronic Music*] about just listening to the world and realizing that your composition is going on all the time.

But of course I didn't want to use a piece of music that already existed and I didn't have the right to do or I didn't have the money to hire a composer, so basically it was just people fooling around with tape recorders and then doing an assembly through a mix. I always did mixes with work print, and I've always been very thoughtful about sync. I always wanted to have charge of that, wanted to have it be repeatable, so that you'd do a mix and you'd know how the sound articulates next to the picture. I never thought the idea of taking a record and playing it behind the piece randomly was a good idea, although a number of filmmakers used to do that. It seemed like that you were relying much too heavily on the familiarity of the song and

that also the song was so strong that it was influencing you in a way that you probably weren't aware of, influencing the audience.

So the sound was collected like the pictures were collected. It was sort of like, oh, here's this. I was going to get into buying— Or Bev was actually buying the Folkways— Interested in sort of early vernacular forms of music, blues singers, some early gospel singers that were untrained and who had very interesting, unique— And some banjo players. I felt free to dip into all of this, some of these Folkways, Arhuli [phonetic]. Even the Harry Smith compendium from the Smithsonian [Institution] was interesting. It came out in '52. I didn't hear it until a long time later, but Harry Smith, who was also a filmmaker, realized sometime in the forties that there was a whole body of recorded music that was mostly made by vernacular players and singers that were made into sheet recordings that were distributed for a while and then forgotten, and that these discs were lying around unvalued. He apparently amassed thousands of them and made a compendium of sort of American music from the first half of the twentieth century, mostly rural.

COLLINGS: It sort of strikes me, now that I'm thinking back, that some of those songs come across as being— For some reason I don't get the sense that I'm supposed to hear them ironically, that some of the images are to be taken at a distance and evaluated and critiqued in the way that we've been talking about, but some of those sounds are not.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, I always used sounds that I really liked. In a way, maybe that— The thing we were talking about earlier, that's maybe something that I would be hesitant, in a way, to drag something in in the way I did then because it may cue

people into thinking that it's a little campy. I didn't see it that way. Well, *Runs Good* particularly had a lot of musical things that— I wasn't very culturally sensitive to what these were. I just loved them for what they sounded like, loved the way they kind of danced with the pictures, and I was pretty uncritical. I used black preachers. I used A. L. Camp [phonetic], who was a white fiddle player.

COLLINGS: It's a kind of a catalog of interesting, rich, interesting sounds of quality, but the images are being treated differently.

O'NEILL: I don't know if they're really differently. I mean, the way sometimes I'm taking an image that's a found image of, say, a lot of people getting married at once, and I'm playing— I forget what the track was for that, but in a sense they're both being displaced and put together in a way that, I mean, had they both been less elusive, the effect might have been better, in retrospect. It might have been more— It's kind of like— Well, at that time I was just sort of abashedly collecting stuff.

COLLINGS: [Unclear].

O'NEILL: And in a way, that tends to reinforce the idea that it's kind of a diary of one's tastes. It became embarrassing.

COLLINGS: Really?

O'NEILL: In a way it was sort of like, well, why are you trying to have so much fun here when it's serious?

COLLINGS: They're great songs. I really like those.

O'NEILL: Yes, but in a way, I'm taking them out of context and I'm putting them together with pictures that are out of context in another way. It becomes sort of painful, in a way, to go back and realize that. Well, I don't know. Anyway, I guess

I've become, as a result of [inaudible] and seeing other work, I've become a little more aware of sort of some of the implications of it. Anyway, that's *Runs Good.*

Then I went to CalArts to teach in 1970, and I did— The first one was *Easy Out*, *Downwind* about the same time. I worked with Stan Levine, who was a student of mine and who was in the composing program and understood synthesis. We worked together on those two films, where I would work with a tape or with a— I guess it was projected sixteen, and Stan would go away and build up material that played through a moog synthesizer.

Then I did a piece where I decided I wanted a little more control. I knew Mort Subotnick, who was teaching there, and still is. By then I'd had enough familiarity with the synthesizer— Well, the moog, actually. It was a bootless synthesizer. It was a synthesizer that was produced by, I believe, CBS. This was an analog synthesizer that had *x* number of inputs and various patches that would electronically modify the sound. I'd spent about a year going in and essentially teaching myself how to make certain kinds of sounds. So *Saugus Series* was the first to come out of that, where I was making these patches that would set up some— I never knew what the hell I was doing. I was twisting knobs and plugging things in. I couldn't tell you what pitch it was or anything. It was just—

COLLINGS: So the film would have been completely edited before you started working with the sound?

O'NEILL: Maybe in the process of making it. I'd have an idea what an image was going to look like, anyway. So there were a lot of sort of dense textures with certain percussive qualities, *Saugus Series*. Then I sort of began rejecting that as well. Then

Sidewinders Delta, I made all the sounds for that just with a microphone and doing things like dropping pebbles into water and recording sources, going out, trying to go to a place that was as quiet as you could find and then record whatever was there so you'd hear distant voices and wind and so forth. Another thing was going way out in the desert with a car radio and putting it between stations and letting the stations beat off, reverb, and recording that. I had hours and hours of that. I'm trying to remember what else was in that. I was trying to pull way back on sound with that film. So it became sort of vacant and echo-y.

Foregrounds was somewhat similar. *Foregrounds*, I would do things like, if we were having dinner or something, I'd just set a tape recorder on the table and get some conversation or listen to a radio in another room that was sort of booming around that room, ambient situations. Also vocal stuff. I was doing stuff where I would just inhale and just let out a tone, or sometimes two people harmonizing a note. So that's most of what *Foregrounds* was, that and some— I think there are Berber tribes playing their flutes, which was recorded by an Englishman, a musician. I can't remember. It was Peter G____ or somebody. Again, I just swiped it. That had to be in the end of it.

COLLINGS: Is that "the Western edge"?

O'NEILL: Yes, that's that piece.

COLLINGS: That's a very beautiful, melancholy shot.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes. It's curious. That shot— I had been in the hospital and had just gotten out. This was two days later. Beverly went down to— It was one of those particularly light traffic days, and she was able to drive all the way along, and I was

just pointing my Bolex out the window. Because I had always noticed how the Palisades, there's no horizon. It's just basically the trees, and then the cliff goes off. Especially if it's a little foggy, there's just a white backdrop.

COLLINGS: I've always been quite struck by that spot, too, because you have a really palpable sense that the United States, with all its hegemonic culture, actually— Of course, there are international waters and American waters and things, but besides that, it actually ends here. This is actually—

O'NEILL: Yes, the edge.

COLLINGS: —the edge of it. [laughs]

O'NEILL: Well, you go to the Grand Canyon, you kind of get that feeling. But I've always liked that place. I wanted to make something that had a very distinct continuity, because then I was going to do this looping thing which I figured out how to do, where you could create the illusion of a circular donut of film that's moving, and the imagery on the film is visible and it's always changing. Of course, the riddle is that if it goes around, that the splice will come around every time. Well, first of all, what I was actually doing is I had a branch. I had a couple of little metal pegs in it so that I could lift this loop off and move it exactly one frame and clip it back on again, take a frame over and over again. But in order to keep it going continuously, I made umpteen loops which progressed one half a loop forward. So the splice would go around the back, and then I'd take another one off, the splice would be— They would overlap. Very tedious little thing, and there's some mistakes in it, too, but it's sort of conjuring up— Well, the sound is associated with snake charmers, ritualism. The sort

of ritual of this mechanical thing which is on an apparently natural form seemed interesting.

COLLINGS: You said that this shot was very time-consuming to make. When you're working on these things, is that peaceful or is it sort of manic and obsessive? What's the mood?

O'NEILL: It's sort of the animating mood, where an animator makes all these stacks and stacks of drawings and then shoots them. It's all very slow. It's basically animating in three dimensions.

Along about that time, I think I was doing a lot of optical composites for a filmmaker in Portland called Will Vinton. Will Vinton became the biggest film production unit in Oregon. His work was— He gave it the brand name of claymation, and he would develop characters shot frame by frame. The camera moves became quite sophisticated. Then he'd kind of do effects where we would put the characters into different backgrounds and so forth.

COLLINGS: Gumby.

O'NEILL: Yes, Gumby-like things. His first film that got him started was called *A Museum*, something about museums, clothes. It's sort of like what happens to the art objects when there's no one around. He's taking art objects and putting them into dialogue and making them animate. It was hopelessly cute, but it was technically very good. He's a very inventive sculptor.

So I was thinking about clay, and I'd never had an idea I wanted to do in clay, but I just decided to do this thing with film. It might be worth bringing in the name of another filmmaker, Morgan Fisher, who— Let's see, this would be '78, so about then

he was part of a group called Oasis. There were about a dozen people, of which Bev and I were a part, and Graham Weinbren, Roberta Friedman, Tim Shepherd. Morgan Fisher was one. Morgan Fisher was doing films that were quite astonishing in a sense. I remember the first one I saw was called *Production Stills.* It was basically a setup on a stage with a huge studio camera and a number of people. The camera is facing a wall, and on the wall there's pinned a picture. What is the picture? The picture is of some detail of a production, I think. That's funny I can't really remember. But at any rate, there's all of this infrastructure that's doing this incredibly mundane, tiny job of taking a picture that's pinned up. Then you hear people talking around the camera, talking about the picture. Then another picture would be put up, and it would be filmed. I think that was in a Filmex, an early Filmex. Filmex started in '71. I remember thinking, "That's the dumbest thing I've ever seen. What do you suppose he's thinking of?" And I sort of put that away.

Then there was a film called— Gosh, I can't remember these titles. It was basically a picture of a synchronizer, a film synchronizer, a four-gang synchronizer, and it rewinds on both sides, but you can just see the synchronizer and the film moving through. *Q Rolls* it was called, and you could see the film, that it was actually film with pictures on it. You could see it run through, and you'd see where a splice would come through. The picture would go to the other reel, the other strip. It was, in fact, a representation of the film that you were seeing. So in a sense, it was a reconstruction of a— It was like a sort of loop. You couldn't quite figure out where you were in it. It was fascinating, and again, it was something that tended to repel you because you weren't very interested, like, well, so what? Then you'd think, well, how

did that get to be there? What is it? So then you'd sort of go off scratching your head about this.

He did another one called *Projection Instructions*, in which there would be just type on the screen. The projectionist was to look at the screen, and it would say "Change focus." So then he'd see it go out of focus.

COLLINGS: I think I've seen this one, yes.

O'NEILL: Yes, it's been see a lot. Anyway, so Morgan was sort of another person in the community that was doing things of a very specific kind. It resonated with Frampton in a way. We've always had sort of a bristly relationship, although I've always respected him, and also his films have changed over time. They're much less programmatic.

I don't know where I was going with this. Anyway, that was sort of a parallel thing, and I was sort of rebounding off of that, in a sense sort of making fun of it in showing this phenomenon of a film that degenerated itself, which of course, you knew it didn't. So in a way, I guess there was a sort of back and forth. What I do is I show this spiral in a distance, sitting in a bunch of vegetation in my backyard. Then I get in closer, and you could see what was on the film and then cut to the film itself.

COLLINGS: So viewers here in this area might very well know that you were specifically responding to his film.

O'NEILL: Yes, it's curious, it was. It was kind of making a sort of folksy version of structuralism that really sort of contained this sort of hidden lie, as special effect always does.

Another thing, there was an industry filmmaker by the name of Lynwood Dunn, who was responsible for a lot of really pioneering optical printing work. In fact, he was credited as being the inventor of the optical printer, but more recently I thought that probably he didn't invent it, but he probably improved it a lot. He was active from *King Kong*, which was '32, and did all the Busby Berkeley films for MGM. Anyway, in the seventies he was a man in his late seventies, I guess. He had a show that was basically all of the work in progress, the reels from that period all the way up through— Oh, I don't know what the most recent ones were, but he worked on a lot of projects. He would show the elements of — The background by itself, the people in the background, the additional effects that were added. You could see the effect of them and see what [inaudible]. I found them just really beautiful phenomena just by themselves and that the artifacts and the unintended consequences were just as interesting as the finished thing.

He did a shot of, I think it was Gary Cooper. Gary Cooper walks into a room that's like a lobby of a hotel. He walks into the room and— I guess he just walks through the room, and right behind him is a tiger. The two of them walk through. He said, well, they tried to do it live with a trained animal, and they couldn't get the shot, so they had to get the animal by himself. So behind the actor and ahead of the cat was a wipe, with a traveling soft-edged thing, and it was the same shot in each—

COLLINGS: Was that *Bringing Up Baby*?

O'NEILL: It might be, yes. Anyway, I saw his show maybe four times in New York City, and I realized that I was trying to show some of—

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COLLINGS: —about the celebration at Big Sur.

O'NEILL: Yes. Johanna Demetrakas and Baird Bryant were married, and they were neighbors of ours in Laurel Canyon.

COLLINGS: Oh, they were? I didn't know that.

O'NEILL: We met through friends, McDermott. Michael McDermott and Diane McDermott had a house where a lot of various artists lived, and among them were Baird and Johanna and also Masami Teraoko, a painter. Later, Baird and Johanna lived in Laurel Canyon and they had a project that they worked on called *Celebration at Big Sur*. It was, I believe, soon after the Woodstock festival, which would be '69.

COLLINGS: I think it came out in '71. I don't know how long it was in production.

O'NEILL: Yes, about a year or so. In fact, that was a production that the company that I was working with tried very hard to get the bid, get the optical work for that, which they didn't get.

So there was a festival at Big Sur, and Joni Mitchell was there. It was sort of a mini-Woodstock, I guess, and Baird was cameraman, one of the cameramen. Johanna, I guess, was sort of just getting her— I don't know if that was the first thing she edited, or maybe—

COLLINGS: I think it may have been.

O'NEILL: We did a number of optical sequences, so I had not seen it. So I don't remember that much about it. I remember we did the titles for it, too.

COLLINGS: Yes, there are some optical sequences that have to do with like a summer night scene, I think. It's kind of like sort of— The concert's not on. I think it's like more of a kind of an evening celebration.

O'NEILL: I don't remember working on that one. I remember using stock footage of war planes flying by, this for a Joni Mitchell's song. Baird actually cut it, or Baird and Johanna cut it, and I was just way involved in execution. That was when I was sharing an optical printer with another guy. I don't think I ever got into that.

COLLINGS: Was that Carl Cheng?

O'NEILL: Jan Buir. It was a sort of chaotic period. I don't know whether anybody was all that satisfied with the results.

COLLINGS: So at this point you were sort of starting up a small special effects business even at that time. Is that right?

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: This was even before you went to CalArts?

O'NEILL: Yes. This actually started in '68. It had kind of a funny start. I don't know if we talked about this, but I had gotten a machine for UCLA that would allow me to do contact printing. Contact printing is when you have a negative and a print stock, and you just hold them in contact, and you pass a light through it. It's the way all prints are made. I was able to get this contact printer. It belonged to UCLA, and it was in one of the photo darkrooms. A number of people came and used it, among them Chick Strand and Burton Gershfield and John Stahura and some others. That was where I did the— I mentioned a piece for Joseph Byrd. That was done on the contact printer, a very simple way to work.

But all the time, what I really wanted to get a hold of was an optical printer because with this you can change time and you can change enlargement and you can do multiple rolls and so on, but such equipment was not available commercially. It was made really only for studios. They're expensive machines, more or less on a par with expensive machine tools. Basically it was like a lathe, with a camera and a lens mount and very precise gearing to move the lenses around and make repeatable positions.

COLLINGS: You specifically wanted this for your own artwork or for your special effects?

O'NEILL: No, I wanted to be able to make films using this tool. Well, even on the very first film with Bob Abel, we paid people with an optical printer to make some high-contrast material. That was sort of the first time I knew of the existence of such a tool, and I could just see that it was sort of a basic studio tool.

So in about '68 I met a man by the name of Bob Beck, who had a little studio he was putting together. He was building optical printers from early Kodak 16 [millimeter] projectors that were made as far back as 1920. They were extremely well made. The early ones were made to very fine tolerances and they were very expensive machines. The registration was acceptable for filmwork. It wasn't really quite good enough, but it was almost.

Bob Beck had rented *7362* of mine, and he called me up and said, "Maybe we could do some business." He was trying to put together a little effects unit. He had done some effects for a Roger Corman film. He was a very funny guy. He was in all sorts of businesses, and he had this studio. He was an engineer, and he knew

electronics and he knew how to make things. He was very eccentric. Later I learned he was also in the porn business, although he didn't involve me in that.

COLLINGS: Through Roger Corman, you mean?

O'NEILL: No. Most of it just in terms of— He had a photo duplicating— He had this funny house over in Hollywood, around Castle Place near the Y[MCA], and he built his studio, a nice little studio, in back. He was a very strange guy. You never quite knew— He had a lot of things going on. Over time, the extraterrestrial stuff started coming out and it began coming out that he had been heavily involved with L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology and had broken with Scientology. He claimed that Scientologists had tried to kill him, and he carried a gun. Anyway, though, this all started— We sort of gradually learned these things.

Anyway, he had this little studio and he had the little film processing lab. He had everything I needed, and he said, "I'll provide the studio if you'll do the work, and then we'll get some jobs." That was fine. So we had about maybe a two-year run there, a little longer. Most of *Runs Good* was made there. *Screen* was made there. So anyway, that was like the first time I had an optical printer. I was living in West L.A. We were married, and I was driving over to Hollywood and working all night, because he had other things he was doing in the daytime. He was continually inventing things. He would continually upgrade the printer, and it was sort of a work in progress. It had its limits. It was slow and then you had to deal with Bob, which was all right at first, but then that got to be a little strange. Then Burton Gershfield was— We were all doing things together. We did the Genesis trailer. Genesis was— I don't know if I mentioned this before.

COLLINGS: The film exhibition?

O'NEILL: Yes. It was a distribution company that was distributing films to colleges, mostly films that appeared in festivals like Ann Arbor. Burton Gershfield and I and then Marty Muller and I did these trailers for them, and that was done over there.

Then I started doing commercials for a man by the name of Herb Stott, who had a company called Spun Buggy. That was another thing where *7362* showed, and somebody from the company saw it and said, "We'd love to be able to do some of these things for some of our clients."

COLLINGS: So somebody from the company would have seen it at some sort of like experimental film [inaudible]?

O'NEILL: I recall that Filmex or somebody had— Or Bob, I know, heard about the film and rented it from— I guess from the [Canyon Cinema] coop and then made a pretty serviceable copy of it.

COLLINGS: It's just today I can't imagine people from the advertising world hearing about something—

O'NEILL: No, actually it still goes on.

COLLINGS: Does it?

O'NEILL: Oh, sure. It's like you see Joel[-Peter] Witkin's photographs, and then you see a Nine Inch Nails video, which is in motion instead of still, but it's basically entirely based on his photographs—that wound it up in a lawsuit—but lots of much more subtle things. It goes on to the point where an artwork appears and it appears in a commercial months later.

COLLINGS: Yes, I know, but I wasn't thinking that they would actually call on the artist who was responsible for it.

O'NEILL: No. Usually it's more like you have technicians and you show them the work and say, "What can we do with this?"

So at the time it was an opportunity. This was before I— No, it wasn't before; it was after I taught at UCLA. Yes, right after that, and I was looking for work, so I worked on a lot of commercials on this little 16-millimeter printer. I remember we did a Dial soap national thing. We did trailers for Disney, believe it or not.

COLLINGS: So were you planning at this time that this was how you would support yourself?

O'NEILL: I never planned anything. It was like, here was access to equipment and some money. In those days, it seemed to be easy to make money. I had been a teaching assistant and made something like three hundred a month, and I was saving money out of that. Things just came along. It was like, well, here's something I can do for a few months, and I did, and that led to more things.

Then Spun Buggy, a commercial production house, they said, "Well, we want to do these ads in 35 [millimeter],"and searching out a place where I could get hands on— Well, the printers were out there, but basically they belonged in shops that were union signatories. So only an I.A. cameraman could operate them.

COLLINGS: Oh, I see.

O'NEILL: One approach would have been to, like, pay for that to be done by directing someone, and the other was to lease a printer and then pay me and some other people to operate it. So that was the scheme for a while. That was a producer

service company single-head optical printer, which was very expensive to lease. We split the lease with a guy by the name of Jan Buir, whose father owned— Jack Buir owned Anicam, which was, I guess, the biggest animation house then. They had like five Oxberry stands, and they did animation. In this building next to them, this little old house that belonged to Jack Buir, we set up the printer. That was all right, except that Jan was having a serious drinking problem and a divorce, and he turned out to be— He wound up living there, which wasn't the original plan. Things got sort of chaotic. This was about the time when the offer to go to CalArts came, so I pulled out of that.

COLLINGS: So what were your impressions of CalArts when you first went there?

O'NEILL: Well, it was wonderful. It was planned to be this community of the arts that brought a whole lot of really interesting people together. Alexander Mackendrick called me up. He was a director in England and later in the United States, conservative but very articulate teacher. It curious, the art department and the music department and theater were all genuinely experimental. Film was more conservative, as film tends to be. But Alexander said, "Well, we have to have at least somebody called avant-garde here, and if you'd like to be it, you can do it. I don't understand what you're doing, but it's all right, we get along okay." I think that they were afraid of getting somebody who would be more aggressively didactic, who would sort of not value what it was they were doing.

The school was being built, and we knew about it and we knew about Disney being behind it. They had to open before the building was completed, so they rented— There was a whole campus of what had been a girls' school, a Catholic high

school, Villa Cabrini [Academy] in Burbank, and they rented that. It was a whole campus of little brick one- and two-story buildings, a lot of lawn around them. Everybody just kind of appeared in this— That would be fall of '70.

Some of the faculty came from Chouinard Art Institute, which was in downtown L.A. and had closed, and some came from the Conservatory of Music, but many others were people that were recruited specifically. Allan Kaprow was one and John Baldessari was there. There were people involved with science teaching. It really was based on the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Everything was wide open to be sorted out, whether there was going to be any hierarchy or some hierarchy, whether there was going to be any evaluation done. At first there was no evaluation. But it did cost money to go there.

COLLINGS: I was just going to say, yes.

O'NEILL: That was the first casualty, was like, well, we have to be able to transfer credits in and out, so you have to have evaluation. It very rapidly became conventional because each department was allocated a budget and had to basically do their own bookkeeping, and so the competition started to emerge between different disciplines. but it was very exciting at first.

Then there was a new building the following year. The initial campus was small enough and everything was sort of divided up in a way that everybody sort of saw each other, so it was easy to have lunch with or just sort of join a group. Then the new building was so much the opposite.

COLLINGS: The one out in Valencia.

O'NEILL: Yes. The building is very horizontal and very spread out, with miles of corridor. The schools are all in the same building, but for all intents and purposes they could be somewhere else. But again, it was sort of like, well, I'd love to come to work there, but I need certain studio tools. The optical printer was one, and this was where the lease arrangement— See, initially, the Producers Service Company owned such patents that they could prevent optical printers from being sold. So they would only lease them and they would maintain them, which was good, to have somebody— Because then maintenance was potentially pretty tricky. But they were starting to— The patents had run out, and so now it was more advantageous to buy it, and then you'd buy a service agreement and have service people that you could call on. So one of the first printers went to CalArts. Well, actually it wasn't one of those. In '74 I bought one. Actually, the first printer we had at CalArts belonged to an optical house that had somehow or other come to own it. This was Research Products. Then they came to build a printer. They came out with their own printer for sale, but the one that we had was a Producers Service printer that somehow they had come to own and they sold it to CalArts.

So the printer arrived, and the Oxberry animation stand arrived, and I was there. So that became my studio tool, and I was free from the obligation to do commercials, although— Yes, for a while I didn't do any outside work; I just worked on my own film. But I had to queue up with the students, and the optical printer was very popular at first. Cyclically, it would have a period of interest. So there were so many hours a day and everybody had to divide them up each week. So you might get eight hours this week and might get twenty hours the next. It was a bargaining thing.

COLLINGS: Sounds kind of frustrating.

O'NEILL: Yes. It was a deal. It was satisfactory for a while, but then in '74 I had a chance to buy a printer, so I could have my own shop. I still taught, but I got a printer. It was a twenty-year-old machine, but it still cost, I think— I think I put about $35,000 into that. It took about ten years to pay off. So then there it was at home. I wallboarded the inside of our garage and I made a darkroom and made a place for the printer. I tried to make it as clean as I could. This was something we hadn't really faced at CalArts; the CalArts printer was never clean enough. The air came through the air conditioning and blew down and there were little bits of lint and stuff. So everything that came out of that printer had dirt on it. We couldn't get anybody to fix that.

So having my own printer, and then having students who— Well, the first *Star Wars* movie was in production in '77, I think, and a number of CalArts people went to work on that either part-time or right after school. I was getting my chops together and didn't do any work on *Star Wars*, but on the following one, on *The Empire Strikes Back*, we got a lot of shots to do. So by then—this would be early eighties, '82, I guess—I was really getting a lot of commercial work. There were three, four people working on shifts. We had some animation work going on. There was as much work as one could handle for a number of years. We had a connection with Foote, Cone and Belding Ad Agency in San Francisco, to do Levi's, to do ads for Levi's. They had these extravagant budgets to do animation. Some of them we actually did some of the shooting on, inserts, models, and so on.

So I wasn't doing any of my own work then. This was sort of around-the-clock work. For a time, I thought I was going to make a lot of money, and I was pleased. Anyway, the printer was being paid off. So then I left CalArts in '76. Coincident with leaving, I had this cerebral hemorrhage and wound up in the hospital and lost my reading ability. It's curious I had— In the fall of '75, I went to the dean, Alexander, and I said, "I'd really like to take some time off." By then I had my own printer and I was busy. I couldn't keep teaching and do commercial work at the same time. I said, "Let's take a year off and then I'll decide." And left for Christmas vacation and had the seizure a few days after Christmas, and just decided I didn't want to go back to teaching. I just decided that I didn't want it to be a part of our life. It's curious. Part of the history of that is that I had been so suffering from chronic fatigue, which started sometime in the seventies, and by '75—

COLLINGS: Chronic fatigue in the technical sense?

O'NEILL: Yes. I went to several doctors and was tested for this and that and the other thing. They didn't know what it was. But I had a doctor who suggested dexamphetamine, and he gave me a prescription for this, and I said, "Oh, this is much better."

COLLINGS: "I can do special effects work all night." [laughs]

O'NEILL: I could act like a normal person. It was wonderful. It was like, I don't have to suffer from this.

So I was sort of steadily going along. I would do the dex in the morning and teach, but it was probably a factor in having this cerebral hemorrhage.

COLLINGS: Oh, was it really? Is that what they said?

O'NEILL: Yes. They said, "Yes, you shouldn't do this." It's probably a combination of things, like medicine always is, but it's sort of like, "Well, you burst a blood vessel. You were on this medication for several years. We don't think you ought to take it anymore." So I never did.

I've suffered from chronic fatigue off and on. It's just very hard to get a handle on exactly. They've isolated certain viruses that the antibodies for these viruses are in the systems of people who have chronic fatigue. Some people have such a debilitating effect that they can't work at all. They're just barely out of bed at all. I never had it that bad, but I do have periods of being really tired. It leads to depression, and I take medication for depression. It's always a problem managing it. So I left CalArts.

COLLINGS: When you are feeling very tired— I'm just kind of curious to know if you feel like any of these perspectival proclivities of yours have allowed you to have a unique perspective that has come into your work.

O'NEILL: How do you mean?

COLLINGS: I mean, like, here you are. One of the things that's interesting about your work is the way that time is played with. I just wondered if perhaps when you're feeling chronically fatigued, does your sense of time change. It's just sort of always interesting to know how an artist's health issues as well as their environment and all these other factors have played into their work. That's all. Do you think that it has had a role?

O'NEILL: I haven't been aware that it has. It usually just sort of leads to periods of withdrawal and inactivity. It's curious that one of the things it's maybe sort of led to

is making drawings that are very small, very minimal surfaces of drawing. That is one thing that I have been able sometimes to do when I didn't feel the energy to do anything else, and they're all about a kind of chaos or a kind of erosion of form into this kind of debris or sand. It's like a set of objects in a field that becomes objects in a field interlocked.

I started doing those drawings about the time I started doing the optical shop, and I would be, among other things, spending a lot of time on the phone. I'm always doing something with my hand. I can't stop. So I'd be drawing. Usually, in the end, it'd be just scraps of paper and be thrown away. Then I started thinking about how I made the drawings. I started liking some of them, saving them, and I thought, well, let's exclude all this other trash and just do the drawing. So by about '80 or so, I was kind of consciously doing these things and saving them.

COLLINGS: I think that in your interview with John Hanhardt you called those jailhouse drawings.

O'NEILL: Yes. I've seen some art work by prisoners, and I guess that— There was show up in— Well, never mind. But thinking about what you could do if you were restrained to one room and you had no materials other than a pencil and a piece of paper. Could you still find some interest in that? Or a hospital room is another kind of jail, or a business where you have to be present to do something but your mind isn't occupied all the time. And it seemed like, well, that's a kind of a state of being that more and more of us find ourselves in. That kind of is our situation, isn't it, that we're doing a job or answering phones or monitoring something, a production that's going

on. How much of you can sort of remain in that, or how can you keep another little part of your mind occupied while you're paying attention to this other thing?

I found that after a while I began to be conscious of doing this, and it became sort of fascinating to realize that I could have a series of conversations going on and still be doing this, almost as if it was off on its own, a robot. So it tends to be a record of periods of time when nothing else, no other creative work was being done, other than managing a business.

COLLINGS: When you were hiring people to work with you, did these tend to people that you liked, and would these be other artists? Would it be a community in that sense?

O'NEILL: Usually it was, yes. In fact, many of them were ex-students of mine or friends of ex-students. In fact, there was really only one person that I ever hired whose work I wasn't familiar with. I had one guy who worked for me for a couple of years, he was strictly an operator, and that was not a very good period. He was at a time when everybody else was so busy and I suddenly had a bunch of projects to do and didn't have an operator, so I hired a guy, and we never got along. It was always like he was sort of suspicious of me and he was the professional operator. So that was just a— But most of the time there were— Well, there was Tom Leeser, who came from the Art Institute in San Francisco. He worked for me for a couple of years. David Wilson, who was a student and who subsequently make the Jurassic Museum, he worked for me, and Diana Wilson also. Diana worked for a long time. She did bookkeeping for me, then she got into animation, did a lot of rotoscope work on the Lucas projects. Sandra Matthews, who was a photographer. Daina Krumins, who was

one of my first students at CalArts. Adam Beckett worked for me for a bit. Actually, he basically just did some of his own work on my printer, so yes, Beth Block, Beth was a student at CalArts, and on and on. So, yes, it was kind of like a little community.

I always made the suggestion that they should—Most people didn't take me up on it, but, "This is your studio, too, and there's twenty-four hours a day, so we can work on something and share it." But generally, when people were working on the jobs, it was so exhausting that they didn't really want to do anything else.

COLLINGS: Yes. When I was talking with Betzy Bromberg, she was describing this intense deadline-oriented situation where you didn't have time to go to the grocery store and you didn't have time to do anything else.

O'NEILL: Exactly. Everybody just assumed that this was— It just is the condition of production that you may be sitting around and sitting around, waiting for these people to get ready for you to work. Then once you're working and the deadline has already been established— So it's always the last thing that's done on a production is the effects, post-production work. So generally, by then everybody is already past their time and they push their anxiety off on you. You have to internalize it and say, well, just how fast can I get this done? It is all-encompassing, and you push everything else out of your life and you do it.

Part of it was also trying to prove that this little company in a garage could do work that was as good as a big optical house that has twenty, thirty, a hundred employees and a dozen optical printers and a person standing by to maintain them. It was always hard. The tradeoff was that this was a small unit and you got complete

personal attention from me and whoever—George Lockwood worked for me for many years—and that it was more personal and that we would get to know editors who would go from project to project and would bring us their work. Couldn't always do it. Sometimes the projects were too big; we couldn't handle them. We could handle part of a project. There was a guy by the name of Chris Cassady, who was a student of mine, who had his own little animation business in a tiny little office over on Seward [phonetic]. He generally had two or three or four people working for him. Often it was doing matting, making drawing mattes for characters, to put them in the background. So for, like, about ten years, we worked back and forth. Whenever we needed something animated, why, we'd give it to Chris to animate. He was also another little business that was hardly there. I guess he was in the phone book, but this was all word of mouth. I don't think I even had a business card in those days.

COLLINGS: So you wouldn't go out looking for business? Everything came to you?

O'NEILL: Yes, well, sometimes you'd go out doing it, too. You'd hear about jobs, and it was always because you knew somebody who was working there, and in some way or other you'd get recommended. People would call you up and say, "Well, I want you to look at these boards," so you'd get storyboards. Particularly in commercials and also on some titles, you'd get storyboards. You'd go through shot by shot and figure out how many dupes, how many times am I going to have to make this dissolve. A lot of it was pretty routine, but the really routine stuff, I think, mostly went to big houses like Pacific Tile or Ray Mercer. There were all these optical houses, and many of them had been in business for many years.

COLLINGS: So how were you able to compete?

O'NEILL: Well, our overhead was a lot lower, and I think sometimes the fact that you were more willing to work with an editor to try to produce something that was a little bit out of the ordinary, that might be very expensive to do through one of the bigger ones. I was available twenty-four hours a day, and if somebody wanted to change something in the middle of the night, sometimes we could do it. We were always driving over to Consolidated Film [Industries] Labs or Deluxe General or a whole string of film labs there. Well, somebody always had to be driving the film over and getting it processed and printed and then driving it back. I'd moved to Laurel Canyon to be close to the labs, among other things, other than the fact that we liked living in the hills.

COLLINGS: So was this enjoyable work for you?

O'NEILL: Some of the time it was. It was entrepreneurial. There was always the chance that— Sometimes people would come along and they're just have a lot of money to spend, and they wanted something in a hurry, and they wanted it the way they wanted it. So it was sort of a challenge. It was always personal relationships. You're working with these people and they've got their temperaments and their time schedules. It didn't always work out, but most of the time it did. I regret the fact that I wasn't doing my own stuff, but it just became so all-encompassing that you'd just forget about everything else.

COLLINGS: How long did this period last of really intensive effects work?

O'NEILL: I'd say it started in '77 and went through about '92 or '93, pretty well tapering off then. It wasn't busy all the time. There'd be long gaps. The business was always having these business cycles where everybody would be busy, and then six

months later nobody's got a new project coming in. Like, oh, this is going to be a depression or something? So since I didn't have anybody on salary, we just weren't working. Nobody was getting paid. I never was in the position— I never took on— We were always all freelance, and it was like there was no benefits, there was no medical attention, medical insurance. In a way, I was sort of riding all these people in not doing that, but at the same time, I was giving them an environment that was a lot more kind of friendly, all the people that didn't want to do a factory job. They were all—

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February 25, 2005

COLLINGS: Anyway, you were saying that these were people who didn't like to have a factory job. This was a certain type of person that was working for you.

O'NEILL: Yes. We weren't thinking much about security or anything other than just keeping our needs met. I made the loan and thereby got the chance to make whatever profit there was after the wages were paid, and it was always just seat-of-the-pants, just sort of saying, "This is what I need to work," or, "Well, maybe I can do it for a little less." Or somebody would come along and say, "I've got this much money. How much can you do?" It was always a different— Some people you'd do a favor for, and some people you'd do it for nothing. There were people coming from— Graduate students that somehow needed something done, and we'd do it. But, well, it gradually became technologically outmoded.

COLLINGS: I was going to ask you.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, Chris Cassady's animation business started falling off. Everything was being done digitally. It started with the very high-end projects and then it gradually became just about everything. For a while, it was just a few holdouts that would projects on film, didn't want to digitalize, couldn't afford it or suspected it. Various people that we'd worked with just fell out of the business and went off to do something else, until by the time I was ready to shoot *The Decay of Fiction* in '94, there really wasn't enough to do in that, that I was working more than one or two days a week. Then along with doing the opticals, I also had a 35 [millimeter] motion

camera— Well, I had the Mitchell than I made, I bought to do *Water and Power*, and I had equipment to do time-lapse shots. Loving to go out in nature and be away from home and looking around in different places, I shot some skies, basically shot from the horizon, the horizon being the bottom of the frame, wide-angle shots, and trying to— This had, of course, been done as long as there had been film, but there seemed to be a need. There were a few people doing time-lapse skies and other time-lapse, time-lapse cityscapes and everything that moved. Then there's the saga of stock footage, retaining the negative and licensing its use to commercials and effect houses and so on. For a while I did a lot of that shooting in the early eighties, and I had a good distributor, or stock house, that returned royalties. So that was another stream of income.

Whenever I wasn't doing optical and I had a chance to get away, I would find places where I knew there were things going on in the sky and would go and try and get interesting stuff, because actually it turns out to be a little harder than it looks, because sky is very big and you don't know where the action is going to be. So it's like going fishing. You go out, you have your sleeping bag, you have the camera, and you have something to eat. You set up and—

COLLINGS: I wanted to ask you about these expeditions. Do you take a thermos? What's it all like?

O'NEILL: I had my van, this one and another one before it, set up so that I could be pretty much weathertight. I didn't want some huge mobile home. I wanted to just have a truck that I could work out of and get some shelter from the weather.

COLLINGS: How long would these trips tend to be?

O'NEILL: Anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. I spent a lot of time in northern Arizona and New Mexico. It was a great break. I really miss not doing that. And it's curious, that business fell apart, too, because the company that was distributing them and was very active in distributing them was bought by a beer company who was less active. Then they were bought— They went through like four changes of management, and it went from an income that was anywhere from, oh, eight to fifteen to eighteen thousand dollars a year for a long run. It got to be more— They had more and more shots. You get a really good shot, and some of those shots were licensed maybe twenty, thirty times. So I have a reel of about three hours or so of the best shots of weather of all sorts, mostly time-lapse. Out of that, maybe there's twenty shots that did all the selling. There was also a few that we enhanced. We took storms and went back and animated lightning and exposure changes. Those were very popular. A lot of the time, I never knew where they were going, but the checks would come in.

Well, in the last few years, that business has just dried up. I don't know, I guess it's because it's so much easier to shoot that stuff now, people just shoot their own, or that I just haven't got a good representative is maybe part of it. So I'm looking for somebody.

COLLINGS: So you have made the choice not to go into digital special effects?

O'NEILL: No, I haven't, really. What happened was, I had this film to make, and the digital work was so much more expensive, because to get from film to digital and then back to film still costs about three or four times as much as to do it on film. I didn't

want to take another huge loan and retrain; I just wanted to do that film. That occupied me for several years.

COLLINGS: Was that *The Decay of Fiction*?

O'NEILL: Yes. By the time we were finished doing the opticals on that, we had one other project that we worked on for a couple of years called *The Empty Mirror* that was a film opticals project, a feature, that a guy worked on for five years and spent millions on. I don't think it ever was released. We had that project going, George and I did. Since then, I've realized that— What I do now is, we learn as we equip. I'm beginning to do it. I'm learning editing software. I still get distracted in making art instead.

COLLINGS: Well, that's all right.

O'NEILL: But I figure that I'll start to work that way. It's kind of like starting over with the optical printer. It's sort of like there are all these parameters and, in a way, there are worlds more possibilities in it. There's other risks, and it's just a completely different environment. I still have the two printers, and when I have the studio building built, I'll set them up. One of them we might set up to do digitizing from film, which requires some more investment.

COLLINGS: So you are building a studio? Is that what you said?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, we bought this house because it had this piece of ground attached. The place where we were, there wasn't any room left to build. At least we couldn't find a way to do it that we could afford. This place appeared in summer of '02, when I was still working on finishing up *Decay*. We actually had most of the opticals done. But I thought, well, this is a much easier place to build and this is a

better house. Everything was better, and it was just like, go for it. Then I've been sort of struggling ever since to get the building done. Just in the last two months I hired Rachel Allen, who is an architect, to manage it, basically, to get the engineering done and get it through the building department. It's been a month in the building department, then we hope that in another couple of weeks we'll be able to start bidding it out. That's really exciting. That's sort of the main thing I'm doing now, is planning that.

COLLINGS: This will be a studio just for purely your own work or also to do some of this industrial work?

O'NEILL: Well, there might turn out to be— We might be able to do some collaborative project of some kind. I don't have anything in the offing. It's at a place where I could get by without doing anything else. I might do a year of teaching. There's been some offers. Yes, to have a room. We built the maximum they'd let us build, which was 1,800 square feet, just the simplest slab floor and four walls and a roof with an air conditioner. I want to be able to just go and sit in there and figure out what the next thing is. It should be enough space. *Decay of Fiction*, I shot a lot of it in a two-car garage. I was using every square foot of it. I had all the walls blacked out, and I was working with performers and models doing moves against this black background. God, if I just had about twice as much room, it would be so much nicer, but I got through it with that. It's always like, it'd be nice to have a big building, but you're going to have to go rent it, you're going to have to lease it for so long, and it's going to take all the money just doing that.

I tried to get a space at the Brewery [art colony] a long time, in downtown L.A., it's an artist community, but that— I never could make a deal I could afford. Space is so much a part of your artmaking experience, and usually you have to make incredible compromises until you start selling work or so, which I haven't really started doing in any serious way. Just to have the room to go in and sit there with the light coming in is just such a luxury. I can't think of anything else, other than traveling.

COLLINGS: You need a room of one's own.

O'NEILL: Yes. You need a space that you can rearrange and you can keep control over, you can light it. You might do something incredibly simple in it, but at least you can get a good look at it.

So I don't know that I'll ever do any more commercial work. As of now, there are so many people in the business, I mean, it's like things that were once a rarity are— There's just hundreds and hundreds of people that are trained to do it, and they've broken it all down into very fine specialties, the animators and the color people and the lighting people. It's a much sharper tool for the producer than it was when I started.

COLLINGS: Yes. It used to be a craft and there were a few people with this special knowledge. That's no longer the case.

O'NEILL: Yes. There were people that could paint backgrounds, and there were people that could do clay animation, but all these things are subsumed within a single mechanism now.

COLLINGS: The computer.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. It is the ultimate optical printer that goes way, way beyond what we could do. I really would like to do some projects that would address some possibilities that I know are there, that have only now become available. So I have to do it with a limited budget. I don't share the idea that I just do film and it all stops there. I know a lot of people think that way, and they feel very threatened by this other thing. It's true it is frustrating that film— The support for film is dwindling, and some of the stocks are being discontinued and labs are not as attentive as they were. The whole focus changes, and you think, well, maybe in another five or ten years, it'll maybe really change. Film may wind up to be an exotic thing that maybe Kodak can't produce anymore and some of these smaller companies take it over in sort of an archival thing. There's all this film out there that has to be serviced and maintained, so I don't think it'll go away, but—

COLLINGS: But also you are working in 35-five millimeter, too, so that gives your mediums a little bit of added longevity.

O'NEILL: That's not quite as threatened as 16 [millimeter], right, right. It's still the mainstream way that feature films are shot. But *Decay of Fiction* I thought would wind up paying, at least, for itself through distribution of some kind. It was a major disappointment that it didn't happen, although I never really made the compromises that would have maybe made it more saleable. It's so much more accessible and sort of interesting to more people, that I thought, well, this maybe will— *Water and Power* almost did.

COLLINGS: Did it?

O'NEILL: Well, it probably half paid for itself. This one has just been a complete turkey. It's like there's just no money coming back.

COLLINGS: That's sad.

O'NEILL: Yes. A lot of filmmakers survived on European television licenses. That's gone. I don't know what happened. I was so tired by the time I got through doing it, that I didn't— I never have figured out how to do the hustling thing. It got good press and probably added to my being able to do the show with Julie. So it's fine. It's done. I wouldn't try to do it again. I never wanted to stand in line and do more films like there's so many people already doing. I wanted to do something that just kind of set its own terms. It means that you have a handful of partisans who really like what you do, but there's not enough volume to make it worthwhile for theater owners to do it.

COLLINGS: Yes. Well, they're brutal even on Hollywood projects these days.

O'NEILL: Yes. Exactly. It seems like the resources are continually shrinking, although there's DVD distribution, which is promising, I'd say. But again, it takes a fair amount to get a good DVD made, enough that you really have to sit back and think about how big a loan do I want to make? I hate being in debt. I've never been in debt seriously.

[End of February 25, 2005 interview]

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE

March 11, 2005

COLLINGS: This is Jane Collings interviewing Pat O'Neill at his home in Pasadena on March 11th, 2005.

Good afternoon. I just have a few, just to start with today, a few pickup questions from our discussion last time. I noticed that— Maybe this is not important, but you dedicated the film *Downwind* to Tinta. So I just have the burning question, who's Tinta?

O'NEILL: Tinta is— Well, we had various nicknames. It's Bev. She was also Pearl Harbor. Tinta was Tintakina, which is *black ink* in Spanish.

COLLINGS: Oh, that's your nickname for Bev, your wife.

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: Oh, that's really nice. I'm glad I asked. Is that nickname widely known?

O'NEILL: No, no, no. No, that was a while ago, anyway.

COLLINGS: Well, actually it kind of raises the other follow-up question. I remember asking last time about your viewer prerequisites, like what should people know, what would you like an audience to know when they come and see your work. I also was wondering, do you ever have sort of "in" jokes in your films, I mean things that only a few people would get and appreciate and that kind of thing.

O'NEILL: Yes. No, there's nothing that's real specifically targeted that way.

COLLINGS: Because I know when I was talking with Chick [Strand], she had a couple of little things that were sort of like little shared references that Marty [Muller] in particular would get, and I just wondered if—

O'NEILL: I'm sure, going through, there are things that are sort of obscure, that only some people would know. There's things that refer roughly to other artworks or other things that take place in other media sometimes. I can't even think of an example right now.

COLLINGS: But not anything that has to do with something that happened among a group of people, a particular joke or something?

O'NEILL: No, not really.

COLLINGS: Okay. I was just wondering about that.

O'NEILL: I was thinking about this after we talked last time, about sort of working process and how to explain or how to put into words what it is that it means to do this stuff. I realized that what I do is very sort of— It kind of happens slowly, and it kind of is an accumulation of different impulses and different meetings of subject matter, and because it happens so slowly, it happens in a sort of complex way and rarely is anything ever one thing. So it does depend to some extent on where you are culturally what you'll see in it, I think.

I was thinking that— So I've never been able to really make a coherent sort of statement about what anything really is about. It's about all sorts of things. It's about living, and I sort of say that kind of cautiously, because I remember from teaching, it was always this sort of danger of someone becoming self-indulgent and just putting everything in just because you feel like it. You generally are trying to get people to

clarify their thoughts and pare the idea down to its essentials. I go through that, but another time I'll just sort of go against it, in a way, and do the exact opposite.

COLLINGS: Will you tend to have, while you're working on something, a vast assembly edit that you are paring down? How do these things get compiled?

O'NEILL: It depends on the project. The earlier pieces sort of would grow by addition and accretion, putting new parts on, replacing parts with new things. The exception would be *The Decay of Fiction*, which, once it was shot, it was basically— The parts all existed, so it was a matter just of sort of working your way through and completing them all.

COLLINGS: That looks like something— That was done with like a storyboard sort of thing, right?

O'NEILL: Well, I shot it, then I made— Yes, actually it was a wall of stills of every shot and timings and then writing dialogue and adding that to it.

COLLINGS: Is there any vintage footage in there at all? Are any of the performers—

O'NEILL: No. The exception is, there's a television shot that we set in the kitchen, where a woman is sort of supervising workers. She has a TV on, and it has a sequence from a film called *His Kind of Woman*, Robert Mitchum in it. The dialogue and the track— The reason I put that piece there was that it involves a fight in an engine room of a ship, so it has this very metallic clanking and banging soundtrack, which sounded so much like a kitchen that it sort of animated those shots. But other than that, no, everything is shot with our own people, but at times the action is determined, to some extent, by the soundtrack that comes from old films.

It's curious, at one point I had hoped to at least do voice reenactions of all of that, and in the course of shooting the film, I realized how hard it was to reenact a scene out of context, so I wound up using the actual voices. There's a Jane Russell song that is supposed to be being sung by a woman in the Coconut Grove. It was called— "You'll Know" was the title, "When It Happens You'll Know," Jane Russell. I know a woman, and she played the role, who is actually an operatic singer, and I thought, well, this would be a cinch for her, but she couldn't do it.

COLLINGS: It's so period-specific in the enunciation, the timing, everything.

O'NEILL: Right. So we wound up using Jane. That's one of the sensitive, potentially sensitive issues.

COLLINGS: Copyright?

O'NEILL: Yes. Even though it was— I think that one was made in about '45 or so.

COLLINGS: So it's public domain by now?

O'NEILL: Well, it was until it was— Because of the Copyright Extension Act, everything's in copyright, technically.

COLLINGS: Oh, right, right. That's right.

O'NEILL: Everything that was made after 1923, which is a bad law and probably— Well, it has been challenged, but unsuccessfully so far. But anyway, the working process is— I guess I really love the working process, and I love the sort of fact that when you go in and start doing something, you really don't know what's coming. You kind of know what the parameters are, but you don't— It's that sort of germ of insight, you hope, where you see how to move it ahead, see how to reframe the question as you're answering it.

COLLINGS: How do you know when it's finished?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, you don't. You just sort of make the assertion at some point, or else maybe you know you can't finish it, so you don't. It's often a matter of trying to get something to work on one— Have one sort of level, one arc of time or of something being explained and then to come back and see what a subsequent secondary level might be, and then maybe a third.

We live in a time when there's been so much art made and there's so many people doing it, you're sort of dealing with the critical imperative of modernism, of trying to do something that's new. We've been taught that we need to do something that's new. I don't know. I'm sure there was a time when that wasn't even on the table, that what you were doing was learning a craft and learning how to carve stone, the way they did in the Renaissance. But long after we grew up, after we started school, it was a quest to break through in some way, and yet it carries with it the possibility that you really never will and that everything you do has come down the line from other workers and other artists. It's sort of fraught with failure, because you do something and then you step back from it and you realize that it resembles something else that you know, that you've seen or— Well, you'd have to have seen it, but it's received knowledge rather than anything original. And I think a lot of young artists today are sort of very aware of the dilemma right from the beginning and sort of going to making a kind of work that's about the fact that you can't make anything original. It's sort of an art that sort of reflects on defeat, in a way.

COLLINGS: You wrote or said somewhere, I think maybe you said in one of our interviews, that you had started your work before the era of Nixon and Reagan and

part of what drove you was the idea that some of these familiar kinds of images could be put in different contexts and could be seen differently. I think that you said that consciousness, itself, could be defined a little bit differently. Because that situation has changed rather dramatically, what then was it that kept you going?

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. Well, part of it is, we condition ourselves to do something, and I guess I'm lucky that I got conditioned to do something that wasn't too self-destructive. You wonder what keeps you going. I don't know. It's curious, the last few years I've been reflecting more and more on sort of early childhood habits and thinking about how they played out later, in a way that I don't think I had ever really thought about much before, and kind of wondering how it was that I— I realize that I've gone through so many periods, starting when I first started school, of sort of like not quite being able to figure out how to be a part of the group, or a group, sort of like being always a little disconnected and not quite getting the joke and not quite being quite fast enough to really enjoy the group interaction.

Then I began realizing that my father was the same way, and I have a feeling from— Because my father became very, very silent in his later years and you would not hear much from him. He would go to a family dinner and he would sit quietly and eat his food. This was not when he was really losing the ability to think, but he just became an outsider in the group. People sort of were used to that, and that was just the role that he always played. I think, well, yes, I can sort of feel what that's like. It's some kind of bent of mind that makes you sort of retreat.

COLLINGS: What about a group of thoughtful, contemplative artists? Would it be the same?

O'NEILL: Well, it depends on the group dynamic, I guess. Yes, it's curious. Everybody I know is— We're all— Everybody's a little defensive about their own practice and what they did. You don't really tend to talk much about that. Then there are those who are thoughtful about art in a way that's very informed by textual reading and so forth, and I begin to realize that that's another reference, that I have read.

COLLINGS: Thank god. [laughs]

O'NEILL: Well, I don't know.

COLLINGS: I'm sorry. I'll delete that. [laughs]

O'NEILL: Well, of course, for everything that you say is the case, there's somebody that's exactly the opposite. But just trying to figure out— I just did a talk yesterday or the day before at Claremont, and I could do virtually anything I wanted to, but it was sort of like trying to figure out, well, what can I say about this stuff that will make sense to somebody who's in graduate school? I found it made me quite anxious. It wound up being the way so many of these things are now, where the audience is very passive and they sit way in the back and they don't let out a peep. You think, well, okay, this is sort of not going that well, but we'll just do it anyway. Then afterwards people are gracious and they thank you for it. So I think, well, this is odd. I don't quite know where people are about this.

It's curious, it goes back to when I taught for a year at UCLA, right after I was— I was about two years out of school. I was part of a faculty that was doing criticisms of— It was a review— No, what was it? I guess they were faculty meetings of what was called the pictorial division, which was painting and sculpture, basically. Photography had recently been admitted, over the protests of some of the senior

members. So I was there, and we were all there, to defend the work of our students on advancement towards graduation. I had this experience of sort of trying to articulate what I felt about these people's work and getting this kind of very condescending sneer from some of the other members, and realizing that because of who I was or how I got to be there, that I was not ever going to be a part of that and being just sort of glad that this year was going to be over and I would never be back there again. It's been a sort of recurrent thing. I guess they call it the imposter syndrome, where people feel like in some way that they don't really deserve to be where they are.

COLLINGS: I don't think it's the role of the artist to explain what their work is about or even for; that's for the critics. That's their job.

O'NEILL: Yes, but increasingly one has to be one's own critic, too, and sort of use those tools to try to advance, I think. I guess that's what we all do. I just feel like there's a lot of the tools I haven't mastered because of the difficulty of the reading and I'm lazy and basically I just like to work with my hands.

COLLINGS: Right. That's great.

Let's see. Actually, I also wanted to sort of ask you about the experience of going out and doing some of these time-lapse shots, just what that's like, what you take with you, what you do while you're there. It's interesting.

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, I got started doing time-lapse work in 16-millimeter with my Bolex sitting on a tripod so it was a fixed shot, and then wanting very much to be able to have the camera a more active participant; in other words, to change the point of view during the shot. That entailed building the motorized motion control tripod that would do that. Part of why I got into it is because it can be a very enjoyable, sort of

passive activity that lets you do whatever else you want to do while the camera does the work. You're basically setting up something and making your best judgement about how it's going to be four hours from now or eight hours from now. That led to doing specifically skies, which became a library. So most of what I did for the skies was to go east at least four or five hundred miles away from the coast so that you had clearer air and more visible activity. Of course, you'd set out armed with weather forecasts, but that's about all. You wouldn't really know. I would gradually find places where it seemed like weather systems affected one another, like northern Arizona, which gets air from the west and it also get air from the south and tends to produce thunderstorms.

Most of what you're doing when the shot's happening is just sort of looking to see whether it's happening where you hoped it was going to, and reading or drawing. You're basically just sort of guarding the equipment. Occasionally you realize that you've made the wrong decision, in fact very often, in the way that the thing that you hoped you were going to photograph is actually happening a few degrees off. So you have to decide when it was time to break and to start it over again.

COLLINGS: Now, this kind of shooting is not connected to a sort of a storyboarded idea of what your film is going to be like? This is more a sort of a collecting of specimens, is it?

O'NEILL: In a way it's—

COLLINGS: Kind of like collecting seashells?

O'NEILL: Sort of like, yes. Well, in *Water and Power*, which was the first one of these, I knew that I wanted to work— I was working up in the Owens Valley, which is

a place where you can drive up to over nine thousand feet and look down on a valley floor that's like six thousand feet below you. So it's almost like being in some kind of permanently mounted aerial situation. It's kind of ideal. A lot of what I did for the first year or so was to work from that position in different angles and get— What would happen late in the afternoon is that the shadow of the mountains would creep out from the mountains and go across and gradually obscure everything.

COLLINGS: Did you know that these shots were going to be for the film *Water and Power*?

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. I basically just started shooting and saving data so that I would know that I had a shot that started here and ended there and such and such happened, and I could go back to the studio and use the data to make another shot that had maybe something happening in the studio.

COLLINGS: And you have some of those time-lapse shots in the city, as well?

O'NEILL: Then in the city I rented a studio on Sixth and Main, with the idea of shooting actors indoors, which actually didn't really materialize. I wound up mostly shooting off the roof, because it had a clear view all the way around the city. So there's a shot, for instance, that starts— How does that go? It starts looking east from the studio, and you can see the county hospital and various things. It was a very clear day. Then it gradually swings around. As the sun goes down, it comes to rest looking straight up Main Street. That transitions into another similar shot that was taken off the roof at ninety degrees which was looking up Sixth Street, because I found out that the L.A. Marathon was going to come up that street, so I was there at dawn. It came

off perfectly. The thing I missed was, like about maybe a week later, the building right next door to mine caught fire.

COLLINGS: Oh, that would have been great.

O'NEILL: That would have been amazing. But I did get the marathon. The fact that that became part of the film was just because I was open to something happening and looking for something, some kind of an event, some kind of change.

COLLINGS: Now, you had kind of a gap, in terms of your films, leading up to *Water and Power*, right?

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: Was that because you were involved with your business?

O'NEILL: Oh, a gap in time? Yes, yes, I was pretty busy, and it took a long time to shoot it because I was busy most of the time, yes. I shot that one from '84 up until '87 or so.

[Speaks to wife] Going away?

COLLINGS: So that was probably the longest period that you spent collecting material for one film. Is that right?

O'NEILL: Yes, the previous film that I had finished was back in '78. Yes, it was a real busy time. Then there was a long period of development, where Mark Maydell, who was my software designer, was coming up with a program that would let me do this. He originally thought he could do it fairly quickly, but it took about a year and a half.

From time to time, I just shot stuff around Los Angeles, using a portable. But now the portable system doesn't exist anymore, so now I'm tethered to a studio with—

COLLINGS: What do you mean? What did you use?

O'NEILL: Well, he based his software on a computer, a portable computer that came out in 1982 or '83, a Radio Shack portable computer, a very simple, low-memory thing. It was only produced a few years, so the software would have to be completely rewritten for a different system. Since then I've expected that somebody would make this kind of a rig commercially available, but for some reason they haven't.

COLLINGS: What would this software do?

O'NEILL: It basically has some number of channels that— The original one had four. Each channel was sending data to a motor, essentially, that would move a fraction of a revolution per impulse and with great accuracy. These motors are called stepping motors, and they are controlled by an electronic circuit, and they move in very, very finely graded steps, a certain number of steps. Might wind up being a certain number of thousandths-of-an-inch rotation and repeat that over and over again. So one motor runs rotation around— A pan, and the second one is vertical, up and down. The third is the zoom lens, which changes the focal length. The fourth is opening and closing the shutter of the camera, so it can open it for any length of time and then close it.

COLLINGS: Boy, this is a great loss.

O'NEILL: Yes, it is. I have a feeling if I looked into it now, I probably could find something that would do it. But most of the people that are doing this kind of work are big studio productions and have a generator and need a much higher-powered device that will move quicker and so forth.

COLLINGS: So technologically, this was the foundation for *Water and Power*?

O'NEILL: Yes. I started out knowing— All I knew was that I was really interested in the phenomenon of time lapse in motion. Then it became where to shoot, and Owens Valley has always fascinated me because it has such an interesting history about it, I mean geologically and politically, because it used to be an agricultural area that became a desert because the water was taken to make Los Angeles.

The wonderful pipe that you can see, I remember playing on the pipe when I was a kid. It's black. It's covered with black tar, and it's riveted, and it's sixteen feet in diameter in some places. It's Williams Mulholland's engineering masterpiece in the way that it carries water. There are no pumps; it goes downhill. It picks up pressure that then takes it up over mountains or over hills. So it's part of the environment that's always been kind of amazing. Of course, *Chinatown* was a fictionalized reassessment of that.

COLLINGS: So did your commercial advertising work sort of feed into your work in *Water and Power*? Could you say that there was any interplay?

O'NEILL: Well, the fact that I knew about motion control and I'd worked on shoots that brought that knowledge to me that I might not have had otherwise. And the film has a lot of sources, some of which are directly taken from commercials. There's a whole sort of section in the middle where a lot of fragmentary motion kind of floats over this watery environment. All those things came from jobs that we worked on or I knew someone that worked on them. So it's kind of a recycling of a lot of things that had very different meanings. So in a way, there are some in-jokes there, if I think about it. There's a character, there are two characters, actually, that are people dressed in these sort of padded, look like kind of inflated ski suits or something. They're

acting. They're on a black set. They were playing the role of lightbulbs in a Sylvania commercial that Bob Abel did. Had a friend that— Well, Jim Shaw, the artist Jim Shaw, worked on the project. Basically, they got the actors to play these roles and then they went back and redrew them into lightbulbs. But these are the sort of guide pieces, and I managed to get the originals and inserted them, really, into the film. They're lightbulbs that are playing that they're tired. They're kind of going to sleep.

COLLINGS: I was sort of interested in that thing that Paul Arthur said about all of the avant-garde. He said you could see all of the names of these avant-garde filmmakers in the final credits of *The Empire Strikes Back.* I was just sort of wondering if, from your perspective—we touched on this a little bit—if the commercial industry and the special effects industry in Los Angeles had provided a kind of a lifeline, economic safety net, for visual artists in Los Angeles.

O'NEILL: I guess so. Just working for Bob Abel, there were quite a number of people. I think Paul McCarthy ran the darkroom over there for some time. I don't know. Generally, people sort of see it as— It was a satisfactory way to make a living. It paid better than anything else you could do. So if you had something you could do and could get hired, then it could cover a few months or years. People would always sort of grumble about the conditions of work and the pressure that they're under, particular in big shops where there were a lot of people. There would be a lot of— Well, I don't know. I guess there's always this sort of "we" and "they" in any equation, but it takes so many people to run around and do everything that's needed to execute one decision that might have taken twenty minutes in a meeting. Then often the decision, the client comes along and doesn't like what he sees, so we have to do it

another way, and you have to stay overnight or the next week to do this. It's always kind of like, "Those people are so stupid. If they'd just listened to me in the first place, we wouldn't have to be doing this." [laughs] It's always like the folks in the shop grumbling about the management. I'm sure it's the other way around for that point of view.

You can't really measure it. I don't know how it would have different if I had been teaching at Rhode Island College [School of] of Design or something. I have a feeling that all of those institutional teaching positions are pretty hard for— I know so many people who have been disappointed by their teaching careers.

COLLINGS: You're dealing with so many personalities.

O'NEILL: Yes, and there's always the need to justify what it is you're doing. I don't know. If you go out and visit in various schools, you get a sampling of the politics, the environment, and it's usually a little bit stressful for the people that have to live there. So I don't know. We've wandered off the course.

COLLINGS: Speaking of being at universities, you were a friend with Bill Morris, William Morris?

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: There's a picture of him.

O'NEILL: There's a picture of Bill, yes.

COLLINGS: Actually, your name shows up in the credits of two of his films, maybe there are more, the Gertrude Stein film and *Slow Moving Rain.*

O'NEILL: Right. What did I do? I don't remember what I did.

COLLINGS: I was just wondering if you could share your remembrances of Bill Morris, since he's an interesting figure.

O'NEILL: Yes, Bill Morris was a very interesting guy. I think Bev met Bill first when they both taught at Occidental [College]. This would be about 1968 or so. Bill was, at that time, married to Priscilla, who was also a teacher. The two of them used to spend a lot of their time in Europe. They did a lot of traveling.

Bill was an avid collector and interested in a whole lot of different aspects of visual art, all the way from opera, not to mention music. He went to work— He left "Oxy" and went to work for Creative Film Society, which was a distribution company that was run by Bob Pike, who was a sort of flamboyant character who distributed my films and distributed a lot of animation and actually managed to make a living off of it. Bill went to work for him, and I think in the course of working there he saw a lot of animation that was not widely seen. I think that was where he got interested in the Whitney Brothers [James and John] and in Oskar Fischinger, Hy Hirsch, and others, but particularly Fischinger. He became acquainted with Elfriede [Fischinger]. By this time, Oskar, I think, had died in '68, and his work was not very well known. Creative Film Society rented mostly to schools and libraries.

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O'NEILL: So there was all this Fischinger work kind of waiting to be revealed and restored, in some cases films that had been made in animation but hadn't been shot or the originals had been lost. Bill got into helping Elfriede Fischinger do this, and then there started like a thirty-year relationship where he sort of toured with her and showed the work. She was very enthusiastic and a good storyteller and made the films accessible to a lot of people.

He was a figure that had started in the twenties. I think his first films were about 1925. He had made animated films set to music, abstractions at a time when there really were only a few people doing abstractions. Viking Eggeling, maybe, was the first. Walter Ruttman, I believe. There's another name. So in a sense, they were inventing a field. They were like contemporary with abstraction in painting.

COLLINGS: There was some French thinking at the time about the notion of visual music.

O'NEILL: Yes. I don't know if it was specifically French, but, yes, the synesthesia thing. I think this is all what leads to the show that's on at MOCA. It's curious, in a way, that the show is on at MOCA but Bill is nowhere mentioned, I don't think. I haven't seen the show, but he sort of laid the groundwork locally, or really all over the country, for people taking his work seriously. And Bill, yes, he worked for Bob Pike, and then that company dissolved at some point.

COLLINGS: And this was a commercial company?

O'NEILL: Yes, a distribution company for Creative Film Society. Bill had various teaching jobs, then he became— Well, he was gay and had various partners. Bob Opal was one who was sort of well known. Bill was always doing presentations and he did screenings at the Theater Vanguard over on Melrose, which was a little privately operated theater. He did a series there and Douglas Edwards did. I think Doug Edwards was really— Bill maybe managed it for a year, and then Doug Edwards took over and managed it for maybe four or five years.

COLLINGS: Does this Edwards have anything to do with the Edwards cinema chain?

O'NEILL: I don't think so, no. No, I think Doug got his start, I believe, with— What was the name of that? Filmex. Filmex was the Los Angeles Film Festival, which started in '72, I think, or '71, was a very influential venue for its first five or ten years. It was started by two guys, both first name was Gary [Gary Essert and Gary Abrahams]. I can't remember either of their last names. The two Garys did a great show, and they brought a lot of people in at great expense, and they had huge audiences. They ran at a loss because they did such a good job, and ultimately it deteriorated.

COLLINGS: And this was in the sixties?

O'NEILL: This would be in the early seventies. This would be '71 to '75 or '76. It continued on. The name Filmex dropped off, and later it became the AFI, Los Angeles [International] Film Festival. It still exists, I believe, but it's underfunded and not as visible as it used to be. In the early days of Filmex, it was a real community thing to go to. There hadn't been anything like it before. They tried very hard to be very inclusive, and they would always do avant-garde programs, and I believe Bill

curated some of them. It was a tough audience to show to because they were primarily people who were attuned to features, and you couldn't tax their patience too long before you started to get hooting. I remember some very seriously hooted shows. It was always kind of like, well, do you want to put yourself through this or not? Generally people figured it was worth it.

So Bill was involved in that and then came to have a pretty hard time making a living. Even though he was very active and well known, he was struggling and continued to struggle right up until he died. He was very impetuous, and he loved so many things that even though he couldn't afford it, he would go off to Europe or he would buy an expensive book or whatever. He wound up sort of— Well, I don't want to get into the all the details of that. But anyway, Bill was making films and he was writing plays and writing reviews. He made, I don't know, about a dozen short films. I was probably credited because— Maybe he did some of the work in the studio. He used to do some optical printing when we had that leased printer that I mentioned.

Bill wasn't the most accurate of workers. Well, it takes a long time to learn how to use a printer like that. It's a curious thing. In those days, I was the guy that was sort of relied on to figure out what was wrong with the printer when something didn't work right. Bill was kind of much more sort of impetuous, and he would show up with something he needed to do, and I'd help him do it. It was kind of trying to make sure that Bill didn't break something or [inaudible].

Bill brought me a print that— He was always picking up prints in 16-millimeter that had come up for sale somewhere. He brought me a print of a piece

called *Let's Make a Sandwich.* Or actually, there was a whole box of these, *Let's Make a Party, Let's Make a Sandwich, Let's do a Casserole.*

COLLINGS: So these were instructional films?

O'NEILL: Yes. Southern California Gas Company teaching, I guess for home economics classes in high school. It was a very sort of straightforward 1955 or so black and white mother-and-daughter piece about cooking that always featured the gas stove. Coincidentally, it was coming along at a time when I wanted to do this project where I would combine many, many films in such a way that they made a sort of continuous surface of movement but that the subject matter was lost, which is kind of an interesting idea. It seemed like it would be pretty easy to do, but a number of people tried this, or tried variations of it.

There's a filmmaker by the name of J. J. Murphy that made a film called *Print Generation* in, I don't know when, mid-sixties, which was taking a given shot and showing it to you and then showing you the duplicate of it and then the duplicate of the duplicate. He took it out through some seventy-five or I don't know how many generations, until finally the image disappears and there's just noise. It just goes. The signal-to-noise ratio gets higher and higher. So I don't know if I'd seen that film at the time. I probably had. But I wanted to make a way that— It's always been hard to explain what it is because it involves combining things through generations to make a series of openings, windows, that are mattes and that then contain something else. I did this in 16 [millimeter]. I started out in 16, duplicating, adding more material, duplicating, adding more material until it seemed that you could still recognize a lot of what was there, but the dominance of any one image was starting to disappear.

COLLINGS: Yes. This is the film *Let's Make a Sandwich*?

O'NEILL: Right. Yes. I used that as the title because it sort of talks to what it is you're actually doing with your printer; you're sandwiching pieces of film together.

COLLINGS: You said somewhere that that was one of your favorite films.

O'NEILL: Yes. I guess it's because the concept is so tight, in a way. It seems to be sort of mysterious to me because while it's completely without any kind of continuity, it sort of revealed itself with repeated viewing. I decided not to make it a conventional film that starts and stops in a fixed place, but to make it so that it was on a loop projector, which was an established technique at the time. People used the loops to present material and conventions and so on. It's curious, everything we use was developed by some other institution for some other purpose, usually commercial or military or whatever.

So I made it. It turned out to be twenty minutes long. It's a series of repetitions, more or less, of the same core imagery with changes in emphasis. One cycle is a two-minute piece. There's, I think, seven two-minute pieces. They're designed so that the last scene cuts to the first scene and then goes on. We put it in a room at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, LACE, in its first home on Broadway downtown. I guess it was the— Not the whole floor, but a good-sized chunk of one floor of a building that was blacked-out with curtains. Had a rear projection screen hanging in the middle of the room. This image played, played for a week, and people would come in and you could walk all the way around the screen, so it was sort of a physical object that could be seen from either side. On occasion, some musicians came and brought instruments and improvised to it. There was also the noise from the

street. It was just up above Broadway, so there was always traffic going. I began to realize that the soundtrack was generating itself all the time. There was always something. So it was kind of like just a different way to see a time-based piece. It was not noted much at the time, I don't think, really.

COLLINGS: And you do use a lot of footage from these training films. Right?

O'NEILL: Training films, stuff that I shot, some advertisements. In the course of making the film, I decided not to just have it be completely scrambled and remade material, but also to show the sources. So there would be sections in between these two-minute pieces where you'd see short glimpses of the things that it was made from. So then sometimes that led you to recognize the pieces later on. There's a lot of precedence for it. It's sort of film looking at itself in a way. It also kind of touches the idea of the disappearance of images of what something looks like as it just becomes— Just goes away.

COLLINGS: Doesn't it also sort of deal with some economic questions, too, about producing goods that—

O'NEILL: Well, that's more in *Trouble in the Image*. There's a track in there that—

COLLINGS: I thought there was something of that in *Let's Make a Sandwich*, as well.

O'NEILL: I'm trying to remember.

COLLINGS: If you don't think that's—

O'NEILL: No. There did turn out to be an image that, for whatever reason, remained dominant, and it was an animation of a lying— A side view of a figure lying down. It was a training film for artificial respiration and it basically shows the trachea and the

lungs and so forth. So you have this face which wound up being more or less in charge of a lot of the shots. You can see this guy's face. It became sort of like symbolic, in a way, of someone who's a dreamer perhaps, or someone undergoing an operation.

I had a woman working for me who was a very interesting filmmaker, name of Daina Krumins. She had been a student of mine at CalArts and a very adept printer operator. So she worked for me during, must have been '76, '77, '78, somewhere in there. She was so patient at doing sort of minimal physical tasks, that I gave her the job of taking this composite shape that I had made, projecting it through the animation camera, which is called rotoscoping, and making a pencil drawing of each frame.

I remember now, this was 1980, and I was in a position where we were doing a lot of work on our house. Bev and I were living in the garage while the work was going on, so there was not much space to work. One had to sort of work small. So a whole winter, I had Daina draw these frames. Then I would take them one by one, using watercolors, and I would go back, using the pencil outline as a guide, and make these kind of very rough paintings over them and then re-photograph those, and that became another section of that *Let's Make a Sandwich.*

COLLINGS: So is this the first time that you started doing this kind of drawing and painting work in your films?

O'NEILL: No. I'd done other animated stuff back—

COLLINGS: Because I'm just sort of wondering when it sort of expands out to become the other—

O'NEILL: The printwork?

COLLINGS: Yes. Exactly.

O'NEILL: Well, that vein was kind of always there, because I started out working in the darkroom making some single images. I had a darkroom at home for a while, but I didn't really— It was a facility that I had set up to do simple tasks for clients and so on, positioning titles and stuff like that. But, yes, I guess this was the first one that had a large handmade segment. Unfortunately, it suffered a bit technically and it doesn't look as good as it could. A lot of the drawn and painted stuff was shot 35 [millimeter]. So I have an original of it that's a lot better than the reduction that's in the— So it's a little bit obscure, which it shouldn't be.

I guess after that, I would continuously doing things on the animation stand in odd moments, and a lot of that appeared in *Trouble in the Image*. A good part of that I owe to a student, one of the first students that I had at CalArts, Adam Beckett. Beckett and Krumins were in the same class that opened the school in '70. Adam was a prolific animator who would draw hundreds of drawings a day. He was very energetic. One of the things that he had learned to do, I don't know whether on his own or somebody assigned it as a project, but he would make a cycle of drawings that would have— His drawings were vaguely anthropomorphic and vaguely organic curvilinear forms that metamorphosed. They were drawn straightforward, rather than being made as animated cycles, so he would just start with the first drawing and go to the second drawing and the third drawing. You're tracing, laying drawings over, you see what's underneath and how fast it's moving. The thing that he did that blew everybody away was that when he got to a certain place in his drawings, maybe, say, a hundred drawings up, he would then take the first drawing and continue that last frame

onto the first and go through the set again and repeat that over and over again until the whole screen was filled with movement. So he did a number of pieces like that.

I started doing the same thing, working with a simple animation stand with a bottom light that shines light through the paper. I'd draw a cycle, and then I would put film in the camera and shoot it and then draw another cycle and shoot it. Using the bottom light method, I could have as many as five levels of bond paper. It gave the whole thing a very sort of yellowish sort of mottled quality, gave it a sort of a lot of gradation, which people can't quite figure out how that happened. That was kind of going forward. I would just make a piece of animation and put it away and wait to see what it might have added to it.

I also shot some stuff in conventional animation cycles. There's a picture of a coil spring, like a mattress spring that's going up and down. That was added to the background of the other image.

COLLINGS: Okay. Let's take a break.

[tape recorder turned off]

O'NEILL: 1978 or so, I wanted to make a longer piece of some kind, because I realized that I needed to deal with a bigger chunk of time to sort of get out of the category of a short film. I guess you kind of realize that you make short films and they wind up being packaged with other short films, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Maybe you need a little more time to kind of have the scope to be a little bit more effective to an audience. I think it gives people time to kind of get into it.

COLLINGS: And you also made the decision to work in 35-millimeter, right?

O'NEILL: Right. That sort of came about through gradually having access to 35 [millimeter] equipment and buying a camera. Well, I bought the camera for the piece. I figured, well, if we're going to go to all the trouble of building a system to move the camera, we might as well have the best reproduction I can get. So it had to be 35.

COLLINGS: Do you think if you hadn't been doing the commercial work, you would have even considered working in 35?

O'NEILL: No, probably not. It's hard to say. Yes, in the industry, at that time at least, 35 was sort of the standard medium, especially for any kind of effects work. I knew I was going to combine these shots, so I had to have material that would stand up. I had been working for ten years in reversal color, which was very convenient; Ektachrome. You could shoot with it and you could look at the original and inspect it and then re-photograph it with the same material. Well, it really isn't that sharp, and it isn't really that— It's easy to use, but it has its limits, and I realized I had pretty much exhausted that. I could see that there were nuances, there was an explicit level of detail that I just wasn't getting, so I had to change. And, you know, living in Hollywood, the cost was— Well, there were several factors. One of them was that I would be doing jobs almost every day at the lab. You rely on the lab that does your processing, that makes your prints. In order to make a profit, they have to have a minimum charge for each event that they do, but up to a certain point, you can add material to the minimum and it's free.

COLLINGS: That's great.

O'NEILL: So that became a factor, because my jobs would go in with some other jobs. Also you could buy the short ends of camera stock from resellers that took

leftover material from reductions, so the cost got kind of halved that way. Then I had the equipment. So I kind of figured if I had a projector, a 35-millimeter upright Moviola editor, and I was set to do that. I got a flatbed later, but that wasn't until about '86.

So I knew I wanted to do a long piece, and I'd been doing time-lapse long enough to know sort of how to do that and how to organize it as a sort of organic whole. Then working with the body, too, which I hadn't really mentioned, working with the figure of a person over time, sort of like— Well, this goes way back to early photography, where you realize that if you move during the time the shutter's open, that your image either disappears or streaks. It changes, depending on what you're shooting it with. That seemed interesting, that and thinking about Francis Bacon, the painter who painted figures that were very distorted, seemingly through photographic means and then way beyond in painting. I was interested in putting these sort of— They're much more figures than they are actors, and their identity is pretty much obscured.

I got into working with a few people that— I realized that if you could train someone to move, to make a body movement and make it quite accurately over and over again, frame by frame, you would have a figure that stayed in place but that would modify with time. So that became interesting. That was why I wanted to be able to shoot actors, which ultimately often turned out to be myself in a black room with fixed light.

COLLINGS: So how many people did you use in that film?

O'NEILL: In that film, well, all friends, all the people that I could shanghai for a day or so. I don't know, there might be twenty people or so. There was one guy I knew because he was working for me. He sought work as a gardener. Joel Alarma worked for me in the garden. He's an interesting guy. He has a graduate degree from Claremont and, I don't know, went through some troubles in his life that he never was very specific about, but he wound up being sort of a casual laborer. He had very good concentration, and he just picked up this technique immediately, so he's in the film in quite a few places.

The process got to be sort of one of learning how to make a move and then repeat it, but then as you repeated it, you began to modify it very, very slowly. So then knowing that it takes twenty-four frames for every second, and you know that maybe he was going to take ten seconds, so you know it's like two hundred and forty moves, and we'd have a timer that would show a number. We'd say, well, we want to extend laterally for the beginning and then gradually turn around and do something horizontally. He was very good at doing that. There were a few other people . I have worked with a dancer by the name of Judy Leaf. Beth Block and George Lockwood were a couple at the time, and they're both in the film. George is in all of my films. George was working for me as a printer operator, and Beth also, Beth started working for me in the seventies, I believe. They're both in the film. Anyway, a number of times there was people that just happened to have a few days off and would do something.

COLLINGS: And when you would shoot this stuff, did you know for sure you were going to be using it in the film, or were you just kind of feeling your way?

O'NEILL: Well, generally I would go out and I'd make the background and I'd figure out the geometry of the shot, so I'd know at least that I had a place for the figure to go, I'd know how far above the ground or below the ground they were looking. But it was always just feeling your way, you know. Sometimes you'd make something that wouldn't work for that shot, but you could make another background that would make it work. I finished the film thinking there were so many more possibilities that could be pursued, and I just didn't have the time to go on with it.

There's one shot in the middle of *Water and Power* that goes up a street, over a sort of commercial environment, and gradually comes to— I knew where the sun was going to set and when it was going to set, so I made the shot so that it came to rest just as the sun went down. Then I knew that I wanted to— As it was going up that street, I wanted it to go past various people doing various activities. The one I used was a friend sitting at quite close range, so it would be about as far as we are, eating, eating and talking. Basically, he came over, I bought some chicken, and he ate the chicken and I made the shot. It's often as simple as that.

COLLINGS: Where does the title come from? How did you arrive at the title?

O'NEILL: Well, *Water and Power*—

COLLINGS: Did you know it was going to be *Water and Power* before you started?

O'NEILL: No, no, no. That came out of being sort of immersed in Owens Valley politics, the Department of Water and Power that owned the Owens Valley and all that land up there. The other thing was, what I found really interesting is that a lot of the film is about water, water in various states, lagoons and seabirds and water courses that are dry, and of course, Owens Lake, where the water is very [inaudible].

COLLINGS: So that's kind of like frozen time, when you have—

O'NEILL: Yes, thinking about water in all of its states, from snow to vapor, and power, which is everything. It's the electricity that makes it possible to make the film, and it's the power of one region over another to change its destiny and so forth. It's funny, when I was getting the film timed at the lab, at Deluxe General, the timer was very taciturn, as timers tend to be. Those are the people that do the color and exposure, shot by shot. They tend to be very—

COLLINGS: They've seen it all.

O'NEILL: Yes, and they don't want to talk about what they think of it. But after it was over, he said, "Will the Department [of Water and Power] pay for this?" I said no. It just seemed—

COLLINGS: The Department of Water and Power.

O'NEILL: Yes. Yes, because it doesn't have anything to do with that. It's hard to title things, and often titles—I can't remember, but I'm sure that wasn't the first title I came up with. It just had a simplicity, a sort of recognizability.

COLLINGS: The film was really well received, wasn't it?

O'NEILL: It was. It was quite well received.

COLLINGS: Were you surprised?

O'NEILL: Well, I knew I had gotten into some unfamiliar territory. I first showed it at an event that was held in Toronto in 1988, '89, called Experimental Film Congress. It was sort of a last such event. There had been others that had happened in—

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O'NEILL: —Toronto in the summer of '89. It was sort of a wonderful coming together of many experimental filmmakers, although some people boycotted it because they thought it was— There were some political problems about how it was organized. But many people were there, and we showed it and it was well received. I met Stan Brakhage at that event, for the first time. I've always been sort of—

COLLINGS: That must have been exciting.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, and we had a long talk. I don't think Ken Jacobs was there, but the film was shown at the New York Film Festival, and Ken Jacobs saw it there. He was interested in it, so he arranged some screenings around New York.

Alf Bowel from the Berlin Film Festival was at that event and picked it up for Berlin. Of course, I had never been to the Berlin Film Festival, and I went there with great expectations. They put me up in a little hotel, and I'm in this hotel, and across the street from the hotel there was one of the theaters that the festival used. I think it was called the B____. That might not be it. But the workers were putting up a billboard for the festival. I looked at it and I saw there was something familiar about it, and I realized that they had made a billboard of a still from *Water and Power* that I'd sent them.

COLLINGS: Fantastic. Now, that's a real coup for an avant-garde filmmaker.

O'NEILL: I was amazed. I was amazed, yes. Well, Alf Bowel, who was the programmer for a theater called the Arsenal was a great force in finding experimental

work. It's curious, because the last film I had I thought would be a natural to show in Berlin.

COLLINGS: *Decay of Fiction.*

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, Alf Bowel in the meantime had passed away, and the festival was just not interested.

COLLINGS: In avant-garde work at all?

O'NEILL: Well, no, they do. They just weren't interested in my film. It was sort of like it all had been forgotten. But anyway, I do have a videotape of the workers putting up the billboard which I'm going to resurrect and send a copy off to the festival.

COLLINGS: What image is it from the film, do you remember?

O'NEILL: It's the same one they used on posters. It's a clock face. It's the shot of the clock that's being operated by [inaudible] figures. I've got some in the other room. Yes, it's this big clock face.

COLLINGS: Now, why does the character in the, you might call it, pre-title sequence jump off the bridge, or do they?

O'NEILL: Uh-huh. Well, that sort of set— That was a shot that I— I came across this bridge, to begin with. The bridge is a wooden bridge, I think, in the country, and it's up in northern California, and it ties two bluffs together. Under it, you look out at the sea. So I had a shot of the bridge, and it was so graphic and so simple that it needed— You could add animation to it.

COLLINGS: Is that bridge on the Coast Road up there?

O'NEILL: Yes, it's on Highway 1.

COLLINGS: Yes, I've seen it. Yes.

O'NEILL: I think it's Elk, the little town of Elk. In the little valley down below it, there's a river that comes out, and there's a fishing camp.

COLLINGS: Yes. I think I've been close to that bridge, even. Maybe not the same one.

O'NEILL: Probably so, yes.

COLLINGS: I think it's on Highway 1, yes.

O'NEILL: Yes. So anyway, the notion of the guy jumping off a bridge so peacefully was sort of like trying to make a statement about what it is like to make this film, that it's like— It was coming out of the sort of end of art and sort of whole discussion about the impossibility of making an original work of art, that my feeling was that, in a way, it's only after you give up the idea of thinking about that and you just give up and fall to earth, then maybe the possibility is that you'll actually do it, or it really doesn't matter whether you did it or not.

COLLINGS: And had you given up that idea?

O'NEILL: No. I was eagerly doing this. This was sort of after the period of structuralism in film where people had become increasingly intensely self-referential, to the point where— I mean not the artist, but the notion of referring only to the medium of film and nothing outside it, which was a fascinating idea and rapidly ate up its own resources, in a way, because there was really only so many ways you could look at the medium without having there be a subject matter behind it. I'm saying, no, I want to do the subject matter, but I don't want to do the subject matter in a way that

has a formula to it. In a sense, "Abandon hope, ye who enter here." It's a kind of yielding, I guess, of intention.

I made the scene— I didn't have at the beginning, until somewhere in the cut, I realized, oh, this is really sort of a preface, in a way. It's not a conclusion; it's a preface. So one might take everything that follows it as a flashback, maybe, or maybe it refers to the end of something that went before and that no longer is.

COLLINGS: What is the last shot?

O'NEILL: The last shot is an interior with a campfire burning in front of a wall. The end of the film is weak. I sort of knew that within about the first year, that the film gets depressing and slow towards the end. I wouldn't have done that again. I would have added other material. The film is vibrant for the first third, then it kind of tapers off, so it really doesn't— It's a little painful at the end. It just kind of grinds to a halt.

COLLINGS: Well, to me it just sort of seems like the energy of the beginning has to do with the dynamic of the struggle over nature, taming nature, which has its gory and its dark side. They're kind of there, and then as you go further along in the film, things just get more complicated and things just get muddier and more complicated. The problems to be addressed are—

O'NEILL: Confusion sets in.

COLLINGS: Yes. It's not just about whether it's glorious to conquer nature or whether it's not, and we should be more harmonious with nature, but it just becomes the life of the city and the interactions between people, and it all just kind of devolves into something that's hard to map out.

O'NEILL: Yes. I would have liked to have made another piece, but I haven't thought about what it would be exactly, because it— Yes, there is one piece that's very near the end, but it just sort of floats there. It's a rapidly moving camera over an urban environment, which is actually shot off of Twin Peaks in San Francisco that's accompanied with— Is there a voice? Yes, there's a voice. I was taking material from a feature even there. God, I can't even remember what it was. But it was a very rapidly moving camera, sort of moving in a rectangle so it never moves outside of its own orbit but gets closer, gets further away. There's this discussion about a shooting and a woman who is hiding in her apartment, essentially, and some mysterious character that is taking some files to the airport, sort of making all this textual adventure that never really goes anywhere.

That's often the problem, I find. *Decay of Fiction* is the same thing. If you can't really give people fragments of drama unless they're sort of prepared for the fracturing. And it's a problem I've never really been able to solve because I haven't really had a dramatic film that I wanted to do, but I wanted it to have people in it and I wanted them to have lines.

COLLINGS: You do want them to have lines?

O'NEILL: Yes. I've given them lines.

COLLINGS: You write them?

O'NEILL: I've written them, yes, or adapted them. But I've always very consciously stopped short of developing the characters and developing a plot line. I've wanted it to be the way it is that you observe drama in your daily life, you overhear it, you see something that might mean something or somebody tells you a story, somebody

recounts their experience, but it's always somewhat out of context. I've always found that unless you've got an awfully story to tell and awfully good actors, that the way I watch films is often looking past the actors at the background or looking at them physically and not really paying complete attention to the consequences of their action. So I tend to make films that way.

When I was making *Decay*, it was sort of like I was constantly having to explain this to the actors. I don't think anybody ever really figured it out. They just sort of indulged me, I guess, ultimately saying, "Well, okay. I don't know who I am or where I came from or anything."

And I'd say, "Well, all right. I'll go make up who you are," and I did. But they were frustrated, and in a way, the audience is frustrated, too. It's just kind of an open question.

COLLINGS: But they knew they were supposed to be using these very iconic forties performances, right?

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, and we were costuming them more or less appropriately. I was showing them stuff, some of the source material. Of course, the acting was so technical because we had to do these shots that had required all this setup, which actors are used to, of course, but it led me to think that I— I enjoy working with some of these people, and I thought, god, it would be interesting to jump into the story. But then I think, ah, that's another realm. It's like there's a lot of people doing that and some people pretty good at it. I don't know if I can do that. I think I'm doing this other thing that kind of refers to acting and is centered on human activity, but it's not the center of it. Normally we think of the action as being the core of the piece and the

settings and the sort of asides as being in the background. I was trying to invert that and saying, well, this is basically this sort of move through an empty building in which we're going to encounter people. They're going to say things that have something to do with people in other shots, but it'll be pretty vague. A few people got into it, but for the most part, critics would sort of say, "Yeah, but."

COLLINGS: Well, I think one of the fascinating things about it is that you're playing off of these 1940s performances and films which are very formulaic in their own construction, so that precisely it is possible to take a little fragment from this and a little fragment from that and put them all together and have something that matches up a bit. I mean, you've got all of this—

O'NEILL: Right. Right. You've got all the expectations that are built up from—

COLLINGS: Yes. And then those performances and those presentations from these studio films of the forties, with their very predictable and highly structured plots, resonate so strongly, continue to resonate so strongly, that you can even have these performers as ghost images, and you can fracture the story to such a degree, and yet this affect comes through regardless. That's something that I felt was really compelling about the film.

O'NEILL: You put it much better than I do. [mutual laughter] Yes, yes. Well, if you think about fracturing the image in *Let's Make a Sandwich* as being parallel to fracturing the performance in this film, it may make some sense. I found a certain challenge in trying to do that, in trying to expand the scope of my own work to include something that was that unfamiliar and, at the same time, that familiar to audiences, everybody that goes to movies, so that it would sort of trigger all of these other movies

that one had seen. It's amazing how you run across fans in shows that know exactly what everything was and who the actors were. I credited all the actors at the end.

COLLINGS: Yes, Dana Andrews and—

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: You mean the scenes from the other—

O'NEILL: Yes. I call them quotes, because I wanted to acknowledge the performers even though they're invisible.

COLLINGS: Right. I know, but they're so—

O'NEILL: They're like voiceovers for animation, I guess you'd say, yes.

COLLINGS: I think it's also interesting, too, because the RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] shooting is referred to in the film, and that makes a nice kind of temporal line between our present age and— I don't want to say a more innocent age, because I'm sure it wasn't, but those are sort of lines that divide eras, those kinds of [inaudible].

O'NEILL: Well, all of those assassinations, starting with John Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, that was sort of the awful conclusion of the sixties, in a way. We realized that forces were at work. That assassination sort of locked itself onto that hotel to this day, not only the fact that it happened there but the fact that it was never resolved to everyone's satisfaction who did it. In fact, I read something just a couple of weeks ago, that the attorney for Sirhan Sirhan had indicated that he thought that there still might be evidence of the— You know the story about the missing— There was one more bullet than there were shots in the gun.

COLLINGS: Oh, I didn't know that.

O'NEILL: Yes. Sirhan Sirhan attacked Kennedy from the front with a .22-caliber pistol which held six shots. There was reporting going on in the next room, so they were recordings that heard the additional shot. There's also the fact that the shot that killed him came from behind. There's all these things. Thomas Noguchi, who was the coroner, testified that the shot probably did not come from the gun of the man who was accused of the killing.

George and I interviewed a man, when we were doing the interactive project about that, Boris Yarrow, who was a photographer who was standing right next to Kennedy when he was shot, said that he thought that Kennedy had stooped so far over that Sirhan could have shot him from behind. He thinks that that was how it happened. But the testimony was so diverse and there are so many different opinions about what had gone on— There was a sighting— Well, anyway, there's this huge— There have been like four books written about it. And I guess that was part of what drew me to working there, or to shooting at the hotel, was that there was this ongoing mystery that had so many tentacles that went out in so many places.

I wasn't there at the hotel when it happened. I was at work and I had the radio on, so I heard it all as it went on, the sort of horror that, in fact, it seemed that with all these unsolved mysteries, that this country was seriously in the hands of somebody that we didn't know who he was. It had so many possibilities, from organized crime, from Cubans, from the Mafia, from right-wingers in the government who didn't like any of these people, the military, not to mention foreign military intrigue. There was a whole thing about Israeli security forces being involved, and the fact that Sirhan is a Palestinian, although he had been in this country since he was a child, but he'd grown

up in a Palestinian household and his own experiences growing up, where he had had an injury that had given him brain damage. He wanted to be a jockey, and he had fallen off a horse and had been unconscious for a time and had sort of paranormal experiences after that, which led to the notion that was explored by at least two of those writers, that he was working under hypnosis. There was serious evidence developed around that. He was examined by psychiatrists, and it became pretty clear that he wasn't completely in control of his thoughts.

COLLINGS: A Manchurian candidate.

O'NEILL: Exactly. Then you sort of cross that with film noir and its fascination—

COLLINGS: Right. Exactly. Which is all about gangs and—

O'NEILL: Well, more than that, it's about mental illness and it's about dread. One of the stories that I sort of stole from and reenacted a portion of is a Joan Crawford piece called—

COLLINGS: *Stella Dallas*?

O'NEILL: No, no. Actually there's two pieces. One of them is *Possessed*, but the other title I'm not getting right now. Anyway, it's about a woman who imagines that she's committed the crime of drowning a woman.

COLLINGS: Oh, yes. I've seen this. I don't remember what it's called, either.

O'NEILL: I knew it like the back of my hand, but at the moment I can't think of it. Anyway, that was interesting because she goes through all this dialogue where she is describing what it is she thinks she's done, and her foil, her husband, is telling her no, it's a dream. Then she'll seem to realize that, and then a few scenes later on she's back into that again. She's saying, "No, I did it. I know I did it." Then I think about

my own childhood and thinking about mystery. I was fascinated with radio shows that dealt with the occult, *Shandu the Magician.*

COLLINGS: Yes, Chick [Strand] talks about him.

O'NEILL: Does he?

COLLINGS: Yes.

O'NEILL: It has to do with Egypt and it has to do with mummies.

COLLINGS: I think that's where Nadia got her nickname, from the Bruce Baillie and it had something like that.

O'NEILL: Oh, I didn't realize that.

COLLINGS: I might not be recounting it accurately, but it's something like that.

O'NEILL: I know she named herself after a character somewhere, yes.

So, anyway, all of these things seemed to me to be kind of embodied in this empty building, which had this patina of all of these people that had stayed there and had created stories around their being there. It had this kind of sense of loss to it. I guess what I was trying to do was somehow to make the situation of this building stand for a wider cultural phenomena that, well, the notion of the decay of fiction, the inability to tell the story anymore, in a way, as the building is decaying, that the sort of mind that had invented it is maybe decaying, became sort of fascinating.

COLLINGS: And these very clear-cut forties stories can no longer be told. They have to be examined from so many points of view.

O'NEILL: Yes, maybe that, or maybe we've evolved beyond these stories. I don't know. It's kind of having this very ambivalent view about the movie industry and its power, its power to shape our imagination. I mean, we pick the stars, and the stars are

sponsored because they represent something that we aspire to. I'm kind of looking at it retrospectively of saying, well, if there was this period where this power was so concentrated and now it's not— Well, it maybe goes on, but I think it's just a matter of being naïve that I tend to think of it in the past.

COLLINGS: But there are all of these stories about ghosts at the Ambassador Hotel. Isn't there supposed to be the ghost of Marilyn Monroe? A ghost of somebody that stayed there.

O'NEILL: I never really had anybody tell me a specific ghost story, but I will say that if you spend the night there, your imagination starts [inaudible].

COLLINGS: And you did spend the night there doing some of these shots?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, often we had to— Well, not often. We'd have a camera set up and it needed to start shooting before dawn, for instance, so somebody had to be there. There were other people there. There were things going on there all the time that often we didn't know what was going on, but the police were training there, for one thing. George had an episode where he arrived there before dawn to start a shot, and he opened the room where we had the camera sitting up looking out a window, and as he walked in the room, he heard somebody click a gun. He looked around and there were two SWAT team guys standing there. They were waiting for some strategic thing to happen, and they didn't realize that we were working there.

COLLINGS: They were doing some sort of like house-to-house [inaudible]?

O'NEILL: Yes, they were doing something. Sometimes they were actually firing— They would fire live rounds, but they were firing shots off. The place was guarded,

but there were so many rooms that somebody could hide in them easily. Somebody broke in at one point and stole some chandeliers while we were working there.

COLLINGS: Those must have been kind of heavy, sort of big to stick in your pocket.

O'NEILL: Yes. They got up on a ladder, and they brought them down from the ceiling, and they were going out through some of the tunnel entrances, and apparently left chunks of them all over the place. They were caught later.

COLLINGS: It's just so amazing to think of that building sitting there and all of these very persistent, rapid-fire-talking, forties ghosts sort of marching around. [laughs] I think it's a really nice conceit.

O'NEILL: The spirit of J. Edgar Hoover, who was a regular there. We met a woman after the shot— Have we talked about the interactive project at all?

COLLINGS: No. I was going to ask you.

O'NEILL: Well, I had the background shot and I was just about to start doing the action, and I got to talking with Marsha Kinder, who's an old friend and who's head of Cinema at [U]SC, head of critical studies at SC. She had a project going at the Annenberg Center to work with people who worked in other media. The first one was a writer, John Richie, and the second was a filmmaker, Nina Menkes, and mine was the third, to work with people who were not customarily working with computers but they had a practice that could accommodate that technique. So since I had made something entirely shot with a computer and with motion control and had all these matching pieces—would have—that it would be a natural to present it as a database rather than as a continuity. It seemed like a sort of natural branch that would lead to two pieces. We got to talking about what it might be, and it seemed like rather than

try to make a dramatic network of pieces, since I hadn't really done that, that what we wanted to do was to sort of infuse stuff from the real world into this storytelling so that we could get more of a history of the hotel and more stories that weren't part of the film.

So we interviewed people. We interviewed Boris Yarrow, the photographer, and we interview some architectural historians about the significance of the building. We interviewed an interesting woman who— I think her last name was— Damn, I have to look that up. But anyway, she was a woman who her father had been the manager of the hotel from when it opened until 1936, I think, so she'd grown up there in one of the bungalows that we'd shot in. She told a lot of stories about her life as a sort of princess daughter of the management. I was heading somewhere with that, and I forgot what it was.

COLLINGS: With a story about her in particular?

O'NEILL: Gosh, I can't remember.

COLLINGS: You were talking about how you were bringing in all this historical stuff that is not in the film and provided with the film.

O'NEILL: Right. So anyway, yes, we began. We searched and we found some film resources, and we made this piece that's sort of a hybrid of documentary and fiction.

COLLINGS: Yes, it's great.

O'NEILL: We were able to make it possible to view the shots with or without the characters, so you could move through these spaces and you would learn how to navigate. There are multiple panels, there are twelve panels, that you could move from one to the next, and once you got in them, you could follow the movement of the

camera or you could stop. You could activate the characters and their lines or not. You could activate voices of people talking about the place, talking about the neighborhood, talking about L.A. development and what Wilshire Boulevard meant in the twenties and sort of bringing it up to the present, what that neighborhood is now. I went out with a videocamera and shot in the neighborhood for a few days, just shooting what it's like to live near this place. So it then becomes a sort of capsule of the place as of 19— Well, the piece was finished in 2002.

COLLINGS: The music that goes with that is wonderful. It was set up at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, as you well know. There's some very haunting musical refrains.

O'NEILL: Yes. All of them came from libraries of early film. The installation is sort of worth mentioning. At some point along the line— This was originally intended to be one computer and one person navigating and watching on the monitor, but we set it up at one point where we had three of them in rhythm together projecting on a wall and realized that the three together would make this one very wide-screen movie that had all this unpredictability of where each one would be and how people would choose to play it. It's curious, at the Santa Monica Museum, I think people mostly just kind of looked in for a little piece and went on. In Rotterdam it was set up all by itself in a kind of big empty room, and we got a lot of players on that one, people who would come back and bring friends. There's a lot of material there. Maybe it would take an hour to just see it all at once.

These computer projects are so dependent on the equipment that one has that I don't know that it'll ever be widely seen, because, well, as we were making it, we had

a boon in that originally it was going to be made on a CD-ROM, which is a very small platform compared to the DVD. The DVD became available about halfway through production, so Christy King and Rosemary Connela had to go back— Rosemary was the principal programmer and she was the one who has the knowledge to put all the data behind the scenes that activates everything.

COLLINGS: And it's available for sale, right?

O'NEILL: It is available. I don't know if they've sold all that many. The problem is that it's so demanding of memory space in a computer and of the computer being exactly the right vintage.

COLLINGS: Even the DVD is?

O'NEILL: Yes. It's a DVD-ROM. It's a data DVD, so you can't play it on a DVD player. I don't know how many people have had a satisfactory experience of loading it on their hard drive and being able to operate it. I know that the computer I had at the time wouldn't play it, and I finally upgraded it.

COLLINGS: Well, this is a problem.

O'NEILL: Yes. It's a bigger problem with computer-based art forms, which wind up having to be retranslated as changes get made in the environment. So it was a project that was very interesting to work on, because problems were being solved that I had no idea— I was completely in their hands. I provided the material and I would— We worked on it for three years plus. You'd have an idea and you'd approximate the idea, and then in order to get a little closer to the idea, you might have to go back and rewrite a lot. It was very slow.

My favorite part of the whole piece was a request on my part, to say, all right, we have all this material stored in here. We have backgrounds in color, we have foreground people in black and white, we have documentary stuff that we brought in from the past, and we have all of the soundtracks that are possible. Now, what I want to do is that I want to go in and seek out, at random, sections from all of these and combine them live so that— I determined that I wanted them to all be a second and a half long.

Rosemary scratched her head for a good long time about this, and she finally came up with a thing that— We used the device of the earthquake. It would be sort of like, as you're looking at the piece, wherever you happened to be when this thing triggered, you would do a little jiggle and then you'd start getting this scramble going on, and you'd get background, foreground, sound, and then cut to another step. So we were always combining things in ways that you never saw before and you'd never see again. It works pretty well. To me, it's the most— I would just sort of sit and keep pushing the button, doing that. I want to generate another project that way, but I haven't come up with what it will be yet. I have these wonderful workers who are subsidized to be there and do projects.

COLLINGS: At USC?

O'NEILL: At Annenberg. It's curious, Annenberg, they haven't initiated— Well, that's not true, they have initiated some new projects, but all the institutional ones that have funding, they haven't brought another artist in. The most recent one was Peter Forgach, who had the Danube River project that was shown at the Getty.

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COLLINGS: The other thing that we haven't talked about is *Trouble in the Image*, which is sandwiched between—

O'NEILL: Yes.

COLLINGS: How does that fit into all of this?

O'NEILL: *Trouble in the Image* was the result of my doing a lot of short pieces of film without a particular setting originally for them, some of the animated cycle things that we talked about earlier. There were bits of found footage, a nitrate print that a friend of mine in Florida sent me, and it was disintegrating in the box by the time I got it. It was a Western from 1935.

COLLINGS: With all those flares.

O'NEILL: Yes. There were some wonderful shots of horses with the emulsion basically just flaking off. I should have probably been more frightened of the nitrate than I was, but I haven't had a nitrate fire.

So, some of the stuff had been started as kind of the preliminary to doing some other project that didn't happen. Other shots were things that originally were going to be included in *Water and Power* and got cut out. So it was a various mix of stuff. It was kind of a question of— Well, this would have been about '95. We'd only shot the backgrounds at the hotel, but I was just in the process of writing a grant to try to continue. I was writing a grant for Rockefeller [Foundation], and I realized I wasn't going to be able to shoot the actors for a while until I recouped some money. So I

started thinking about finishing this other project and what one could do with a bunch of work that was all done by my own hand but at different times. I started rereading John Cage's *Indeterminacy* and thinking about chance process and how one might assemble these according to some process that was not predetermined. And I got into thinking about what Bill was doing with Fischinger films and thinking about curating somebody else's work and what the difference would be in curating your own work as though it didn't belong to you, that you were just basically to display it, and kind of like setting up a kind of mock environment where A is compared to B and B is compared to C. I always seem to wind up thinking about things in triads, groups of three, because they seem to always have a kind of stability when you have three things that are all different from one another and then you have another three things that are all different from one another but they have some similarity to the last group. Pairs don't seem to do it as well. Then you get above three, and it gets to be sort of too many. Maybe that's why three is so important in Christianity and so forth. So, anyway, I sort of settled on three, groups of three, and using a random table to assemble them.

COLLINGS: You did use a random table?

O'NEILL: Yes. I made up my own. What did I do? I had a bunch of white poker chips and I numbered them, and then I'd put them in a can and shake and throw them out one by one. I assembled the film that way.

COLLINGS: Sort of the I Ching of filmmaking.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. I don't know. It's just to sort of try to overcome your own preconceptions about how things should be, I guess. But I didn't feel constrained by it. When things seemed to be really unpleasant, I would go back and change it.

I had a lot of material. I had about a hundred and fifty shots and began putting them together and also at the same time finishing a few new things that would complete some of the groups. Let me think now. This would be '95. I'm working with George on the sound. George and I did the sound for *Water and Power* first, and then we got into doing this one. I was foraging through archives and providing him with a lot— No, actually what I was doing with this was I was cutting the film on a flatbed. I had bought a flatbed from a friend. I transferred a lot of sound to 35-millimeter mag, which was very expensive but that seemed like the way to do it, a lot of soundtracks transferred from tapes of features and from everywhere, stuff off the radio, some library stuff, and matching up dialogue with pictures

It's funny, there was one thing that was included. Bruce Conner sent me, out of the blue, a package that had a film in it. We've occasionally traded things. This was a man talking about animal psychology. He was talking about training. He tells a story about a dog. When he was a child he had a dog that wouldn't let them go near the water. As soon as they'd go in the water, the dog would come and try to pull them out. So that image of that man, who basically is a talking head, became a part of the composite.

I had done a fair amount of shooting down at Salton Sea at a place called Bombay Beach. Bombay Beach is a trailer park on the east shore of the Salton Sea, which is a big salty lake in the desert. A number of photographers had represented

this place. Richard Mizerak is one. That one on the wall is from there. It's a curious environment, where a lake had begun to rise. It periodically rises and falls. It had come up about two feet and then taken back a lot of land that had been populated. A lot of people left trailers and houses behind and moved to higher ground. So there's this very dystopic kind of environment of buildings that were disappearing into the salt water. I found that pretty fascinating. I guess this was early ninety— I'd be down there sometimes in the area, shooting skies for stock footage, and I started shooting this place.

It was a curious place. They built a dike, a retaining wall to keep the water from going any further inland, but they just left all the town that was outside of it, almost as a kind of curio. It could have very easily destroyed it, but somehow it was just there and still is, as far as I know. So there's number of shots of that environment that we got in the film. There was a number of shots of the sets for a commercial. A friend of mine worked on the project. I was able to get in and shoot behind the scenes people working in an environment of a cave, the interior of a huge cave like the Carlsbad Caverns, all sorts of geology, a beautifully made set entirely of foam and wood. I was able to shoot behind the scenes where they were actually shooting and then, the following week, to shoot a crew destroying the set, which project was never really finished because somebody in one of the trade, craft, unions objected to my being there. So I had to leave before we got the room completely cleared. It seemed like another sort of metaphor for kind of wasted motion, in a way. The commercial was made and aired and vanished.

COLLINGS: What was it a commercial for, do you know?

O'NEILL: It was a very expensive Intel commercial that involved— I never actually saw it finished, but it apparently involved an extraterrestrial landing. It was in a cave environment. I assume it was someone bringing in the— I think it was when the Pentium was first announced, and I believe they showed it at conventions. The destruction was very low-tech. It was basically a bunch of guys with hammers and [inaudible].

COLLINGS: Right, just knocking away at it.

O'NEILL: Right. And that was sort of the crux of the dispute, was that whoever the contractor was that was doing that didn't want his workers identified, even though they're pretty [inaudible].

COLLINGS: Yes. I don't think you could identify them. Okay. Whatever.

O'NEILL: They figured there was something going on. So that was the level of it.

There was a number of shots from rotoscope drawings made from a police TV series called *Police*, I think. It was one of the Steve Bochco shows. It was an early [inaudible]. It was shot in 35, and I was able to buy some prints of it, quite good-quality 35 prints, looking around for action on film that could be retranslated into drawings. So one of those episodes became a number of the drawings. Often it's interrogation sequences, and it's police operative things. There's a stickup. There's a guy pulling his mask off.

I had several people working for me. Christine Critter was one; she's an artist. Audrey Phillips was another. Nancy Oppenheim was one. I had enough work going through that I could afford to keep these people on payroll to draw frame by frame, to say, "All right. All I want from the shot is the outline of the man's head and a little bit

of the table." Or sometimes I would say that "I deliberately don't want continuity. I want you to go in and just trace the sticks of the background and then on the next frame just go in and trace them again but don't worry about making it match."

COLLINGS: So this is an absolutely fantastic example of the commercial industry work supporting artwork.

O'NEILL: Yes, the fact that the people were there and the people know how to do it. By that time I could process 35-millimeter film. I bought a film processor from John Whitney that he had bought new in 1965 or something, a microfile processor called a ProStar, a wonderful little processing machine that you can operate in a closet. He bought it to do the mattes that made, I think, the film *Lapus*, one of his films. I bought it from him in about 1987 or so, something like that, and used it to do a whole lot of— All the matte work that's in *Decay of Fiction*, [inaudible].

COLLINGS: You also credit David [E.] James in that film.

O'NEILL: Yes, because David James gave me some film, some nitrate World War II military propaganda films that had apparently been in the basement of Occidental College and they were throwing them out. He got them and he gave them to me, so they provided some war material and some shots of refugees moving houses. It's hard to remember, really, but they were 16-millimeter films, I believe, [inaudible]. I'm just trying to think of what else was in that film. There's bits of action that I'm doing. Some of them started out as tests for *Water and Power* and can be interesting on their own. It was just kind of me experimenting using my own shape as a performing device and trying to figure out what— Well, I would do things like walking into a scene and then sort of slumping to the ground, doing that over and over again.

COLLINGS: The film seems almost like a stepping stone between *Water and Power* and *Decay of Fiction.*

O'NEILL: Yes, but it's the most thematically ruptured of all, in a way. Even *Water and Power* is a little bit thematically contained by the geography, to some extent. I did another little piece that never was quite finished. It was called *Sleeping Dogs Never Lie.* It was a series of very fractured shots that had kind of a little bit of a diary of a period, which I have always intended to extend but I never did.

Trouble in the Image started out being rejected from every festival I sent it to, and then a few people sort of got into it and people started asking for it, and it's had a life.

COLLINGS: How did you name the film?

O'NEILL: Well, it's funny, I originally had a different name, which in retrospect I like better. I'd given it a name that makes you think of something other than what it is. I called it *Lazy Susan Three* because of the threes and because of the lazy Susan, where you take your portions off. Well, that was something where Bev and I didn't agree. She said, "That's a terrible title. It just sounds like porn." [Collings laughs.] I thought, yes, it does sound like porn. She kind of threw me off stride. I got to thinking, well, maybe that's not a good title. I thought of this and that. It had several titles. In fact, it's curious, now I remember the film was finished originally with a different title, and I showed it a few times. Then I came back and I re-cut it, and I did a lot of changes to the soundtrack. It was kind of an expensive thing. George and I had not really communicated about the soundtrack. The film was so jarring and dissonant that it just flattened you against the back of your seat. I just said, "No, this

doesn't feel right." I went back and replaced about a third of the sound, basically mostly just simplifying it. At that point I was thinking about— I had a notion of the images being troublesome or being troubled. Well, that there were questions. The story about it is that a sound— It's fiction, but I made it up. Anyway, that the comment had come from someone who is fixing a problem with a soundtrack and says, "Well, the track is fine, but there's trouble in the image." So I called it that.

COLLINGS: I like the title because it seems to refer to what so much of the problem is in art and film, that the trouble is in the image. You don't know how much of the content you can or should accept at face value, how much of it is being quoted at you. You become engaged with certain content and yet you don't know if you're supposed to. There are so many levels at which one must evaluate the image.

O'NEILL: And of course, in the film, where it changes from shot to shot and you're left considering the transition, what that means, what the consequences are.

COLLINGS: Right. Yes. So I think it's quite a good title.

O'NEILL: Well, I'll have to name something else *Lazy Susan Three*. It's the lab. It's like you go to the counter and pick up your dailies and you ask for it by title. You hear what all the other titles are that are being asked for. You hear all these obscure porn titles.

COLLINGS: You'd have to hire somebody to go in and pick up the film for you, somebody standing on a corner, "Can you go in and pick up my film?" [laughs]

O'NEILL: So that's where that came from.

COLLINGS: Do you watch much TV?

O'NEILL: I've never been a big watcher, no, no. Much more now than I used to.

COLLINGS: Do you channel-surf, or do you tend to just watch one thing?

O'NEILL: Well, it's curious. I live with someone who is so knowledgeable about television and so involved with specific programs that she plans things out ahead of time, and I drop in and watch the things that I'm interested in. Now we follow a series that we're interested in, *Sopranos* and *Carnival.*

COLLINGS: But you're not one of those people who watch three or four shows simultaneously?

O'NEILL: No. It kind of looks like I am, but it's not something I do much.

COLLINGS: And do you like to listen to music, or do you tend to enjoy a quieter household?

O'NEILL: I tend not to listen to anything while I'm working, but I love lots of music. I listen in the car sometimes. I seem to need— I really like to work in silence. I think it seems to let more things come out.

COLLINGS: I'm sorry. What were you going to say?

O'NEILL: I have to make a little break.

[tape recorder off]

COLLINGS: I don't know if this is a question that you even want to respond to, but in your show catalog you say that film saved your life on several occasions. I thought that that was a pretty interesting comment. Do you remember saying that?

O'NEILL: I don't specifically.

COLLINGS: Okay. Well, then maybe it's not anything to pursue.

O'NEILL: Probably in the more general sense it was sort of saying that an art practice was what helped me through some pretty hard times, particular early on. As someone

who sort of developed this habit of existing in the imagination really early on, well, being an only kid was part of it and then somehow being kind of protected as a child. I did have friends, but I tended to have a lot of time by myself and I tended to read a lot.

I don't know if I told you about this before, but I would camp with my folks, with my uncles and so on. So you be in an unfamiliar environment and you'd walk around. I guess with most kids you'd be doing games of some kind or sports or something. I would tend o gravitate to places where the landscape could be doubled as a sort of miniature, particularly places where there was water standing and there was maybe earth, clay, sand. I'd start seeing it as if I were looking at a model. I could begin to act on it, like making a dam that went across a creek or something or a mockup in my own mind of something that's going on that I could effect. That became sort of an obsessive ritual in a way. I guess I would go off and do this for hours.

Even in the backyard of our house, I remember having a place where there was a lot of leftover construction sand, and I would model this into a landscape and spend an unusual amount of time doing this. So it kind of led into the idea of making a mock environment, which is what you're filming. There were times when— You know, I mean teenage years, you go through a lot of revelations, and I think I was really pretty freaked out for about ten years or so, just quite not knowing how to deal with my contemporaries. Maybe the fact that I did have this capacity to become completely involved in fiction— It's like being a writer, I guess. The familiarity of that became a sort of bulwark against this sort of terror and anxiety of confronting the real world. I

guess if you went a little further with that, you could go all the way into schizophrenia. That was what I meant by that. In a way, it's also this sort of story about the character that walks across the bridge, gets up and jumps off is jumping off into that space, that other place, which I guess everybody who does art has some version of it.

I wanted to mention another influence that I hadn't mentioned before. I just went to a show of his, I think since we talked last. Peter Hutton is a filmmaker who has worked with landscape in a way that was very influential to me, and I still think he's one of the most interesting filmmakers I know. He developed a practice— I think I saw his work first in about '72, and he had made two films then. He had been a merchant seaman and had done a lot of ocean travel, and he'd lived in San Francisco. He had a Bolex. He shot entirely in black and white with a fixed camera. He was a landscape photographer and one who was very sensitive to time and to seeing what was happening in a place and [inaudible], and very modest, in a way. He's an observer in the world, that works by himself. James Benning is another one who's also very productive.

Hutton's vision is just really remarkable. He goes on. He's still doing it. He showed me that you could cut a film without making it cinematic, in a sense. You could make a film that was made up of individual pieces which were separate from one another, but that were strung together in a sequence that had meaning, but the shot didn't have to have consequence built into the cut. After I saw him doing it, I started doing it and various other filmmakers—Louis Hocks is another one—who work with motion and time, but not with dynamic entity. It's kind of like taking one, two out of that mix and saying—

COLLINGS: One and one.

O'NEILL: Yes, you just do the one thing. It was also connected with the idea of doing one thing as a loop that goes on and on and on. That's one kind of content. Another might be that it's like a collection of homes or like a book of photographs, except that they move. So he just showed at REDCAT and showed some new work, and it was very refreshing to see.

COLLINGS: Yes, I think that's a good analogy, like a book of poems or a photograph.

O'NEILL: Yes. You could look at the pieces, some of them individually, but the whole thing makes sense by itself. As he moves through different environments and so on, he brings the same— He has a video of things that happen very slowly, the Hudson River series. He teaches at Bard College and lives somewhere out the Hudson from New York. He'll have this black and white landscape that's almost all snow, and then there'll be a boat, a tugboat pulling a barge up the river. It'll sort of just come right through the frame and wipe it all off.

COLLINGS: That sounds wonderful.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes. Well, anyway, that was—

COLLINGS: Important to add.

O'NEILL: Yes. Peter Hutton was one, Adam Beckett was another. It's curious, you know, these people are very different from one another. Bob Nelson was another. Bob Nelson is a filmmaker who was in San Francisco and had a very prolific period in the late sixties. He made a film called *The Great Blondino* and another piece called *Blue Shut*, funny and wry conceptual pieces. His collaborator on some of those films

was William Wylie, who is an artist in the Bay Area and a draftsman and a painter. Wylie and Nelson were sort of two sides of the same coin in a way, they collaborated so well together. In fact, I think Bob has been less productive— Well, he finished his first film in about twenty-five years recently. But a kind of Bay Area sensibility which could be defined as very much the antithesis of anything to do with the industry of film and very much opposed to anything that's at all slick, finished, as being an evidence of corruption in a way, that film production doesn't necessarily hide all of its rough edges.

There were a number of artists who sort of emerged at the same time, Bill Wylie and Robert Arneson and William Hudson and a number of people whose work was inclusive in a way. It took in all sorts of doodles and scratches. Wylie loved to write stories on his paintings, and Nelson would make a shot and then drop another shot right in the middle of it, maybe a bit of mangled footage out of a commercial or something, and keep throwing you off into different substories. It's curious, I hadn't thought about that for a while. The Bay Area thing was very opposed to Los Angeles, as San Francisco tends to be, the two being antithetical in a way, commercially and geographically. So being from here was sort of like being from outside, but I had a lot of coming and going up the coast.

COLLINGS: Well, it sounds like you were really interested in those ideas, but at the same time, you liked working on the craft of your— You didn't want it to have like sort of throwaway rough edges.

O'NEILL: Yes, except at times I sort of courted that in *Trouble in the Image*. But, yes, I was committed to making a living here, and I liked being able to have the control, even if I didn't use it.

There's a woman, Freuda Bartlett, who was my distributor for a while. She had a company called Serious Business Company. She started out representing her husband, Scott Bartlett's, films and then did a lot of Bay Area people, and she was quite successful for a few years. Eventually, like so many of these distributions businesses, she just couldn't grow beyond a certain point. She couldn't afford to subsidize it.

COLLINGS: Is that how your films were distributed?

O'NEILL: Yes, for a while.

COLLINGS: Are they available now? I mean, you could never distribute the 35-millimeter prints, right?

O'NEILL: Well, they're available through Canyon Cinema Coop, which— I don't know if I mentioned that, but this has been a serious force for many, many filmmakers, the coop movement. The Filmmakers Coop in New York was the first, and Canyon Cinema Coop was started by Bruce Baillie and Chick Strand and I'm not sure who all else, in about '62, I guess, or '63, with the notion of being a noncommercial distributor that would accept work from anyone who wanted to submit it and would handle the details of distributing it without doing any advertising. So they weren't responsible for making judgements about any of the work that was there. Canyon in particular has been an enduring institution. It's declining now because 16-millimeter projection is just getting rarer and rarer. But over the years they've

managed to keep it together and have a couple of capable people working there to do it. So that was a help.

For a time I was with Freuda's Serious Business Company. There was a firm in New York called Visual Resources that had my stuff, and various distribution companies that just simply walked off with the material and vanished. It's always been sort of marginal to be able to make enough money at it to really pay somebody to do it. Canyon has managed to be a good business model. They take 50 percent and return the other 50 percent, and you have to pay, I think, something like sixty dollars a year as a membership fee. They have the 35 [millimeter] stuff, and there is occasional interest. I don't know how much longer it'll go on, because now things are getting—It's getting to be a DVD sale environment.

COLLINGS: For sure, yes.

[End of March 11, 2005 interview]

GUIDE TO PROPER NAMES