

Regional Oral History Office

The Bancroft Library

University of California

Berkeley, California

David Ireland

INSIDE 500 CAPP STREET: AN ORAL HISTORY OF DAVID IRELAND'S HOUSE

Interviews Conducted by

Suzanne B. Riess

in 2001

Copyright © 2003 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and David Ireland, dated January 15, 2002. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, 486 Bancroft Library, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley 94720-6000, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

David Ireland, "Inside 500 Capp Street: An Oral History of David Ireland's House," an oral history conducted in 2001-2002, by Suzanne B. Riess, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2003.

Copy no. _____

Cataloguing information

David Ireland (b. 1930)

Inside 500 Capp Street: An Oral History of David Ireland's House. 2003, viii, 150 pp.

A digital video oral history with conceptual artist David Ireland that takes place at 500 Capp Street, the house he has restored and which serves as a showplace for his art: background on family and education; Hunter Africa, African influences; acquiring the house, insights into ownership, documenting initial decisions; materials used in making art, concrete, wax, wallpaper, dirt; accumulations of brooms, shoes, hair, air; the dumb balls, demonstrated; collectors and galleries; beliefs about art.

Interviewed 2001 by Suzanne B. Riess.

Table of Contents--David Ireland

INTERVIEW HISTORY	i
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	iii
Interview I	
September 11th Attack Thoughts	1
David Ireland's House, 500 Capp Street	4
Concrete, Red, Duchamp	6
Things in the Vitrine, Wax, Wallpaper	8
"La Plume"	13
Dumbbells, Torpedoes, Potatoes	14
Materials, Stones	19
Green Line, and Yves Klein	21
70th Birthday Jars, and Other Jars	24
Buying the House, Taking "Action"	25
Brief History, and New York Years	27
Back to the Walls, and Ceiling	30
Resolution, Exhibition	31
Interview II	
Family in Bellingham	35
High School Art Class, Small Town	36
Power Places	38
If the Artist Calls it Art	39
Memories of Radio, TV	40
Minorities	41
Handy-ness, Trash Disposal	42
"Angel Go Round"	44
Height, Fame	45
Fathers, Cross-Country Trip	46
"Doing More" With Art	48
More on September 11th and Memorials	49
New York's Response to David Ireland, 1973	51
Dan Flavin	52
Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns	53
Franz Kline	55
Working with Wire, and Fire	56
Copper Window	59
On and Under the Table	60
Interview III	
Insurance Work, GI Bill	63
"I Can Do That"	64
Fluxus	65
Concrete	67
Galleries, Art Talk	68
Worrying About the Work	69

Getting Close to the Edge, Paper Towels	71
Originality	72
Art Teachers, Schools	73
The Moving Green Line, Making Changes	75
Knees Cups	78
Dirt	81
Hair, Tumbleweeds	83
IKB, Yves Klein Blue	85
Sparks	86
Brooms, and Wallpaper Patties	87
Looking in the Cabinet	90
Insulation Foam	92
Newspapers, and Attention Art	93
Interview IV	
Hunter Africa, Influences	95
Discussing Drawing	99
What You Need to Know to Criticize	104
Keeping Personal History Separate	105
Art is Perfect, if You Can See It	106
The Position of the Historian	109
The Camera in the Study	112
Joseph Beuys	113
Reliquary of Friends' Work	115
Books, Shoes	120
The Camera, on Down the Hall	121
Brooms, Cream Whipper, Peat Piece	125
Interview V	
Dining Room, Skulls and Wall Pieces	129
Concrete, Unidentified Rocks, Roofing	131
Art Being About Pleasing the Artist	136
Allan Kaprow	137
Challenging the Viewer	138
Seventy-nine for John Cage	141
Words, Mundane, Insincere	142
More on the Teachers	143
Installations, Galleries, the Maintenance Action	145
TAPE GUIDE	149

The David Ireland interview was conducted in partnership with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and was made possible by a generous grant from the Koret Foundation.

INTERVIEW HISTORY--David Ireland

In July 2001 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art president Richard L. Greene got in touch with the Regional Oral History Office about his wish to have us undertake an oral history of David Ireland's house. House? What the museum wanted was not-your-ordinary oral history. Rather than setting out to do an oral account of a life, marching through the chronology of birth, education, and work, the subject of the interview would be a house, 500 Capp Street, San Francisco. David Ireland's house, his embodiment, his "action."

I needed to make myself acquainted with David Ireland's work. A file of pieces explaining, defining, the art of David Ireland was supplied me by Greene, and gallery owner Paule Anglim. Most helpful were Karen Tsugimoto's "A Decade Documented, 1978-1988" to accompany an exhibition in the University of California's Matrix Gallery; Bill Berkson's cleverly titled "David Ireland's Accommodations" in the September 1989 *Art in America*; Maine College of Art Institute of Contemporary Art curator and director Jennifer Gross's 1997 essay contextualizing an Ireland installation at MECA; Betty Klausner's essay tackling the Dumbbells in *Land Forum*. I recommend them all, and look forward to the catalogue for the 2003 David Ireland Retrospective at the Oakland Museum of California where Karen Tsugimoto and Jennifer Gross return to their subject with new insights quoted from the oral history.

In August I went to visit David Ireland for an initial meeting, to get an impression of him and of the house, and I left 500 Capp Street that day wildly excited at the prospect of doing the interview, talking about art, whatever that might turn out to be, with David. Conceptual art seemed, indeed, very much to lend itself to talk. But how to deal with the question of description? We would be surrounded by numerous Ireland pieces, on the walls, tables, shelved behind glass--the very room itself was perhaps his most familiar and frequently photographed conceptual work. While description on the part of the interviewee might be necessary and interesting, it would have the awkwardness of describing for a third person, the reader, what was right there in front of the two participant parties, David and myself.

Knowing that part of the plan from the point of view of San Francisco MOMA was eventually to have a video that would serve to tour the viewer through the house, as well as the oral history for researchers to read and reference, I decided from the beginning to take both video camera and audio tape recorder, and have both of them set up to record. Thus descriptions are reinforced by the image and the burden was far less on David to put everything into words. 500 Capp Street was perfect for such a visual setup. My wires and cords and tripod merged with the wires and arrangements that supported or powered David's work. The camera's eye, when not on David or on some specific piece under discussion, focused lengthily on sweeps of glazed yellow wall, or slabs of red-painted concrete, or streaks of green marked plywood as the conversation went on about them.

The interviews span a period from October 12th to December 12th. The decision was made from the beginning not to take the interviews out of the house--in other words, not to film at sites like the Headlands Center for the Arts where Ireland's commission in 1987 was also about changing historic space. Not to film at Ireland's Oakland studio and see what goes on in that space. True to our mandate we confined ourselves to the world of 500 Capp Street.

To set the scene: I arrive and ring the bell. David answers the door immediately. He has been looking through some mail and papers placed near the front door. I think he has seen me from upstairs when I was parking on his busy Capp Street corner. He is very tall and gracious. He is wearing a dark sweater. He offers tea, and goes back to the kitchen to prepare it. I take the various recorders, my stack of research and

interview notes, my camera bag and tripod upstairs. It's tricky to find a place to plug things in, but the location for the "shoot" is my choice. Mostly I want a chair for David, and one for me, and an angle on the art. Later, in other interviews, we'll get up and move around down the hall and closer in with the camera.

Each visit I find the house to be somewhat different. The plywood piece with the green streak moves from the wall to the floor. It's the artist's prerogative, I know. I note the changes, and make a sweeping panoramic memo with the video camera. In a minute or two I hear David coming carefully up the stairs from the first floor, balancing a tray with two cups of tea. We set the tray on a bit of free surface, check to see that all the recorders are rolling, the mics attached, and we begin our look at 500 Capp Street, our oral history of a house.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Suzanne B. Riess, Senior Editor

Regional Oral History Office

Berkeley, California

March 2003

DAVID IRELAND

Born

1930 Bellingham, Washington

Education

1972-74 M.F.A., San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California
 1972-74 Laney College, Oakland, California (plastics technology and printmaking)
 1950-53 B.A.A., California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, California (industrial design)
 1948-50 Western Washington State University, Bellingham, Washington

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2003 "David Ireland: A Retrospective," Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA
 2001 "David Ireland and Gallery Paule Anglim Contemplate the de Young Museum,"
 Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA
 Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
 2000 "Reflections," Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
 "Everyday Art," Freedman Gallery, Reading, PA
 1998 Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA
 1997 The Gallery of the American Academy in Rome, Italy
 1996 Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL
 Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Garden, San Francisco, CA
 1994 "Skellig," Ansel Adams Center for Photography, San Francisco, CA
 1993 Installation, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA
 Laura Carpenter Fine Art, Sante Fe, New Mexico

Selected Solo Exhibitions (continued)

- 1992 Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
 "David Ireland/Ann Hamilton," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
- 1991 "You Can't Make Art By Making Art," Helmhaus, Zurich, Switzerland
 "Proximities," Damon Brandt Gallery, New York, NY
- 1990 Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
 "A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books," Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1989 Germans Van Eck, New York, NY
 The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia, PA
- 1988 Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
 Damon Brandt Gallery, New York, NY
 "A Decade Documented," University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley;
 University of California at Santa Cruz; University of California at Irvine
- 1987 "Gallery as Place," Adeline Kent Award exhibition. Emmanuel Walter and Atholl
 McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA
- 1984 New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
- 1983 American River College Gallery, Sacramento, CA
- 1982 Installation, Emily Carr College of Art, Vancouver , Canada
- 1981 Leah Levy Gallery, San Francisco (off-site location)
- 1980 White Columns Gallery, New York, NY
 Libra Gallery, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, CA
 80 Langton Street Gallery, San Francisco, CA (off-site location)
- 1979 "Mr. Gordon's Birthday Party," Action at 500 Capp Street, San Francisco, CA
 "65 Capp Street, South China Paintings," San Francisco, CA
- 1978 Exhibition of the Maintenance Action at 500 Capp Street, San Francisco, CA

Videotape: "Mr. Gordon at Lunch," Tony Labat

1976 Restoration of a Portion of the Floor, Wall and Ceiling of the Main Gallery, Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco, CA

Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, WA

"Calcutta Culture Spa," San Francisco Art Institute Annual, 16th Street Gallery, San Francisco, CA

Selected Group Exhibitions

2003 "Magic Markers: Objects of Transformation," Des Moines Art Center, De Moines, IA

2002 "Sweet Tooth," Copia, Napa, CA

2001 "Making the Making," Apex Art Curatorial Program, New York, NY

2000 "Seascape," Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

"Rapture," Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA

"Eccentric Forms and Structures," Microsoft Art Collection, Redmond, WA

1999 "Museum Pieces: Bay Area Artists Consider the de Young," San Francisco, CA

"Ideas in Things," Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA

"On the Ball: The Sphere in Contemporary Sculpture," DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA

1998 "Double Trouble: The Patchett Collection," Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, CA

"Affinities and Collections," California Center for the Arts, Escondido, CA

"pFORMative Acts," San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA

1997 "The Art Orchestra: A Sculptors' Ensemble," The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, California

1996 "Thinking Print," The Museum of Modern Art, New York

"SFAI 125th Anniversary Tribute Show," Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, California

1994 "Solid Concept Three," Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, California

Selected Group Exhibitions (continued)

- "Duchamp's Leg," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (Travels)
- "Mapping," Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
- "David Ireland/Annette Messenger/Bill Viola," Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, California
- 1991 "Selections from the Permanent Collection: 1975-1991," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California
- 1990 "In-Site," University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA
- "Signs of Life, Process and Materials, 1960-1990," Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- 1990 "Paradox of Process: Collages and Assemblage in the Permanent Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
- "Constructing a History," Works from the Permanent Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
- 1989 "Solid Concept," Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA
- "40 Years of Assemblage," travelling exhibition organized by White Gallery, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California
- 1988 The Home Show, Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, CA
- Awards in the Visual Arts, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
- Carnegie-Mellon Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, CA; the Virginia Museum, Richmond, VA
- 1987 "The Right Foot Show," San Francisco Airport Commission, San Francisco, CA
- 1985 "New Furnishings," Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, CA
- "Inspired by Leonardo," San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA
- 1983 "Elegant Miniatures from San Francisco and Kyoto, Japan," Kyoto, Japan, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
- 1976 "Eighteen Bay Area Artists," Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
- 1975 Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery, New York, New York, Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA

Public Projects and Commissions

- 2000 IKEA, Oakland, CA
- 1999 “Big Chair,” Lincoln, Nebraska
- 1996 Addison Gallery, visiting artist’s apartment (Function artwork in collaboration with architect Henry Moss and master craftsman John Sirois), Andover, MA
- 1992 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
- 1990 Pacific Enterprises Corporate Office Installation, First Interstate World Center, Los Angeles, CA
- Security Pacific Bank Gallery (collaboration with Frederick Fisher, architect), San Francisco, CA
- 1998 Collaboration with architect Mark Mack for design and execution of furniture, The Headlands Center for the Arts, Fort Barry, CA
- 1987 Outdoor sculpture for the Three Rivers Art Festival, Pittsburgh, PA
- 1987 “Light Up- Philadelphia,” light schemes for the city of Philadelphia, Fairmont Park Art Association
- 1986 Artist in Residence, Headlands Center for the Arts, Ft. Barry, CA
- 1985-87 “Newgate,” entryway sculpture for the landfill Preservation area, Candlestick Point State Park, San Francisco, CA
- 1985-88 Functional works in the visitor’s facility of the State Reformatory at Monroe, Washington
- 1984-85 “Jade Garden,” A collaboration with Robert Wilhite at Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C. A functional work serving as an apartment for visiting artists.

Awards

- 1997 American Academy of Art, Rome, Italy
- 1988 The Englehard Award, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
- 1987 The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant
- Adaline Kent Award, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA
- 1983 National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Fellowship grant

Awards (continued)

- 1982 Oakland Museum of California, Contemporary Art Council, Artist of the Year Award
- 1978 National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Fellowship grant

Selected Collections

Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York

Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California

Achenbach Foundation for the Graphic Arts, California Palace of the Legion of Honor,
San Francisco, California

Oakland Museum, Oakland, California

Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, California

Whatcom Museum of Art and History, Bellingham, Washington

Massachusetts Institute of Technology Gallery, Cambridge, Massachusetts

University of Californian, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA

Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Logan, Utah

Norton Family Foundation

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID IRELAND

[Interview 1: October 12, 2001]##¹

September 11th Attack Thoughts

1-00:00:00

Riess: Before we begin talking about this house, and your art, I wish you would tell me what your experience was of September 11th.

1-00:03:18

Ireland: On that morning [September 11, 2001], I guess it was around 7:30 or something that a friend called, and he said the World Trade Center had been hit by a plane. I thought what he was doing was telling me something of fiction--we talk occasionally about fiction--and I said, "I'll talk to you later," because I hadn't worked my sleep out yet. Then he went on before hanging up to say--this is a friend of mine who lives in Oakland, owns a café there--and he said, "You know, you don't understand. The World Trade Center has been hit by an airplane." At that point, with the North Tower being the first to get hit, it wasn't known immediately that it was a terrorist thing. Maybe by those people who know.

1-00:04:22

Anyway, when I came to my senses I turned on television, which I can operate from my bed, and I saw this was for real. This was now a terrorist function. Then different members of my family started to call in, which makes me think that it's really important for all of us to have a family plan of some sort. Like, if you have a husband or a child or something, that everybody has to report--before the lines get clogged, you have to do it instantly. You've got to go immediately to your telephone to talk to a child or someone and say, "I'm okay. Call somebody." But that somebody should be clarified, it seems to me.

1-00:05:18

Well, here on the West Coast, you know, we have the insulation of about 3,000 miles, which is something. You know, 3,000 miles from New York to San Francisco, something like that. I bring that up because it's an insulation.

1-00:05:50

Riess: From the feeling?

1.## This symbol indicates that a video tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the video tapes follows the transcript. Please note that this interview was recorded on both audio cassette tape and digital video tape. The timecodes included in this transcript follow the video tapes only. Where there is not a timecode, the reader may assume that the interview was recorded on audio cassette tape alone.

- 1-00:05:54
Ireland: Yes. Well, the feeling too. You know, we've had the memorials and that kind of thing here, and everybody is concerned, as they are there, but we haven't been touched here on the West Coast other than by earthquake, and so I think that the sensitivity to the whole thing is slightly different. I think people in New York are trying hard to go back to business.
- 1-00:06:33
Riess: Do you have artist friends in New York who you've talked to about September 11th, and are they having a response that you can relate to?
- 1-00:06:44
Ireland: I think people are trying--I do have, of course, art friends in New York. I want to say that I think that they're more realistic because it's in their own front yard, but that not may not be fair to say that.
- 1-00:07:05
Riess: What do you mean by realistic?
- 1-00:07:08
Ireland: That we didn't have a bombing here in San Francisco, and that would be realistically--. You know, I feel like I could talk forever on this whole subject because it's so devastating. About how one feels, whether you know anyone or knew anyone who was a victim.
- 1-00:07:46
Riess: About your own personal feeling of being threatened?
- 1-00:07:50
Ireland: Yes.
- 1-00:07:52
Riess: Do you feel that?
- 1-00:07:54
Ireland: Yes. Of course, immediately, when the whole north and south towers were definitely declared a terrorist maneuver--I don't know what I was going to say that follows that. Ask me something.
- 1-00:08:14
Riess: Well, talking about fear and personal safety.
- 1-00:08:20
Ireland: I personally didn't feel it the way I think I would feel it in New York. I think that's the word "realistic" again, somehow.
- 1-00:08:32
Riess: How about your response as an artist? Does making something make you feel better in a confusing time?
- 1-00:08:51
Ireland: That's interesting. I think it--making something, like a distraction? Something that will take your mind off of it? Is that what you were thinking? I think as an artist--I'm not going to answer your question, by the way, because I don't know the answer--but as an artist, I think when it comes time to punish, or something like that, that an artist [should] be consulted. Not

even punish, but artists may say, "No, you can't kill these innocent civilians," and then somebody--the word that they're using is "collateral, collateral damage."

1-00:09:35

Now the word "collateral" to me doesn't fit in this particular instance, but it's the justification for the killing of, or the demise of, everyday citizens. And so as an artist we should be able to say, "No, you can't kill the people. You can embargo them, you can cut their money supply off, you can cut their student privileges off, you can tell everyone who's Afghani or Pakistani to get back to their own country. We're not going to let you come and take training about how to fly a 747 so you can turn around and kill us with it."

1-00:10:28

The United States has a history of that, I think, of helping different countries, Middle Eastern countries particularly, and Asia as well--we have a history of being nice to these countries that turn right around and kill us with the stuff that we've given them. Don't you think it's odd that we would let somebody who has a dubious reputation go to a school in Florida, where they learn how to fly a jet aircraft. I would say if you're on our hit list particularly, boy, you don't get near one of these planes.

1-00:11:30

Riess: Something you said reminds me of the language of war. I was reading about, during the Vietnam War, the language of deceit, words like "debriefing, body count, collateral, air operations."

1-00:12:29

Ireland: It's interesting that you bring this up. I was thinking rhetorical speech seems to be one of just ponderous repetition. Like, how many times did George Bush use the word "justice?" "Bring him to justice." We've been hearing "bring him to justice" for a month now. When he made his first speech, he said, "We will get them and we will punish them." Did he use the word "punish"? I don't know. His vocabulary is only about this wide [demonstrates a tiny measurement]. It's just a static: "The American people." "The American people have to be assured." "The American people." "We promise the American people we'll do this." I just get so I can't stand these speeches, but I still listen to them because I want them to break out of that confinement, rhetorical confinement.

1-00:13:35

Riess: Maybe I have the wrong take on what you would do, but if you can't stand it, does that mean you want to smash something? Does it make you want to take one of your Dumbbells and drop it out a window? Is there a part of you that needs action?

1-00:14:00

Ireland: Yes. None of those things really work, I guess. Doing something physically, a little bit violent maybe. I'm not by nature that kind of person, so maybe that's an individual thing, what would *you* do? what would this person do? What's the name of the book? *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*? Thornton Wilder. What each person was doing at the time the bridge collapsed or that day?

1-00:14:33

Riess: Yes.

1-00:14:39

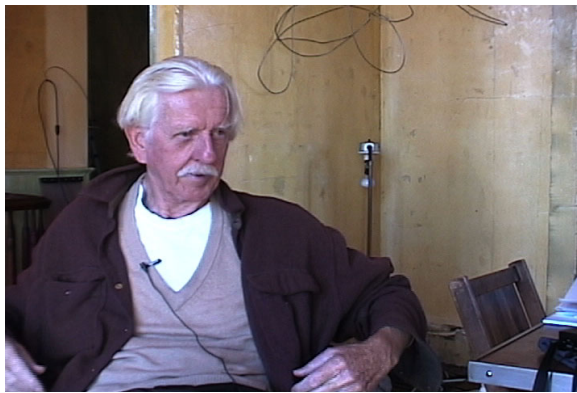
Ireland: But talking about art and doing something creative or non-creative, it makes some art work very superfluous and unwarranted or uncalled for. There's the one school that says, "Let's kill 'em with our culture." And the other is--[pauses] I lost my place.

David Ireland's House, 500 Capp Street

1-00:15:18

Riess: Let's take it another place.

This house we are in. You're sitting in a handsome chair.



Tell me about this chair.

1-00:15:32

Ireland: This chair is a family chair, my grandparents' chair. I didn't know my paternal grandparents. One died about three years before I was born, and one died shortly after I was born, so I couldn't go around and ask, "Oh, Grandpa, is this your chair?" and this and that. But it wasn't conjecture. It was that this actually was my grandfather's chair. I don't think he used it too much because it doesn't feel like it's had some of that sort of history. But anyway, that's all I can say. It would be a library chair, I think.

1-00:16:19

Riess: Did you refinish it?

1-00:16:21

Ireland: No, I never touched it. I don't quite like the finish, but, you know, once again, this is the way it came to me, and so I feel--see, this is the kind of thing I respond to, some of this, but it has not been refinished by any one of my family or generation.



1-00:16:54

I wouldn't hesitate to do something to it if I knew what I was after other than I wanted to see some of its history reflected. I want to know, too, whether this kind of Queen Anne leg, whether this is a typical example of a chair of this period.

1-00:17:45

Riess: When the house is a museum, would this be part of the house?

1-00:17:54

Ireland: At this point I'd say yes, and I'll tell you why I say yes. It can have a more honorable past by me leaving it in the house than if I take it to the flea market or take it to someplace--you know.

1-00:18:16

I have three sisters. When the four of us expire, or one of our children--this chair can be handed down, you know. But someone along the way will say, "Well, it's not a very interesting chair," and then sell it. But if I put it here in the house with the other relics, then I think they would say, "Well, this is quite special. This may end up in the [San Francisco] Museum of Modern Art. Who knows?"

1-00:18:49

Riess: That's so interesting, isn't it? You think like that?

1-00:18:54

Ireland: I do. Well, right behind you is a glass cabinet, and that was also my grandparents'.



1-00:19:03
Riess: We'll turn to that.

1-00:19:13
Ireland: The same thing happens as with this chair. I mean, if someone was to say, "Well, he's dead. Let's take this chair that doesn't have a very nice stain to it and throw it out or give it away or sell it to an auction" or whatever--I feel in a way I'm saying that I want this to stay forever. That can have different connotations, too. But I want this, and what's inside of it, the honorable past.

1-00:19:51
Riess: Don't you occasionally change the contents of the cabinet?

1-00:19:57
Ireland: I can do whatever I want. When I have it, you know? Is that accurate, to say that?

1-00:20:10
Riess: Yes. I've seen pictures where the cabinet had different things in it.

1-00:20:16
Ireland: Well, yes, as does the cabinet out in the hallway, white one, which at some point we'll be looking at.

Concrete, Red, Duchamp

1-00:20:30
[laughs] This is deeply philosophical. There are some things inside the cabinet--I can't see it too well from here, because of the sun shining. That's a problem. This red thing--I call it a thing because in some sense it's a painting, and in another sense it's sculpture. I figure that it was probably a painting of mine, and I thought, "Well, if I put it in the cabinet, the vitrine"--the vitrine is something that protects things. It isolates, if you want that. It separates an object from another object, or includes one object with another object. What I'm boiling down to here is that I think that this makes it sculpture, that it no longer has painting connotations, it more has sculptural connotations, which, as I was just saying, is a way of--. Taking a painting off the wall and putting it in a cabinet, I think it's immediately no longer a painting, now it is sculpture. And it is sculpture by reason of conceptual idea.

1-00:22:34
Riess: Does this piece go back to the 94-pound work?

1-00:22:39
Ireland: Yes, actually it does. Not very directly, but somewhere along the way, it would. I'm amazed--you read that somewhere.

1-00:22:51
Riess: So this might be from 1974?

- 1-00:22:54
Ireland: Actually, that's quite accurate, yes. The enamel--I haven't at this point reasoned out why it's red or why it's cement. There's cement on there, on the canvas, with an adhesive material that's built into the paint. So it's very stable. But it would break if somebody decided they wanted to smack it over their knee or something.
- 1-00:23:24
Riess: You mean the bottom layer of it is canvas, then cement, and then--
- 1-00:23:29
Ireland: --enamel, yes.
- 1-00:23:30
Riess: What about this color red?
- 1-00:23:33
Ireland: Well, red has been used in different ways by artists, and some is that--what form of speech would red be? As in a ready [red-y]-made Duchamp? So I was taking the liberty of saying that it's a play off of the historic father, Marcel, himself. So that's one explanation. There could be others as well.
- 1-00:24:21
Riess: It's not just critics saying you're Duchamp's natural heir. You think of him as a father?
- 1-00:24:33
Ireland: As a patriarch might be better--yes. Well, I think we acknowledge that he set us free. He said everything we want to be art can be art, but we have to clarify it, or we have to announce it somehow and say, "This is art." I mean, all of the objects that he made are by his own choice and are sculpture--they're clearly not painting. I don't know what he would have said about being labeled as an artist. He may have wanted just to be an artist, or he maybe wanted to be a sculpture. That would take a minimum amount of research to find.
- 1-00:25:23
Riess: That he wanted to be an artist or a sculpture?
- 1-00:25:26
Ireland: A sculptor, sculptor.
- 1-00:25:27
Riess: I like the idea that he wanted to be a sculpture, that he wanted to be the object.
- 1-00:25:31
Ireland: Well, that's true, too. If you look at the journals of Duchamp, you see that. He did things to his face, and haircuts, and things like that, so you can say that he wanted to be in his work. Not always, but he definitely, by and large, you're just opening this up for me--he definitely wanted to be part of his work. I shouldn't say "definitely." I should say he wanted to be, instead of saying it so emphatically and definitely.
- 1-00:26:38
Riess: "To be part of his work." Are you embedded in your work in some way?
- 1-00:26:41
Ireland: Embedded. Let's see.

1-00:27:01

Riess: A bit of fingernail paring in the concrete? Have you done anything like that?

1-00:27:09

Ireland: I have. Do you want it now, or do you want it later? I've been collecting my toenails for so many years, I can't believe it. Is that what you're asking me? Like, hair or a collection of something.

1-00:27:25

Riess: I meant bits of yourself in your art.

1-00:27:32

Ireland: No, I'm more inclined--well, I'm not inclined that way. I don't know why.

1-00:27:41

I have used concrete consistently to indicate certain things. One thing is that it goes from liquid to a solid in its naturalness. And concrete is universal. You don't know that it's concrete here [the red painting] unless you read the label. It doesn't come out and say, "I am concrete" like the other examples that we'll talk about.

1-00:28:15

Riess: Like these pieces on the floor?

1-00:28:27

Ireland: I love these round, deep things.



1-00:28:30

They're really quite extraordinary. I don't have an explanation for those, why they're that way, these round things that the wheels go into.

Things in the Vitrine, Wax, Wallpaper

1-00:28:43

Riess: What else is in the vitrine? What is the liquid in the jar?

1-00:28:48

Ireland: Oh, yes. I'll tell you about that.

1-00:28:49

The red concrete sculpture--I had to take the shelves out to get the red piece in there. You can see that, that it wouldn't get in with another shelf in it. So I have the shelf just in case I decide I want to take the red piece out and put another object in it. I mean, I have the privilege to do that. And in the long run, if there's a mandate and a procedure that must be followed, I could say this has to be like this for six months of the year and the other six months it's going to have this other thing, which I'll identify.

1-00:29:36

The jar of water I call Hundred Year Old Water because I was told by an antique dealer that the object that the water came from was one hundred years old, so I call it my Hundred Year Old Water.



[Ireland had washed a piece of the original furniture at 500 Capp Street and the water from the washing, which he collected, was then the "Hundred Year Old Water."]

1-00:30:03

Riess: Was that Mason jar here when you bought the house?

1-00:30:08

Ireland: I have a collection of jars. I can't remember whether--I could probably tell by looking at the water whether it was here or elsewhere.

1-00:30:21

Riess: What is that to the water's right?

1-00:30:37

Ireland: That white thing? That's kind of a narwhal in wax.

1-00:30:41

Riess: I thought it was.

1-00:30:44

Ireland: Oh? How many people do I know in this world who would even know what a narwhal is?

1-00:30:47
 And on top of the narwhal--the narwhal was more of a process work, and on top of the narwhal, only because it's a matter of convenience, is a piece of peat that came from Ireland. And farther to the left is a handprint, my handprint on a wad of wet wallpaper, which came as a result of me scraping the wallpaper off the walls. At some point we'll look at those things in detail.

1-00:31:25
 There's a photograph of my abdomen when I had surgery.

1-00:31:30
 Riess: "In detail". You mean, like, opening the vitrine? May I?

1-00:31:38
 Ireland: Yes. There's a little wedge of paper, Suzanne, on the ground. That has to go back in--when you pull it--yes, there you are.

1-00:31:48
 Riess: [laughs] Now we've turned this into an action film!

1-00:31:52
 Ireland: Yes. That's good. Oh, I love to see that happening. Yes, that's nice.

1-00:32:05
 That's the peat. That's from Ireland, itself.

1-00:32:25
 That's tea, on your right hand [a blackboard eraser-sized block of tea, related in size and color to the peat].

1-00:32:41
 The plate, by the way, that was one of my grandmother's tea plates.

1-00:32:55
 Riess: [looking at narwhal tusk made of wax] How did you do this?

1-00:33:00
 Ireland: I have a supply in my studio of wax. I'm quite fond of wax. I'll tell you a side story about the wax, and one of them is it takes a temperature of around 150 degrees to turn wax into a liquid, and if you take the wax--I'd sit in my car, because it gets up to around 125 degrees, it's like going to a sauna, I'd sit in the car, and the wax becomes pliable and I can pull and twist it and make all sorts of stuff.

1-00:33:47
 Riess: You should hold this in your hand [for the camera]. It's pretty beautiful.



1-00:34:15

Ireland: Did you do this, Suzanne? Get your hands in it. It goes clockwise. You'll be able to tell that.

1-00:34:28

Riess: I can feel that. But I would hesitate to do that without permission because you "don't touch" art, right?

1-00:34:39

Ireland: We started our conversation here with I can do what I want, and that's one of the wonderful things.

1-00:35:05

Ireland: One of the things about wax which is not nice is if there's any dirt at all close by, it makes the wax dirty. This [narwhal piece] is okay because it's dry and hard enough.

1-00:35:21

These are my toys, Suzanne.

1-00:35:47

Okay, this is a drawing of a heating system for my house. This is a furnace, and this is the air return, and these were different rooms of the house that had heat. As a conceptual work, it couldn't be much better.

1-00:36:10

Riess: It's called Winter Heat. You did it in 1985? Is it part of the installation of the vitrine?

1-00:36:27

Ireland: No, I think that I was looking for a place to put it.

1-00:36:34

That's the handprint.

1-00:36:39

Riess: What's this material?

1-00:36:40

Ireland: It's wallpaper. [holding piece] I have to find a place for my hand, and then you can try it. Let's see. There's that.



1-00:37:11

You try it, Suzanne, and find a place. Here it is. All four fingers are in there. You may have to roll it around to find out where it wants to be. You find a place there where--yes, you're approaching it.

1-00:37:35

It's like a multiple because I made several. But very personal, obviously. What I like about it is that it is so purely conceptual. I mean, it's an idea, to make a drawing or a print of my hand. It's shrunk a little bit, that's why it's not wanting to do its thing too much.

1-00:38:14

Riess: From my understanding of the purely conceptual, you wouldn't have needed to make this, you could have just thought of it.

1-00:38:20

Ireland: I could have someone do it for me. I could say, "Make me three of these or four of these," and that would be another conceptual work, but it would be moving the artist from it instead of including him. See, here definitely I'm included in the work because it's my print.

1-00:38:47

Riess: Language is a part of it all, isn't it?

1-00:38:51

Ireland: It seems that way. Definitely. If I just put it on the table, and I say--clearly it's an art work, but the explanation of what it is really completes the work. The work suffers for lack of explanation maybe.

1-00:39:24

Riess: Does it become a different work if I put my hand into it? The relationship of another person to the work, does that affect the work?

1-00:39:47

Ireland: No, I think everyone can do one. Anyone--I mean, the Dumbball is clearly about that. Anyone can make a Dumbball. They just have to adhere to the process. So that's a matter too, what you're just putting in there. That's the process. It's a process work. And there are several directions it could take. Maybe it includes passing it around the room when it's in its wet state. You do an impression and the next person does one, or something. And you can involve other people. It's sort of open ended.

1-00:40:28

But you're right about language. Somehow the work becomes nothing but a total mystery unless there's an explanation for it

“La Plume”

1-00:41:19

Riess: Okay, let's get the camera and take a tour. There's the teapot.

1-00:41:40

Ireland: The little figurine--I was born practically on the border between the United States and Canada, Bellingham. My mother had a sister living in Vancouver, so I have cousins there, so we would in the course of the year take several trips to Vancouver. One of the things that my mother always enjoyed was buying a piece of china, maybe a special teacup and saucer, or she would buy a figurine. There was one particular store in Vancouver that specialized in these figurines and fine china and things like that. So she bought at different times three figurines. But I have three sisters, so we would in total be four, and we all wondered who got omitted. Clearly I'm safe, because I'm the only boy figure. But there are two other figures, and there should have been three other figures. I've always amused myself with this idea that somebody fell in disfavor with my mother and didn't get her figurine.

1-00:43:13

Riess: So is that a sentimental addition to your house?

1-00:43:24

Ireland: No, that's one of those things where I might say, "Well, let's leave it, or take it." I don't feel necessarily sentimental about it, but I could explain it, which I couldn't explain otherwise.

1-00:43:44

Now, the paint roller thing. There's something again--you talk about language. I call it "La Plume," to indicate that it is something like a pen, only it's taking advantage of the existing material, the roller, that would be in the same service as a pen in some cases. It's a tool for writing with, writing with its particular capability. I'm quite amused by that. It took its inspiration from a pen. I don't know--you get that? The explanation?

1-00:44:47

Riess: Yes. There are things that I might wonder about, like why it's a new roller rather than one full of paint, or why it's erect like that, why you have it arranged like that.

1-00:45:19

Ireland: I want to make a monument of it, sort of. And I think that this is the joy of making something. I'll sit around with a paint roller, and it's loaded with paint, and I'm painting away, and I say, "This has got to be a labor of love," or something like that. Or you say, "Let's play with this roller, and draw on the wall with the roller." But like I say, it kind of takes its cue from a pen, or a pencil or something.

- 1-00:46:10
Riess: My interpretations, I have to kill that instinct, because it's *your* meaning. But for me it could be an eraser, because a paint roller covers things up. Or the way you've arranged it, it looks like a lamp. You might expect it to shed light on something, so you could call it a lamp.
- 1-00:46:42
Ireland: Yes, that could be. I don't think that--. You know, if that were my intention, if what you see is not my intention, or is my intention--they need to mesh, you know? And if the work fails, it's because we didn't take the right tools to the job.
- 1-00:47:44
Riess: This lamp in the concrete base, does this date back to the beginning of the work in concrete?
- 1-00:47:57
Ireland: Actually it does. And those pieces on the floor don't necessarily have to be arranged in that particular fashion. If I want something to remain in a particular position, a particular location, then I try to make the work spell it out, or I put an explanation with it, but ideally you let the work do the talking.
- 1-00:48:39
Riess: How do you get the wiring into this piece of cement? Or do you call it cement?
- 1-00:48:48
Ireland: Well, two things. Concrete is a mixture of sand and cement and gravel, and cement is actually only an ingredient to making concrete. People very often call concrete cement, incorrectly. Concrete is clearly what those materials are.
- 1-00:49:17
Riess: You've put electrical wiring in them?
- 1-00:49:21
Ireland: There's no wire in here at all, so I just have to bring it from wherever I can find it. This goes downstairs into my archive room. I drilled a hole in the floor over there and put the extension cord through. This is just an extension cord, and it operates with a couple of other objects.

Dumbbells, Torpedoes, Potatoes

- 1-00:50:00
Riess: Here's another narwhal shape over there?
- 1-00:50:04
Ireland: Yes. Somehow I find making this kind of torpedo--. Marsha Weisman, do you know who she was?
- 1-00:50:19
Riess: No.

- 1-00:50:21
Ireland: She was a wealthy art patron from Los Angeles. Very perceptive person, I might say. She died about five years ago, I think. She brought a tour of people from Los Angeles to visit here one time, and she said, "These are potatoes. Mr. Ireland makes potatoes." [laughs] That's a wonderful way to avoid any further explanation, you know?
- 1-00:50:55
Well, there's more explanation due on that sort of turd-like thing. I'd been trying to make a non-shape, Suzanne. I wanted to make something that wasn't overbearingly designed. I wanted it not to be designed, but that it just became very close to a natural--you know, your hand being the mold. Both hands--there are still little bits of my impression.
- 1-00:51:58
Concrete requires you to pay attention to some of its properties, and one of them is, it wants to be molded. If you just put it here like this and it's fresh from the mixing, it'll just fall away. It won't hold together. So you either have to hold it, or pass it slightly back and forth. This is what makes the Dumbball.
- 1-00:52:26
Riess: The Dumbball was so deliberate?
- 1-00:52:28
Ireland: The Dumbball is deliberate to see if I can't do the process, make it a perfect sphere, and this [torpedo shape] is to say something almost opposite, to keep it moving but to keep away from any design considerations.
- 1-00:52:51
Riess: Is it a different kind of concrete, too?
- 1-00:52:55
Ireland: Yes. Exactly. This looks more like a moonscape, doesn't it? This is a different aggregate, which is the stone in it.
- 1-00:53:08
If you do this [passing from hand to hand] faithfully for about ten hours, you'll actually get a sphere, and it will be a sphere that will be the size of "whoever-makes-its" hand--if you said, "I want to go home and make one of these myself. I'm not gonna pay him \$10,000 for one."
- 1-00:53:28
Riess: Is that what you're getting for these?
- 1-00:53:29
Ireland: I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding. Actually, I try to get \$100, and it's sort of a way to support whatever you call it, support the cause.
- 1-00:53:49
Riess: Do you add particular aggregates to them?
- 1-00:53:53
Ireland: No. Someplace in between the exposed aggregate and the non-visibility of it, there is a place--and that's me.

- 1-00:54:05
Riess: Say that again.
- 1-00:54:10
Ireland: What did I say?
- 1-00:54:13
Riess: Somewhere between it and--?
- 1-00:54:16
Ireland: Oh, yes. Between no visible aggregate showing other than sand, as in this one [torpedo] there's a place, between the very heavily exposed aggregate in this, that I like to see.
- 1-00:54:43
Riess: So this is overly smooth?
- 1-00:54:45
Ireland: To me. Purely just to me. You're making one in your backyard now, remember? You say, "I'm not gonna sit around here for eight hours or ten hours, doing this to keep it from falling apart". You put it down prematurely, it gets flat on the bottom, and you don't want that. Unless you're saying, "I want this ball on my desk or under my foot. I want it flat on the bottom. A little flat, just enough to keep it stable." And that's your privilege. But the perfect Dumbball tries to become faithful to the process. You keep moving back and forth until it is set.
- 1-00:55:32
Riess: Does the aggregate come to the surface?
- 1-00:55:35
Ireland: Yes. Some of it. Now see, there's something--the aggregate didn't have any more adhesive property, so it just fell out.
- 1-00:55:52
Riess: David, could you tell me when you did that first, and why, and how satisfying that was. The first time you made a Dumbball?
- 1-00:56:06
Ireland: I can tell you it was kind of an outgrowth of the wallpaper. I was getting the idea when I was taking the wallpaper off, and I'm talking 1975, when I came from New York.
- 1-00:56:41
I could be mistaken, and it hardly matters at this point, but I think the wallpaper came first, and it was just taking it off the walls, getting that kind of thing. Then I thought, "You know, there's a process that makes it," and I was starting to get some feeling for process. And the perfection of the process is how well it comes out in my mind. I'm saying, "Okay, I want to make something. Wallpaper has its limitations. I want to do something that will be permanent and will be--" what we talked about before, the size will be determined by the size of the hand of the person who makes it. It's a universal material. It's available all over the world, yet it somehow is particular to the individual.
- 1-00:58:15
Riess: You say this as if you thought other people would want to do it once they saw yours.

- 1-00:58:25
Ireland: Anyone can make one. There's no mystery to it. It's purely saying that to succeed, and be perfect, you have to adhere to the process. There's no shortcut to it.
- 1-00:58:51
Riess: What about the first one you made? Were you committed to doing it until it was done?
- 1-00:58:56
Ireland: Yes. The first one--I made one and it took me all day. If I could feel that it was going to be flat on the bottom, I would have to keep throwing it, passing it, back and forth, from one hand to the next.
- 1-00:59:19
Riess: Could you walk around your house? Did you have to be in one place?
- 1-00:59:24
Ireland: I can watch television or read a book, do almost anything. That's correct: you can walk around the house, anybody's house.
- 1-00:59:39
Riess: When you were done, who would you have told about it? Who would you have bounced that idea off afterwards?
- 1-00:59:51
Ireland: A woman who's Swiss [Marie-Louise Lienhard]. She's presently in Berlin, but she's from Zurich. I was saying to her--I said, "I'm really trying to find an object that I can make that will be non-designed." And I said, "I don't want it to be imbued with heavy design consideration." You know, like, you make a little box and put concrete in it and it dries and you have a nice cube, or you find a way to make a mold--which is not impossible. Down by Embarcadero, by the way, there are these huge balls.
- 1-01:00:35
Riess: The bollards.
- 1-01:00:36
Ireland: Yes. She said to me, "By putting energy into not designing, you are designing." And so that kind of woke me up to the fact--or awakened me, excuse me--and so I thought, "I'll yield to the idea of process." I'm trying to remember whether there was a reaction from her to seeing a finished Dumbball or not, but anyway, she straightened me out on this idea that--she's a gallery owner-director. And so I was able to have a conversation about it.
- 1-01:01:34
You know Betty Klausner? She did an essay on the Dumbball.² Without too much--I think she just, like you or any of us--without direct explanation, you can almost just see, if you handle it--if you make a mistake and it becomes flat on the bottom, you can say, "Well, I didn't adhere to the process." You can critique it along the way. It's like a planet. It's your own little universe.
- 1-01:02:24
Riess: Do you continue to make them?

2. "Dumb Balls" by Betty Klausner, in *Land Forum '04*, Spacemaker Press, Washington, D.C., 2000.

1-01:02:27

Ireland: Rarely, but I figure once again it's my thing. I can do them if I want to. I have a cabinet that I have some of them in, in my studio, which of course you're welcome to visit, but it's not about the house. But it is true, you'll see some of the things.

[end of video tape, audio continues on cassette]

Now I lost my place.

Riess: About whether they're still in production.

Ireland: Oh, yes. But the cabinet, you know, is a way of--it's a vitrine. I have made a vitrine for them, so that they get that respect that other things we've been talking about get. I don't know. It's not like the ready-made, but it is a participatory piece.

Riess: This [video-tape] needs to be replaced, but that's okay, we can go on talking. Or you just might want to take a break. But it's going well, I think.

Ireland: Well, it gets easier all the time, I think, Suzanne, because we're kind of getting used to one another here. I like your method of inquiry. [looking at camcorder] I'm going to get one of those, one of these days.

We're still rolling on the audio-tape, aren't we?

Riess: Yes, that's still going.

Ireland: When I was in graduate school, one of my fellow students collected salt and pepper shakers, which is obviously not very unique, but he said, "If you want to collect something and you don't want it to be too expensive," he said, "find something that no one else will want." I thought that was good advice, that you can collect something that no one else wants.

Riess: Are you thinking about your Dumbbells in such a way?

Ireland: Well, it's possible that I've achieved this non-designed designed object.

Riess: I would propose that the toenails would be in that category, too.

Ireland: Yes. I'll have to show you the toenails before--they're kind of repulsive, but they're in a jar.

Materials, Stones

2-00:02:26

Ireland: A lot of what's in here is things that have been given by other people, and I can't even remember some of them.

2-00:02:36

Riess: I see more wax pieces.

2-00:02:39

Ireland: Yes. I was thinking of something that would be a cousin to the horns downstairs, in the dining room.

2-00:03:00

Riess: Is this oryx?



2-00:03:01

Ireland: Yes, you've been around, I see. This is oryx. This has some narwhal property to it, but when I finished it I said--my intent was to make an oryx, and were I to name it, I would probably name it Oryx. But at this point I started to enjoy the fact that it was like a torso with legs, almost dancing. Very abstract, of course.

2-00:03:50

This isn't quite so exciting in that same way. More like a cowboy. But this was a Cape Buffalo. This has a nail in it, so it can go on a wall, a "nar-wall." [laughs] You can buy wax in these bricks. It's very dirty. If I had a mold for it, I'd melt it down so all the dirt would go to the bottom. Some of these things are relics from--this is kimberlite. I should have tested you to see if you knew what it was. Do you know what kimberlite is?

2-00:05:15

Riess: It must come from the Kimberly Mines.

2-00:05:18

Ireland: See, you know too much, Suzanne. You know too much. If you go to Kimberly, which of course I did, there's a huge sign there--I'm talking about many years ago--they probably have it cordoned off now, but the Kimberly hole is quite fascinating to look down and see where they were digging diamonds out. There was a diamond claim. It was only about three feet by two feet, something like that, and what happened, they're so small that people had to buy two

or three claims if they could afford it or could get them at all. There would be a man--a partner would be up on the rim of the crater that they've created, and he would pull a box of dirt and sift it when he got it up to the top.

2-00:06:22

Well, anyway, the sign says, "Don't pick up anything off the ground." So I said, "Aha!" There's some wax on it, unfortunately. I guess I could find a way to get that off.

2-00:06:35

Riess: It has some mica-like things.

2-00:06:39

Ireland: It does, doesn't it?

2-00:06:42

Riess: Well, you're very fortunate to have that.

2-00:06:44

Ireland: I can retire on that? [laughs]

2-00:06:48

Riess: Or they may be looking for you.

2-00:06:51

Ireland: Probably that. Deep inside there is a beautiful diamond. Kimberlite.

2-00:07:01

This, I'm not sure where this is from now, I think it's from Death Valley or something. But it's a beautiful piece of stone. Now, here's a thing. You talk about sentimentality and talk about, "Will you keep this or will you give it away or throw it away or whatever?" I can't identify it, but I do think it came from Death Valley, but it feels quite good. It's kind of slippery.

2-00:07:43

I have other stones, and unfortunately I don't know where they're from.

2-00:07:50

Riess: Was this something you liked as a kid, rock-hounding kind of activities?

2-00:07:59

Ireland: Yes. Actually, that's true. It's not hard to do that. You're walking on the beach and you look for something special in the way of a stone or a shell or something like that. Of course, I was right there. It's not unique to people of creative minds--everyone is fascinated, practically, by stones on the beach, the different shapes.

2-00:08:34

Riess: Were you a collector as a kid?

2-00:08:37

Ireland: Not necessarily. People ask me did I always want to be an artist, and I said, "I never thought about it." It never occurred to me that one has to declare that.

2-00:08:51

Riess: I really was asking whether you were a pack rat.

- 2-00:09:01
Ireland: I have to really say I wasn't. My son, on the other hand, can't let anything go. My landlord in Oakland--he says he loves to get rid of stuff. Every Thursday before the scavengers come, he's in there, throwing stuff out.
- 2-00:09:28
Riess: So the kimberlite and the stone from Death Valley, you brought them home?
- 2-00:09:40
Ireland: Well, something unique in the stone or in the wood or in the sand, something unique that draws your attention to it. Therein, of course, is the art making. Something unique, possibly. The issue of making art--I think they are hand-in-hand, this idea of uniqueness goes into art making, a discovery, something from one's investigation.
- 2-00:10:23
Riess: When people pick up a rock from the beach, they like to think they've gotten a unique rock.
- 2-00:10:28
Ireland: A unique rock, yes. The favorite with my children was always a big clam shell and it would have bits of glass that had been washed over many times so it wasn't shiny glass; it was sort of translucent glass. And then there was--this is actually accurate. My sisters remember, and I don't remember this, but they'd go to the beach contiguous with our family summer place, which is quite small, but they'd find dishes, fragments of dishes that they remembered--someone would break a plate and throw it on the beach. "Oh, yeah, I remember this. We had a whole set of this."
- 2-00:11:25
But there is something unique about--we'd like to be unique, uniquely original if we can get away with it. It's very difficult.
- 2-00:11:35
Riess: Do you think that's the human instinct? Or is that more the artist? To be unique.
- 2-00:11:52
Ireland: I don't know. I'm trying to couple it with investigation, but that might be a cousin to uniqueness.

Green Line, and Yves Klein

- 2-00:12:13
Riess: What about this piece of plywood with its green line here?



2-00:12:20

Ireland: Yes. That takes its cue from--well, it's a piece of plywood, of course, but the imagery is tracing--I don't know what to say.

2-00:12:44

Riess: Did you just do that playfully there, or did you think about that?

2-00:12:50

Ireland: Well, I think--again--I'm stuck for a minute. Can you see what's going on there, why I chose that direction? You see, the green follows the natural imagery, the grain.

2-00:13:26

You can just throw that on the floor, Suzanne. [referring to a cardboard box painted red.]



2-00:13:28

That's my paint store. They give you the paint in this, and I throw the paint away and I take the--no, not really.

2-00:13:39

Riess: You just told me a joke, and I'm not getting it.

2-00:13:44

Ireland: It's a throwaway material, of course, a piece of cardboard, and somehow--if I want to put this on the wall, I don't purposely go and put a nail in the wall and hang it on it. If there's a nail there, then I'll use the nail that's there. I won't put my own hot idea into it. I'll take it as it comes. That's not very clear. I'm sorry.

2-00:14:19

Riess: I came across an expression yesterday, "ghettoizing art by hanging it on the wall."

2-00:14:29

Ireland: Uh-huh. Well, it responds to painting. Historically, painting goes on the wall. Tapestry goes on the wall. People hang things because that's where it is traditionally--so here we come along, Duchamp or others like him. We don't have to put it on the wall anymore. We can put it on the floor or do anything. But the wall--you have to break free of the wall.

2-00:15:04

Riess: So, on the plywood you followed the grain.

2-00:15:07

Ireland: Followed the grain. Exactly. And I chose that--there are other things [lines of the grain] I could have chosen, but I chose that particular one because I like the way it starts and I like the way it concludes at the top. It probably will get on the wall, but it doesn't have to, in my mind. And that's why it's not on the wall; it's on this pedestal. We're talking about this big pedestal now. This would have come from a grocery store--they put merchandise on it. It was probably on the street or something like that.

2-00:16:04

Now, that's wallpaper. At Christmas time I make tree ornaments. There you are. See, you can see it [the ornament]--there's newspaper in there.



2-00:16:20

Riess: It's newspaper. Rather than wallpaper.

2-00:16:23

Ireland: Rather than wallpaper. I do have some, I think, that are wallpaper now.

2-00:16:29

Riess: See, now, it's falling apart. Look what I've done.

2-00:16:34

Ireland: Look what you've done. Yes, but you can wear it as an earring, or put it on your Christmas tree. I made several concrete Christmas tree ornaments. Of course, I call them Ornaments Everlasting.

2-00:16:49
The artist, Yves Klein? You know? Well, this is a friend of mine [Tony Labat] who's mimicking Yves Klein's leap into the void. That's what that is.

2-00:17:07
Riess: And Yves Klein's leap was a manipulated photograph.

2-00:17:16
Ireland: That's what I presume. He's not going to throw himself out on the street.

2-00:17:20
Riess: But what did Tony Labat do?

2-00:17:24
Ireland: Oh. I think he did it in a darkroom. He just cut the photograph with a razor.

70th Birthday Jars, and Other Jars

2-00:17:46
Those are bullets. They were a gift from somebody, so I can't claim them as anything but a gift, but aren't they--they are salt and pepper shakers, I guess. Those are slides. I don't even know what they are. I've got tons of slides. I don't even know how to get them out of here. [looks at one] Well, this is a picture from a tulip festival.

2-00:18:25
This [looking in a small jar] was chocolate--this was my seventieth birthday, and my sisters had this cake made with my initials on it. It says, "David Ireland's Seventieth Birthday Cake." Some birthday cake is in there. And this is from my fiftieth birthday. On my fiftieth birthday, some friends put together a wonderful party, and they made moustaches for everybody at the party, so everybody--man, woman, child alike--was wearing one of these. This is upside down. These were to be mimicking my own moustache. Anyhow, I don't know who put it in the jar for me.

2-00:19:28
I have Mr. Gordon's birthday cake up there. You can see it up on the top cabinet, that gray cabinet. Mr. Gordon is another--he was living here when I bought the house. Can you see the date on there, Suzanne?

2-00:20:01
Riess: Yes, it's 1979, 2 p.m., David Ireland's House. Mr. Gordon's Ninety-Fifth Birthday.

2-00:20:09
Ireland: Yes. He lived here after I moved in. He was just here for a few weeks. He was looking for a place. Then I told him I was going to tear the walls down, and he was quite distressed by that. Here [in the picture] he is blowing out his candles. Now, I hope I have the negatives for that because it's not going to last too many more years in the condition it's in. It could blow up, I suppose, at any time.

2-00:21:00
Riess: It seems to be inert.

2-00:21:05
Ireland: Yes. I don't think it's going to blow right away.

Buying the House, Taking "Action"

2-00:21:21
Riess: Let's talk now about moving in here and making your mark on this house.

2-00:22:04
Ireland: You want me to give you some background on the house and my coming to it?

2-00:22:09
Riess: Yes, the decisions about buying the house, what you saw in the house.

2-00:22:16
Ireland: Again, it was the uniqueness. It was something separate from the general run-of-the-mill house. The beach example is perfect because here we are, I'd come back from my year in New York, you know, the ubiquitous year--everybody who graduates from school thinks they should go to New York, and I was one of them. Of course, I had a girlfriend at that time who lived there, so I had a place to stay, so that made it wonderful.

2-00:22:50
But when I got back after my year I needed a place to live and a studio, and so I drove up this street and down, and up this street, because this was the only part of town I could afford. And I saw this house. Someone suggested to me, "Buy a duplex and live on one floor and have your studio on the other." A perfect concept. Not a heavy concept.

2-00:23:21
So I found this place. I said, "It's perfect. I'll tear all the walls out, have one big space. It'll be kind of a studio space, and the other will be the living space." I hadn't decided which would be which. The sign on it said "For Sale." I called the realtor, and he met me over here, and the accordion maker who owned the house was here, and we did the normal deal, I made an offer, and I ended up with this house, \$50,000. I helped him get his stuff out after a week or two or whatever. I tried to get information out of him about "where were you when this happened" and what was going on, but he just wouldn't respond. He didn't want to talk about anything.

2-00:24:37
Anyway, I end up with this house, and I started taking the wallpaper off and doing different things, and really feeling like I'm making some art work. But it was not my intention to make an art-work out of the house. I always insist that people understand that this isn't what I'm doing. I mean, I'm just cleaning house. I called it a Maintenance Action. So I could sort of think of it as a performance, installation, kind of all of the different art forms: painting, sculpture, more traditional sculpture.

- 2-00:25:18
I had all those different things I felt I was addressing, a perfect opportunity to do an art-work. I moved in, and I started picking away at it, and I thought, "I can't really tear these walls out. They're too great". So I forgot about that idea of taking the walls out.
- 2-00:25:42
Riess: The walls you would have taken out in order to create the studio?
- 2-00:25:45
Ireland: Exactly, exactly.
- 2-00:25:58
Riess: How long did you live with the house before you started to redo it?
- 2-00:26:09
Ireland: Well, it was a slow process. I bought it in 1975, and next year I'll be twenty-six years here, so I think about a year. And then I started--incidentally, Tony Labat, he was the videographer here. He came along and would do different sequences of repair and restoration. I never called it restoration; I called it a kind of a stabilization, a kind of holding it and freezing it in place.
- 2-00:26:59
Riess: What was the feeling of the rooms?
- 2-00:27:02
Ireland: You know, they weren't--the next two rooms don't have any varnish on the walls, and in retrospect I would have not varnished the walls, urethaned them. I would have let them be that kind of chalky whiteness. I don't dislike it this way; it's just another statement. And one of the wonderful things about the statement here is that it reflects what's going on outside. A car goes by and it gives a big red streak on the wall, and a blue one goes by and I get a blue streak. Quite fascinating at times.
- 2-00:27:44
Riess: Because of the reflective quality.
- 2-00:27:46
Ireland: The reflective material, yes. It's like a preserving material, stabilizing it, or like a scientific glass, a glass specimen: put something under glass to hold it in place. So I'm giving myself all these explanations. We always have to explain ourselves, explain ourselves.
- 2-00:28:14
Riess: That [explainingness] being kind of how art was in the seventies?
- 2-00:28:17
Ireland: Well, it depends upon what kind of art.

Brief History, and New York Years

2-00:28:20

Riess: When you came back from New York did you know Tom Marioni and other artists doing conceptual work here?

2-00:28:34

Ireland: I knew all these people before, but I got to feeling more about where I belonged, you know? I felt conceptually that I wanted to make ideas an issue, addressing ideas. Tom was very good because he's full of ideas. I always say, "Give me a good idea, and I'll give you an A," when I was teaching.

2-00:29:07

But I came back, and this satisfied all kinds of things.

2-00:29:21

Riess: The physicalness of it, the work?

2-00:29:32

Ireland: Yes. I liked to get my hands on it. And there are artists who you know and I know who don't want to get their hands in it, they want to give direction. I admire that too, you know? I sometimes respond to a historic inspiration. I might do something that's more traditional: drawing. I try to stay away from painting because that's pretty clearly a separate thing. I'd rather have my energy going to non-painting things.

2-00:30:16

Riess: But you're drawn to painting?

2-00:30:27

Ireland: Well, the house is all about painting, too, you see? When I talk about the reflectiveness of it. It's as much about painting as painting is about painting. Demar Varnish is always the thing that painters historically concluded their work with, a coat of varnish, and I've done that. So I think I take a lot of cue from painting.

2-00:31:10

Riess: You were at the San Francisco Art Institute from 1972-1974. What did you get out of going to art school?

2-00:31:38

Ireland: A credential, acknowledgment. You go to art school--I don't know whether Tom Marioni has an art school background or not. Terry Fox does not. Do you know that name? There were a lot of them who didn't. But it seems like you can't teach unless you have a master's degree, and so it's become a mandatory thing. It's not that you're not willing to teach or not willing to--you just say, "Take me as I come." You know what I'm saying.

2-00:32:32

Riess: Your techniques with plastic materials or wax or one thing or another, were they learned in school?

2-00:32:45

Ireland: I don't think so. I never was doing anything in concrete or wax or paint--well, maybe some paint, but no, I think just thinking and being around people who were doing different things. That's the value of school, is kind of interaction with other students. There is the education. And attending lectures, getting to know, via lectures, different artists in the country who would come out here for whatever purpose. A lot of them came to work at the Crown Point Press. They were financed by a New York dealer, so they came out. I had a chance to meet all the important people of that time.

2-00:33:41

Again, we talked about getting your hands in it. I'm a hands-on person. But you take Sol LeWitt, he's exactly the opposite. He wants to sketch out what he wants, what goes where. Wonderful position. I think we owe a lot to Sol LeWitt. So there's two sides of the coin, you know?

[the following portion is out of sequence]

2-00:40:14

Riess: When you were in New York in 1975 did you have a gallery?

2-00:40:19

Ireland: When I was in New York, I had both of my degrees, the CCAC and the Art Institute, and I went to New York and stayed for a year. I had some really wonderful breaks because people opened doors for me. I was able to meet dealers. Most of them were very encouraging. They said, "We like what you do, but we'd like it better if you'd have done it ten years ago," or something like that. "We needed you then. We don't need you now." That was kind of interesting for me to have that experience, for people to say "I needed you then." There was a style, deStijl [laughs]--there was a style, and it was part of the Brice Marden look. Or Ellsworth Kelly. Definitely not [Jackson] Pollack. He was another time.

2-00:41:35

Riess: Were Brice Marden and Ellsworth Kelly people you admired?

2-00:41:38

Ireland: I just pulled them out of the sky. Not necessarily. There are a lot of good artists in that period. Sol LeWitt and Brice Marden and Robert Mangold and Dan Flavin. These are people who I met, some of them, out here. Now, they didn't say, "Call me when you're in New York." No one would do that. But no, I met a lot of terrific artists and dealers. Then I came back. And I had made enough headway that--I was going more frequently to New York, keeping current with stuff.

2-00:42:38

Also I was working as a carpenter for several years. I wasn't affluent at all. I was doing what--the women wait tables and the men do carpentry work. I did that until, well, I'm trying to think--. It was bits and pieces. I had this business of importing stuff from Africa, and I made a little money from that and a little from teaching, an itinerant kind of occasional teacher. Little things. I liked the idea of trying to make art making and architecture somehow coming together somewhat. I did a lot of slide shows, lectures. It was little fragments of stuff that made it possible to survive.

- 2-00:35:02
Riess: David, because we have not been treating this as an oral history of you, but instead an oral history of the house, I am falling further and further behind on your life history. You were saying that if you had been younger, the New York time might have been different.
- 2-00:35:04
Ireland: Well, yes, because I was forty-six. Well, I graduated in '74. I came back here in '75.
- 2-00:35:41
Riess: Because we have not been talking about that part of your life, I don't know the married and having children part.
- 2-00:35:53
Ireland: Well, that was one of my reasons for coming back here. My kids were in Santa Barbara with their mother, and I wasn't about to move to Santa Barbara, but I felt I wanted and needed to spend more time with the children, so that was part of my decision. Then the other thing is that living is tough in New York. It's expensive. I had enough money to not have to work for a year, which was quite unique--well, from selling a house in Tiburon, I sold that actually when I got back from New York. That was my proceeds.
- 2-00:37:59
Riess: From what I've read you were in and out of Africa in the late 1950s. [reads from notes] You studied painting, print making, industrial design, and set decoration. You became an architectural draftsman, a carpenter, an insurance salesman. You were in Africa as a safari guide.
- 2-00:39:18
Ireland: I emigrated to South Africa so I could stay and work, and I stayed for a year. When was Sputnik? We used to get drunk on brandy and run out in the field at night and watch Sputnik go by and I think that was '57.
- 2-00:39:53
Riess: You had a house in Tiburon?
- 2-00:39:57
Ireland: It was a little tiny house. It was as big as these two rooms.
- 2-00:40:04
Riess: And you were able to live on the proceeds of that for a year in New York.
- 2-00:40:09
Ireland: Yes, yes. Exactly.
- [there is a gap in the video sequence at this question]
- 2-00:43:39
Riess: Was that Tiburon house a place you had made any impact on?
- 2-00:43:44
Ireland: The house in Tiburon? It was a two-bedroom house, literally. One bedroom is as big as this, and the other one--yes, it was just dinky.

2-00:44:30

Riess: The house in Tiburon, did you work on its surfaces?

2-00:44:45

Ireland: Not so much the surfaces as just the general arrangement of rooms and utility of--that kind of thing.

2-00:45:06

I lose track of these dates. I don't know how old my children are or anything. I count on them to tell me. I say, "How old are you?" Well, it's not quite that bad. But it is.

Back to the Walls, and Ceiling

2-00:45:34

Riess: Okay, let's turn and look at this house more. These surfaces are interesting. What is it that happened on the ceiling that caused the streaks?



2-00:45:42

Ireland: The lines--I had to determine all this, but style had a lot to do with it. If you see what's called the picture rail--I think it's a rail--if you look around, you'll see there's a picture rail at different heights, two different heights, which makes me say it's about the style. I could just imagine somebody getting ready to wallpaper, and they would say, "Oh, you know, they don't do it that way anymore. They raise it up another fifteen inches."



2-00:46:53

Incidentally, that brown stripe by the window? You asked me why the wallpaper was brown. That's a scrap of brown wallpaper. I think there may have been some deterioration, but yes, that brown stuff is wallpaper. I think it was kind of an undercoating of wallpaper. But the ceiling--you see the pencil line is where they put a pattern. You see? If you look over here you can see it too--I can't see over there, but over here. That would have been a different color of wallpaper. And that kind of gray stuff is wallpaper paste. Some places where it's very orange-y--out in the hallway you can see it--there is water damage from a leaking roof.

2-00:48:46

Riess: Did you have a big steam machine to get it all off?

2-00:48:51

Ireland: You know, I did, and then I stopped using it because it was expensive, and so I just soaked it with water with a big paint roller here. I just kept soaking it and soaking it and letting all this crap fall to the floor. I saved--by then I was saying, "There's something powerful in this stuff. I better save it". So I had a plastic garbage bags full of wet wallpaper.

2-00:49:27

Riess: Did you have friends come and help you?

2-00:49:29

Ireland: Not so much, but that's okay. If you're doing an art work, you do it in your privacy. I had some friends come by, but not too many were interested in helping out, and I didn't mind that at all. I didn't know what I was doing. If you have friends working, or even people you're paying, you have to answer them. They'll be asking you what to do about a certain situation, and you have to come up with a remark, you know.

Resolution, Exhibition

2-00:50:15

Riess: If you were living with it, how did you stop? When did you know your day was over?

2-00:50:22

Ireland: Oh, art making is a--I want to say conclusion, no, resolution. You resolve something for the moment, and that means you can accept it or reject it at that moment you choose. Or you can say, "No, I'm going to look for further resolution." Or you say, "This is resolved for now." I think that's important because painting historically has gone through all of these--I see students working, and I say, "Why don't you quit?" And they say, "I can't. I don't know how." I say, "Why don't you just say that for the moment it's resolved and then go on at a later time?" I kind of find that interesting. Resolution doesn't mean that it's final. It means that for the moment it's final, but just for that moment.

2-00:51:49

Riess: When you were working on the house, were you also working on smaller pieces?

2-00:51:58

Ireland: Yes, I was. And I can't remember exactly, but some of the pieces--I'm trying to fit the Dumbball in there. The Dumbball made its debut at Leah Levy's gallery. I'm not sure I know what date it was [1982]. But I made this cabinet I'm referring to, this vitrine, for the Dumbballs. I wanted to honor them and make them respectable, not a throw-away idea or a gag or a joke or a fraternity boy's hoe-down or whatever. I wanted it to be seen as a significant and important process work. And there weren't too many people doing process work. And so I felt that I had an opportunity to be a little bit unique in that respect.

2-00:53:15

Riess: The wadded paper pieces, did you show them too?

2-00:53:44

Ireland: Well, Leah--that was an opportunity to show the Dumbballs, and that was I think my first, and then I looked for opportunities where I could show my wallpaper wads. I didn't have the wax at the time. But different things that supported my position. I was looking for opportunities, and I think they were coming more in the line of public art--you know, installation work, which still had hands-on and process--all of the things I was interested in and supporting were apparent in some of the public art stuff that came along. So I had several opportunities to do that. Well, the Headlands [Center for the Arts] was kind of part of that.

2-00:54:43

You've been to the Headlands, have you? Yes.

2-00:54:45

Riess: I've been there for a party.

2-00:54:51

Ireland: It's nice when no one's there. Well, the Headlands embraced everything. Again, it was about painting, about sculpture, about process, about the litany of different aspects of art making.

2-00:55:16

Riess: Is writing part of your art making? There's some writing on the wall here.

2-00:55:34

Ireland: Oh, those are phone numbers that got locked in. They're on the other side as well.

2-00:55:45

Riess: They're under the glaze.

2-00:55:51

Ireland: They're under the glaze, yes. They should have been removed, but in a way there's a little history there, so.

2-00:55:55

You look like a pro, Suzanne, with that camera.

2-00:56:00

Riess: I have to zoom in. We're going to get that person's phone number. There we go. Bridget Bowers, and underneath someone named Foxy.

2-00:56:45

Focusing on this with the camera, the image *is* like a painting. Do you see the house in bits like I am seeing it, framed segments?

2-00:56:54

Ireland: Oh yes, I think you can't avoid it. I would always acknowledge that it was somehow--kind of Diebenkorn-esque. The earthquake cracks--I've always presumed that they're that.

2-00:57:57

Riess: Why did you decide to leave the window moldings like this?



2-00:58:01

Ireland: Well, because it expands the available imagery. That's a lot to say. But you know, if I'd left the trim on, you would just think that it was what every piece of architecture is about. Architecture is about resolutions and combining physically--[pause]--I'll get it. Architecture is about bringing things together, like floors to ceiling and floors to walls. Relationships. I felt that if I wanted to expand this information, that I would take off the trim, which is the precious thing that architecture was about. It's about trim and joining and selecting and all that sort of stuff. I wanted to just--people say, "Oh, look, you can see all the window weights." That didn't interest me as much as the idea that we've caused people to pay attention to this particular detail.

2-00:59:48

No, I have to say that I see it all. I mean, I think I see it all. And sometimes you don't want to see any of it. You want to say, "Enough's enough."

##

[Interview 2; October 26, 2001]

Family in Bellingham

[This portion is on the audio tape, but not the video tape.]

Riess: Before we start the camera rolling I want to ask you a couple of questions that don't require filming. I'm interested in your surroundings growing up. Did you grow up in any kind of an arts environment?

Ireland: No. My parents were very supportive of the arts in all forms, but they weren't participants, and we didn't have a library, for example. There wasn't a lot of reading, which I find kind of unusual in reflection. I don't remember bookcases bulging with books. We had the *Encyclopedia Americana*. Whether we ever used it or not as students, elementary school students, is another question. We had relatives who had books, and you could look at the spines of the books on their bookshelves, and books with all of the famous artists of the last century. I'm talking about a time when I would have been twelve, fifteen, something like that. And I don't remember my father curling up with a good book. He was well educated and a smart man, but books were just not part of the visual material in the house.

When you come from a more provincial town, which Bellingham was--the population then was 25,000 and now it's 45,000--there are traveling events. For example, the Seattle Symphony would make an appearance in Bellingham and play in the local high school. There were things like that that were booked by some agent or whatever, the symphony or maybe it would be the ballet or something like that, that required little construction, if any. They would bring their own set with them. So we weren't completely in the Dark Ages. These were always respectable events that I'm talking about. People looked forward to it. You could support it by buying a series of tickets for all these imported events.

Riess: I think Merce Cunningham was part of a dance group in Seattle.

Ireland: Yes. And John Cage, of course. Yes. John Cage boasts of taking a job in Seattle at the Cornish School, I believe. And he said there was a job opening for a person named Bird, and he couldn't resist the opportunity of working with someone with the name of Bird--Bird-Cage [laughter]. [This person was dancer Bonnie Bird Gundlach.]

Riess: Would such avant-garde stuff also come to Bellingham?

Ireland: No, I don't suppose that Cage or Cunningham ever got to Bellingham. It would be my surprise. But [Robert] Rauschenberg, I think, yes. I don't think, I know he did a summer workshop on Whidbey Island, which is one of the islands off the far corner of the Northwest. As a matter of fact, quite a few years ago Rauschenberg had a one-person exhibition here, and that would clearly be between fifteen and twenty years ago. So we talked a little bit. I saw him at a cocktail party--and he liked his cocktails. I talked to him about--Port Townsend, I think was the name of the town.

So, you know, one way or another, one gets an education. Talking about the avant-garde, we knew people who knew--oh, what's his name? Not Mark Tobey. But, you know, there were things going on. Like I said, I wasn't alert enough to say, "Well, hey, I'm fifteen years old or twenty, and I should be able to predict that this would be the new avant-garde or something." I was much too naive for that.

High School Art Class, Small Town

Riess: Did you have encouraging art teachers in high school?

Ireland: Well, I'm sure--. In high school I think you take an art class because you presume that you won't have to do too much, if anything. Only do you find out later on that you picked the hardest possible thing, which was to develop a serious thing of art.

Riess: You mean your high school art class actually was serious.

Ireland: Yes. There was an art class, and I took the art class, and everyone did something different because they all did what they could do best, and people still do that. And some of them don't, which they should. Like I said, one girl I remember could draw shoes very well. She just drew shoes. I was asked to do a handout, sort of a--what would you call an instrument that was--a playbill kind of thing. What would we call a playbill?

Riess: A program?

Ireland: Program, yes. So I designed a cover for that, for the local high school annual bash, where there was dancing and singing and stuff like that. The operetta. We would have an operetta, which would be an opera with an "etta" on it. [laughs] There's probably one around here somewhere, one of those programs.

Riess: Back to around-the-house. Books were not in evidence. How about newspapers?

Ireland: Oh, yes, my father read the paper every night, when it came. We didn't have a morning and a night paper; we had a night paper. Even as children we enjoyed it because it told us what people were doing, who was getting married, for example. A small-town newspaper, everybody knows everybody else, and so you could read it and you could make some remark about who was being depicted in the paper that particular week. It's not a weekly, a daily. But the big Sunday paper, I think you coveted that because that had lots of information.

Riess: Did you like the small-townness, or did you want to get out of there?

Ireland: I wanted to get out of there. I don't know why. It didn't treat me badly, but some of the privacy, I think, even was an issue. Whatever you would do had to be understandable by let's say the readership, if we're talking about this place. Clearly what we're into now is being free, we want to go free. People like Duchamp, Leonardo da Vinci even, would be people who allowed us to go free, too, but mostly Duchamp.

So where are we?

Riess: Were there any mentors in high school who were free?

Ireland: I don't think so. I mean, there may have been, but once again, my blindness made it difficult for me to see who I wanted to align myself with. I think here in San Francisco it's pretty clear somewhat. Everyone makes a choice of other artists who they admire and feel inspired by, and that would obviously carry all through the United States and into Europe. So it's not just a local thing.

I think sometimes our career sneaks up on us and we don't realize we're getting educated. I feel in some ways I was getting educated by my relatives who, as I said before, had the spines of the books all there. I remember all of the big heavies were there, dead or alive.

Riess: You went over there to read their books?

Ireland: I don't think I so much read them as they symbolized something, some sense of an intense life of the culture.

Riess: For a writer, often coming from a small town is great because there's wonderful story material. I wonder what you incorporated of your background in what you're doing, if anything comes to mind.

Ireland: Hmm. Can I ask you to say it again?

Riess: In your art do you reach back to images from where you grew up?

Power Places

Ireland: There were things--I'm jumping in here maybe prematurely, but friends of mine--and I could feel myself doing it--used to see that I wasn't completely like everybody else. In fact, one of my best friends--we would go camping on deserted islands in the Northwest, where you could have a whole island to yourself. It took a boat with a motor to get there, of course, but it wasn't a big thing getting there. And you'd have this wonderful sense of having this place to yourself, this island. It might be an island as big as from South Van Ness to Valencia Street, in a more round configuration.

One of my pals that I used to go with, camping, boat camping, he said, "You know, when we'd get to the beach someplace where we wanted to set up camp, you would have to walk around and find a power place."

Riess: "A power place."

Ireland: A place that sort of exuded something. Nothing material, but something--I don't know what the right word is here, but I would always be looking for a place to put my sleeping bag that was somehow arranged between certain logs and certain items, so I'd pull up logs from the beach and move them around, and I'd find out, "Yes, this is *my* camp." And my pal would be twenty yards down the beach. He'd found a place for himself. But it was important to me to find this special place.

And I'm still doing it. That's the thing. I mean, like when you came in today and said things have been moved around a little bit, I'm just constantly looking for the place where they somehow say something to me. I'm sure other people do that, but we don't sit around and talk about how we arrange things. It's not like that.

Riess: Is it about controlling the environment?

Ireland: Well, something to do with acknowledging space and what occurs inside of space, or the idea of space.

Riess: Was it like an action? And what does that word "action" mean, anyway?

Ireland: The way I think of it—I'm going to have trouble with it a little bit. But performance—some Conceptual artists wanted to be sure that the conceptual people were apart from theater people so we started calling—things that might be thought of as theatrical implies that artists, performance artists are also theatrical, which they're not; they come from a whole different background from sculpture.

The word "action" somehow implied that there was some movement, but there wasn't an attempt to be theatrical. I think pretty much you can review the work that we do that is considered to be action work. Theater, I guess, is something believable and enlarged. Possibly. Not necessarily. Somewhere in there I'm trying to grab onto something.

Riess: An audience is involved?

Ireland: Not necessarily. Action work—as a matter of fact, I was at a lecture last night of Paul McCarthy, who's a Los Angeles artist, and he talked about sometimes just closing the door and doing something, but it seems like he makes attempts to bring in a viewer, someone to see the work. Almost it's necessary to substantiate that some work was done.

Riess: So back on the beach, then, as you arranged your particular spot. Is that an action?

Ireland: I could say yes, this was an action work. I'm moving logs around and I'll find a place that seems to be a resolution here for the moment. It doesn't mean that once again we can't change it or do something more to it, but for that moment it is resolved, and I accept it as being resolved. But I could say whatever I'm doing is sculpture, is action sculpture.

On some occasions now you're seeing the word "social sculpture" coming into play. Of course, that implies that there's some use or some involvement with maybe more than just acknowledging materials and things. Social sculpture, I guess, is anything that has to do with people. Would that be right? An action that involves somebody.

Riess: I am trying too hard for definitions, I guess.

Ireland: Maybe we'll grab some of these fragments and pull them in. I don't know. We'll see.

If the Artist Calls it Art

Riess: One thing that you've said several times is, "I can call it art if I want to call it art." There's a sense of permission. How do you learn that, or acquire that?

Ireland: Well, I have work--this is not completely answering your question, but I have work that comes back from exhibitions or something, and I start working on it some more. Someone could say, "Hey, you just showed that work, and you didn't have it in this arrangement." I said, "Well, it's mine to do what I choose." If it's taken by an institution or a private collector or something, then no longer do you have that right to move stuff around because the person doesn't buy it on speculation; they buy the work because they happen to like the work, of course.

Bruce Conner, who is very well known here, was offered a show back in the sixties or early seventies at San Francisco MOMA, and the rumor, and I don't know if it was rumor or fact, is that before he would permit them to do a show of his work, he wanted the right to go in and play with some of the previous works they were going to show. Henry Hopkins was the director at the time. He said they just couldn't let him have a show with that condition because he'd go in and tear things out and put more things in.

Anyway, where are we now? Am I giving you anything?

Riess: Yes.

Ireland: Well, this is an important thing, I think, about what makes something an art work. I think the artist makes it happen.

Memories of Radio, TV

Riess: Back to your early home scene. Did you have a television, or did you live in a radio world?

Ireland: We had a Zenith radio, which made a lot of static. A family gathering--every Sunday night we would sit around the radio, and my father would indicate that the time was now, and I could turn on the set. That was my job, to turn the knob. I got a nod from my father, who would have a watch, and he would say, "It's six o'clock. It's time for Fred Allen" or Charlie McCarthy or something like that.

I don't know when television came out, but guess we would have had one of the earlier ones. When did Roosevelt die? [April 12, 1945] I'll tell you why I'm asking it. Because I distinctly remember mowing the lawn in our yard in our family home, and my father coming out to the yard and saying, "You've got to come in and watch the funeral for President Roosevelt." I presume I went in and sat in the living room. I don't know what year it was. That would pinpoint it.

My father liked spectator football. On Saturday afternoons he'd always watch a game.

Riess: Did he expect you to watch with him?

Ireland: Not necessarily, because I might be going off skiing someplace. I think he was kind a loner, my father. He didn't ever make an issue out of, like, saying, "Well, sit down here next to me," or "Sit down here and let's watch this game together," or whatever. That wouldn't have been his way of doing things.

Riess: The Zenith radio, what did it look like?

Ireland: It had legs, turned legs on it, and the radio part would have been about where I'm holding it. It would have been about like this. It had legs that came to the ground. It would be a fairly traditional cabinet sort of thing. I wish I had it now. It had two doors that opened out, and it had this--I don't know what the word is, the thing that you changed stations.

Riess: Knob. Dial?

Ireland: Yes, the dial. It's quite a change from radio to television. I was trying to pinpoint down just when--and all I remember about that incident is my father coming out to the yard and saying, "You should watch the president's funeral." And I don't think of my father as being a super patriot, but he was. He used to say things like, "If you don't buy war bonds, then we can't win the war, so you might as well buy war bonds as an assist to the government for all the expenditures." I remember him saying that as well.

Minorities

Riess: Did you have any Japanese-Americans in Bellingham?

Ireland: Oh, boy. I don't think so. We had one in high school, when I was in high school, and he turned out, I think, to be a hairdresser, hair salon person in Seattle.

Riess: So you don't have memories of the relocation?

Ireland: I don't remember that I was ever--with black people, I think there was two or three, literally. Bellingham was, I should say, a WASP-y town. We had all kinds of other ethnic groups, you know. We had lots of Swedes and Norwegians and Yugoslavians. The fishing fleet was all Yugoslavian. And that was kind of fun to have that. We got lots of jokes to tell about the Swedes and Norwegians and all that. But I don't think there was a Japanese-American or black or even Hispanic--none of it. It was kind of a controlled little community. Anti-Semitic as well.

Riess: How did you know that?

Ireland: Because I think that could be talked about. In high school, you know, there were a dozen or so, and somehow to some people it made a difference. Yes.

Riess: Would that be something you'd talk about at home, puzzle that out?

Ireland: Yes, I think so. And I can't imagine what would precipitate that, but something would occur that one would say, "Oh, well, this person is a Jew," or "This person is a black American." So you have to treat your experience with them, or the reason you're participating in the conversation at all, there's some reason that you take to it, and it may be an ethnic slur—it would be very easy for people in a small town to make those things which we've somehow learned to call ethnic slurs. Did we use that expression? Yes.

As a matter of fact, my older sister would be very protective of anyone who was a minority of any sort. She would argue with my father. I never would, but my sister would. Like, maybe describing some club or fraternal order or something like that that didn't permit Jews or something like that. And that's very recent in this country of ours that there are still ethnic problems, regrettably, of course.

Riess: What do you mean?

Ireland: I mean that minorities are still suffering from not being admitted to the full plate, you know?

Handy-ness, Trash Disposal

Riess: Was your father handy, good at fixing things up? Did you learn that kind of stuff from him?

Ireland: He wasn't handy. Golly, I was thinking of something I want to tell you about. Last Sunday I went to a backyard barbecue of some friends in Oakland, and we were building a big fire to barbecue some chicken and stuff like that. I was carrying wood to the fire--you get armsful and you go--and it reminded me of stacking firewood with my father, because I would select pieces of wood to form my load. I'd pick a piece here, and then I'd say, "Oh, let's take that one, and then let's take this one over here," you know? And my father would say, "They all have to go in the house, so why don't you just take them as they come instead of trying to choose them?"

He made that remark to me several times, that I was wasting time and energy picking up selected pieces of firewood. It's really something. But this building a fire last Sunday caused me to think about that again, because here I was, picking and choosing, picking and choosing.

Riess: How about your mother? Could she do things?

Ireland: She could sew, but everybody could sew. Even I sew. I have sewn.

Riess: Why would you be sewing?

Ireland: Because I had a business in San Francisco on Union Street, selling hides and fur and trendy decorator wild animal skins, zebra skins. The zebra count was heavy here. So we made things: pillows, fur pillows, blankets called cuirasses, and they were a combination of smaller pelts sewed together. We had a fur machine, a machine just designed for sewing fur, which furriers still use, that style of machine. I learned to make fur pillows and fur blankets and put felt lining on the bottom of the zebra skin and things like that.

But anyway, my mother would sew stuff for my sisters, and of course, when you have three sisters it's a lot of hand-me-downs, and they didn't always like that. They wanted original stuff, but they would accept some hand-me-down stuff.

My father was not handy. As I say, I don't think I ever saw him with a screwdriver or a hammer in his hand. My mother--this was in the fall of the year, this was the time of year when you started to make things. It seems to me she would go to Canada, to Vancouver, where we had relatives, and she'd buy yardage there, usually wool yardage, and she'd make stuff for my sisters. And she knit a sweater for me. I remember that.

Riess: When things got old around home, they just got thrown out? They didn't get fixed?

Ireland: Yes. We had a summer cabin in the Northwest on Orcas Island. I told you we used to throw the broken dishes off the bluff to the water, and then when we would go down in subsequent years we'd find familiar pieces of chinaware. "Oh, I remember that teacup," or, "I remember that platter," or something. And the stove. The salt air, or the salt in the firewood that we burned in the wood stove--we still have a wood stove--it would eat the stove up. [laughs] Eat it, not heat it, but eat it. We would throw the range, the wood range over the cliff, over the bluff, onto the beach. We had no sense whatsoever of trying to be environmental. We didn't have any sense of destroying anything.

Riess: As you describe it, it sounds like a ritual, festive activity: throwing the stove over.

Ireland: Oh, yes. Well, nightly my task was to throw the garbage over the cliff. Maybe a sea gull would grab it if there was anything edible in it. Throwing the garbage, the daily garbage out onto the water and you hope the tide will take it away. You get rid of it: out of sight, you know, out of mind. But I don't remember any environmental conversation where we ever admitted to destroying the habitat, our own personal habitat, I guess. It's like wild animals: you hear, particularly elephants and giraffe and things, that they eat up their environment. They go and eat. They have no sense of when to quit or stop, and very often they eat themselves out of their life.

Riess: Wasn't there a local dump around there?

Ireland: There is now. Oh, yes. Now activist groups have taken over, the way they have all over the world, in some cases, and there is a dump, and you can only dump on certain days of the week and you put the aluminum cans here and you put the glass there--you know, the same routine that's going on here.

"Angel Go Round"

Riess: I know you liked finding stones on the beach. Would you also have rummaged on the beach to find beautiful driftwood? Did you have a sense of that being beautiful?

Ireland: I don't think it was in my vocabulary to use that word ["beautiful"]. Just like the word "statue." I've come to learn to use it now--"sculpture" yes, but not "statue."

Riess: Why is "statue" coming up now?

Ireland: Well, because I'm using things which get identified and called "statues." You probably saw in some of the books that you, I hope, have. There's one piece called "Angel Go Round." It's a fiberglass angel on a motor that surveils the whole gallery. Incorporated into this is concrete statues. "Statue" was always sort of a comedown. To say something was a statue meant that you weren't acknowledging--if it was a very sophisticated and culturally important issue it would be sculpture and not statue. I don't know. Lawn statue, garden statues. In some cases, I suppose you can say they're intertwined a little bit, but there is a way--you know, you separate sculpture--sculpture doesn't always necessarily include "statue." It's something that's almost a slang expression.

You asked me about beauty, and I didn't answer because that's the big one, you know. That's a toughie. I don't recall--when I said it wasn't in my vocabulary, the idea of beauty, I hadn't learned to use that word. And I think that now one even hesitates or I hesitate about calling myself an "artist". I think it's an elitist expression somehow, or conceptual art sometimes

tends to be elitist. It's supposed to be idea art, and idea-oriented art, and that is kind of elitist. It means the rest, "They don't have ideas. We've got ideas."

God, I don't know how you can do this, Suzanne. Well, I think as time goes on it'll make it easier. You having to transcribe all this is just--!

Riess: Somebody else will transcribe it. It's fine.

Ireland: Okay. I was only wanting to be supportive by that remark.

Riess: Thank you very much.

Height, Fame

Riess: In high school--you know, girls take home ec and the boys take shop. Did you have shop?

Ireland: I had shop, yes.

Riess: Were you good at shop?

Ireland: Yes, I was pretty good. I remember making a lamp base on a lathe, turning it. It sort of looked a little bit like a lighthouse. It was truncated and it came up--it was wider at the bottom than at the top. And there was some carving on it, and I carved some leaves. I don't know whatever happened to that, either. But I started to have the sense of the preciousness of this, this lamp, and that you look forward to going to wood shop and having that time to yourself to make something unique. I had a sense, even going back that far to high school, that was a little bit like the art classes, where you could do anything you wanted as long as you didn't cut your fingers off. They were careful about power tools and things.

Riess: Were you popular in high school?

Ireland: I don't think I was popular. Well, I was tall, and somehow that makes you a little bit focal, you know? It depends on who you ask whether I was popular or not. I wasn't an athlete particularly. I mean, I was a pretty good skier, snow skier, but I think probably more like a loner than otherwise.

I wasn't--I don't know what to say. There wasn't any melancholy. I wasn't depressed, that I saw. I think I would just answer that I was kind of a--well, I've lost it here, Suzanne. I want to

say "average." I was just sort of an average person. That's my impression of myself. But once again, I said there weren't more than one or two or three in the whole high school of 1,200 that were as tall. Of course, that in itself was--you know, I'd get called certain nicknames, like "High Pockets," that was one. There were these nicknames that tall people had to suffer.

What you really had to suffer was buying clothes. What fit one person wouldn't fit me, so I had to take--in Bellingham, once again, there was no haberdasher that was able to stock stuff for one or two tall people, you know? People would ask me about basketball, and I would have to tell them, "No," I wasn't a basketball player. I wasn't coordinated well enough. I wasn't a football player because that was too tough and rough. Like I said, I'm just sort of an average Joe.

Riess: Have you gone back to reunions? Do the people who were in your high school class know that you're famous? What do they say?

Ireland: They remember--we all sort of have a time freeze where we remember certain things very specifically, and these come out sometimes in the reunions. I think I've probably done my last reunion. I can't even remember what year it was. Well, '48 was the graduating year. I would recognize no one, but they would recognize me. Of course, everybody has got gray hair. [laughs] Sometimes we use a touchstone. We just grab onto one little fragment of a story that describes why you're remembered in high school, because you did something crazy or whatever.

Riess: And do they know who you have become?

Ireland: No. The odd person who I've made a point of it maybe, but generally no.

Fathers, Cross-Country Trip

Riess: When you went to Western Washington State University, were you living at home?

Ireland: Yes, exactly.

In that time between high school and college, that spring we did a family drive across the United States. Can you imagine six people in a regular car, four-door sedan, driving from--well, my mother was born in North Dakota, and my father had relatives in Iowa. Anyway, we did the family drive. After that, we were all another year older, and we all went in different directions.

My older sister was graduating from college in the East, in Vermont, so our destination on that trip was Bennington.

Riess: Bennington. That's interesting.

Ireland: Yes, and that would support interest in the culture on my parents' part, because they had to make some sacrifices to see us all through college at the same time, too. My younger sister was just beginning--she's four years, I think, younger than me. But anyway, so we bundled up in our car and drove to Bennington.

Riess: What are your memories of that trip?

Ireland: I remember there was a lot of arguing each day about who got to sit next to the window. And it was hot, for the most part. It was America in typical summer weather. There weren't freeways yet, as I recall. You know, the big interstate system.

Riess: Were you driving?

Ireland: I was driving some, yes. My father, of course, did most of the driving.

If I could say something to my father at this point in time, I would tell him how much I appreciate that he had to deal with six people for breakfast, six people for lunch, six people for the night someplace, in some motel, six people, all of these times. You know, it's like when we'd go to the beach in the summertime and we'd get home after being sunburned and dirty with sand and cranky and half asleep, and we would all go to bed. My father would have to unpack the car and get the cooler out, get all the sandy stuff out and then get all the towels out. You know, his job was just beginning. We take some of that sort of thing for granted. Really, of all of the things that I remember about my parents with respect to myself was how much they gave us.

From Bennington we picked up my sister after the ceremony and we drove to Montreal, and then we went down to Florida. Spent a week in New York City, probably.

I took my two children on a trip like that. I was living in New York in '75. They flew back, and we drove back across the United States. We drove down to Florida. But every night they'd want, "Da-a-d, we gotta have a McDonald's close by." Or, "Dad, hey, we gotta have a swimming pool. Don't find a place without a swimming pool." That was their focus. I'd say, "Let's go to the Smithsonian," or, "Let's go look at the Aeronautic and Space thing." No, they didn't want to do that.

But somehow they absorbed--I would overhear them talking to their friends about what they'd seen and that sort of thing. Sometimes they didn't want to let on that they were having a certain experience.

"Doing More" With Art

Riess: Bennington, was that option open to you? Not Bennington, but something--

Ireland: --comparable? I suppose it might have been, but I was content to not have to do that, not have to go to a major college, university. I think maybe I was starting to have a sense that I might do more with art. See, I started CCAC in 1950, and I think that--I'm trying to think what year it was, '49 seems to me--well, it wasn't determined that I was going to go to art school, but one of my art teachers took my father aside and said, "You know, David can't spell so I think he'll have to go to art school."

I've told this before, but it's absolutely true. "No," she said, "he'll have to go to art school." You know, the Scandinavians have a name called the "clocker," and a clocker is a person who is sent to--a novitiate?--what's the word? Seminary. If they weren't smart enough to deal with the liturgy, they would make them what they called a clocker, which was someone who just helped in the garden and helped in the kitchen, and they didn't have papal responsibility of any sort.

Anyway, I'm trying to piece together that period of time, 1949-50. The fall of 1950 I started at CCAC for the next three years, and they gave me some credit for the fourth year from Western Washington. WWCE. Western Washington College of Education is what it was, properly, at the time. It's called Western Washington State now, I think.

Riess: Now for you are reading and books very important?

Ireland: I did a lot of reading. Don't ask me what the books were, but I read a lot of books in the Army. Sometimes there would be a weekend where everybody would go on a pass, and I'd have an entire barracks to myself, and so I enjoyed that. I don't recall ever having any sound equipment, no little player, you know. I don't know if the little Sony thing [Walkman] had been designed yet. Probably not, because that would be more in the seventies, I think. So music wasn't a big thing, because I didn't have a tape player or whatever. Musical events, if they existed at all, were in remote towns someplace.

Riess: When you work now, do you like to work in a quiet surrounding, or do you put music on?

Ireland: I do that, music or NPR [National Public Radio], if the news is hot and they don't have too many interviews--they're playing those things constantly. A little chaos doesn't bother me, because I work on a lot of things at one time. I don't just start something and finish it. I don't mind the quiet. I like that. And for the most part I have that in my studio.

More on September 11th and Memorials

Riess: Last week I asked you to talk about the World Trade Center bombing. Since then I've read the folder you gave me from the Christopher Grimes Gallery which quotes Linda Shearer writing about you and referring to "the choice of sites that can be transformed to resonate with memories and history. Sculptural response determined by the architectural realities and public and private histories attached to that site." That seemed relevant to thinking about the World Trade Center and how people are thinking of memorials. I wondered if you have thoughts about how that site should be treated.

Ireland: The site that held the buildings, you mean?

Riess: Yes. What you would do if you were given that?

Ireland: Wow. I'd take it. No, I think--well, Maya Lin [architect of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington] set a standard of excellence and perception in that piece that I think is hard to equal.

Ireland: You would think that every artist would perk up and say, "Hey, maybe they'll choose me to do this memorial." It's going to come down to a dogfight, I'm sure. When you have--the loss thus far is 4,600 people that they still haven't accounted for. And among those 4,600 people there have to be a lot of people who would have a different idea of how to memorialize that event and the loss of these lives. It's not as though it's a memorial for a single figure. This is highly complex, and people who have been victimized by reason of losing relatives will want to see their grief submerged in something elegant.

I would never say that the Maya Lin piece was elegant, but this is why it's such a wonderful work, that it kind of supersedes that idea of something elegant. It could be that it is beautiful in the broadest sense of the term. And to me it is a piece that moves you to tears. It did me, anyway. Twice I visited it, on different occasions. I thought it was a very moving, extremely moving piece. If you knew people who had died in Vietnam you could see--it's like the Wailing Wall, they're just stroking this. I've never seen the Wailing Wall.

Anyway, I guess I might do something with water that would be below the earth, below the surface. That's just picking something out of the air to answer your question.

Riess: The Maya Lin piece, just why do you think it is so moving?

Ireland: For me, it's the going down, almost into your burial position. I think that's one of the things. It can almost be thought of as creepy. That's the wrong choice of words. A person has a sense of themselves going below to a burial site. But, you know, the activists don't like it. They want a guy with a machine gun and canteens full of water and whiskey. You're aware of that piece? I don't know what they call it. But that tells you a lot right there.

My guess would be that they'll be haggling over the World Trade Center memorial for years to come before ever anything is done. They're already receiving things, you know. Bronze foundries are already knocking out heads and busts, and what's to be done with all these things?

You know, while we all acknowledge that this horrendous thing is probably the worst thing that could happen to us, long after we're gone--it may be that in a hundred years no one will be alive that knows any of the people who would be inscribed in the granite or whatever they have to choose. It would be like a tombstone, I suppose, where the rain and the weather--and you know, if you go to is it Trinity Church in the financial district in New York? You can hardly read anything now because the weather has just obliterated most of the text. Of course, cemeteries all over the world are the same way. The text eventually gets consumed by the environment.

So it would be nice if one could say, "This is in perpetuity," which it is, but how do we know--people will say, "Well, we don't know any of these people. We're in the year 3000 now," or something.

Riess: When you think about how difficult it is to settle on Holocaust memorials.

Ireland: Yes, yes.

Riess: Have you ever been asked to do any such work?

Ireland: I've done some public stuff, but nothing--mostly they aren't referred to that way.

There will be competitions, and it may be such that I'm really wrong that it will take years of haggling to resolve it. Maybe what will happen is the president may say, "I want this all done and wrapped up in a year and a half," or maybe there will be some pressure brought and the president will interfere with the cultural schedule. There will be a speech, you know. The president will come out from his shrouded place and say, "We've decided that we're going to spend two years and that's all."

New York's Response to David Ireland, 1973

Riess: One more thing: I listened to the interview that we did last time. The statement, "We needed you ten years ago," when you were in New York and that was the response by galleries, tell me more what that meant.

Ireland: This was one particular gallery. And this is him talking to me, not me talking to him, of course.

The word "minimal" came into the vocabulary, and it meant I think work that was, well, what some of us were calling "New York art." It was dominated, I think, by New York artists. That didn't make it minimal, but I think minimal in the structure of the art work, and probably one of the most well known is Sol LeWitt, but Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin--oh, my word, the litany. There were many artists who were working in a way that wasn't spare, necessarily, but they were reducing things. It grew out, of course, of abstract expressionism, and eventually everybody seemed to agree that it wasn't the way--to go forward, we have to get rid of some of this--. Oh, this is terrible!

Riess: [laughs] I'm hanging on every word. This gallery said your work came too late?

Ireland: I think there used to be a little joke around about Brice Marden, that everybody was painting like Brice Marden. He was with a gallery called Bykert. The work was generally spare. You know, monochrome. And I think it was a matter of the abstract expressionism going into polychrome, which was a holdover from classic times. So Brice Marden is one of the earlier people, and Bob Mangold as well. They were doing these color-field pieces, where there was just one solid color. And Ellsworth Kelly would be in there. You could name a hundred artists.

Riess: That's bad news, isn't it, if you can name a hundred artists who were doing it?

Ireland: Well, I would have a tough time. But no, I think you could put down a pecking order, who's at the top. Like I said, Sol LeWitt would be near the top, and Brice Marden. People said they'd have to have a Brice Marden look-alike show, because everybody's work looked like his. That's kind of what I wanted to get off. But he did some beautiful things, and he continues to. He's sort of changed his style a little bit. The progression and all is substantiated by the work that he's done in the last twenty years, thirty years, maybe.

My work--I wasn't being a hero, I was just being another person on the bandwagon, you know, trying to copy a Brice Marden work, you know? Or a Sol LeWitt work.

Riess: Would you show those pieces now in a retrospective?

Ireland: I'll show some of them. You try not to be derivative, but you can't help it somehow. You can, if you just say to yourself, "I'm just going to stay here in this chair until I purge myself of all of this referential work," you know? [laughs] There are artists who have done it.

Allan Kaprow, who's in the San Diego area, he's the father of the "happening." I heard him in a lecture say, "I went around to see everybody I knew that I could get to, to see what they were doing, and I determined I wasn't going to be like anyone that I saw." So he avoided being identified as derivative of so-and-so, it didn't exist, because the happenings were totally unique and original to him. There are a couple of others, too, but for the most part, I think that he prides himself and is acknowledged as the father of the happening. Happenings were crazy things.³

Riess: How does Rauschenberg erasing a De Kooning drawing fit in there?

Ireland: That would be before Brice Mardenism. I don't know exactly when, but the forties? [1953] Somehow I think that clearly Brice Marden was after them, but I think they were an inspiration to people who would be--. Franz Klein would have been one of that group, of course. And Frank Stella somehow would be later, but they're just--we won't get through a hundred, Suzanne, but we'll come close.

Dan Flavin

Dan Flavin--I went to a little party that was given for him when he was doing some etching here at Crown Point Press. And he wasn't uncomfortable, but he just sat in a chair the whole night until it was time to go home, whenever it happened to be. But he came to do, as I said, etchings with Crown Point. Normally artists who were working at Crown Point would try to reflect some of the work that they were known for as painters, and they would take some element of the painting and take it into an etching. He decided that since you can't draw light, that he would draw sailboats. To this day, I think there are a few prints around of Dan Flavin's sailboats. That wonderful way--things like that made me jealous at times, to think that someone could let go and just enter a whole new realm. That's a story that came from Kathan Brown, I think, or possibly from Dan Flavin, himself.

Anyway, this sort of circles us back to David McKee, who made the remark to me, "Where were you ten years ago?" You know, he said, "You were playing in Africa when I could have used you." But he said, "Now I have that category of work taken care of. Someone else is doing it, so I don't need two of you, or three or four."

Riess: It seems an odd way of talking about art. "I've got that covered."

3. Also see p. 137 of this interview.

Ireland: Yes, and I reminded him of it fairly recently. I went to the Martin Puryear opening--he's at the Berkeley Museum right now. An awfully nice guy. Certainly a good artist. And totally unlike others, he's pretty much carved out his own slot. But I happened to go to a no-host little thing at the Durant Hotel and so I found myself sitting next to David McKee and I reminded him of what he had said. We had quite a nice conversation. I don't remember now whether he said, "Yes, I remember," because that would be really presumptuous, that I presumed that he would remember thirty years later.

Riess: But for you his saying that was a decisive moment.

Ireland: Yes. Well, the burden ends up, of course, on the artist, who has to do whatever he has to do to separate himself from everybody else. But as a dealer, professional dealer, it worked fine for him to have one photographer or two, and one etcher, and one--you know.

Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns

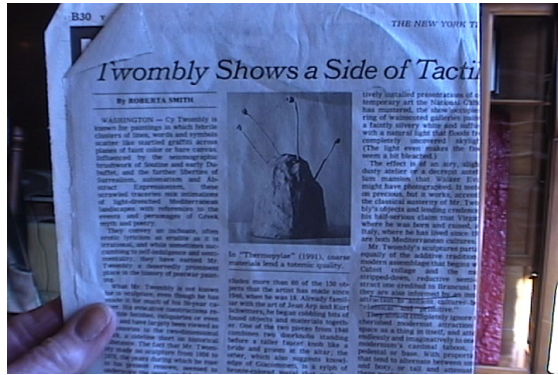
Riess: This is reminding me of a review in the New York *Times* about six months about Cy Twombly.³ It showed some stuff that seemed like you might have done it.

Ireland: [looking at illustrated newspaper article] Well, without reading the text [of the article] I would say he's someone who I'm sympathetic with this way [what he is doing here] more so than the drawings that he does on canvas, the scribble stuff. It's an attempt, I think, to go another dimension. When you've said everything you can in two dimensions, the natural thing is to go to the third dimension or the fourth dimension, or whatever. Does that make sense to you?

Riess: It *does* make sense.

Ireland: You know, if you get to be like Rauschenberg and [Jasper] Johns--here I'm talking like an authority, and clearly I'm not. But where do you go? Don't think it hasn't been an issue with lots of artists. They say, "I don't have any more ideas."

I like this [referring to Twombly piece "Thermopylae"] very much. I'm not so fussy about what I see here, but what are you going to do with a newspaper photograph?



Riess: To me it looks like Cy Twombly got his ideas from you. It seems to me stealing.

Ireland: Stealing?

Riess: Stealing ideas.

###

3-00:01:15

Ireland: I've always professed to stealing Brice Marden, not singularly, but all of those of us who have done monochrome panels. Everybody--because it's reductive. You keep doing something, and eventually you eliminate practically whatever you find to do.

3-00:01:51

[reading from review of Twombly exhibition] "Twombly shows his side of tactile eloquence." Well, Roberta Smith--she's one of those people who you don't argue with.

3-00:02:14

Riess: Why do you like this "Thermopylae"?

3-00:02:17

Ireland: Because it sort of has that throwaway look to it. I mean, it doesn't have sophisticated design. No planning, no forethought. And I like these antennas. I don't know, but I'm anxious to see the piece--I suppose it would appear in a catalog somewhere, but to see the whole piece would be great. I have a sense that it's like this, and these antennas are going out, so the whole piece is no larger than what I'm trying to describe here.

3-00:02:57

But we were talking about Rauschenberg and Johns and where do they go. I don't know what Rauschenberg is up to, but Johns has--you know the piece of his current work that is at the [San Francisco] museum? It's up permanently. Not permanently, but it's up a lot. You know the string that goes across? Which really baffles me. It's almost the best way that one could avoid being like anyone else, that nobody's using string. Well, that's cutting it pretty short, there's more in it than the string. But it has a piece of string that starts sort of halfway up the format and then loops around and comes to the other side, at an equal place, so it's sort of like

a hammock of string. If you have an opportunity at all to go down there to see that piece. I liked it. There was a risk element in it.

3-00:05:23

I find this [Cy Twombly piece] inspiring, quite frankly, because I like non-designed things.

Franz Kline

3-00:06:21

Riess: I thought you would be cross that Twombly had stuck things into pieces of concrete, that that was your thing.

3-00:06:39

Ireland: Oh, I suppose, Suzanne, if I were a twenty-two- or twenty-three-year-old art student or somebody, I would be beating my chest because this guy, Mr. Big, Mr. Important, Mr. Everything has outdone him and ruined his chances--this is the art student's chances--for ever penetrating that material. I was that way. I'm sure I was.

3-00:07:08

I remember just almost succumbing to--I was outraged when I saw Jackson Pollack's Blue Poles, or whatever they were. It was 1954 or '5, and there was a big spread in *Life* magazine on Jackson Pollack. I said, "This guy is no place. This guy is just a terrible artist." And we're all laughing and saying, "Look at this! Look at this!" This was just absurd, you know? Well, the rest is history.

3-00:07:52

Riess: Did you really feel that way about him when you saw it?

3-00:07:56

Ireland: Oh, yes. But at the moment, you know, the same time period, I was determined--I had never seen a Franz Kline painting for real. I'd seen a little catalog. As a matter of fact, I had a little catalog this big [demonstrates size]. And I said, "This is where I want to be." On one of my visits to my children in Santa Barbara, we went on to LA--I was sort of looking for things to do with the children--we drove on for the weekend to Los Angeles and went to LACMA, it seems to me.

3-00:08:43

I made a deal with the kids. I said, "You stick it out with me." It would bore 'em to death, you know. I said, "When I see something I like, then we'll quit." Well, I was up a couple of floors at LACMA, and I looked across the open well--you know how it is. I came out of the elevator and looked--straight ahead was an enormous beautiful, beautiful Franz Kline thing with this rich black, white, just carved. My children report that tears were coming down my cheeks because I was seeing for the first time the painting that at that point in my career, which was just getting going--I still had not seen a work that was one of my idol works. It was just the most moving thing to see a painting that brought tears to your eyes. The kids said, "Great! Now we can quit!"

3-00:09:58

Ireland: If you look at [Robert] Motherwell, Kline, all of these people who really were--[Willem] de Kooning, God, you know, he had another hundred to lay out. But you could see why Brice Marden and Robert Mangold would be--Mangold was still hanging on a little bit to the drawn image, the lines that would always appear. Brice Marden had eliminated the lines, and he was just doing monochrome work. But I think these things--if you look at the chronology, too, you sort of see how these things evolve, the different sort of styles. Some artists just hit the right place at the right time: "This isn't being done, and I like this territory."

Working with Wire, and Fire

3-00:14:00

Riess: Now, with the camera on would you tell me about the wire pieces. There's a small one behind you.



3-00:14:44

Ireland: Okay. This comes from a straight piece of wire, and I found a way of kind of weaving it, the piece of wire, and just sort of--you know, when you have a fairly good work it's hard to describe it sometimes, and I'm a little lost for words about giving you an accurate account, other than for me to say that it's a drawing element that attracts me. Obviously, it doesn't have immediately to do with the house or any of the other scratches or lines or whatever you see [on the walls and ceilings]. It's really isolated from the house and its concerns, I think. Well, maybe not isolated from it. But it's a wire drawing. It's simply a wire drawing.

3-00:15:47

Riess: Did you do it on paper first?

3-00:15:49

Ireland: No. I could, I would not be opposed to it, but I've tried to draw like this on paper and it's very difficult because it doesn't bring out the dimension in it at all. It turns out to be a flat work.

3-00:16:22

Riess: Is it important to you that it's set off by the lines on the wall?

3-00:16:30

Ireland: No.

3-00:16:31

I was looking at that, though, more seriously. I think if you squint at it, it incorporates it; it takes it into your view. I suppose you could ask me, "Would you prefer if I took the lines out, or took the wire piece out and relocated it someplace where it didn't have to compete with the line?" But I don't see it competing. I see it more as being just a separate work. By the same token, I can't imagine making a second piece or any number of pieces that would ever be the same. They use the same technique, but the technique is not without its problems.

3-00:17:30

Riess: And behind and above you is another small one.



3-00:17:42

Ireland: Yes, it's just a little wire drawing. Maybe the key here, Suzanne, is that it's not to be taken too seriously. I don't know whether that's accurate or not to say that. Maybe that's something I shouldn't say.

3-00:17:59

Riess: You mean the smaller one is not to be taken seriously?

3-00:18:03

Ireland: No, well, this is more serious than that. It took some time to do it, as well, to find the right wire that was flexible enough that I could bend it into those shapes. I find it more like a, interestingly enough for me, a de Kooning type thing. If you look at some de Koonings--just the gesture of bending the wire.

3-00:18:57

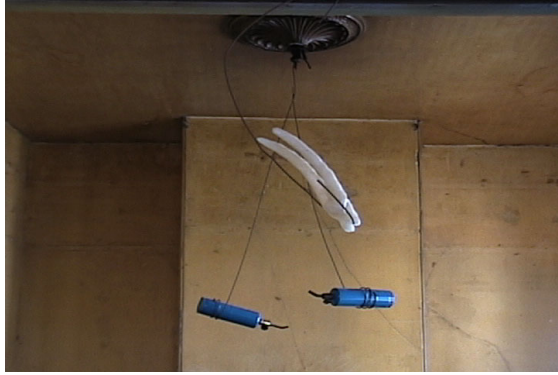
Riess: Now I'm focusing on the oryx up there.

3-00:19:04

Ireland: Oh, yes, the Flying Oryx. Well, that was clearly intended to be a sketch in wax of the oryx downstairs.

3-00:19:27

Riess: And the two blue tanks on the ceiling?



3-00:19:32

Ireland:

Yes. Well, there's a fire drawing. Think of things as being monochrome or polychrome, and drawing. I love the idea of fire drawing. I don't know any better way to describe it. Picasso did the flashlight things, you know--and I'm not identifying with Picasso, but I think there's some similarity of thought there, that I can take that thing and light it and wave it around.

3-00:20:36

[unhooks from tape recorder to light the two propane tanks, gives them a push, and they bob and move with flame]



3-00:22:10

Riess:

Wow! Are you allowed to do this? This is what goes through my mind.

3-00:22:17

Ireland:

The worst thing that could happen to me is that someone would alert the fire department and have them over here, and then I'd never be able to do it again, so I do it in small spurts. At night, when it's very effective, I probably have to avoid it.

3-00:22:34

Riess:

What are they, anyway?

3-00:22:37

Ireland:

Propane. Just propane gas. It's the kind of thing you use when you go camping or whatever people do.

3-00:22:46

Riess:

How many times have you had to replace them?

- 3-00:22:50
Ireland: Never have, but I don't let it run on and on, you know?
- 3-00:23:08
Riess: The tension of the wire is a big part of this, isn't it?
- 3-00:23:11
Ireland: Yes, exactly. [looking out the window] [moves to piece again.] I'm going to shut it off now.
- 3-00:24:43
Did I show you this last time? You know what it's for? I'm giving you the special preferential treatment here. [wraps wire piece around his waist in the fashion of a sporran]
- 3-00:26:28
Riess: What's in that? Hair?
- 3-00:26:30
Ireland: My hair. My pubic hair. It may have faded in the light. Does hair fade?
- 3-00:26:42
Riess: Wow! Have you shown that?
- 3-00:26:49
Ireland: No. I don't think I have. But it's ready to go. These are things that--you asked me something about whether I have an audience or not. If I want to amuse myself, be a little bit crazy around the house, I can do this.

Copper Window

- 3-00:31:36
Riess: Before we leave this room, the copper window. We didn't talk about that.



- 3-00:31:49
Ireland: No. And I'm in a dilemma, Suzanne, right now because I don't know whether--it will polish to a bright copper, but I like it not that way, you know? I didn't know that. I used to religiously have a little ceremony where I took the film off it to make it a bright piece of copper, and

since I've lived with it all these years, just letting it take its natural course, then it makes me want to leave it alone.

3-00:32:27

Riess: Why did you make that piece?

3-00:32:31

Ireland: The window was broken, and I felt I didn't want to necessarily repair it, but it's the--I wanted a material that communicates the inside and outside. You know, there's a tape that goes with this. Did I play the tape for you? What I did on the tape is to describe the view. A sort of loop, it keeps going.

3-00:34:34

Let's see. I just want to--[for one minute he plays the tape which describes exactly the view from the window.]

3-00:35:15

I think you get the idea. It describes the view. And copper being a conductive element--I've chosen copper for the material to block the window out. It was an etching plate. It's the kind of stuff that the print people do.

3-00:35:52

Riess: But if you shine it it becomes what?

3-00:35:57

Ireland: It becomes something else. It just happens to be that that's what you do. It would be very much like a painting. Just because you arrive at a particular place doesn't mean you have to live with it forever. If you're the painter, of course, not the viewer.

On and Under the Table

3-00:36:29

Riess: Let's look at the things on the table, too.



3-00:37:07

Ireland: The first item is a hair dryer from which I've unhooked the heating element. Sculpture in the classic sense was thought to be any material that's re-formed, so what happens here, you plug this in and you start this, it just blows, and the blowing is re-forming the air around it, Okay? Enough said.

3-00:37:47

This is my ear African map-influenced work [the elephant ear being the same shape as the map of Africa], and it has Air-D-1 on the lid, and this is comparable to Duchamp's "500 cc's of Paris Air." So wherever this goes, I can pull the lid off, fill it full of local air. It could be in New York, it could be here, it could be at your place, whatever.



3-00:38:22

Riess: What you're holding is the handle?

3-00:38:26

Ireland: I cut this flat piece on here, but maybe if I had to identify it and sign it, so to speak, I could sign it here, if need be.

3-00:38:46

This is a wire-and-concrete drawing, and it's the Dumbball--the Dumbball is one of my things. It's a drawing, and it incorporates the concrete, but it's like a galaxy, and I'll tell you why. This is a piece I call "Saturnia," for Saturn. It could only be effective if it's photographed. You see, if you were photographing that, it would be a blur around [demonstrates].



3-00:39:55

Then, the final piece is "Hollywood Strings." There used to be a quartet years ago when I was probably in high school, something called the Hollywood Strings, so I have a string collection which I inherited from the man I bought the house from. You can see Hollywood, and the string.



3-00:40:26

Riess: And it's sitting on a base?

3-00:40:29

Ireland: It's on a base. I don't know what this would be. I think it was probably a laboratory for a Bunsen burner or some kind of a thing, you know? Yes. So that's the contents of this table.

3-00:40:49

Riess: And under the table, in a basin?

3-00:40:53

Ireland: This I'm not sure about. This is a little bit disgusting, to me. It's meat. I might at some point do something different with this, but I haven't as yet. In Africa, South Africa they make jerked meat called biltong. That's the translation. And biltong is any meat that they dry it, and you eat it, you carve off slices of biltong. I wouldn't want to eat this, but I guess in some situation you could.

3-00:42:03

Riess: It *is* meat?

3-00:42:06

Ireland: I took a piece of steak and I cut it up. This is actually meat.

3-00:42:14

Riess: And it's kind of shredding itself into the bowl?

3-00:42:17

Ireland: That's just to keep whatever off the floor. I can't be sure.

3-00:42:29

Here, this looks like it's an extra piece. I could make you an earring, Suzanne, a meat earring.

##

[Interview 3: November 9, 2001]##

Insurance Work, GI Bill

4-00:02:08

Ireland: The summer following graduation I went into the army for two years [June 1953-1955]. The draft law still applied. And I was very unhappy about that. But later on when I realized I was eligible for the GI Bill, then it made it very worthwhile because it paid my tuition for graduate school, eventually. So '53, that's when I was at Arts and Crafts. Then there were two years in the army followed by working in my father's insurance business, selling insurance. And also I met an architect in Bellingham--he was like the city architect, he had only one competitor to deal with. Now there's a whole bunch of them. And I did architectural drafting for this architect.

4-00:03:31

That was pretty useful because when I started to do a little trip in Europe and Africa, I took drawings with me that I had done so I was able to get work in foreign countries, particularly South Africa. And I was in South Africa, it seems to me, from--well, actually, the work with my father in the insurance business was after that, because I wrote him from South Africa and said I thought I'd try joining him in the insurance business, being as how he'd helped me travel for a couple of years. I thought after running around I could pay back that support.

4-00:04:33

Anyway, art school, the army, working for my father, and then after that--there's a couple of years in there which I can't remember at the moment, but I had finished my South African time. Then's when I went to work for my father. Eventually my father retired, and it seemed like an opportunity for me to get out of the insurance business and do something I was interested in. I started importing things from South Africa and East Africa and eventually started to do safaris in East Africa. That all happened in the late sixties, '66 or '67, in there, and kind of terminating around 1970.

4-00:05:47

In 1971, '72 I decided to go to graduate school, art graduate school at the Art Institute.

4-00:06:00

Riess: What made your mind change? After the war why didn't you go straight to graduate school?

4-00:06:25

Ireland: I wasn't involved in art yet, other than art school in the fifties. I had not--I think what happened--well, divorce can change things. When my wife and I decided to separate, I said, "Here's an opportunity for me to go to graduate school." Things were in a kind of a turmoil, so

here's a place I can say, "Well, you take what's yours; I take what's mine." The traditional sort of divorce. And so I took advantage of that time.

"I Can Do That"

4-00:08:51

I started to see things and become attracted to mostly the expressionist people, even though what was popular in that time was the emergence of people like John Cage and the Fluxus artists. I was quite fascinated by what was going on in the art world, and, like I said, Andy Warhol was a big name, not to be treated lightly. There were just so many artists--I could hardly imagine how many there would be.

4-00:09:35

Anyway, so I was fascinated by it as a viewer, and I was saying something to myself like this: "I can do that. If this is what's going on, I can do it." So that's what really propelled me into art school, the Art Institute, was that I said, "Well, let's try it."

4-00:10:02

Riess: Where were you seeing things?

4-00:10:05

Ireland: I wasn't going to galleries so much, either. I think just a general absorption, just by being in San Francisco and being interested--I used to go to the Art Institute and walk through the studios to see if there was anything there where I thought I fit in. Actually, I didn't, but I was making an attempt to locate myself in the art-making business.

4-00:10:35

It got very exciting because I started doing everything: sculpture, painting, printmaking. I don't think I did anything with photography necessarily other than that I had taken a lot of photographs in East Africa, so I had lots of photographs, and I traveled then, too, around the world. I had even then pictures of Afghanistan. I was there. And traveled in India.

4-00:11:08

Riess: You said you were starting to do some printmaking and this and that. Was that in the school context, or were you doing that before?

4-00:11:29

Ireland: I did some before I applied. I was trying to make a portfolio, so I was doing a little of both, getting it ready to make a submission.

4-00:11:41

Riess: A couple of words you've used are interesting to me. You refer to the art "business," and you said, "I can do that."

4-00:11:52

Ireland: That doesn't sound complimentary, but. In Los Angeles they talk about "the industry," and that means anything to do with entertainment. "The industry". That's the word I've heard Los Angeles people use. I don't need to have that in my vocabulary at all.

4-00:12:16

Riess: But you could feel comfortable saying the art business.

4-00:12:23

Ireland: Oh, it doesn't sound very arty, but--I don't know, that sounds awfully commercial. Of course it does. I wasn't thinking of it in those terms. I wasn't thinking about a gallery or selling art or anything like that, which would really support the notion of business. So let's call it something else.

Fluxus

4-00:12:51

Riess: Did the work of the Fluxus artists attract you?

4-00:13:03

Ireland: I'll have to come back to this question. I went to New York when I graduated in 1974, and then--I felt that what I was interested in, which was more like the Fluxus people again--I wasn't seeing that in New York; even though it existed, I wasn't seeing that. So I said, "I might as well go back to San Francisco because already the conceptual people are doing things there."

4-00:14:10

Riess: Fluxus, says my book on Conceptual Art, was one of the "two movements of the early 1960s from which Conceptual Art of the late 1960s most clearly derives."

4-00:14:18

Ireland: Right, and the fifties. Alan Kaprow was sort of the head of the Fluxus people because he was the father of the Happening. And let's see, John Cage, of course, was very focal and George Brecht. Here locally Bruce Connor was important. Tom Marioni, of course, was very important.

4-00:15:14

Riess: And they were in the Fluxus group?

4-00:15:16

Ireland: Yes, even though Tom doesn't think of himself, I don't think, as a Fluxus artist, he's a Conceptual Artist--but I don't think that's his choice of words. I don't even know if John Cage calls himself a Fluxus artist, either. There were several. Dick Higgins would be one. And Brecht. Anyway, we don't need a litany of all the Fluxus artists.

4-00:16:10

Riess: My book says it is characterized by "individual eccentricity and collective amusement."

4-00:16:16

Ireland: I don't think that's quite accurate. Its job is not to entertain you, it's to develop an idea and the permutations that go with it. It's developing probably an expression or a thought or an idea, and what does it take to express that idea. I don't think of art making as something to amuse.

4-00:17:33

Riess: Is it more a matter of wit?

4-00:17:35

Ireland: Wit, and I think one's intelligence produces all kinds of things. Some things I've always thought of as--I'm not sure that I like this, but I'm going to say it--fraternity boy's actions, you know, things that students would do, throwing some effigy out the window of a fraternity house or whatever, you know. Whatever it could be. I don't think Fluxus artists were interested in pranks. That's the best word I can think of is pranks, or themselves as being prankish.

4-00:18:21

I've been referred to as one of those people. I don't think it's accurate, because I don't think I want to be known as a prankster.

4-00:18:34

Riess: The Fluxus movement would be contrasted with Minimalism.

4-00:18:43

Ireland: Yes. The Minimalists are people like Sol LeWitt, people who abstracted something from their environment or from their experience generally. They have taken something out, or they made an observation. There were a lot of people in that Minimalist time. And I have one toe in it because I think a wonderful way to express yourself is through minimal art.

4-00:19:24

What did I read last week about Arte Povera? That movement is kind of coupled with Conceptual Art, of course. I think something I was reading indicated that it could have come from Russia originally, that the Russians were doing work that no one could buy or would buy, and there were no materials for art making, you had to create your own materials. And if you had an idea you wanted to express, you just had to fine tune it until you could find little bits of this and that, and put it together.

4-00:20:37

But Italy gets the recognition, I think, for being the Arte Povera people.

[There is a slight interruption in the video here.]

4-00:20:58

Riess: To go back to what you said earlier, you were seeing things and were saying, "I can do that." Would you give some examples?

4-00:21:10

Ireland: Well, I think if someone said to me, "Do you think you could be like Andy Warhol, painting a Campbell Soup can?" or something like that, I would say, "I could do that, but it doesn't really interest me." It's acknowledging that there is some place that you could--if put upon, you could produce an Andy Warhol piece. But it wouldn't satisfy me because somehow--I'd just have to trace myself through an example, and I can't put my finger on it at the moment.

[tape interruption]

Concrete

4-00:21:23

Ireland: What interested me more was the bending of the wire and the concrete things, the concrete globs. And no one was bending wire except for [Alexander] Calder, who I don't think was alive any longer. But I wasn't interested in little circuses and stuff. Calder, you know, swept the art country, or art community is a much better word, when he did his little toy things, you know, and the mobiles. The mobiles were magnificent.

4-00:22:18

And I said, "Okay, I can be like Calder and do Calder mobiles." Everybody loved the mobiles, and all the major museums have one. Most of them. Again I said, "Okay, this is wonderful work, but it's not what I want to do." So I kept kind of saying, "Okay, this is not it. So let's say we approach things from that way. This isn't it, this isn't it, this isn't it--okay, then what is?" Eventually I came to the place where I said, "This is it. This is where I really feel happy and comfortable," and this is working with the concrete, developing the Dumbball action, making things that have a low design aspect to them. I didn't want the thing to be overpowered by, manipulated by design. I wanted it to sort of design itself somehow. Well, if we extract something from nature, we can't manipulate nature necessarily. We can manipulate nature, but it's a little bit different in this instance.

4-00:23:41

So anyway, I was fascinated by the concrete, and I don't know why: its universal nature, it didn't cost anything, to speak of, and I felt I could defend it, somehow. I mean defend it if someone put me on the spot and said, "Okay, what are you doing?" I think I could come up with a reasonable answer.

4-00:24:18

Don't put me on the spot, please. [laughs]

4-00:24:23

Am I getting anywhere with that whole idea?

4-00:24:26

Riess: Yes.

4-00:24:27

It's interesting. I was uncomfortable with your talking about the "business" because I have this idea of the soul of the artist, and the passionate.

4-00:24:52

Ireland: I think the passion came with the discovery, you know? I'm sorry I gave you the word "business." "Community" is the word that I use myself a lot.

4-00:25:12

I think it came as a revelation almost, because certainly when I was working in undergraduate school, concrete was nothing to me. I couldn't see it anywhere, and I wasn't looking for it, and it didn't appear.

4-00:25:34

I think it's probably--I shouldn't focus so much on concrete. That's not so much the issue. It's what does the concrete represent? And it is an opportunity to do these design-free objects. I say "design-free." As I said previously, it isn't overpowered with some intelligence. You know, it came to me in the form of wax and string and wire and concrete and plaster, wood, rubber. I don't care. You just can go on forever naming things: food. Alan Kaprow again--he used to put food displays out on the freeways for people to stop and make a meal for themselves.

4-00:26:44

I'm lost for a second. Bring me back in.

4-00:26:50

Riess: The passion.

4-00:27:23

Ireland: Passion. It's there, and it was exciting for me. I mean, I couldn't wait to get up in the morning to go back to my work area. It was very exciting. This was in that period around the Art Institute and the graduate school and graduating from graduate school and then going on to New York. It was in that time frame, so that would be somewhere like '72 to '75. I bought this house in '75.

Galleries, Art Talk

4-00:28:05

Riess: In that earlier period you would visit museums or galleries. Would you read art magazines?

4-00:28:37

Ireland: I wasn't probably too much into art magazines, but I was aware of them. And galleries are fairly new, galleries like we think of them. Now they're all over the place. There's a hundred in the Bay Area, over a hundred. I'm talking about a period in the fifties when there were probably two galleries maybe in San Francisco. They just didn't exist. And then very gradually some people started to come from New York maybe or started to see what galleries were all about, and maybe there was hope that artists might be able to make a living for themselves. You know, success in the art world in those days was a teaching job. If you could get a teaching job, you scored, and you could wear a turtleneck sweater around. [laughs] Drink wine. No one have even heard of wine drinking until then.

4-00:30:28

Ireland: Charles Ives and a couple more [musicians, artists, poets] were in the real business world, so they could finance their music or their visual art or whatever.

4-00:30:42

Riess: When you were working in insurance with your father did you always know that was not what you really were?

4-00:30:52
Ireland: Yes. Well, he was sympathetic with me. He could see that it wasn't my cup of tea, so to speak, and so when he retired I said, "I want to retire with you." There was no monetary gain for me in that way, but it was time for him to retire.

4-00:31:12
There were things going on in this world, the art world--better than art "business," the art world. I was saying, "I'm not up to capacity. Who am I going to sell an insurance policy to today or tomorrow or whatever?" That was my business, and I wore a suit and a hat and a raincoat and the whole thing, you know?

4-00:31:52
Riess: Were you asking yourself what it was all about, the meaning of life, of art?

4-00:31:58
Ireland: Oh, you know, over cups of wine one would do that, yes. I think there are ongoing questions that artists have. What makes it wonderful to be an artist is that you can ask these questions. You may not get the answers, but there's questions out there all over the place.

Worrying About the Work

4-00:33:05
Riess: Were there questions in your mind, before you became an artist, about meaning? Were these troubling questions?

4-00:33:28
Ireland: There's so many ways to deal with this question that you're posing. I think everyone, almost everyone, is making an inquiry of some sort, whether it's art or not art. There's some constant inquiry about the why of something and the what of something. It's not like there's one central question. I think it's a complex thing, and there's an attempt to reduce the complexity to something simple in the way of satisfying your curiosity or satisfying your nature.

4-00:34:25
The Why keeps coming up. Why are we doing this? and Why don't we stop doing it? and Who are we doing it for? Just a constant bombardment. I still ask myself these questions. I still quit and then start in the next day again.

4-00:34:44
Riess: Really?

4-00:34:46
Ireland: Oh, I've announced that: "This is my last art work." And then I say, "Well, let's see. Maybe if I just did this this way and turned this another way, it would resolve itself." And then, "Oh, goodness, let's do that." And then the end of the day comes, and once again you're in a slump because something didn't work out the way you'd hoped it would. This may be conceptual, it may be a formalist decision that was not made satisfactorily.

4-00:35:24

When you're on a roll, things that are good are happening. That, of course, is very gratifying. And then the question, "Why did I get nervous about a piece resolving itself or taking care of -you know, what's the big deal?" And you say, "Well, God, if it isn't a big deal, then why am I here?" These things never stop coming along. So. I used to try to think, Who are we doing the work for? I mean, as a critique. Our fellow artists? Our parents? Is it a sweetheart? Is it a deity that we create ourself? We create the critical mass, and we test it constantly.

4-00:36:31

If you find it interesting, I can assure you that I find it interesting, too. The inquiry never stops, never goes away.

4-00:36:40

Riess: I love it that "for our parents" is a possibility. I think that's true.

4-00:36:47

Ireland: You don't want to hear it, but it's true, yes. Well you know, if you send your kid off to art school and it's costing, now, \$20,000 a year, if you're a sensitive child to your parents' sacrifice that they have made to send you to school, then you want to do something that they can understand. One of my teachers [Jerry Gooch] knew that he could prove to his parents that he was a substantial and significant artist by his ability to draw faces, just regular faces, and he was so good that he could even draw faces as they popped on television, they came up. While the commentator was talking the news, he was busy drawing them, and he'd show them to his parents, and they'd just swoon over Jerry's work.

4-00:37:47

Riess: And I was thinking more internalized parents.

4-00:37:50

Ireland: They operate in both camps, yes. Well, if you want to woo somebody, make them like you, make them love you, then you want to find out what their vocabulary is and what their bank of reference is, and what do they think is art or good art. This was what led me, too, to the concrete. Why do I have to please? Why do I have to please somebody? I can't use concrete because it's a basic construction material and it's available all over the world and it doesn't cost anything, to speak of. Why can't I shake off the need--the ego penetrates this issue--why, why, why? Why keeps coming up. And I keep pushing farther into the inquiry, deeper into it.

4-00:38:56

Oh, Suzanne, I'm getting all excited now. [laughs]

4-00:38:59

Riess: Yes. "Why can't I shake off the need?"

4-00:39:04

Ireland: The need to identify. Otherwise you just make it. You just make art. If you want to shake it off, you have to do something that nobody else is doing. Again, this is the Kaprow notion. Or you do nothing. If you do nothing, then you're no place. Sometimes, you know, you almost want to say, "Well, how close can I come to nothing and still be seen as an artist?" That's always a curious question that I like to mull over, too.

Getting Close to the Edge. Paper Towels

4-00:39:55

Riess: In my book a sculptor's empty studio is shown. He had taken everything out of it--this was his senior thesis or something like that--and left only a plaque saying he had been there. He was not given his degree for that, that wasn't approved, but the plaque was sold in multiples.³

4-00:40:51

Ireland: It's a dangerous edge, I always think, of how close--this person could say, "If I get a little bit closer to the issue, how close can I get without burning in flames?" You know, the moth burns. His wings are on fire. There are artists who work pretty close to the edge, to the razor's edge. They don't want to be seduced by something pretty, what we talked about earlier today. Is it humorous? Is it this? Is it that? Is it happy? Does it make you happy? Does it make you cry? Does it make you not want to be one of them? It makes you lots of things.

4-00:42:13

I had a student who wanted to do a piece--I wanted him to do a piece in the house here. This was quite a few years ago now. So he took these windows behind me, and he did this. He took them out of the casings and removed the weights and all that, and he took these and went like that [demonstrates reversing hands] Fine. I gave him \$20 for the piece. Totally invisible, right? Invisible as an art work.

4-00:42:51

In the course of making the change, he washed the windows so they would be free of dirt at least. And ten years later he called me and he said, "You know, when I changed the windows, I washed the windows." I said, "Yeah, I remember." "May I have those paper towels that I used?" I said, "Yes, you can borrow them." But I wouldn't give them to him. I paid for them, I mean, I paid for the piece. So anyway, he took pictures of them. He was applying for school, graduate school. This was wonderful, to me. But it took something to establish that, which was missing. The paper towels--and I have them over there right now; I can show them to you.

4-00:43:47

Riess: You kept the towels.

4-00:43:50

Ireland: I kept the towels because I knew if he "got it," so to speak, one day he would be calling me, and he did. [laughs]

4-00:44:03

I'll tell you what he did, too. He had my name tattooed on his back. That was a later work of his. But he was working close to the edge. An awfully nice guy. He's not crazy or anything, he's just a thinking person. There are artists who don't want any evidence of having been there, but then you ask yourself, how do you identify yourself, and how do you locate yourself in the art community, and in the world, not just the art community.

4-00:44:54

Riess: That's interesting that you said that he wasn't crazy.

3. *Conceptual Art*, p. 381. "Gavin Turk Sculptor worked here 1989-1991."

4-00:44:59

Ireland: He wasn't.

4-00:45:00

Riess: So this is almost a danger, if you become really engaged in this close-to-the-edge stuff?

4-00:45:13

Ireland: No, it would be an observation that surely the artist isn't crazy, but someone observing it might say, "Oh, this is ridiculous. This is stupid." It's not just this paper towel episode, it prevails all over. I mean, there's a huge, long, long list of artists' actions that would be in the same camp, in the same community.

Originality

4-00:45:57

Riess: What about the need to be original?

4-00:46:06

Ireland: Sometimes one's original as an artist and doesn't realize it, and if you stay close to yourself, you're original, because there's only one of you, and one of us. I think it can be a dilemma because you can say, "Oh, gee, everything's been done. What is there for me to do as an artist? It's all finished." Then all of a sudden you start to realize that maybe this is a shortcoming of the artist, saying everything's been done, because you start to find that electronics now, you know, are very, very important to the art culture.

4-00:47:00

But you can say, "I'm going to do myself. I'm going to be an art work or I'm going to make something as an artist," and I think if you adhere to just some simple principles, you'll be original. That's what I started to say, is that--but originality maybe comes along. As you work, you find that you are doing things that no one else is doing, and it's just because you have a certain perception.

4-00:47:50

I don't think you can consciously say, "I want to be original," but you'd like to be, and eventually you will be. It takes some time. To dwell on this idea of being original I think is a waste of time. It will come. Or you might see an artist working in a way that you say, "If this was my work, I would extend it a little bit this way, or it would be more successful for me if I did it this way or that way."

4-00:48:23

The thing is, you don't do someone else's art necessarily. You take inspiration from it, but you don't necessarily try to bump somebody off, you know.

4-00:48:42

Riess: Every time I see round pieces of concrete, of course, I think of you.

4-00:48:48

Ireland: Well, there's success, too. Thank you for telling me. I can say there's one person in Berkeley who believes in me.

4-00:49:01

Riess: [talking about Mexican onyx or marble decorative balls]

4-00:50:38

Ireland: The way you describe them I think makes them sound quite elegant. I don't use that word in my vocabulary, elegant, because I think it's controversial, but I think that there's a place for elegance. When I talked earlier about Los Angeles being "the industry," they use the word "elegant." "Elegant" is a word some artists use. I don't. I want to get away from the elegant. That's where the concrete comes in. It's a beautiful escape hatch.

4-00:51:40

Riess: I have a question about what it felt like, at the age of forty-four, to come out as an artist. Did you feel shy about all of that, or triumphant?

4-00:51:52

Ireland: I didn't start out as a successful artist; I started out as someone who felt that they were making art, and art of a certain nature, art that was expressed in the community of Conceptual Artists. You have to say it again, Suzanne.

4-00:52:23

Riess: Coming out and calling yourself an "artist", whether you felt a little shy about that, or what?

4-00:52:39

Ireland: No. Well, I recognized that I was an "older person." When people get into their seventies and eighties--I presume eighties--they may slow down, or they may accelerate; you never know. But I don't feel that I felt bashful about anything. I just identified myself with those people who were doing the kind of work that I admired particularly.

Art Teachers. Schools

4-00:53:11

Riess: Let's talk about that, and who your important teachers were at the San Francisco Art Institute.

4-00:53:17

Ireland: Even people who weren't teachers, like Tom Marioni, and I've mentioned his name before. I've gotten a lot out of Tom, being an inspiration for sure, a person who is very complete and knows where he fits, knows what he's doing. I admire that very much, someone who knows what they're doing. There are times when I think I know what I'm doing, and there are times when I can't imagine what makes me do something, some particular thing.

4-00:53:50

Howard Fried. Well, he wasn't a teacher either, because these guys are younger than me, and I'm in graduate school, and I'm a graduate student at forty-three or forty-two or something like that, and these are people who are ten to fifteen years younger than me. So there was Howard Fried and there was Tom.

4-00:54:15

Paul Kos was a very good friend of mine. And the person who did the drawings from television, Jerry Gooch. He was impassioned with support. He was the kind of guy who

would practically clutch his heart when he looked at your work. Even though it wasn't very good, he was never negative. He would say, "Oh, this is beautiful. This is wonderful." And I'd think, "Boy, Jerry, you see something that I don't see because I think it needs a lot of extra work." He was incredible. He has disappeared, I don't know anyone who knows where he is now. But he was wonderfully supportive.

4-00:55:13

And Kathan Brown was an inspiration, too, because she played hardball. She asked you about your work and where you were going with it. And she wanted an answer, she didn't want you to say, "Well, I happen to like blue," or brown or something. That wasn't good enough for her. She would say, "If you can't express yourself about the work, or there's something in it that needs clarification, you have to get rid of it until you can support it." She would be tough. She'd say, "Look, I can't criticize this work without having you tell me what it's about, because I can't see it."

4-00:56:02

Eventually she and Tom Marioni became husband and wife.

4-00:56:08

Riess: There could be a kind of blah blah blah aspect of art school experience, art talk.

4-00:56:17

Ireland: Well, it comes back to what we were talking about before. You know, we were talking about things like this. Art school--sometimes it's questionable whether one needs art school or not.

4-00:56:36

Riess: Do you think it is important to be able to talk about what it is that you're doing?

4-00:56:45

Ireland: I agree that it is essential to be conversant in it. I think it's a sign of maturity of some sort that you start to take this knowledge that you've extracted out of the world, and some explanation is due. I mean, let's say you're an artist and you're invited to a dinner party of non-artists, and you're sitting next to someone who says, "What do you do?" I say, "Oh, I make art," or, "I'm an artist."

4-00:57:21

And they say, "Well, what did you think of the current show that's playing?" And you say, "Gee, I don't think I remember that." You need to have a little scrap of intelligence. You have to know what's going on. I don't ever say that I'm an art maker, or artist. If someone asks me that question and they don't know, I prefer to steer them off because probably I don't really want to talk to them about my experience as an artist. Now, this is not always, but in some cases I just tell people, "I'm a carpenter"--which I am, or have been. I'll say whatever I think gets me off the hook, you know?

4-00:58:27

Riess: Now, that sounds like sort of snobby.

4-00:58:33

Ireland: No, I think it's assessing the moment, and with whom you're talking. That's all I'm talking about, yes. No, I think--well, I've been accused of being a snob as a teacher, because I only want the best students. I don't want some kids that are insincere and who are resistant to being instructed. I say, "Someone else can have them. I'm a snob. I want the best students."

4-00:59:06

Riess: Did you ever consider going to UC Berkeley? What was its reputation?

4-00:59:13

Ireland: It never even occurred to me that that was a possibility. I don't know why I picked--well, I do know why. That is, in the early seventies, before I was going to art school, I took a class in printmaking at the Art Institute, which is where I left off at CCAC , so I was on familiar ground.

4-00:59:52

I went to Palo Alto [Stanford University] to see Nathan Oliveira, who I knew from CCAC days. He was a TA or something for me, a teaching assistant. He said he couldn't take me because he only had a budget for two graduate students. Now they have five or six, something like that. But he liked to keep a high ratio of faculty per individual applicant.

4-01:00:47

Anyway, I already knew a lot of people at the Art Institute from having done this course in print making, and so I enrolled, submitted a portfolio of prints I had made in that period. Nathan phoned me a couple of months later and said, "Would you like to come? I've got an opening." I said, "I already started at the Art Institute." That was the end of that. So I might have ended up at Stanford, but I'm content with the Art Institute.

4-01:01:31

Riess: I don't know the department at Stanford.

4-01:01:33

Ireland: It's mostly art history, but they do have a studio program, too.

##

The Moving Green Line, Making Changes

[Interviewer and interviewee are facing a wall with a fireplace.]



- 5-00:00:23
Riess: David, the first time I was here we looked at this piece where you had followed the grain of the plywood in green, and now you moved it over here, to this other position. Why?
- 5-00:00:39
Ireland: I'm just trying it, to see whether I like the context. Art doesn't necessarily stand by itself. In some cases it requires a viewer, and if you're not willing to share it with a viewer, then what's the point in making it at all?
- 5-00:01:05
Riess: But what about if you think of this house as a museum, and things change position?
- 5-00:01:12
Ireland: I don't think of it as a museum. It's a place where I try things. It's my laboratory. So if it's my laboratory, I have to try out different possibilities and be willing in some cases to take the result.
- 5-00:02:12
One of my pleasures, Suzanne, is to have the privilege to move things around until we find a place that we think the work is resolved at the moment. Doesn't mean that it won't change in the next moment or the next period of time. It's the idea that you keep looking for a different resolve, are constantly on the lookout, even though you don't know you're on the lookout for, but in your memory bank you say, "Oh, yes, I could use this." This thing that you found, the found object comes into play.
- 5-00:03:09
Riess: You have a piece of plywood that's an art object and other wood that you're burning.
- 5-00:03:21
Ireland: That's what we call an issue of choice. You have the choice. So I could be burning the panel and saving the wood or not saving either one, and then saving the ashes that accumulate from the wood burning. Choice is very important in this dissertation that we're having.
- 5-00:03:46
Riess: This arrangement, the wood, and fire, this piece with the flaming matches, above the fire-- what do you see when you look at this wall?
- 5-00:04:22
Ireland: Oh, I'm not thinking of all that stuff as being part of my art work.
- 5-00:04:27
Riess: No?
- 5-00:04:28
Ireland: I hope I didn't disappoint you by saying that, but a choice has been made. I made the choice that that's what I do not want my art to be, in this particular situation, in this particular location, on this particular day, with this particular amount of light, or lack of. I think the wonderful thing about Conceptual Art is that you have a focus on a particular thing, and it hasn't pleased you yet so you have exercised your right of choice, and you continue to make choices until you have reached a satisfactory solution. I pick a solution. It's not the viewer, unless, as we've talked before, we decide the viewer is significant and I want to do something

that the viewer can see without question--that what I'm thinking of and what the viewer is thinking of, they connect with one another.

5-00:05:46

Riess: How about over here in this area with the television and the mirror?

5-00:05:55

Ireland: The mirror. You know what's holding me up on the mirror is I haven't been able to decide whether to clean it or not. You know, it's got sort of a scum on it.

5-00:06:09

I wanted to do something that was more portable, the same as the choices that I made around the house, itself. So this was kind of an abbreviation, taking a smaller element--to strip down, to go beneath the wires, go beneath the wallpaper, you know. Here's an attempt to do something that's similar in character, similar in commitment and interest, curiosity. Here is the house "stripped bare by its bachelor." Here is the television "stripped bare by its bachelor."

5-00:06:58

Riess: Do you use that analogy?

5-00:07:02

Ireland: It's such a wonderful [Marcel] Duchamp thing that I can't resist it sometimes.

5-00:07:10

Riess: Isn't that television set usually seen face forward?

5-00:07:13

Ireland: It's upside down. It worked very well at one time until someone came in and fiddled with it, and it's never worked since. But the audio part works. When they had the first space shuttle, I had my son come; he was here, and I had him come and sit with me while we watched the space shuttle. Because it was upside down, the television, it looked like the plane was crashing. It was going down instead of up. And when it was supposed to be coming down, it was going up, so it was rather amusing.

5-00:07:59

Riess: Is that a piece that you ever show in exhibition?

5-00:08:02

Ireland: The television set?

5-00:08:04

Riess: Yes.

5-00:08:05

Ireland: No. But I think if I can find someone who can help me rewire it, I would love to show it sometime.

5-00:08:14

Riess: What's in the jars underneath?

5-00:08:16

Ireland: The jars that are in the Coca-Cola rack are the sawdust that I accumulated when I sanded the floors in this room.

Knees Cups

5-00:08:42

Also on the little stool are two knees cups.



5-00:08:53

They're molded from my knee. We were talking earlier about being original? You'd have to say--I mix this plaster material and I slap it over my knee (I have an old pair of trousers for it), and--[demonstrates].



5-00:09:15

Riess: [working with camera] Yes, I found your knee. I want you to do that again.

5-00:09:35

Ireland: These are the knees cups. They're made by my mixing up a plaster material and putting it over each knee, my right knee and my left knee. So it's original because it's my knees and only my knees, and this is what we were talking about before, remember? Being original. If you ask me that, this is very original.



5-00:10:12

And then this could become something to drink out of, which I wouldn't want anyone to do.

5-00:10:221

Riess: That has a red dot on it.

5-00:10:24

Ireland: Yes. I just put the dots of red, and the black, to identify them as the Knees Cups with Red Dot. It's kind of like a signature, Knees Cups, Black Dot.

5-00:10:45

There's something behind you I want to talk about. I want to talk about those cartons, you know, with the paint in them, black paint and red paint. They're way behind you. There's a tin can there. You can't pull it out of there.

5-00:11:06

Riess: Oh, yes.

5-00:11:09

Have you done other body parts?

5-00:11:12

Ireland: No. But the elbow makes a nice bowl. Once again, it's an "original" elbow. I quite like these. And there's one or two of these out in the cabinet in the hallway. I like these, and I think this is my example if someone came to me as a student or whatever and said, "I want to be original," I'd say, "Take your trousers off and slap some plaster on your knees. That's original." So these aren't things without thought and without possibilities. But I wanted to show you those, and you've seen them.

5-00:11:53

Leave this right here for the moment.

5-00:11:57

Riess: I'm taken with the idea that the knee cup is so close to a knee cap that you should be able to put it on your head.

Ireland: Oh, yes. There would be no problem whatsoever in doing that. As a matter of fact, that's yet to be done, and maybe I'll be the one to do it. Who knows? And I'll give you a credit line.

5-00:12:02

You know, you have to take this whole thing with what? A grain of salt? Which means that if a person doesn't see it, that doesn't mean it's not a successful work. Let's just say if these Knees Cups are shown in a gallery, which they have been, people may not like them. Why don't they like them? They're perfect works.

5-00:12:17

Riess: But you would label them, wouldn't you?

5-00:12:20

Ireland: Well, I would label them as what I just described to you, that they're Left Knees Cup and Right Knees Cup.

5-00:12:32

I imagine an action--I would love to take a container of the powdered material, take some water, and you mix it, and while you're doing this you're boiling water for tea, and you'd have "tease" cups. But it hardens up immediately. I haven't the courage to try it.

5-00:13:14

Riess: Now, about these buckets? The first one looks like some kind of dry blood.



5-00:13:37

Ireland: Well, this was part of a piece, and it was dismantled because of my choice--again, the choice is the issue. I chose to dismantle this particular work, but I like that--part of what was going on was that it was stained with red dye and salt, which is kind of a traditional thing--if you've ever dyed anything, you know what I mean. But what happened, which was so wonderful, is that there's a crystal in formation in here that exists, and I don't have the heart to--you can see it sparkle a little bit?

5-00:14:26

Riess: Yes, yes.

5-00:14:28

Ireland: So I've kept this as a relic of a former piece.

5-00:14:36

Riess: And these basins?



5-00:14:38

Ireland: I love basins and stools because they allow you opportunities to contain things and put things up a little bit off the floor. [turns to look at the walls] I'm just looking at the yellow on the walls. It's just in a wonderful place right now, if you're looking at that.

Dirt

5-00:14:58

Okay. Then we see our traditional Dumbball.

5-00:15:32

Riess: But these are not Dumbballs, are they?

5-00:15:36

Ireland: No, these are non-Dumbballs. My basement is made of this dirt, totally.

5-00:15:45

Riess: Would you pick up one of those things?

5-00:15:50

Ireland: Yes. [Does so] I don't like them. They look like potatoes.



5-00:15:56

You can see finger marks on here. I call the basement my gold mine because I can go down there and pick up chunks of dirt and mix it with water, and it solidifies. This is just totally sand, a kind of sand.

5-00:16:22

Again, you see, here's a case of some poor person who doesn't have any inkling of originality. See, these ridges come from my fingers. You could say that this is a perfect example of something that is so close to manipulation that you can hardly see it. And if a person--I just randomly picked this out of here--but maybe he'd say, "My parents might not recognize this as art work for the term, so I better look around in this pail and see if there isn't a more clearly defined ball." [laughter] So we'll see.

5-00:17:28

It's a good thing I like to do this, Suzanne. It's always fun. Well, they all have these little ridges on them because they're all-- And the quantity--it's not important for me to know whether there's twenty-nine of these things or thirty-five or whatever, you know? But every one of them has a little mark. It would be like an Indian midden, where there were arrows. You know what I'm saying?

5-00:18:08

Riess: Yes, arrowheads.

5-00:18:09

Ireland: Arrowheads, and they chip away at it. So here every one has some little indication that a human being was involved, or nature was involved.

5-00:18:23

Riess: And did you actually dig shovelfuls of this material out of your basement?

5-00:18:30

Ireland: Oh, I have a shovel, and I put it in a plastic pail or one of these pails, yes, yes. If I want gold. It's my gold mine. Yes. Before we're done with this--I mean, in our umpteen hours--I'll take you to that part.

5-00:18:51

Riess: And then next to it?

5-00:19:00

Ireland: I don't know where this came from, but it looks obviously like the body form. Someone gave it to me, and then it's not identified, so it's almost useless because I don't know its origin, except that it looks like a body in so many different ways.

5-00:19:19

These went to an exhibition someplace, and this is the way they returned them. I don't even know what's in here myself, so we'll find out. [unwrapping object] We will find out. Sometimes you find incredible packing by art forwarders, and sometimes they have real dislike for the work and treat it accordingly. Oh, my word, yes!

5-00:19:54

Okay, this is a treasure trove. This is wallpaper. Notice the ridges again. Okay? Ridges tell us all kinds of things. [holding the piece] What I want to do is find the place--right there--where

it's squirting up between my fingers, and here you have--this was here. This was here. There's a place for everybody. I'm not going to open all of these. But some are more definitive than others.

00:20:53

Riess: How would they have been exhibited?

5-00:20:55

Ireland: Just maybe on a table, maybe by itself or with a bunch of other pieces, you know, just like what we have here, several pieces. Well, you know, here's this--this is not the gold mine but it's the silver mine, and that is that the wallpaper comes from taking it off the house, so that has some significance to it, in its own way.

5-00:21:30

Well, I'll throw this back together.

5-00:21:38

Riess: Is the idea of multiples of things when you exhibit--is that important?

5-00:21:44

Ireland: It could be. Everyone who makes one of these would be different. It would be an original work, because if it's me, then you accept my prints, my hand prints. If somebody else, then you--or wherever--where are we now?

5-00:22:27

Riess: We're heading over to another basin.

5-00:22:30

Ireland: Okay. This more immediate one--I don't know what made me do this, but I remember at the time I felt I wanted to make some kind of shape out of it, and I don't know what prompted that particular shape, but it looks like a tomahawk or something like that. No intention to do that. But anyway, that finds a home in here.

5-00:22:58

And here is a dirt pistol. Sometimes I call it the shit pistol, but anyway, it's a pistol, and it has a place where the thumb hit before, so we know it was a fabricated piece, and the dirt comes from the gold mine in the basement.

5-00:23:28

Riess: I think a person would have to conclude that you are a very tactile if not sensual individual because of all of this--you know, messy stuff.

5-00:23:42

Ireland: Uh-huh. I think the fact that you believe it or I believe it--that's all I can say, you know.

Hair, Tumbleweeds

5-00:24:00

Riess: Now I must detach the camera from the tripod to get a better look at all this.

5-00:24:09

Ireland: This is horsehair, and it's a gift from Ann Hamilton.



5-00:24:24

She did an incredible piece of work using horsehair, and I think the horsehair came from China. So she gave me this piece of hair, and I see another piece. This is a piece of white horsehair. It looks like me, doesn't it? My hair? Probably.

5-00:25:04

This is what I call an Irish Beach Ball. It literally came off a big, particularly blowy beach with violent winds, and the wind rolled this stuff down the beach.

5-00:25:19

Riess: Like a tumbleweed.

5-00:25:20

Ireland: Yes, tumbleweed, and they came out almost completely round. I was just totally fascinated. This was full of sand and junk like that.

5-00:26:00

Riess: There's a red one in there.

5-00:26:03

Ireland: I dyed it purposely, and I don't know why. I don't always know what I'm doing, you know. I like to not know because that's when I can move ahead, is to not know what I'm doing.

5-00:26:18

I'll put this back in here. This was just simply the beginning of a ball which never got completed because I figured I wanted to work with these identifying things again, these different creases and ridges and things.

5-00:26:38

The white thing is a turkey egg. Egg shell. I hope it doesn't have a live turkey in it.

5-00:27:00

This piece was given to me by someone who had stolen it from China. It was secured to a building somewhere. It speaks to the architecture. A man carrying--I guess it's a man, maybe not--a jar of some sort.

5-00:27:28

Riess: Does that happen a lot? That people bring you things?

It would be very tempting to give you things.

Ireland: People try to give me brooms, and I say no, the thing about the brooms is that they came from the house.

5-00:27:46

Ireland: These two boxes deal with the identical--can you get enough light there? Okay. I call these Intentional Spills. If you spill something, it becomes an accident or is the result of an accident, but if I create an accident, I call it an Intentional Spill. Now, here's a case where I can choose to have it come out differently, but I chose this particular way of dealing with it, and so it's a can of black paint and a can of red paint, and it formed an image because of the nature of the way it was poured. But I call it an Intentional Spill because, as I just said, it deals with intention.

IKB, Yves Klein Blue

5-00:28:48

Ireland: And now what do we have?

5-00:28:50

Riess: The blue thing.

5-00:28:52

Ireland: The blue thing is kind of--you know Yves Klein? The artist? I think he died around '65 or something like that [1962]. Anyway, he worked with this particular color, and you work with it in the presence of gold. Gold leaf is a helpful situation.

5-00:29:15

Riess: The table is gold leaf.

5-00:29:17

Ireland: This is gold leaf and this, of course, is plaster, dyed blue plaster, which would be called International Klein Blue, IKB. I love that blue with this gold. It's really elegant. Now, there's elegance, and I said I don't use it. Well, here's an exception. I have to be allowed an exception, I hope.

5-00:29:45

Riess: You are.

5-00:29:47

I'm going to take a little peek out the window here.

5-00:29:51

Ireland: Okay. Before you do that, this was dirt that came out of the windows when I took the boards off, and it was just full of dirt. And this is more sand from sanding the floors. And over here we have a sweater that was given to me by a preparator in Washington, where I did a show. He soaked it in amaretto or some liqueur and poured the whole bottle into this jar with my sweater in it.

5-00:30:30

Now, who says there's humor here? This is serious business.

Sparks

Riess: While we're up and walking around, let's go into a few more corners. More propane?

5-00:30:41

Ireland: Yes. They look a little like the oxygen tanks that are discarded by mountain climbers on Mount Everest. I've not seen them myself, but they say there's a litter of stuff that climbers leave; on the way down they don't want to deal with it anymore, they just leave it. I don't propose these to be anything to do with oxygen tanks, but in some way. They are the necessary pieces of equipment for the [propane ceiling piece].

Riess: Is there anything else happening down here?

5-00:31:42

Ireland: This is residue from Actions. These--I'm going to block you for a second--this is Sparks. When a machinist pushes a piece of steel against a wall, this shower of sparks come off. You know what I'm saying? It's hard--you can't--how many billion sparks does it take to make that?

5-00:32:11

Riess: So the sparks actually accumulate?

5-00:32:13

Ireland: Yes, exactly.

5-00:32:16

Riess: Where did you get it, then?

5-00:32:17

Ireland: This is another one of those--well, actually, I can't condemn it as being a gift work because it's something that I picked off the wall of a machine shop, and I asked the machinist, "Do you need this?" He said, "No, we just throw it away." So I have a found object, which is a quantity of Sparks.

5-00:32:41

Riess: Here's an artist's name, Marcel Broodthaers.

- 5-00:32:48
Ireland: Yes, it takes a couple of years to learn how to pronounce it, and then when you learn, you don't care anymore. No, he's very significant.
- 5-00:32:56
That jar of rubber bands--unfortunately it's not operating right now, but the sound element is the sound it takes to remove a rubber band from a piece of newspaper. It has a tape recorder, and somehow it doesn't function anymore. I know what's wrong with it, and I have to take it all apart, I want to reassemble it.
- 5-00:33:18
Riess: And the newspapers?
- 5-00:33:23
Ireland: I inherited these, actually, from the previous owner, Mr. Greub, the accordion maker.
- 5-00:33:55
Riess: Mr. Greub was the broom collector?
- 5-00:34:00
Ireland: Yes, and the rubber bands, things that pertain to the house mostly.
- 5-00:34:07
I think I showed you this. This is Dust Bunnies. No, it's my hair. One or the other. No, it's not Dust Bunnies. It could be, though. And I think we talked about the sporran before.
- 5-00:34:37
Riess: Here, this is one of your concrete light bases.
- 5-00:34:54
Ireland: Yes. People have always said, "Why don't you make a line of these, or distribute them or sell them or something?" I just am not interested in that way of dealing with my interest.

Brooms, and Wallpaper Patties

- 5-00:35:11
Riess: Okay, let's lean against a wall here. I'm going to lean against a wall because I want to stay steady with all of this.
- Ireland: Tell me what you want me to do. Direction. I need direction.
- Riess: So do I. Short of falling down the stairs, this is a good way of looking at the brooms. Please tell about the brooms.



5-00:35:16

Ireland: Well, when I came to the house, I wanted to get rid of the previous owners. Not get rid of him--I wanted to get his ring around the bathtub out and his odors, cooking odors, whatever they were. I wanted to remove the obviousness of the previous owner. I wanted to get rid of everything I could. I started throwing things out that I didn't see immediately as having significance. But somehow the brooms started to appear. In every corner there was a broom. I think there's twelve or thirteen brooms here.

5-00:36:06

I decided I would configure them in some kind of clock formation because it would show--you buy a broom, you sweep with it, you wear it out, and you discard it and buy another one and do the same thing, so there's kind of a repetition of assemblage here.

5-00:36:30

Riess: It's nice to look at this. Do you agree that some of your things are more pleasing than others?

5-00:36:41

Ireland: It just depends on who's looking at them and who we revere as a viewer or as a critic. This has turned out to be very satisfying. Probably what I should do, to support my philosophy, is smash it--you know, get rid of it.

5-00:37:03

Riess: How does that support your philosophy?

5-00:37:05

Ireland: Well, I mean, the idea that everything is perfect. Everything can be an art element, an element to fabricating a piece of art.



5-00:37:19

Riess: The fact that it is so universally loved becomes suspect. Is that what you're saying?

5-00:37:30

Ireland: Say it again.

5-00:37:34

Riess: It's too pleasing, or something like that?

5-00:37:36

Ireland: Yes. It's seductive. No, I recognize that this has lots of appeal, and everyone wants to have it, but I feel it belongs to the house because the brooms came from the house and should remain, I would think.

5-00:37:57

Riess: People try to acquire it.

5-00:38:02

Ireland: I've had institutions want to buy it for a collection. I figure if it stays in the house and the house survives, then it's in the right place. But otherwise, if the house were to be torn down then I would make it available to whomever would want it, institutionally. But it wouldn't have the same--it would have different origins. It would appear the same, but a viewer let's say twenty-five years from now wouldn't necessarily know that it came from 500 Capp unless I put a label on them.

5-00:38:45

Behind it there is a boom, I call it, that stabilizes the brooms; keeps them from falling over. I like it, the broom. Collection of Brooms with Boom.

5-00:39:00

Riess: And up above?

5-00:39:02

Ireland: Yes, I don't know what's going on there. I've had it that way for years and years. I inherited all these chairs. Right here, there's three of these. From Mr. Greub. That panel--I haven't decided what that's about yet, but the wallpaper patties were inspired by manure patties, you know, that you find in Asia. The children, probably, put these patties on the sunny side of their house, and then when the sun bakes them they pop them off and they start a fire with them and cook their next meal, so they're kind of recycling.



5-00:39:59

See there, the wallpaper? There's four, and seven--there should be eight. You probably can see little hand marks, too. If you're going through India, or Burma, or any of those Asian countries, you see patties like a wainscot up on the sunny side always, and they're baking in the sun. I can't imagine it would be too healthy to eat, but who knows?

Looking in the Cabinet

5-00:40:27

Riess: Now that I know, these are more knee caps.

5-00:40:29

Ireland: More Knees Cups. And they aren't identified with red dot and black dot, but I don't know how important that is.

5-00:40:38

There's another wax object. There's no way to describe it. The gray and the--this is a piece called True East. There is the reoccurring elephant ear, African map, you know?

5-00:41:09

And you can see some small miniature painting?

5-00:41:16

There's my scar from the hernia operation I told you I had.

5-00:41:50

[Attempts to open cabinet.] Well, maybe we won't open it today.

5-00:42:25

Riess: This whole cabinet seems of a piece.

Ireland: Oh, yes, I like this the way it is.

5-00:42:40

Riess: You said that you have someone come and clean here. Would she be permitted to clean in the cabinet?

5-00:42:47
Ireland: No, she wouldn't probably touch it. Hmm. I replaced one of these lamps. [Works to open cabinet.]

5-00:43:17
Riess: Could you call what you're doing now an action?

5-00:43:20
Ireland: No, I wouldn't. I mean, I'd have to proclaim it as an action, I suppose. I don't know what's going on here. [continues to try to open cabinet.]

5-00:43:37
Riess: For some reason, it opened.

5-00:43:40
Ireland: Yes. Well, it doesn't really need it, but--. I like this. This in some way encapsulates the entire house. Here's the house, you know, and within it are art objects.

5-00:44:34
Riess: When is something a vitrine?

5-00:44:43
Ireland: Anything with glass in it can be a vitrine. I guess that's what the word defines.

5-00:44:50
Riess: Does it mean that it contains precious objects?

5-00:44:56
Ireland: Objects that you want not necessarily to be precious, but you want to identify or get specific about them. It can be something very special and unique and you want that preserved and you want that protected. I think it's a matter of how you want your viewer to deal with it, if you want them to come up and say, "Oh, look at all these wonderful things in here. I don't need to see anything else. It's all here."

5-00:45:37
Up here is an Elbow Cup.



5-00:45:49
There are finger marks on the bottom again. That's very important. I don't know what this is. This was a gift--not this. You know, you have to think of yourself almost as an archaeologist,

and you say, "I don't know what it is, but I know someone was here because here their thumb has smoothed out this."

5-00:46:20

This is cast iron, and I can only imagine it being a funerary piece, something that would be left in a cemetery, something like that. The flowers would wilt and be thrown out.

5-00:46:36

Riess: That was the piece that someone gave you.

5-00:46:38

Ireland: They gave me this part, and I--there's occasional use of something, but I think going out and letting things find me is more the issue, rather than me finding it.

Insulation Foam

5-00:46:58

Riess: Now, this looks like worm castings.

5-00:47:06

Ireland: Oh, yes. It does look like worms, doesn't it? Well, this is insulation for when you have a hole in the wall and want to keep the mice out. You squirt this stuff in there. You buy it with the understanding that it will eventually end up being consumed by the atmosphere. It deteriorates. The piece, which is the same material, over in the window--you can see that closer up. You can see where it's starting to break down. [moving over to piece] It's light, and I used to have it in my bedroom because someone said to me, "You should have something like this that's lightweight so if it falls off and hits you in the head when you're asleep, you won't--" you know.

5-00:47:51

Riess: So did you squirt it?

5-00:47:52

Ireland: I squirted it to be sort of a painting in character, but a sculpture in philosophy, I suppose. You see how it's kind of coming apart? Just the air combines with something. I should put something on it, but I'm afraid that'll spoil it. I haven't figured out yet what to do with it.

5-00:48:18

Riess: Does the stuff come in aerosol cans?

5-00:48:21

Ireland: Exactly right. How would you know that?

5-00:48:29

Riess: It's like Silly String. Do you remember Silly String?

5-00:48:33

Ireland: Oh, yes. Well, those things are the artist's Mecca. I call myself a hardware store junkie because I can't stop looking at little parts and how they fit together.

Newspapers, and Attention Art

Riess: Okay, let's go back and look at the other chair.

Ireland: Okay.



5-00:48:50

This has its importance because of the newspaper. Now, it's something that you can see here about Jimmy Carter, which is not an issue, but what I want to be an issue is that--the date is 1980, and I wanted something that would demonstrate attention on a daily basis, like an altar, and you put flowers on it, you put fruit on it, you light candles; and when the candles burn out then it's time for a new one. There's a time span involved, a time piece.

5-00:49:29

I wanted to keep these together. One of the galleries was house sitting the house for a special occasion of a couple of weeks, so every day I came and I saw the newspaper had or had not been used. So if the date is the actual date, you'll find all these--if there's a missing one, it means no one came. That's about as simple as I can make it.

5-00:50:15

Riess: And it's become the back of the chair.

5-00:50:18

Ireland: Become the back of the chair. It's not stable, which bothers me a little bit. I mean, stable in that this could disintegrate so easily. And 1980, it was twenty years ago, you see? Twenty-one years ago.

5-00:50:34

Riess: Does that bother you?

5-00:50:37

Ireland: Either I figure out a way to encapsulate it some way. I don't know how I would do it. But the date is the symbol of intention.

5-00:50:50

Riess: I don't know what that means.

5-00:50:55

Ireland: Well, that you attended.

5-00:50:58

Riess: Attended, or intended?

5-00:51:01

Ireland: Attended, not intended.

5-00:51:03

Riess: You said it's the symbol of intention?

5-00:51:07

Ireland: No, attention. Somebody coming on a daily basis with the newspaper. They put the newspaper on here when they came. I had the newspapers here. I think I had a piece of plywood on here. And I thought if I left it on here, eventually people would be sitting on it, and they would spoil it, so if somebody comes, it doesn't matter at this point who it is, but-- oh, I know an example. Watchmen have a little machine that they carry with them, and they have to plug it into an object on a building to indicate that they were there. This is the same way. The date is important. Attention, not intention. Intention would be someone wanting to make a piece out of it. Then it's intention, to do that.

##

[Interview 4: November 27, 2001]##

[Ireland tells about his Thanksgiving with family, and a trip to the Sierra.]

Hunter Africa, Influences

6-00:01:30

Riess: I admit I imagine that everything you do you do as "an artist," and your Thanksgiving and your trip to the Sierra are different from others' experiences of the same thing. When an artist goes to the Sierra--

6-00:01:57

Ireland: --it's different than if you're someone in the sciences.

6-00:02:04

Riess: Yes, everything an artist does counts differently.

6-00:02:07

Ireland: It's funny, when you're so close to it, as I am, and other artists, you don't always see all that. You don't always know that's what going on, that everything you do and see, you are looking through an artist's eyes, or reading through an artist's lenses.

6-00:02:31

Riess: You don't have that consciousness?

6-00:02:33

Ireland: I try to avoid it if I can. I try to not be an elitist. By calling myself a Conceptual Artist--for lack of something else, more accurate, I go along with the Conceptual Art notion, but this thought of being an idea artist, an artist who deals with ideas, it's like saying that if you aren't a Conceptual Artist you can't be dealing with ideas. Which is foolish, you know.

[Riess continues setting up equipment.]

6-00:05:35

Riess: Today let's go back to the history of Hunter Africa. Was it a shop, or a gallery? Tell me about it. How does it fit in?

6-00:06:25

Ireland: It all started, my interest in South Africa, in the fifties, '56 or '57. I wasn't thinking about a store, but I was thinking about, "How can I come back?" If I leave and want to come back,

how can I get someone else to pay for my airfare, and whatever. I thought I should find someone else and I'd provide guidance for one or two people who want to go to Africa as well. So it was a matter of aligning myself with people who were interested in "dark continents," as I was, "dark," or mysterious.

6-00:07:25

Anyway, when I left Africa after a year there, I was yearning to go back. And my thought was I could go and buy merchandise, artifacts, zebra skins, lion skins, and that sort of thing. Not thinking that I was at some point raping the natural beasts, or anything like that. So it worked, I advertised myself as a photo safari person, and I would take people with me on my buying trips. The two things kind of supported each other, and it was good fun, but it collided eventually with my separation from my wife and the normal bitterness that goes with that sort of thing.

6-00:08:33

So I did for a couple of years have the store, Hunter Africa. Hunter Africa had other purposes too. One was to create an armchair safari for people who would never go on safari, because of the expense or whatever. The armchair safari was that you buy our merchandise and we will create a little African experience for you. A zebra skin on the floor, an elephant foot, horns on the wall, and that fit in of course with things that were popular at the time, the big ferns, the Boston ferns. Very trendy. It was kind of fun. We even went so far as to have hats made with a zebra skin band, so you could sort of be a Hemingway character.

6-00:09:43

Maybe when we were talking about [looking at the world] through the artist's eye, maybe that's--these things could be an art form. You're creating an environment for people to participate in, very clearly an installation performance type of thing. So anyway, that was Hunter Africa.

6-00:10:09

Riess: What was the appeal of Africa for you?

6-00:10:13

Ireland: Oh, it was personal, you know, mountain climbing, Mount Everest in the twenties, submarines, even so far as to say a fascination with cowboys, rodeo riders--I had no aspirations of getting on a bull, by the way. But it was I guess a sort of romantic nature, a romanticist nature.

6-00:10:45

Riess: Did you climb Kilimanjaro?

6-00:10:48

Ireland: Oh yes, I made a special trip to do that. At the same time combined with bringing back a bunch of things. That was a fun experience. It wasn't unique, because lots and lots of people have climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. It's magnificent to see, exciting in a way--have I told you that the African chiefs of the tribes would send their warriors to the top of the mountain to "the white." They didn't understand the concept of ice or snow. The warriors were to bring [the snow or ice] back, but of course they couldn't bring it back because it melted. The chiefs would tell the warriors to bring it back, and if they didn't bring it back they would cut their heads off, so they were anxious to get the ice back. I don't know how many heads fell! Or whether it's a true story or not.

- 6-00:12:16
Riess: Are some of those Hunter Africa environments still around?
- 6-00:12:26
Ireland: Probably not. Well, there are people who still have zebra skins. I have one. And I have horns downstairs. But I don't know that anyone I know was as immersed as I was. I was proposing everything, you know, the safari chairs, the tents. Not just a photo album of the African experience.
- 6-00:13:27
Riess: You were serious that people would want to have an African corner of their house?
- 6-00:13:49
Ireland: People do it with Indonesian stuff and everything else. They might have something that has Norwegian overtones to it. It can be anything. I was focusing on Africa because I had this fascination with it, and these experiences in South Africa, which really is industrial to the extent that there aren't any wild animals, except for Kruger Park, I guess. The farmers are a much stronger force than the--
- 6-00:14:37
Riess: The environmentalists?
- 6-00:14:38
Ireland: Yeah, the environmentalists.
- 6-00:14:41
Riess: You brought that up earlier, thinking about taking the animal skins. Was that an issue?
- 6-00:15:00
Ireland: It's interesting. My children were toddlers at the time, and they said to me, "You know, Dad, the animal has to die before you can take the skin off," and boy, you know that was so observant on the part of six or seven-year-olds. It never occurred to me that they would make that observation, but they did.
- 6-00:15:35
Riess: Now what are the influences of Africa in your work? What's left?
- 6-00:15:43
Ireland: Well, there are the things downstairs.
- 6-00:15:47
Riess: Anything about your sense of color, for instance?
- 6-00:15:50
Ireland: You know, I used to say, "I'm trying to keep the art life separate from anything else." And there's nothing in this area of the house--well, there's the Cape Buffalo horn with the painted skull, that's pretty clearly part of the African experience. But other things [gesturing to propane chandelier]--this is as distant from that as it can be. So there has been a consciousness on my part to keep my personal history separate. One aspect of my personal history.
- 6-00:16:49
Riess: You don't want those references to your personal history to drift into your art.

6-00:16:57

Ireland: Well, I want it pointed out that I have several attitudes and positions. [laughter] Yeah. But you know, it would just confuse--if I were to take those same pieces, those three or four pieces, the purple, and the blue and the gold table top, and I was to try to tell someone who would be a buyer of zebra skins or something else that this was a fine art work and it wasn't threatening, it isn't challenging or injuring the environment--well, you know. So I say, okay, the Africa stuff is separate, a separate life. The Southeast Africa, the South Africa--those were different, there was some difference in my position.

6-00:17:59

I could see--I have to digress a little bit--I could see that I wasn't going to be able to make a living as an artist, as an artist as we know it, or I know it, so I needed to do something else with the same sort of enthusiasm as the art was providing. The art clearly, and even to this day, doesn't pay all the bills. I could have gone big-time, as they say, with the African stuff, and brought in lots and lots of zebra skins, and lots and lots of horns and created a big sort of Trader Vic situation. Trader Vic, we didn't talk about that--I don't have any connection with Trader Vic, but it's creating that sort of South Sea position, you know.

6-00:19:00

Riess: And the Banana Republic.

6-00:19:05

Ireland: Yeah, I admire them for being very creative with that title, the name, Banana Republic. I remember those early days when they were with Malm Luggage, down on Grant.

6-00:19:43

Riess: The photo aspect of the photo safari, did you teach photography? Were you an expert?

6-00:20:01

Ireland: I took a lot of bad pictures myself. No, it was just that it was non-shooting, it wasn't so much the photography. I think almost everybody took a camera. It was not unusual.

6-00:20:31

Riess: On a trip like that would you sketch, take a sketch pad?

6-00:20:40

Ireland: No, never did. Well, I did when I was a teenager. Definitely. I would take a tablet with a pencil or charcoal or ink or whatever. But I never did on safari, and never did before or after either. I would do a drawing occasionally for some particular purpose, but never sketched, you know, with a tablet in my lap.

6-00:21:16

Riess: That would not be a way you would record something.

6-00:21:21

Ireland: No, the camera was still the desired tool. I just made bad photographs because I was a bad photographer. But now it's become fashionable to be bad.

6-00:21:39

Riess: Did you get to know artists and craftsmen in Africa?

6-00:21:47

Ireland: I had no interest in that. East Africa is not the place for tribal art. West Africa, which I never visited actually, is where you find all of the African art--American and European collectors flock to West Africa to get the wonderful pieces. I wasn't thinking about art in those days. I was just thinking about the safari experience. And importing some good things. There were lots of carvings available in East Africa, but they were not the ethnic things necessarily, they were made for tourists. And there were paintings, of wild animal scenes or whatever.

6-00:23:58

Riess: Did your shop have a theatrical look? Did you design such an environment?

6-00:24:09

Ireland: Yes. I wish I had some photographs. I do, somewhere. The shop was in itself one huge armchair safari. Somebody could take the whole thing, you know. But they wouldn't, they'd take a portion of it. Or mix it with other things that were popular at the time that suited their interest. Definitely there were times when things were popular, and then they were not popular. A Jaguar in San Francisco, and Boston ferns, and a zebra skin, certain things become the trend, or the fashion. Interior design, that business thrived on this. A new frontier, in architecture as well as interior design.

6-00:26:14

You know, art and architecture is constantly searching for ways to develop some clarity. And some concern and some interest, in the state of the environment, whatever. Searching for the new, and searching for the new self, perhaps. I think it's a matter of being important to the art culture, artists doing work that is significant.

Discussing Drawing

6-00:28:40

Riess: After Hunter Africa you were doing printmaking, and drawing. What kind of drawings? Was drawing a response to what you were seeing?

6-00:29:17

Ireland: Well, you've hit it. It's drawings--again I'll explain that--but printmaking, photography, architectural drawings, expressionist drawings. Drawings historically are something that an artist would have used to create the composition that he or she wanted, you know, and the drawing would not be the major work. But now, of course, we have drawings, which still are not considered to be major work, but they are important work to define and acknowledge a certain artist and a certain style or a certain type of thing. I mean, Sol LeWitt, or Brice Marsden, or any of those people, you know.

6-00:30:17

Drawings conceptually are usually things that have some idea base that the artist is wanting to work off of them. Again Sol LeWitt comes to my mind. He wanted to remove himself. He wanted to design the work, but he wanted to remove himself from the fabrication of it. Definitely one of the important artists of the last part of the century. And I guess maybe he would have some drawings, Sol LeWitt would, about how to lay out all the imagery he has in his mind.

- 6-00:31:01 So, that's drawing.
- 6-00:31:07
Riess: And drawing, for you?
- 6-00:31:10
Ireland: Occasionally--I mean, I would be drawing, and I would start to see, equally, drawings of larger installations, and again using the same sensibility that I was talking about. You--I lost it, Suzanne.
- 6-00:31:33
Riess: So these are drawings that are guides to creating the work.
- 6-00:31:44
Ireland: Well, I said historically that was it, but now a drawing can have all kinds of connotations. It can be political, or sociological, or psychological.
- 6-00:32:55
Riess: [laughs] Well, is it something that happens on paper?
- 6-00:33:26
Ireland: Paper seems to be essential to drawing. Doesn't mean that you can't do drawing--you can use a drawing material and it can be on a piece of metal, you can inscribe it. But customarily it's not that way. A drawing is on paper, and in some cases it's altered or affected by your interest and your artistic ability. [laughs] Some of this is for the historians to thrash out. They would probably dig up examples of drawings, and drawings that were pertinent to other work.
- 6-00:34:22 And of course drawing was essential to architecture, but now it's not something where you sit at the drawing board. Now you have computers--all computer drawing. But I think the format still exists, still remains.
- 6-00:35:01
Riess: What kind of drawings would you have had in your exhibitions of drawings in the seventies, like at the Whatcom Museum, or the Society of California Printmakers?
- 6-00:35:15
Ireland: They were essential to a position, being you couldn't afford anything more. You know? Some of the drawings which we cherish--don't ask me to name them, because I can't.
- 6-00:35:40
Riess: Were they the early work of artists who became successful enough to stop drawing?
- 6-00:35:51
Ireland: No, I don't even know if they are related, necessarily.
- 6-00:36:01
Riess: Let me put it this way, why did you stop drawing?
- 6-00:36:04
Ireland: I didn't stop drawing.

- 6-00:36:04
Riess: When did you stop beating your wife? [laughs] I'm out on such a limb here!
- 6-00:36:14
Ireland: No, you're doing fine because you're making me think about all this which I was letting lie dormant. But by no means do I not draw. I mean, I have several hundred drawings at least. And drawings that sometimes no one else has seen. And some of them are paintings on paper. So then what do you do about that? And then there's the way you exhibit it, and maybe that makes it sculptural, just like the cabinet with the red painting inside.
- 6-00:36:48
Drawing of a certain kind, or drawing of a certain intent, is very important, and not to be discarded necessarily. Drawing is in a way the kind of backbone of art making; it's the spine, maybe. I would never want to be referred to as someone who deplores, or doesn't respond to drawing. Drawing becomes another characteristic, you know.
- 6-00:37:35
So, keep asking me, we'll get it. I'm glad there's not a big TV crew here.
- 6-00:37:49
Riess: Are there times when you feel like drawing rather than anything else?
- 6-00:37:55
Ireland: Yes, yes.
- 6-00:37:56
Riess: Have you drawn the balls? The Dumbbells?
- 6-00:38:01
Ireland: Yes, but not seriously, because the ball is available and consumable. It has its purpose and its process, which is revealed through the making of it. But to draw the ball is just [gestures making a circle]. That's it, you know, that's the ball. When you say, "Have I drawn the ball?" Sure, but that's not the important part of it. Essentially it's the fabrication of the ball.
- 6-00:39:07
Riess: I wonder when you would draw. When you might use drawing to illuminate other work, to pre-visualize a sculptural piece?
- 6-00:39:28
Ireland: A conceptual thing generally requires you to take to it your interest and what you hope to achieve by making the drawing, whatever. It doesn't imply that you--we had a good thing going there Suzanne, but I kind of lost it.
- 6-00:40:21
Riess: Let's step away. You introduced me to the curator who was visiting from the Addison Gallery at Andover. You did an apartment for them. Tell me about that. Did you do drawings for that?
- 6-00:40:52
Ireland: Sure, there had to be drawings. Because they had to get estimates from contractors to build it, so drawings were necessary.

6-00:41:12

The artist's apartment is for visiting artists and their families to stay in while they are being artists-in-residence at the Addison Gallery. So that's quite simple, the whole idea being that here's the attic of a building, from 1700-something or other, hand-hewn timbers inside the attic. They wanted to save as much of that as possible, and it's illustrated, so it's available. Anyway, the idea was to create a place that would be of interest sculpturally--of interest meaning people can go see it even when no one's living there--and it's a place designed for someone who's living there with a limited number of people. It's a shower, it's a kitchen, it's a dining room. It's an interesting space. I tried to maintain the character of the space because of the material that's in it and its age. When that was finished then they would invite different artists to stay there and do their thing. It's pretty straightforward in concept.

6-00:42:57

Riess: To go back to drawing, or the move from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional--you have over there above the mantel a framed piece with two leaf-like shapes.



6-00:43:26

Ireland: Well, that should be like you saying, "Did you ever draw a ball?" And I would say, "I've been working with this idea of the non-sophisticated object. A sphere is I think very sophisticated, so I don't include that. But I would say that I want to create something that's an object and also allowing myself to see it as a drawing. But its real purpose is--these sort of torpedo shapes that you see around? I wanted to take that non-object and embed it in the idea of architecture. And so the vertical piece--there's a line there, a pencil line, and that's to be an architectural corner. And the black is the shadow--if there's a light source in the right place there's a shadow that will be cast from the brown piece to the black piece."

6-00:44:35

Riess: I never would have known that.

6-00:44:38

Ireland: No, you wouldn't, but you're in the in-group now, you see.

6-00:44:54

Riess: [goes up close to the piece] I can see the line.

6-00:44:59

Ireland: And the brown is the object color. You know, it could be squirted out of wallpaper, as we talked about the last time. Remember we were playing with some of these paper objects?

6-00:45:16

Riess: Yes. So you see it as three-dimensional?

6-00:45:22

Ireland: Not at this particular level. But the drawings came after the object, after what you're calling the three-dimensional object. That was first. Then I just one day in the studio was saying, "What would it look like if I take this non-object, this non-sophisticated design thing, and I locate it in such a way that light coming off of it would create a shadow that would be kind of equivalent, so that the black is as dominant as the brown." But I would also take advantage of an architectural corner, an inside corner or an outside corner. I'll have to show you those on another meeting.

6-00:46:13

Riess: And the corner here in the drawing is the straight line.

6-00:46:16

Ireland: Exactly.

6-00:46:21

[laughs] Now, that brings up another point. You said, "I never would have known that." And the question is, what's my position there? You say, "Well, who's it for, and why does it have to accommodate someone else's way of thinking about things?" Maybe it's just a private work that's to be experienced by people who are given a tip-off, to say, "That's one of his non-design pieces coming along again." And of course the thing is too, this clearly cannot be a non-design, because if you put a mark on a piece of paper, or a hole in a piece of paper, it has to have, in some cases, equal merit, and equal significance.

6-00:47:23

See, if I talk too much about it then it spoils it.

6-00:47:51

Riess: Earlier when we talked about the wire pieces, they seemed to be like drawings.

6-00:48:13

Ireland: I think of the wire pieces as drawings, just sort of drawings in another dimension.

6-00:48:13

Sometimes the distinction between painting and drawing is something to do maybe with size, you know. But then there are people who paint paintings that are no bigger than your thumbnail. So you can't just say that it's about size. But somehow drawing very often gets into the category of something smaller, rather than something larger.



6-00:49:59

Now this piece [also over mantel] with the red boat and the oars, that's the work of a friend of mine who's Cuban, a Cuban boat-person, so he has that memory of a boat that goes from Cuba to Miami. So who's to say what that is, a painting or a drawing? Well, it really isn't an issue. It can be whatever you want it to be. You can call it a sculpture, you can call it a painting, you can call it a drawing.

What You Need to Know to Criticize

6-00:50:41

Riess: The boat shape echoes your torpedo shape.

6-00:50:46

Ireland: Well, I think it's supposed to be more a boat than anything.

6-00:50:52

But this is a good question. This is how you criticize Conceptual Art. You say, "I don't see a boat. I see a cigar, but I don't see a boat." So then if you want the image to be understood by more people you say, "Okay, I'll make it more like a boat than like a cigar--or like a torpedo."

6-00:51:14

My thing and his are separated by twenty-five years.

6-00:51:23

Riess: You said, "If" you want it to be understood. So that's a question too?

6-00:51:28

Ireland: Well, if it was like a torpedo--you might see a canoe or something else, but you would not see so easily that it was a boat. But if you cut the end, that transom off, you end up pretty close to a boat figure. Then the oars, those two matches which were the oars--if I said to someone, "Here's a piece of work that's from a Cuban friend of mine," and I'd hold it up, they'd say, "Oh yeah Cuba, boat people, Miami, Havana," the things that come up. And were this person not Cuban, you'd say, "I don't see the Cuba." You have to know your history, you know. Conceptual Art ideally doesn't leave any unanswered questions. Even though it gets them.

6-00:52:41

Riess: The history is important.

6-00:52:45

Ireland: It is. And again, it's sometimes a student issue. They do some work, and I say to them it's not clear, because you don't know the history.

6-00:53:01

Your blue blouse, anyone who's an art person, responsible for a certain segment of art history, would recognize right away that you're wearing "Yves Klein blue." If a person wants to do an Yves Klein thing, you'd make a mistake if you don't make it blue.

Keeping Personal History Separate

6-00:53:31

Riess: Now back to this idea of "leaving your history downstairs." That confused me.

6-00:53:47

Ireland: Well, it's changed. Now I have art stuff down there, but at one time I kept them quite separate.

6-00:54:12

What confuses you about that? Because this is an interesting subject for me.

6-00:54:18

Riess: You said something about keeping your personal history separate from your art. Your art is up here.

6-00:55:09

Ireland: What I was trying to say was I thought that it was important at one time to keep it separate. Now, in the last ten years or something, I've decided that was not important anymore that I keep it separate, that if you're an artist, you're not just an artist because you walk a floor down or a floor up. Everything somehow gets perceived as potentially an artwork. But no longer do I consider that a problem.

6-00:55:50

I mean, it's not unusual for someone to enter the art culture, the visual art culture, at a later age, which I was, or am. But I had all this African stuff long before the art stuff came in, you know, the bent wire and the little torpedoes and stuff like that. You know, what fits ones way of seeing changes, with information and with some maturity about what you're talking about. I think I'm just saying that there is all that stuff mixed together downstairs, and it was not at one time. And it was my own--I didn't know about idea art so much. I knew about abstract expressionism, you know, that's pretty available to art-likers, art-interested people.

6-00:56:59

But people would ask me these questions, and I think you have too, "Is that segment of your life, the elephants and the tigers--there were tigers too, not just Africa but India--represented in your art?" And I wasn't even thinking that these cement things in my bedroom and downstairs, and in the studio which you haven't seen where there's lots of stuff that looks like

elephant skin, I never thought about it that way. I was more interested in the universal basic material of cement, and concrete later on. Nothing to do with elephants. But people would come in and say, "Gee, that looks like elephant skin, or rhino, or hippopotamus, and I'd say, "Oh yeah, it does look like that."

6-00:58:04

They'd say, "What's the story?" And I'd say, "I like cement because it's inexpensive, it's available, it's universally available. It goes from a powder to a liquid to a solid. It goes through these different things. It can be made into a sphere with a certain process." You know, all these things were more important to me than supporting the idea that these things looked like something else, from my past.

6-00:58:59

Riess: And now if someone comes by and makes the suggestion about elephant skin?

6-00:59:05

Ireland: I say, "Yes." [laughter] No longer--well, I don't have to--you know, cement can be a good thing or not a good thing, depending on the artist and how the artist does what he's going to do.

6-00:59:29

You see, you have a supply of objects that are available, which means anything. Everything brought into proper focus and context can be an art object. So I can't very well say, "This is an art object, these are art things. Can't use cement, it's too nothing, too throwaway a material. People batter it, and bang it all day. In every urban place they are digging up concrete." I would say now that I accept everything, absolutely everything that the artist chooses to use to make an artwork. Nothing to be excluded. You can't exclude something. You have to accept perfection, I think, that everything is an art-perfect material, an art-material tool, a tool to express yourself.

6-01:00:44

Riess: You said "art-perfect?"

Art is Perfect, if You Can See It

6-01:00:49

Ireland: Art is perfect, as we are, but we don't acknowledge it, because we have a tough time accepting our own perfection. And we have a tough time accepting human excrement, which doesn't interest me at all, but there are some artists who like to take a Dixie cup and poop in it and put a plastic lid on it and exhibit it, and museums have exhibited those things. It doesn't seem to me to be--but I can't say it's not art. It's art, but not art of our choosing.

6-01:01:23

The idea of choice is so important, that you have to choose. You have available to you different choices, and different desires, and you can say, "Yes to this, but exclude that." But there's no ground for excluding it. What you do with students is you tell them what tools-- "You need a different tool. You can't make a red rowboat, you need something else, you need to have someone doing the tango there. But this is not art." And of course that's ridiculous,

because everything is. As you choose it. The artist is the one who makes the choices. And choices--maybe someone doesn't see it the way you do--you say, "I really want you to see this work, so maybe I'll alter it a little bit so you can see it the way I see it". All these things now, the objects, we call them tools, they are instruments for developing a clear idea.

6-01:02:45

[laughs] Something like that.

6-01:02:47

Riess: Thinking about trying to get someone to "see" something, is it another artist you imagine you would be having this dialogue with?

6-01:03:00

Ireland: Oh boy. Yeah. No, it can be another artist whom you admire, and you won't violate your friendship by asking them because they'll tell you, if they're honest. And if they're not honest they won't tell you. They'll say, "Congratulations." That's the word.

[this conversation continues on the audio tape only]

It could be a lover, it could be a parent, it could be a former art teacher. It could be someone you create, who doesn't even exist. But you say this being, from the heavens, has not given me a clear enough position. But generally speaking there is a lot of variation about who you are trying to please, and whose adulation you want, you know.

Riess: But within a fraternity of people you think have something to offer, something to say?

Ireland: Yes, I think for me that may be the strongest call, to not lose grace before your friends, your art colleagues, or whatever you're going to call them.

Riess: What about the art critics? Are you having a dialogue with them?

Ireland: I'm not, because I have trouble reading those things. They don't have trouble. And they can cut it to shreds, you know. The title sometimes is important, very often important, and that leads the critic into the work, maybe. Sometimes the title is totally essential to the success of the work, to give a person a springboard.

Riess: Stepping back, have you had moments that are like epiphanies, where suddenly you have arrived and the light shines and you know where you are going?

Ireland: Oh yes, and they don't last very long, the epiphanies. You kind of go up and down. You'd have to almost ask other artists, but I cannot--you know, you have to be driven by trying to further use your available tools, and to clarify--I use the word clarity a lot, trying to be concise and clear. It never really ends, because you're not so sure how significant your work is, or independent your work might be from other artists, if we can use that term.

There are times when it's quite wonderful and you're stoked up and you say, "This really does it for me," for the moment. "For now it's"--what are we going to say?--"resolved." Resolution. Something's resolved. And we say to ourselves, "It's resolved for right now. But maybe it won't last. Maybe tonight I'll go to bed and tomorrow morning I'll get up, and, 'Oh boy, I lost it, that piece wasn't as good as I'd remembered it.'"

When I used to do printmaking at Laney College I used to come back across the bridge at night and routinely I would go to Chinatown, ten or eleven at night, and eat late Chinese food, by myself always. I'd come across the bridge and either I'd had a good day or a bad day, and I'd just be totally depressed if things hadn't worked out the way I'd wanted them to. So there is that place where--. And then on the other side, the flip side of the coin, you've had a wonderful day and you're whistling Dixie, and you've got the radio going, and you're thinking of yourself as an artist. [laughs]

Yeah, there are wonderful days and there are not so wonderful days, and I suppose if you're a writer or a musician you have the same thing. I'd have to imagine that, not being one. But you know, if you're writing, you want to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, and if you're a composer, you want to get something and you just haven't quite got it yet, you just keep working on it.

Riess: And if you're an artist, what do you do? Tear it up?

Ireland: Well, that's a good question. I think sometimes you say, "Okay, let's keep it around for six months or a year or whatever, and see if it improves." Then you can say, "It was a lousy piece of work when I started it, and it's still terrible, and [discard it]." I use them--I print over things, or paint over them. So you don't necessarily tear it up, but you could. And you could tear it up as a process. You could have people come in to watch your performance, and you take your work and you tear it up. I have some work that's like that. You can see a piece in the bedroom there--I think it's there, maybe it's gone now--where I've torn up work and embedded it in Play-Doh [torn up prints and pushed them, embedded them, in Play-Doh [plasticine].

Riess: If your artist friends didn't see what you were so pleased about, what would they say?

Ireland: I think very often artists--if you go to a gathering of artists, the person who's the artist will say--well, someone will say, "What are you going to do? You've going to do a performance. What are you going to do?" You say, "I'm going to take my clothes off, and I'm going to run around the room until I fall down." "Oh yeah, far out!" your friends say. So you can be inside privileged. Then you have your expectation and you see it, you see the naked person running around the gallery. And all the variations that go with that.

You have to use this notion that it's all art if you want it to be such. And I don't know whether we can call it art, whether we identify it or not, but for us, it's perfect. People have trouble with my idea of the perfect universe, and I don't see any reason why one would have any problem with it because all things are perfect. And we just have to learn--our life is going to

be spent accepting our perfection. And art is the easiest way, just to use it as an example, and say that everything--if there's an artist and he does something, and he says, "What I do is I'm an artist and I make art, that's what I do--with exceptions." No! No exceptions, because how do you make the choice then, you see, if you don't accept it?

The perfect universe to me is--I mean, I'm not a good pupil of it because I still live with a certain amount of anxiety, but if the anxieties were removed, or I remove them, through meditation or whatever it is, you are there, or realized.

Riess: This is a Buddhist point of view.

Ireland: Yes, I think more or less. You accept yourself.

Riess: You don't try to change things.

Ireland: You could. You'd be privileged to, as long as you accepted--yes, I think you could desire for change. But not for removal from the list.

You can reject anything you want. You're privileged as the artist to do just exactly what you choose to do. And if somebody gets it, that's fine, and if they don't you can say, "Well, I'll make it so you can accept it, you can see it," or "I'll just let you founder."

This all narrows down--I'm making an observation now on your time here just this morning, that we're starting to compress it nicely. I mean, I'm getting a lot out of having you here. [laughs] The way I see it, and the way you're responding to it, and the way I'm responding to what you're saying is we're approaching a place that in my experience is very worthwhile. I think we, both of us want this oral history to fly, you know, and I think we're a lot farther along now in this hour than we were when we first started, is what I'm saying. Maybe it's not fair for me to say that about you, but I'm saying that about myself because I think there's some clarity coming along that heretofore had not been there.

The Position of the Historian

Riess: When I arrive I have a set of typed questions, and I'm trying to develop a thesis, trying to pack you into a coherent package, as someone who has evolved from point to point.

Ireland: I want that too, I want you to have that. I want to have that as well. That the thesis is concise and interesting, and important and worthwhile, and all those things.

Riess: It's interesting that you have a couple of times said that you would have to ask other people for an objective view. Giving a kind of privileged position to historians to look at your childhood in Bellingham, to look at your marriage and your education, and Africa, and to begin to draw conclusions. You say that's the job of the historian, it's really not your job?

Ireland: That's right. If you want to make it your job you can, of course, in addition to whatever else you might do. But that's right, once you release it to the public domain they can cut it to ribbons if they want, and they do, sometimes. They may find the work to be any number of undesirable things.

Riess: Has any critic given you some insight into your own work through their writing about you?

Ireland: I've had some good reviews, but I've had some bad ones, too. I guess Andy Warhol or somebody like that said that if you believe them when they tell you you are good, then you have to believe them when they tell you you are not good. Once it's out there in the public domain they can rip it to shreds, they can praise it. You have to decide, too, whether it's important to you. Some people just never--I only want to know about them when they're good. [laughs] That's my humanness coming in.

Sometimes I get reviewed when I can't understand a thing that the reviewer is saying. They see it all completely differently. And I sometimes just can't talk about it because I don't have the vocabulary for it. It's kind of curious that way. You can't stop a good critic. You can't say, "I don't want you to write this up," or "I want you to know this is something that I was thinking about but this is what happened." In other words, you want to appear at your strongest before the ax of the critic. And sometimes you get them, and sometimes you don't.

What I find annoying a little bit with critics is they want you to know that they know a lot. That maybe they even know more than you do. That they know where your work fits in the whole stream of the art culture. They never fail to tell you what their history is, what their credential is, their qualification. And you can say, "Oh shit, this person, this critic, doesn't get it, he doesn't know anything about it." Well, he may be right, the critic. Maybe it isn't a good piece of work. So why should I get all worked up over a piece of work that's mediocre, or got out of my studio before I got a chance to really shake it down.

So anyway, where are we?

Riess: [looking at November 2001 *Art Week* review of David Ireland exhibition at the Christopher Grimes Gallery in Santa Monica.] This piece [sink] seems referential.

Ireland: That's true. It's Duchamp, the urinal, only in this instance I'm not using the urinal, I'm using the sink. I think anyone who would see that who would know about Duchamp at almost any level would get it.

Riess: So that is the point of it.

Ireland: Right. The monochrome panel is historic in that it's the reduction of polychrome to get down to the basic notion of--that's why monoprints and mono-things are often about history.

[tape interruption and discussion off the tape of the difference between the work Karen Tsugimoto is doing with David Ireland preparing for the catalogue for the Oakland Museum of California's 2003 David Ireland Retrospective, the work Betty Klausner is doing in writing a biography of David Ireland, and the oral history of David Ireland]

Ireland: You were interested in whether going through all these autobiographical processes serves me well. And I guess the question is, "What. What well?"

Riess: [laughs] What? Well.

Ireland: You're saying you're traveling down maybe the same path a little bit with the oral history. And that's true. I've got only one pitch, basically, and these things have to come up. I think Betty's book, assuming it gets published, by whom I wouldn't guess, will be done and packaged and off and disappeared or whatever before you're done with the oral history.

Riess: Heavily illustrated with your work?

Ireland: Not really, because she recognizes it's not about the work so much.

Riess: Like a book about Picasso that is really about the wives and mistresses and so on, but not about the art?

Ireland: Betty's smart about her art history experience--she had a gallery in Santa Barbara, she knows a lot--but I don't think she's used it completely to capacity. I think it's probably just so exhausting to do the book at all.

Riess: And Karen Tsugimoto is writing a monograph?

Ireland: She will write one, and we had David Ross lined up, before he was out at the [San Francisco] museum. He was going to write a preface. And I think Karen's got a woman named Jennifer Gross who's at Yale in the art gallery. She wrote that catalogue for a show of mine in Portland, Maine [Institute of Contemporary Art, Maine College of Art]. That's her work. She's a wonderful person. I feel very comfortable with her. She did a Richard Tuttle piece for a Ph.D. thesis. I don't think it was in connection with a show.

The Camera in the Study

[Ireland and Riess are walking through the rest of the top floor of the house.]

7-00:00:17

Riess: [heading down the hall] These parts of the house are as they were when you moved in?



7-00:00:23

Ireland: Except for the surface, yes. I took the wallpaper off and this is what I got. All the earthquakes--the house was built in 1886 so it suffered several earthquakes. But I rather like them. I think the cracks and lines are wonderful to look at.

Riess: [in study] Lots of things pinned on the walls.

Ireland: Some things are mine and some aren't. You see a collection, of course, of my children, my grandchildren. And me lying in a snow trench. And the yellow dots are a friend of mine's work, not mine. There's a framed piece called "Notice." Have you seen that?

7-00:01:05

Riess: Why are you in the snow trench?

7-00:01:10

Ireland: It's a trench that fits my body, and after the trench is complete I'm out of it and a concrete truck comes and fills the slot with concrete.

7-00:01:22

Riess: Where is that?

7-00:01:24

Ireland: It was in the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. They may have thrown it out, I don't know. I made several.

7-00:01:33

Riess: What's in the jar?

- 7-00:01:38
Ireland: A piece of meat. A cigar butt.
- 7-00:01:43
Riess: And this check in a jar?
- 7-00:01:48
Ireland: That's not my piece, it was a friend who had a gallery in New York for a short period of time. The check--it's made out to cash. "The Church of the Little Green Men"--this guy went to theology school in Berkeley then opened a gallery in New York. He sort of did the theology course as an artwork.
- 7-00:02:19
Riess: Here's one of these gray cement pieces.
- 7-00:02:26
Ireland: Elephant skin.
- 7-00:02:51
Riess: [looking at bookshelves] What do you like to read?
- 7-00:02:54
Ireland: I like good fiction, and I like poetry, and I like--actually I have a sort of loose friendship with John Ashbery. He came here twice, both times to get a story, for *House and Garden* or someplace like that, and we had some good conversations. He's read poems and acknowledged [dedicated] them to me, which has been nice. He had a chronic problem with alcohol. I don't know about that now.

Joseph Beuys

- Riess: This book about [Joseph] Beuys. Let's talk about him, and the piece that is tipped over on the books.
- 7-00:03:21
Ireland: That's not mine, that little framed drawing. That's done by a friend of mine who lives in Marin.



7-00:03:28

Riess: Why is it placed at that angle?

7-00:03:31

Ireland: That's just where it fits. It's not significant. Since it's not my work I guess I could put it in a collection of other artist's work, friends work.

7-00:03:47

Riess: Beuys, did you know him?

7-00:03:49

Ireland: I saw him once only, and I didn't appreciate him when I saw him. I mean I hadn't really become a devoted Beuys follower. But I've read almost everything there is on him. I think Beuys is so misunderstood by younger people because they think the objects are what's important. And he's a politician, he was a politician, and that's the thing to focus on, in his mind, is one's political position.

[the following was not captured on the video tape]

Riess: The work?

Ireland: The work is a result of his political position.

Riess: And for you?

Ireland: I'm not such a purist and so I look at it and say, "That's a beautiful piece of work. A beautiful object." But I don't have that strong political conviction that he had. My position was to sort of look at the objects and the materials that he chose to examine and explore and use to his advantage. Are you a Beuys fan?

Riess: I remember seeing his pieces at the museum.

Ireland: They have some of his work in their permanent collection, I'm sure. But you know, everyone has responded so much to his choice of materials, wax and fat tallow and honey and all these things that came out of his own personal experience, naturally. Not an unusual position to be in. And felt. He forever locked down certain materials, "locked down" meaning that you can't do anything without acknowledging who it would be--"Oh, that's just a Beuys piece," or a [Richard] Serra piece or a this or that.

Riess: And you have done that with concrete.

Ireland: Yeah, I mean I've singled out what worked for me with my particular philosophy. It doesn't mean that he couldn't have used concrete at some point, but we don't think of him as a concrete person.

Riess: And when you use wax or tallow?

Ireland: Sometimes you acknowledge. Like I refer so often to Duchamp.

Reliquary of Friends' Work

Ireland: I'm not given somehow to plastering the walls with little mementos, but I have my cabinet here, my reliquary of friends work, some friends work. [comment on a few photos on the wall.] [laughs] After you and I are through here I'll rip everything down.

7-00:04:56

Riess: [looking at jacket on a hook] Is this Yves Klein blue, this jacket? Is it hanging there because you might get into it?



7-00:05:08

Ireland: Oh yeah, I wear it. I've got two things hanging on the wall. I haven't got any closets. So that's why it's there, and it's in use. When I wear it for a performance it'll be performance art.

7-00:05:16

Riess: What about this photograph?

7-00:05:19

Ireland: That was when I was in the army--I look like an army person, you know.



7-00:05:20

[standing with his portrait]. This is 1955, 1956, something like that. There was a photographer in Saint Louis, where I was stationed nearby. He was quite famous for men's portraits. How I got onto him I'll never know. I know somebody else who has their portrait done by the same photographer. I don't remember my parents ever showing that portrait. They must have acknowledged it. That would be something I would ask my older sister, she would remember everything about where it was, or where it had been. It could have been in my parent's bedroom, their sanctuary.



7-00:05:47

Now here is an attempt to do something, the piece with the wire on it. It was just trying to take what would be a satisfactory to me surface material, which would be the cement again, and coming along with a drawing element to fit with the completed surface. I wouldn't have to distress it any more, but I wanted it to keep working, to keep moving, so that's what's going on there.

7-00:06:38

Riess: I like that *very* much.

7-00:06:45

Ireland: I think Karen has selected it for the show. I have three of those of different sizes, huge sizes.

7-00:07:14

The contradiction is what appealed to me about it, the contradiction between the stiff fabricated wire and the distressed nature of the surface below it.

Riess: [in front of cabinet] Where to begin? Is this a bit of Africa?

Ireland: That's Turkana, Turkana tribe.

7-00:07:41

This is also--you know the Duchamp piece, he has the nude woman and the waterfall? Okay. And these are mostly pieces that are other peoples work. A student of mine who had a thing about fur coats and who would go on weekends to the salvage shop and buy fur coats and make fur pillows and fur things. This is one of her pieces and I thought it was beautiful. And this is a piece of my son's?

7-00:08:26

Riess: Your son is an artist?

7-00:08:28

Ireland: My son was an artist for a short time because I told him the family couldn't stand to have another one. This was his, it's a lovely little thing. He was probably about fifteen years old when he made that.

7-00:08:46

I forget what this is. And this--Tom Marioni did an edition of "Champagne and Beer Bottles". Or maybe it was just "Beer Bottles and Champagne Bottle". This was a German kid who came through the city, offering to do paintings for maintenance. Now this was taken from a window above Paule Anglim Gallery, looking across the street. And here coming up is a rhino tooth. Think of all the grass that has had to munch.

7-00:09:39

Here's a really wonderful piece. [looking at photo card]



7-00:09:54

This to me is so wonderful. Rebecca Horn. It's imagining that one would have tons of liquid gold, and you would be in the Alps and you would pour it down 'til it created--let's see if she's named it anything special, "The Golden Waterfall." Well, of course. Isn't that something, to imagine conceptually how this would be flowing down Yosemite, or something.

7-00:10:16

Riess: You did something like that didn't you, a waterfall with concrete?

7-00:10:21

Ireland: Yeah I have. And I don't know which came first, this or that.

7-00:10:30

There's lot of stuff that could get elaborated on here.

7-00:10:37

Here's our shape again, Suzanne. The idea between this and similar ones is reconstituting the paper--by dipping it in water you can read the paper again. When you are through reading it you can squeeze it out and put it away. Or it can be a Christmas tree ornament, as alternative use.

7-00:11:54

Riess: Here is the portrait of Duchamp.

7-00:11:55

Ireland: Oh yeah, by Man Ray.

7-00:12:09

This is a little piece of mine, an earthquake indicator. If there is an earthquake it activates. You have to get up and immediately run to it.

7-00:12:20

And here--is this Cezanne or what? [a photograph] Let's see. Yes. Cezanne. They say that he was that way, that he wanted to not be seen as a ragamuffin.

7-00:12:48

Riess: What is this ball of shreds?

7-00:12:55

Ireland: I think that's a piece from Ann Hamilton. We occasionally would trade things, and that was one of hers. She took a razor and cut out strips of text.



Somewhere I have the lenses for Terry Fox's eyes. "Six more survive trip from Cuba." Remember I was telling you about the piece out there.

7-00:13:14

Here's something. This was an award from a woman who created a thing in Boston. [unwrapping noise] This is like a pebble, in sterling silver.



7-00:13:41

Isn't that something? It has my initials. Let's see if I can read the inscription. Engelhart, Charlene Engelhart. 1988. Can you see it? She had one of these made for about ten or twelve artists. She came out here and she selected--with the help of David Ross, I might add--individual artists to give grants to. So ten or twelve of us got one of these things with our names. I like this. I'm sure I would lose it in the first five minutes if I carried it. I probably should just throw it away so that I wouldn't have to worry about it. [wraps it up again]

7-00:14:35

Riess: Can you incorporate it into something?

7-00:14:36

Ireland: I suppose. That's a good idea. Thank you.

My mother had a worry stone and she wore it around her neck.

Books, Shoes

7-00:14:48

Ireland: [looking at bookshelves] Here's my [Charles George] Gordon, my Africa explorer books. Some of them I've given away. A Swahili Dictionary. *Stanley in Africa*. Kipling. I'm a Kipling fan. You ask me what I like to read, sometimes I just want to read Kipling. All that history.

7-00:15:12

Riess: Africa couldn't be further away from Bellingham, could it?

7-00:15:15

Ireland: Yeah, and it caused me some concern, too. Sometimes I would be lying in bed and I would say, "My God, you're 13,000 miles away from your home."

7-00:15:29

And I've got all these art books, too. Some of them are quite important.

7-00:15:36

Riess: Do you ever refer back to them, the art books?

7-00:15:41

Ireland: I would, but they aren't catalogued some way so I know what they are. That's the problem I have. There are certain artists I'd like right now to look up their kind of work, and I can't decide which of the books contains their work.

This is my shoe collection over here, Suzanne. It will be tough to see them [with the camera]. You get in as close as you can. You'll have to see over the top.



7-00:15:44

Riess: These are your shoes?

7-00:15:46

Ireland: All mine.

7-00:15:51

Riess: They're served their purpose?

7-00:15:52
Ireland: They're just disgusting, and they've served their purpose, pretty much.

7-00:15:58
Riess: Why didn't you throw them out?

7-00:16:01
Ireland: Well, I guess it's sort of like the brooms, and the rubber bands. While they're not someone else's they're mine, they tap into a bit of my history. And they come with some regularity. That is, you wear a pair of shoes out in a year, so you could say if you counted the pairs there, not too many, how many years are represented. I only started that ten years ago or so. Ten or fifteen years.

7-00:16:40
Riess: Let's see what you have on your feet now?

7-00:16:43
Ireland: What I'm wearing? They're different, and I don't like them, because they don't breathe. So I feel my feet are moist all the time.

The Camera, on Down the Hall

7-00:18:04
Ireland: That [light fixture] was here, one of the things that was left to me by the accordion maker.

7-00:18:16
Riess: Did you ever hear him play, the accordion maker?

7-00:18:21
Ireland: I never heard him play. I would assume that he could play. But he and I weren't on the best of terms somehow. We didn't have a communication. I was here when he was taking the stuff out, but you know, he wasn't very interested in what I wanted to know, ever.

Look at these cracks [on study wall], they're so great. They're kind of parallel, like the earthquake went in a particular direction.

7-00:18:41
Riess: And that light fixture? [donut-shaped neon light]



7-00:18:44

Ireland: I never turn it off. It goes out sometimes when my daughter is here, which is rare, because she likes it dark inside at night.

Riess: What is this room?

7-00:18:57

Ireland: This is my office. This is where the answering machine is, and fax machine, and phone book. And that's my one closet in the whole house. Rather sad. Sad. It limits my ability to--. The towel is just hanging there because there happened to be a place for a nail.

7-00:19:29

Riess: The open box, red [opened out square cardboard box with opening against the wall, painted red].

7-00:19:30

Ireland: That's the flag of Switzerland.

7-00:19:45

Riess: And this yellow square [painted piece of cardboard].

7-00:19:52

Ireland: Probably it was a piece that was important to another piece, to complete--that's what I'm thinking.

7-00:20:23

Riess: Here's a book, "David Ireland."

7-00:20:27

Ireland: Yes, someone who was going to organize things. Do you see anything there at all? It was so funny, this person was going to--here, 1982, a mailing list, but no addresses. Hmm. I can't begin to--like telephone calls, more or less. Someone who heard my woes about all the stuff I had to do.

Riess: And back here, this ball?

7-00:21:04

Ireland: That's another person's wire ball, someone who was formerly a student. Very often I see my work coming up, too, but isn't that the way students and proteges work?

7-00:21:36

Riess: Here's a wing, a metal wing.

7-00:21:42

Ireland: It's not metal, it's paper and dirt and ink. Extender they call it. [working with it] There we go. I guess Karen wants to use that, too. If it gets squashed out good and flat then it will be--it's kind of a process work because one side blots against the other. You fold it and then you press it and then you unfold it and then you presumably get something a little bit different on each side. It's heavily waxed as well.

7-00:22:22

Riess: I haven't seen this kind of work before.

7-00:22:26

Ireland: I have quite a lot, not in that particular shape, but I have a lot of ink paintings.

7-00:22:36

Riess: The color?

Ireland: It's like a rusty piece of steel.

7-00:22:48

[moving out of the room] Isn't that something? This came from North Adams, Mass, where the Guggenheim [Thomas Krens] has done that art center [Mass Moca]. I haven't seen it, but I am good friends with the architect who was on the job. He worked with me at Andover.

7-00:23:00

This is a photograph of the house, at a time when they had trees out there.



7-00:23:15

The copper window upstairs is here. There was--I boarded it up--a big window for the accordions to be shown. This is a little explanation of what I was thinking at the time. I'll try to dig one of those out for you.

7-00:23:54

One thing I like, and I couldn't do it now because it would be destroyed instantly, is this is iron, an iron railing, and there were nice flowers and stuff growing in there, and I have that capability to put flowers or shrubs or something in there, but people would be scooping them out of there the first night. This photograph was in the debris downstairs when I moved in.

7-00:24:22

Riess: A passing glance at a standard bathroom. You haven't added any touches?

7-00:24:28

Ireland: Well, I probably have. Here, let's go in here just a second. Here's one of the torpedoes again [looking at a framed drawing]. That's become almost for some reason my signature shape, my trademark shape. I'm quite fond of the torpedoes. No one else has quite responded to them the way I have. But that's okay, I'm not doing it with that expectation.

7-00:24:45

Riess: They were in a show recently, weren't they?

7-00:24:51

Ireland: Yes, you're right, at Paule's [Gallery Paule Anglim].

7-00:25:00

Here's one of thousands--not thousands, but many objects. This has got a lightening agent called vermiculite mixed in with the concrete. I don't know why that's got that anthrax [reference to anthrax scare at the time that had people suspicious of any white powder] on it, but--you couldn't have any less, it couldn't be less, less. Less more. More less. Yeah.

7-00:25:24

Riess: You have an Altoid collection.

7-00:25:27

Ireland: I love those boxes. If I were I a fly fisherman, which I'm not, I'd keep the flies in those little boxes.

[looking in another door] This is the dark side of America.

Riess: [looking into alcove] This was a window?

7-00:26:37

Ireland: Originally this was open, and then the owner, me, filled in this part so we don't have to deal with the neighbors, nor they us, or me. Unfortunately I've just got it full of junk right now, which I'm not happy about. It's all that stuff, like the IRS stuff that never ends, that just keeps accumulating.

Riess: What is going on here with the chair and the tusks?



7-00:26:56

Ireland: That's upside down, it's a kudu. And that chair is a genuine Stickley chair, side chair. There's a little label under it, if one could see it. Of course the leather has had it.

7-00:27:12

Riess: Will this be left?

7-00:27:15

Ireland: Not actually that piece, but some things. This [wardrobe] was left [by the accordion maker]. That's what I said--it limits my appearance.

7-00:27:31

Riess: These wire drawings, you just stick them into available holes?

7-00:27:38

Ireland: The hole comes first.

Brooms, Cream Whipper, Peat Piece

Riess: Is the broom piece going to be in the retrospective at the Oakland Museum?

Ireland: I try not to take it out of the house, just because of the stress on it.

7-00:27:48

Riess: It's fragile?

7-00:27:55

Ireland: It's easily done, but I don't have a show date until '03. I'm going to leave it here during the retrospective because I'm going to have the house open to people, on a limited basis.

Riess: And what is this? This is the Duchamp?

7-00:28:08

Ireland: Yes, and again, I'm not so sure about it, whether I like it or not. I had it in the studio for such a long time, and I thought, well okay, I'd get it out of there.



7-00:28:42

This is a cream whipper. [loud cranking, tongue of silver foil]



And this is the peat piece.



7-00:28:57

I put water here in the pan when I want to activate it, and I turn on the electric, and you get the smell of peat here in the house. It boils and the smell comes up from the moisture in there. That's an electric frying pan.

[Ireland pauses to admire the glossy yellow wall in the hallway and stairwell] What happens if you stand here long enough and a car passes--you'll see it in a minute or two--you'll see a streak of red or a streak of blue, the passing car color.

7-00:29:35

Riess: Why did you stop the paint there?

7-00:29:37

Ireland: That's a good question. Somehow I tried to make a transition between the old, original stuff and the new. Probably I wouldn't do it again, but here it is. One makes their aesthetic mistakes.

7-00:30:01

There used to be a window here, and again, I wish I hadn't taken it apart. I had a little place where I could put a projector in and I could show slides, 35 mm. slides in there. It made kind of a dark box. But I couldn't get into it when the box was there. Now I have the benefit of the space.

Riess: You made this table?

7-00:30:33

Ireland: That's partially attributed to Cezanne, as well, because of his disinterest in perspective. And it sort of takes up that gap. Actually the chair isn't part of it, unless somebody says "with the chair."

7-00:31:00

Riess: Do you have choices in what goes into the retrospective?

7-00:31:18

Ireland: I can say, "I don't want to show that," and I think they'll respect that. Or if I say, "I want this," and they say, "No," for whatever reason--well, we'll try to accommodate one another.

##

[Interview 5: December 12, 2001]##

[Interviewer and Ireland walking around dining room.]

Dining Room, Skulls and Wall Pieces

8-00:00:13

Riess: What's on that table, David?



8-00:00:16

Ireland: They are all skulls. Well, there's a crocodile here, a giraffe, and a hartebeest, and the jaw of a wildebeest. And a rhino. They are all from different trips [to Africa]. This one was probably hit by an automobile because it was by the side of the road. Can you imagine just driving through a place where you are seeing bones of all sorts of creatures! I would doubt that there would be any left now.

8-00:01:00

Riess: Why did you bring them back?

8-00:01:02

Ireland: Oh, why did I bring them back? It seemed like a good thing to do. It's the same thing as the house, it's kind of getting to the skeleton. You get to the skeleton of the house by taking off things too.

8-00:01:24

Riess: You found beauty in them when you got to the skeleton?

8-00:01:31
Ireland: Oh sure, but they were already in this condition. I didn't have to scrape anything away like I did on the house. I guess the underpinnings of things have always interested me.

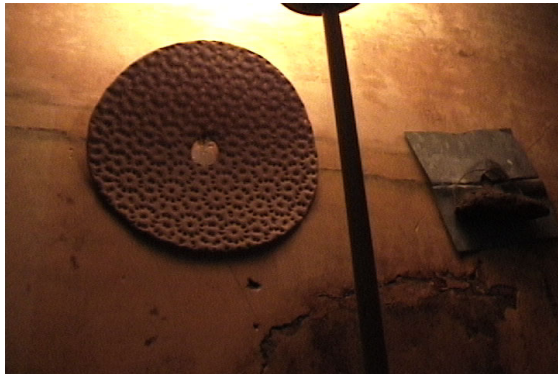
8-00:01:48
Riess: And these fortune cookies?

8-00:01:49
Ireland: Yes. I don't know what they say because I don't have my glasses with me now.

8-00:02:00
This is the tool used to carve out the basement downstairs. One day we'll look at that. It's a dirt basement. It's my pride and joy.

8-00:02:18
Riess: This appears to be a piece of rye bread.

8-00:02:25
Ireland: Yes, a friend of mine who's German came from Germany for a particular holiday and he had a loaf of bread to give me. And rye seems to be a favorite of Germans, and he brought it all the way from Germany to give to me for a Christmas present. And so I accepted it and thanked him and it's been here ever since, ten years maybe. This is Norwegian flat bread or something up there, that round thing.



8-00:03:07
Riess: What about the hairs hanging from the bread?

8-00:03:09
Ireland: That's horsehair that I inherited from some place. And I took the liberty of configuring it that way.

8-00:03:17
Riess: That flatbread?

8-00:03:20
Ireland: That's something that probably when Scandinavians want to abuse themselves they eat that.

8-00:03:36
There's a Danish pastry way over there on the far right.

8-00:03:42

Riess: And this in between?

8-00:03:44

Ireland: That is just another one of those torpedo-shaped things. It defies clarity. See, there's a use of that word.

8-00:04:05

The important thing for me is that I uncovered this crazy shape, and what was the purpose of it, and how did it come to be this way? I have to imagine that there was a flue for a chimney or some such thing. There is a fireplace directly behind it in the other room.



8-00:04:48

Riess: The horsehair--more horsehair.

8-00:04:54

Ireland: That came I think from--you know Ann Hamilton? She's done projects where she has used horsehair, lots of it, and she gave me some horsehair.

8-00:05:13

Riess: What about the Danish pastry?

8-00:05:15

Ireland: The Danish pastry--the story is too long to tell you. But anyway, it's rather disgusting because it shows signs of mold. It's been up there for seven, eight years.

8-00:05:35

Riess: If I came to dinner and brought you something--how do you decide what to put on the wall?

8-00:05:50

Ireland: Some things I would reject for my own personal position on it.

Concrete, Unidentified Rocks, Roofing

8-00:06:25

Riess: [looking under the table with the skulls] More concrete pieces.

8-00:06:27

Ireland: Yes, those are found chunks that appealed to me. Mostly picked up along the street--I think all of these are. They are like icebergs. I love them. Something about something being resolved in a nice way that I really like. Over and above another one. I might select one, or add something to it. That sort of bulbous shape is not concrete--that's from another source.

8-00:07:28

These are the gloves for making Dumbbells.

8-00:07:34

Riess: Then how do you get the imprint of your hands?

8-00:07:37

Ireland: At some point you can use your hands, but this is for getting started.

8-00:07:52

Riess: Have you gone through a number of pairs of gloves?

8-00:07:55

Ireland: Oh yes. And there's all different kinds. The ones I use mostly are surgical gloves. Something that fits tight.

It's like Stonehenge.

8-00:08:19

Riess: Except with Stonehenge you wonder how the people did it.

8-00:08:26

Ireland: Yes. There's little problem in this instance.

8-00:08:39

Someone gave me this piece of obsidian. I don't know who it was that gave it to me. That bothers me now because I wish--at the time I said, "Oh, this is wonderful, thank you." And now I don't know who it was.

8-00:08:58

Riess: This picture looks like it came from a video.

8-00:09:00

Ireland: Yes, it did. Tony Labat took the video. And you can see all of the lines that comprise video in there. So that's me, vintage 1976.



8-00:09:25

This is a rock that came off a man's farm in Northern Kenya. It's a beautiful piece, but once again, you know, there's no identification. A very interesting man. I went hunting with some people on this property. This had pushed its way up through the earth to the top surface, and I picked it up. I hate to see it go away, but there's no identification.

8-00:10:07

Riess: But you could make an identification of any kind you wanted.

8-00:10:13

Ireland: Sure, I could make it up. No one would notice the difference.

8-00:10:26

These books--here are my famous concrete bookends. And these books were given to me by my best friend's father, who was a surgeon, *Diagnosis and Prevention and Treatment of Tropical Diseases*. I had tapeworm at one point so he gave me these. He said he had never had the occasion to read the books and never would, so he gave them to me. I know something about parasitology from owning these books, and there are some wonderful illustrations, of elephantiasis and that kind of thing.

8-00:11:21

This rock came from Ireland.

8-00:11:41

This is from Ayer's Rock in Australia. I don't know why it has the little ribbon on it.

Riess: And this card, with the word "Casa?"

8-00:12:04

Ireland: A woman named Kate Erickson--and I think she's since died of cancer, a wonderful person--she and her husband, or boyfriend, whatever, would go around and put text on top of--made to be like a roof someplace. They'd get the owner's permission. They'd say, "We'll give you a new roof if we can paint the poetry on your roof."

8-00:12:46

Riess: This [card] is a piece of asphalt roofing material?

8-00:12:52

Ireland: Exactly. [reading back of card] "Thanks for the evening at your home. It was great to catch up. We'll keep in touch." Zeigler, his name was Zeigler. So they made it for me out of a piece of asphalt, you know, the stuff you put on roofs, roll it, or in shingles.

8-00:13:16

Riess: And they were at 65 Capp Street, at the Capp Street project?

8-00:13:19

Ireland: They were residents there. Their deal was going around finding unusual things to do. They did a poem in North Carolina which I was able to see. They wrote it on the sidewalk with material they found which was pretty stable. And then after the opening, and the show ran its time, they went out with sledgehammers and broke it all up. I think it was a great idea. That was some years ago.

8-00:13:59

This [photograph of a water meter cover] is the work of Tony Labat, who did the video of the Maintenance Action. I don't know how he talks about it, if he does. What does it say on here? SF Water Department.

8-00:14:22

Riess: [looking at photograph] Is this your family?

8-00:14:24

Ireland: This is my mother's family, yes. My mother would have been about eleven, we determined, eleven or twelve. Her father died, my grandfather, when my mother was twelve. My mother was the last to go here. She's on the right. The first to go would have been my grandfather who was a lecherous, very undesirable person apparently. He was a Lutheran minister. They're the worst. He came from Norway when he was about twelve, apparently, and married my grandmother, who never smiled in her whole life. She was very attractive as a young woman, but having eight children kind of beats it out of you, I guess.

8-00:16:01

Riess: And this angel?

8-00:16:18

Ireland: [as he leaves the room to make tea] That was the inspiration for the angel piece.

8-00:16:38

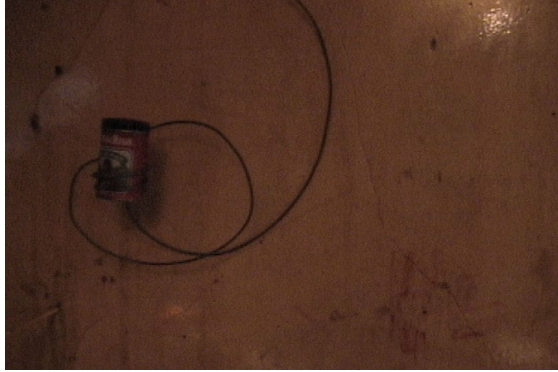
And this photograph is of two very good friends who I was supposed to join next week to go to Vienna, and I decided not to go.

8-00:16:56

This [in jar] I believe is my hair, after one of those times when you don't cut your hair for six months. There again, I haven't identified it [on the jar] so no one--they would throw it away. It's kind of repulsive. If someone wants to do a DNA on it they can determine, probably.

8-00:17:39

Riess: What about the Contadina can here? Does it light up?



8-00:17:41

Ireland: Yes. This was part of an exhibition at the Art Institute. [looking around] I was fishing to see if I had a match. But it's a candle, it just burns like a regular candle.

8-00:18:11

Riess: That has a great appeal for me. Maybe I could make it.

8-00:18:30

Ireland: Sure, sure. Well, people become artists because they can't afford to be collectors. They can't afford to be participating. A man on the street, curious about art, the fact that he can make it-- it's almost a myth that you can't make it without being an artist. Making it goes along with being an artist, not being a collection.

8-00:19:02

Riess: What is this box of blue things on the table?



8-00:19:10

Ireland: Yves Klein objects, I don't know how to describe them.

8-00:19:18

Riess: In a Kelly Moore Paint Company box.

8-00:19:21

Ireland: Yes. I've been deliberating for some time whether I should have the Kelly Moore on there or I should have it plain.

8-00:19:41

Riess: Will this go in your retrospective?

8-00:19:45

Ireland: It should, and it may, but I doubt it. It's a matter of how much space we get and how much we can cram into it.

[Interview moves upstairs and continues on audio tape only.]

Art Being About Pleasing the Artist

Ireland: I would like always to be hot [means making clear statements], but I'm clearly not.

[watching Riess organize equipment] I had a film crew here from BBC some years ago, and they had so much equipment with them, you couldn't imagine it.

Riess: What were they doing?

Ireland: They were doing a series which to my knowledge never got off the ground. They were doing a weekly thing that one week they would show, interview, talk to collectors, and the next week administrators, and then art supply people, and then finally the artists. But they interviewed so that you would see all four or five of these one hour pieces, and they all fit together. And you could find out about what it feels like to be a collector, or whatever. It was supposed to be viewed over British television, and they said they would let me know when it was going to happen. But I never saw it. I think they probably had budgetary problems or something like that.

Riess: I wonder, do you think people understand your work? What about understanding?

Ireland: There are different theories. But one is that the viewer picks up what the artist's intention is. So the artist says to himself, "I want my viewers to see thus and so," and they work toward that at all times. And then there are many artists who don't care whatsoever whether the viewer "gets it"--that seems to be an expression that has been around for a long time.

Riess: "Getting it," do you think that's always been an interest for artists? Michelangelo, Van Gogh?

Ireland: I don't know about those two artists. If there was a concern that Van Gogh had, for example, he could write to his brother, Theo--Vincent would be in Arles or someplace and his brother was way up in the Netherlands. And in writing he was talking about his work and whether it was difficult or easy, or something he was still trying to get, maybe, the air, the light. But I don't recall that he had this burning sense of having to please the viewer.

You don't have to please a viewer and you don't have to entertain a viewer. That's not art's job. Art's job is very much about pleasing the artist, the artist pleasing himself. This is why I use this word clarity all the time because you're trying to get the essence, you're trying to compact, or do something so that you as the artist are pleased with it. You can shift and move things around. You have all sorts of privileges to do exactly as you like. If you look at Van Gogh's time, for example, there wasn't this incredible system of galleries in those days. [laughs] I'm not trying to sound like an historian but it's coming out that way. It was very much the artist wanting to do art that pleased them, the artist. And then go on to the next work.

Riess: There weren't the galleries then, so you were freer, without the market?

Ireland: The market didn't exist.

Riess: How does the market figure in your thinking?

Ireland: I would be a speculation for the market. If a person comes and sees what goes on here it can be very confusing because they probably are bringing their knowledge of art history--all of these things that are guideposts as you move along through an artwork.

Riess: But you set out to find a dealer when you came back to San Francisco?

Ireland: I needed to make a living. You could be a holdout and say, "I'm not going to do anything that resembles or product or a need for a gallery."

Allan Kaprow

Ireland: I told you about Allan Kaprow, the "father of the Happening?" He tells a story of--he needed to do two things. One was to establish a credential, which would allow him to get his foot in the door. Whatever. That's very metaphorical, of course. But he felt that if he got a degree in philosophy, which he did, and art history, which he did, that would allow him to penetrate the system, so to speak. So he did that.

And the second thing he wanted to was to do something no one's doing. So he went around to all the people he had access to who were making art and he said, "Okay, this person is working with this and so. And this person, something else." And if his work even resembled any other artist's he wouldn't do it, or he destroyed it, whatever, disposed of it in some way. So then he said, "Okay, no one's doing Happenings." So he did things like on the Pennsylvania Turnpike he put out a buffet for motorists to stop and eat, you know, and when he went back the next day he said everything was gone. The table as well!

The Happenings were his baby, so to speak. And this idea of turning your back and running away from anything that's being done by another artist, that's the thing. What prompted him to do things like the Turnpike Buffet I don't even know. But if you talk to him--he was at Mills for a residency, and if he ever comes back I'll notify you. It's interesting. Nobody that I know as an artist has worked with such gusto, such conviction that he knew that he could make a contribution to the visual art culture if he did what no one else was doing.

Riess: And then what happens when other people start doing Happenings?

Ireland: If people start doing Happenings, and there are some, mainly masquerading as performance art, well you just go back into yourself, find out what serves you, what you feel that--maybe you take a political stance. Maybe you take a psychological stance, or philosophical.

There is something I think always within the artist--see, I can't operate without using the word "clarity," trying to get something clear between viewer and artist, or something. So that they find some cause, some communication available between the two, the artist and the viewer.

Challenging the Viewer

Ireland: What I am trying to avoid is this business of trying to please the viewer. I don't want to please the viewer. I figure that what makes a piece successful for me is when the viewer is totally ill-equipped to understand why a piece of concrete that I find on the street should be significant.

Riess: And after they have seen it is significant to you?

Ireland: When I see them getting close to understanding it, then I want to push it farther away from their grasp. You're on the cutting edge and you want to continue to be on it, maybe at some sacrifice to yourself. If you believe in something, that belief should get richer for you all the time. If someone comes up and says, "This is beautiful," then I think, "What can I do to make it not beautiful".

We take to our experiences our histories, where we come from, where we've been. I think the idea is to challenge those things that allow us to participate in a piece of work. There's no reason whatsoever why those pieces and chunks of concrete are important, but they are important, because they sort of allow you to turn your back on what's acknowledged and accepted. See, I think the concrete is very important in this issue, because everyone who looks at it says, "Well, it's not worth anything." But if there is someone who says, "Yes, it is worth something, because it takes a message of denial and makes it active, makes it important."

Riess: A message of denial?

Ireland: That I would be denying myself an opportunity--if I cast something that was nice and clean, a nice curiosity piece, it would mean I was trying to appeal to the viewer. And I don't want to appeal. If I see them starting to get it then I want to tug it away, you know, like a cat with a string that you are pulling on.

Riess: You know your audience pretty well? The "them?"

Ireland: There are some pieces in here [the house] where I have made an allowance for a viewer who doesn't know everything. There's a little mixture here. You can go around and pick out certain things and say, "This is a softer blow"--I mean something that utilizes some of the artist vocabulary that people start to develop a familiarity with.

You know, I'm not prepared to know what the artist's position, or role is. But I know it's not to entertain.

Riess: The book I'm reading on Conceptual Art talks about overcoming alienation, and concerning oneself with everyday objects and life, and art "lucidly recreating everyday life."

Ireland: People write that kind of thing about me.

This idea of using social implements as a conveyance for artwork--they don't have to be social, but social would imply some tool, some mechanical tool, possibly. I'm thinking of Orozco, or whatever his name is, and his banana leaves. [Riess had sent Ireland photographs taken at the Gabriel Orozco exhibition at the Marion Goodman Gallery, New York City, Nov.-Dec. 2001]. To me, that's him trying to get as far away from what would be thought of as a beautiful object. I mean, a dried banana leaf, or a cactus leaf, or something like that.

Riess: And he used laundry lint. What did you think about the laundry lint?

Ireland: [laughs] I'm so familiar with that lint, that it, you know--

Riess: It's a kind of cliché, almost?

Ireland: Well, yes, almost. I don't know how he would do it. But, you know, we've all been aware of lint, and, you know, in some cases some glue has been put on the surface of something, and it sticks to it. But no one got it to market. So maybe it rode in on the wings of the banana leaf. [laughter] My thought is, what's the next thing? We'll see what he does after this show comes down. Does he show them elsewhere, or does he discard them, or what does he do

with them? I would say that's a real tough position. When you get to concrete you're dealing with a pretty raw situation.

Whatever it was that you read, I think it's the usual way to describe art that is spare, and bare, and minimal. And it would seem that it's also something that challenges the vocabulary of the normal viewer.

Riess: Something else from the book, is that Conceptual Art forces the viewer to become an active participant.

Ireland: See, I call that only a form of it--it doesn't have to be a performance work, and it doesn't have to be an installation work, but a lot of--well, Conceptual Art is idea art, where there is an idea presumably in advance of any action being taken. The person has this idea, and then the artist says, "What tools do I need to make this a reality?" So he goes about gathering banana leaves, and sugar cubes, and distorted maps, and mud balls, and, you know, the list goes on forever, truly.

This brings back our old friend "clarity." If it's not clear, the communication between the artist and the viewer, if it's not clear, then the artist's responsibility, if he wants it, is to find new tools, or other tools, because the tools that he has selected are not doing the job. Orozco may have visions for doing something with these cactus leaves, or these banana leaves. But the clarity is essential for the viewership to pick up on the idea. The viewer is supposed to participate with the artist, and if it's not happening it doesn't mean that the viewer is wrong, it means that the artist hasn't selected the right equipment to go in and do this job.

The test is whether the viewer gets it. The test is set up by the artist and the viewer—bit I'm an opponent of the expression "gets it," because if the viewer doesn't "get it" that means the artist had selected the wrong tools. It's about selecting tools to do the job, you know, making decisions and judgments. Don't use a saw when a hammer is what you're after.

I think, What are institutions going to do with work a little bit like Orozco? They have Damien Hirst and they have people who make life very miserable for curators and administrators, because they have to find a way to deal with it, keep it plugged in. Some wonderful pieces he's done. And you know, Matt Barney.

Riess: What about your interest in controlling the piece? Somebody could take a Dumbball home and put it in their garden as a garden ornament.

Ireland: Yes. Well, since it would be worth \$50,000 [laughs], they won't put it in the garden.

Riess: \$50,000?

Ireland: Well, \$1,000, yes. There are people who have bought it, but more as an indication of support than of knowing, you know, of getting it. Or there are people too that--if you do something long enough, people will start to believe you. So in a way, a newcomer is--I've forgotten what--I had something brilliant though. [laughs] Well, anyway, ask me again.

Seventy-nine for John Cage

Riess: Another way of asking this question is, When the work is out of your hands what do you care about how it is presented, or something?

Ireland: I think you let it go. Unless you mandate that it's not for sale.

Riess: Do have pieces that you regret selling?

Ireland: Oh, yes. Sometimes, you know--you are invited to do something someplace. And you never see it again because they come in after the show's over with chain saws and chop it up, or whatever tool it takes. Yes, it's sad to see some pieces go. Of course, one could say, "Well, all you gotta do is go out and find some more concrete and get busy."

Riess: You wouldn't miss any individual Dumbball, though.

Ireland: I would not. I may miss an opportunity to show a collection, like *Seventy-nine for John Cage*--that was his age and I made seventy-nine Dumbballs. I had four boxes that held twenty balls each, with the exception of one, the last one, which only had nineteen, because he didn't make it to eighty, he died right before his eightieth birthday. The whole piece is--the balls are taken out of the crates, the wooden crates, and they're there for people, the viewership in the gallery, to move around any way they choose, like John would have. People can participate in it, like in his sound pieces. There's a lot of chance stuff because the result of it is just the ball--a person rolls it with his foot, kicks it, and it goes twenty feet over that way.

Anyway, it's called a memorial work. It's dedicated to the memory of John Cage, and the date that he died. He's been very popular these last years, I think. Since he died there's a lot of people who wish they had paid more attention to him while he was alive. I see all kinds of symposiums on Cage and, you know, different pieces are redone. So he does--most of the work I think allows for it, he expected it to be redone. He expected people to continue using the setup that would allow for work to be done so that he could approve it. [sighs]

Riess: He also did visual pieces, didn't he.

Ireland: My recollection is that a lot of the visual art that he produced came after he had established some credibility. It may not be fair to say that, but I think he was more a musician and a composer, and I think that's what he'll historically go down as being, a musician, writer. While he's done beautiful etchings, and I think they're of first-rate quality, that's not what his reputation is. It's like me--the brooms, those crazy brooms, or this house becomes signature for me, and the silent pieces are signature for him, you know.

Words, Mundane, Insincere

Ireland: We all get a signature whether we want it or not because someone has to communicate from this person to this person, "What does it look like, the Orozco work? What materials did he take to it?" And, "Well, he used some dried cactus, and let's see, they're about thirty inches, and a sharp little point on the edge of them, a little thorn." You know, stuff like that.

"Oh, I get it, I get it--yes."

Riess: You're describing what is kind of a problem?

Ireland: Well, Conceptual Art allows for that. I mean, unless it's denied.

Riess: It's descriptive.

Ireland: Yes. "What did you do?"

"Oh, I was invited to Seattle to do an installation, and so I found in the garbage some cut-up pieces of two-by-four and a bag of sand and stuff, so I went into the gallery and I wedged it into the corner."

And the person [listener] says, "A two-by-four, sand--the container that the garbage goes out in--yes, okay, I get it."

Riess: That was part of my response to the Orozco, that I wanted to replicate some of the pieces.

Ireland: Yes. Well, I think art comes in various packages. But I think that it's important that you be able to do something if you want. If you want to say, as you're sitting here, "When I get home, I'm going to see if there aren't some leaves around and I might be able to find a rubber ball someplace." You can say, "I'm tired of being concerned with other people's art. I want to do it myself, my own art."

You see the Broodthaers, the Marcel Broodthaers catalogue? He's one of my people. What I'm after here [looking through catalogue] Suzanne, is to see if I can't find where he says, "I couldn't afford to be a collector, so I had to be an artist."

Here's what I'm looking for. "I too wondered if I couldn't sell something and succeed in life. For quite a while I had been good for nothing. I am forty years old. The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind and I set to work at once." The critical word here is *insincere*. So he's very sincere about insincerity. It means he would do something that was determined by others, by the market, by the art market. Anyway, this is hot. And he only had about twelve years. He died rather young, smoked a lot, probably died of lung cancer.

Riess: But you're not insincere, are you?

Ireland: No, but wouldn't you say that the appearance of the piece of concrete was a show of insincerity? It seems like such a throw-away. I mean, if I had it cast in bronze it might be saying a whole other statement.

##

More on the Teachers

9-00:00:13

Riess: You admire Broodthaers. Who else?

9-00:00:39

Ireland: I think people like Robert Smithson were--you know of him?

9-00:00:47

Riess: Smithson, the jetty?

9-00:00:48

Ireland: The *Spiral Jetty*, yes. And, locally I think my friends are what I think are good artists. You know, Tom Marioni, and Paul Kos, and Howard Fried particularly. So you don't have to go away. And there's several European artists but, somehow I can't--they aren't coming to my mind quickly.

9-00:02:56

Riess: And who would you say gave you inspiration to go on with your art?

9-00:03:09

Ireland: I told you about Jerry Gooch. He would come into the studio where I was working, and he would say, "That's so beautiful."

9-00:04:08

Riess: And he used the word "beautiful?"

9-00:04:10

Ireland: Well, it's to the point where the word hardly means anything. But we think of it as support, somehow, supporting some aspect of our senses, you know. I wouldn't want to be quoted saying I know what the word beauty means because people have been trying to define it for years and years, and will continue to try to define it. We use the word beautiful, it's in our vocabulary, everybody uses it. Maybe it's a sign of insincerity--we don't know. It's like "Congratulations" lets the person off the hook, you know. You don't have to like something to still say "Congratulations" to the artist.

9-00:05:02

Riess: Like people saying that something is "interesting."

9-00:05:15

Ireland: Yes, right. "Interesting." I propose that question to students. It's almost like the Buddhist--where you go to the master and he hits you if you don't have the right answer. So then you get the right answer, and you take it back to him, your mentor, and he hits you again. And you say, "Why did you hit me? You told me if I produced the answer--." He says, "Because I changed the question."

9-00:05:56

Riess: A little like what you were saying earlier about your work, that as soon as people think they've understood it, you want to move on.

9-00:06:08

Ireland: That's right. Exactly.

9-00:06:16

Kathan Brown was an inspiration--I mentioned her earlier. She was printing a lot of New York artists at Crown Point so she had experience with all these people. And she would give me a critique about what I was doing. She was clear that you had to be able to defend your position. And I found that quite useful. Even now I can say, "This is working, because I've removed all of the stuff that I can't explain." That [ability she had to do that] came out of her experience with Conceptual Art, you know--I mean, being married to one, Tom Marioni. And then she had the opportunity to talk with, you know, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Ryman, and all these dozens of people that came out from New York to print.

9-00:08:06

Riess: Did you learn from her critiques so that you now can see as she was seeing?

9-00:08:50

Ireland: That's exactly right, yes. She wasn't anyone who was my influence on a twenty-four hour basis, she was my advisor at graduate school for one term. But I got a lot out of those remarks. If you can't say what you're doing, then that means that you don't know what you're doing, and accordingly the work doesn't make it." So it was lasting, and I continue to use it today. Doesn't mean I succeed. I don't succeed every time in being able to clearly describe or explain why I picked this, or that, or the other thing, you know.

9-00:09:43

Riess: If you are clear about what you're doing, about what each line or void means, then will the viewer see it in the terms that you see it? Ideally does the viewer see the work as you see it, line for line?

9-00:10:25

Ireland: Yes.

9-00:10:29

Riess: So it's in some way an intellectual activity.

9-00:10:39

Ireland: I don't want it to be intellectual. But you're right, it is. And it's kind of a snobbishness that produces a lot of it, too. You hear stories of artists walking off the stage, or taking their show down at the Whitney when there is a Vietnam protest march, or--you know? Wanting the best of everything, and your piece won't make it unless you have the best.

9-00:11:11

James Lee Byars--you might say he was an inspiration as well--he was offered a show at a gallery in Chicago, and he wanted to take an exterior wall down. He wanted them to remove a whole wall. Of course they said they couldn't do it, but apparently they were kind enough to take the subject up with the board of directors for the Arts Club in Chicago--I had a show there myself--and they thought they were crazy trying to even propose such a thing. But they said that they would do him that courtesy. It was a new building, they had just finished the building, and he wanted to come along and do something to it, violate it or whatever.

9-00:12:15

Riess: A criticism of Conceptual Art is that it is "just pointing at things."

9-00:12:23

Ireland: [laughs] There is the idea--you have a clicker, you know, like you used to get for Halloween? The little thumb thing? And you and I decide to go to New York, and we're going to go to galleries, and we each have a clicker in our pocket. And we'd go "click" and we'd just have an exchange of clicking. You don't have to use any words. "Click" means "pay attention." Doesn't mean it's good or bad, it means just for your attention. It's just wonderful, that idea. They don't sell those anymore, I don't think. I haven't seen one for a long time.

Installations, Galleries, the Maintenance Action

9-00:14:37

Riess: What do you think of the idea that the artist should curate his own exhibition?

9-00:15:26

Ireland: By and large it's the artist's responsibility to do what he's going to do in the gallery. I don't mean that it's financial, necessarily--it could be, but it's not. I think that to say that Conceptual Artists are creating or curating their own shows is very accurate, but it doesn't--I've done pieces like the angel piece, "Angel Go Round," all over the place. And it's clear enough with the directions that I give for installing it, the photographs and all that, that a person can install it. And if necessary, the artist is sort of invited to participate in erecting his own show, too.

9-00:16:24

I had a show in Escondido, and I showed the angel piece. I thought it was a very difficult piece to install and so I was kind of hanging out by the telephone during the installation week prior to me going down there. I kept thinking, "The preparator, God, he hasn't called. So he

must--" The point is, he never called because he didn't need to call me. And he hung the show. It was beautiful, it was incredible. I said to him, "I couldn't believe that you could do this without me being there." "Oh, no," he said, "Your drawings were perfect and you gave us the right equipment to do the job with." I was quite stunned, but I was very relieved because I didn't have to--I just washed my hands of it. It was great.

9-00:17:26

Riess: Where is that now, the angel installation?

9-00:17:29

Ireland: It's going to be in the Oakland show, the retrospective--it's in my studio.

9-00:17:36

Riess: It takes a lot of room.

9-00:17:38

Ireland: Not so much as you would think. It's an awkward size, unfortunately, with the wings the way they are. It's hard to crate it. But that was a fun piece to do. People like mechanical things; I mean, viewers like things that move. Remember the ball thing at the Port Authority Terminal in New York? That sculpture--I don't know who the sculptor is, but the ball starts at the top, and eventually, some long minutes later, it comes out the other end.

9-00:21:15

Riess: About galleries here, what was your first gallery contact?

9-00:21:31

Ireland: Leah Levy had a gallery in an apartment out in the avenues, a good little gallery. She had some good people. Her experience was from living in Boston, where she either had a gallery or she worked for a gallery. She was pretty sharp. She gave me her last show--the show which would be her last show. She decided to get out of the business and have children, which she did, two great kids. But that was my first real show, you know? Where I first showed the Dumbbells. So that was important for that.

9-00:22:30

Riess: How did that first show work? She understood what you were doing?

9-00:22:42

Ireland: Well, she liked what was going on at the house here, but we weren't going to be able to take the house to her gallery. So the Dumbbell was something she embraced as well. I think the strength of the Dumbbell--Conceptual Art hadn't come to focus with her, because she was still dealing with people doing expressionist kind of work, so I was kind of a breakthrough for her. I did an installation in the space as well, and it was fun. It was an indication of acceptance, you know, at some level, that I was being accepted by the viewership.

9-00:23:44

Riess: Had you been trying to get a gallery, or a dealer?

9-00:23:48

Ireland: I decided that I was going to have to take my career into my own hands and not wait for someone to come to me. So what came out of the house here was that after the [Tony Labat] video was done I did a mailing piece, I mean a poster, announcing it, and I made it available to the art community, and everybody came.

9-00:24:43

We took the video down the street to McCarthy's, which is a bar, an Irish pub. The house was open until 8:00, and people could come back and forth between the bar and here. And we had corned beef sandwiches. It was a good evening, because the house seemed to be--what I wanted was to focus on the house. It wasn't about the Dumbball, the Dumbball really came later, in that show with Leah. But it was a good thing, I got some attention, and Paule Anglim came over, and she said, "I will be your international dealer, and Leah can be your local dealer."

9-00:25:42

Riess: That was 1978? The exhibition of "The Maintenance Action" at 500 Capp Street.

9-00:25:56

Ireland: Yes. "The Maintenance Action" was because it was all about house cleaning, basically, and making repairs.

9-00:26:06

Riess: Did you narrate that? Or were you just shown doing things in that video?

9-00:26:18

Ireland: It was mostly without dialogue. But Mr. Gordon, who was a tenant here, I have a video of him, via Tony, and I'm talking to him in the kitchen about his remembrances of the house. So it wasn't just "The Maintenance Action." "The Maintenance Action plus Mr. Gordon at Lunch" was the name of that.

9-00:27:06

It was very funny. I told Mr. Gordon when I first bought the house, I said, "You know, you can't stay here, because I'm going to tear some of these walls down." I was literally going to tear this wall down, I wanted the whole, big space, so I told Gordon that he would have to find a place. I asked him to come for lunch, because I wanted him to fill in unknown stuff, and he could talk about the owner of the house. He was here himself for about ten years, Mr. Gordon--Mr. Greub was the one I bought the house from.

9-00:28:32

In the video Mr. Gordon said to me, "You know, the pictures that you are taking, the ones of me I'll give you for free." Something like that. It was too funny. Tony and I used that expression for awhile. In the tape Mr. Gordon's having lunch in the kitchen, and I'm talking to him, and he says--he wanted a donut and coffee. And I said, "Do you want another donut?" He said, "Well, one donut is enough. One donut is enough." So Tony and I would always say, "Well, one donut is enough." And he'd say it back to me, "One donut is enough." [laughter]

9-00:29:52

Riess: How did you decide to videotape?

9-00:29:55

Ireland: Oh, I knew in the beginning that I wanted a tape of the different actions, you know. I mean the stripping of the wallpaper, and the scrubbing, and taking the trim off, and digging dirt out of the basement. Tony caught all of these different moves. Scrubbing the floor--I have slides of all it, tons of slides.

##

Tape Guide--David Ireland

This interview was recorded using both an audio cassette recorder and a digital video camera. This tape guide, as well as the timecodes in the transcript, refer to the video taped material. The portions of the interview that were recorded by the audio cassette tape are indicated within the transcript and do not have assigned timecodes.

[Interview 1: October 12, 2001]

Begin video tape one	1
End video tape one	18
Begin video tape two	19
End video tape two	33

[Interview 2: October 26, 2001]

Begin video tape three	54
End video tape three	62

[Interview 3: November 9, 2001]

Begin video tape four	63
End video tape four	75
Begin video tape five	76
End video tape five	94

[Interview 4: November 27, 2001]

Begin video tape six	95
End video tape six	107
Begin video tape seven	112
End video tape seven	127

[Interview 5: December 12, 2001]

Begin video tape eight	129
End video tape eight	136
Begin video tape nine	143
End video tape nine	147

Suzanne Bassett Riess

Grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She received her B.A. in English from Goucher College in 1957. For several summers she was a feature writer for the *Bethlehem Globe-Times* of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She did her graduate work in English literature at the University of London, and in art history at the University of California, Berkeley. She has been a senior editor in the Regional Oral History Office since 1960, interviewing in the fields of art and architecture, photography, social and cultural history, anthropology, writing, journalism, horticulture, physics, and University history. Her other interests have included many years of being a natural science docent at the Oakland Museum, that museum's Council on Architecture, free-lance photography, writing, gardening, and travel.