For Glenn Wharton, Fales Library, NYU, David Wojnarowicz project

Diana Kamin (DK) and Glenn Wharton (GW) interviewing Sur Rodney Sur (RS) on September 8, 2016

DK: This is Diana Kamin and Glenn Wharton interviewing Sur Rodney Sur on September 8th, 2016 at NYU. So, Sur, when did you first learn about Wojnarowicz's work?

RS: My god, I'm trying to think. I guess in 1982. That was when Gracie and I occupied her first formal gallery storefront on Tenth Street, across from Tompkins Square Park. And around the corner from us on Eleventh Street was Civilian Warfare, kind of on that same block. And we became really interested in each other because the artists that we were working with kind of like, you know, it was a community of artists that go back and forth, so they'd come to our openings, we'd go to theirs. And David Wojnarowicz was kind of very popular amongst those downtown artists, I guess because he was the most multi-disciplinary. He was working with the filmmakers; he had a band going so he was performing in clubs. He was also doing his paintings and drawings, and he was doing some performative work, some guerilla art action things. So he was a really interesting model. And also, a lot of the East Village artists were sort of like part of a collective, so David Wojnarowicz was a part of a group with other artists. I mean, I see them all sort of like as lumped together. David was more kind of like silent, tall, had this really resonant kind of voice. He had some idiosyncratic things about him that made him sort of stand out in away.

DK: Who were the other artists you considered in that group? [0:02:00]

RS: Oh my god, I have to go with names again. Chuck Nanney, Steve Brown, Keith Davis was another one he was around, Peter Hujar later; he spent a lot of time running around to things with Greer [Lankton]. What's his name he did all those performances with? She's with Pace Gallery right now. Having a hard time with these names. The woman that he – Kiki Smith. Then he was doing films with Nick Zedd and that whole group of theater. I heard that he got involved with films because he thought it would make him really famous and then when it wasn't he kind of lost interest. But he was around and very kind of like active. And I guess his work was like very distinctive.

DK: So when you learned about the work it was the painting work? Or the sort of stencil work on the street?

RS: It was the stencil work. Basically, he was doing a lot of stencil work then, and I think he had stenciled the storefront sign over Civilian Warfare.

DK: Yes.

RS: So that was really prominent. That became like a signature piece. Then we were aware of his stencil stuff that he had sprayed in the city, I think. Before the East Village thing happened he

had had a show at Milliken Gallery or something in Soho, and that got a lot of attention because it was the first artist that was having this big show in Soho. So that got a lot of attention. So he was really popular for the stencils, the stencil thing. And I think, after the stencil things, I can remember he was doing stencils on trash can lids; that was all happening at the same time. And then he did this amazing show with these sculptural heads that he had. He made all of these sculptural heads that were all kind of similar and alike, but painted different colors. From what I understand, one of them had cremains on the inside but we've never been able to discover whose cremains they were. I remember when they were setting up that show. It was sort of set in a target shape, all the heads on these shelves they screwed into the plaster wall. And before the opening they all came crashing down. So the opening was delayed for two hours so they could reset everything up. That was a moment. [4:25]

DK: And this was at Civilian Warfare.

RS: This was at Civilian Warfare; yeah. But I think his stencils -- a lot of the artists who were doing stuff in the street were getting a lot of attention. That's how they, you know, they could show the work in the gallery was on the street, so there was like, people like Ed Brezinski was doing a little bit of stuff in the street; Richard Hawkman was painting sculptures so he had sort of a name. David Wojnarowicz was doing stencils. Michael Roman was another one that came later that did a lot of stencils, and Basquiat was doing work on the street. So there was this kind of, you know, I really think that had to do a lot with bringing attention to who they were, because they were working socially and publicly as well as in the studio and the gallery.

DK: And you met him socially also through openings at Civilian Warfare, or?

RS: Well, you know, a very difficult – David was very shy, and a lot of the times wouldn't even show up at his own openings. Or he'd sort of like be smoking cigarettes out on the street in a corner. So he wasn't the kind of person that you'd go, "Oh, hey, David!" and socially engage with. He didn't like being around crowds of people. So he was kind of more of a one-on-one person, or in very small groups. So he was like elusive that way in terms of big public situations. And if there was like a big scene where David was around, he'd more likely be kind of in the corner.

DK: Hmm, that's interesting. So before we move into sort of the first installations of Wojnarowicz at Gracie Mansion, maybe if you could tell us a little about the context of opening up the gallery, your relationship with Gracie and what you two were hoping to accomplish at the gallery, a little bit about the gallery space on Tenth Street, and what your program was like at that time.

RS: I think Gracie got into, she basically started showing work in her apartment. And she would show works of friends that she'd sort of like, and find people who were interested in buying it. The work was like very cheap, a couple hundred dollars usually. That grew, through her popularity in the press, to force her out of having it in the residence because she was having problems with the landlord. So she felt committed to opening up a gallery gallery and finding a storefront. And I think we found, the one on Avenue A that we found, was like $600 a month. It was like really cheap. And Gracie had a patron at that time -- his name was Jim Stark – who

offered to buy enough art every month to cover our $600 a month rent. And in terms of a program, we had a program in terms of, if they were artists that Gracie liked and we were interested in, it was kind all very social. So it was more like our friends. And the idea was to create something for ourselves that we weren't seeing out there. And we felt Gracie – Gracie was pretty much, I let her take the lead on her interest in what she wanted to show, because she was so passionate and had this very distinct aesthetic in terms of her likes and not likes. I mean, she'd sort of run it by me, but a lot of my interest in art was sort of diametrically opposed to Gracie. But Gracie and I were really good friends. I really liked her. I really liked her commitment. She had a very good eye. And I thought the artists we were working with were interesting people. Even if I wasn't as interested in their art, they were interesting as people, so I didn't have a problem with that. And it was basically to just do something in a way that we hadn't seen done before. So, we showed these artists that we felt were doing really interesting work because we knew that they weren't going to be picked up by a Soho gallery or anything. We knew that we didn't want to have, like, a white cube, so we'd ask the artists of they could paint the gallery walls any color they wanted except white. So we painted the galleries like literally for every show a different color. And I think the color, in the intimate space with the colored walls and the other quirky things we used to do really drew a lot of attention. So photographically, I think one of the reasons our gallery was so photographed was because we had this artwork in this color field or wallpapered background, so visually it kind of popped. And I think that had a lot to do, just the reproduction of all of those images, and color background, and Gracie was really into color in a lot of the artists, like Rodney Greenblatt and David Sandlin were working with very bright colors. So the whole thing was like walking into an environment, and then there was all of this artwork that was really available really cheap, and it was exciting. It was exciting for all of these artists to see their friends, to see something that they weren't seeing in other spaces. We would serve vodka martinis instead of wine at our openings, because it was cheaper to serve vodka martinis than wine. We figured that out. Because people would have one or two vodka martinis and stop; wine they would just drink like water. So it brought our costs down. So within the family, people get really excited about this. We felt we were exposing something that wasn't really being seen before. And really, no one paid us any attention. We didn't expect we were going to become big and important. We were just happy to be doing something that looked good, that was successful, that people were talking about and people liked. And when we started the gallery, both Gracie and I had jobs. So we would switch off in terms of hours so we could be available to be at the gallery. And then, I think, Gracie gave up her job after a while and started doing it full time, and then I would show up after work and tag team with her. And then after about almost a year, I think, I gave up my job, too, and we put our full energy into the gallery. The thing that sort of changed it, that really made us realize we were going places, was when that article that Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick did called "Slouching Towards Avenue D". [1] Right? That was the article that for some reason just started attracting a lot of people. There were a few big dealers like Holly Solomon and maybe Charlie Coles and people like that that had come down earlier. I think a lot of that stuff happens

[1] "Report from the East Village: Slouching Toward Avenue D," in *Art in America*, Vol 72 No 6 (Summer 1984).

through the young gay boys attracting the uptown to downtown dealers who are gay or working into the downtown thing, sooner. But it really kind of exploded through all of the press and a lot of curiosity. And when those people started coming down, we started having people like Ileana Sonnabend and Leo Castelli running down to our gallery, because we were open on Sunday, so that was a free day for them. And all these heavy hitters would be coming down to our gallery, and they were really thrilled and excited because there was a certain kind of excitement. Collectors were telling us that the East Village was a very exciting moment for them because it was something that was lost. I mean, the art world had become so staid and so business-like, and here we were like a bunch of kids to them, being crazy, painting our walls, you know. What was going on, there was stuff going on in the street that was as exciting as what was happening in the gallery. And it was like a real neighborhood where there were real people doing things. It wasn't like a commercial district. So the whole vibrant community and walking into these small storefronts and seeing all this art that was kind of new with so much enthusiasm, really invigorated them. And I think that brought a lot to the scene and a lot to those collectors who got kind of really excited about it again, and pulled in a lot of the press. And that's kind of how it started. I mean, it was a surprise to us that it was happening so fast, and as big as it did.

DK: So between 1983 when you opened it and by 1984 when you started working with Wojnarowicz, it was already. [13:00]

RS: Yes, because, you know, we were doing things like we were taking out these ads. If you look at our ads in *Artforum* and *Art in America* then, we spent a lot of money on advertising. They're really kind of like, there's a lot of humor and tongue-in-cheek and satire behind it, even in our press releases. We would sort of make fun of what we were doing and talk about how fun it was. And then we put an ad in when we moved in 1984, in *Artforum*, I think, that said, "Gracie Mansion gets a 2.4 million dollar facelift." It was something we took right out of the *Post*. And actually, the storefront that we had was a 2500 square foot space, and we brought an architect in that designed it, Michael McDonough.

DK: This is the space on Tenth Street?

RS: No, this was the space on Avenue A.

DK: Oh, okay.

RS: We originally started with one storefront, and then we expanded into the second storefront, so we had two side-by-side storefronts and a sculpture garden in the back. That was 1982. Then in 1983, we had both storefronts. Then in 1984, we moved to Avenue A. And I think our old storefronts were taken over by Greathouse on one side, and I can't remember; there's another gallery that took over the other side. But we moved into this really large architecturally designed space, so psychologically it looked like we were really rolling high on the hog: because we had this big space, we must have been successful. And I think it also assured collectors, because if they saw that this was happening, that they felt even more secure about investing money, because we obviously knew what we were doing, because we had expanded so quickly. Right?

So we were raking in a lot of money, but we were always broke. I think the thing that helped us was, we got a loan. Jeffrey Deitch was working at Citibank, and he was able to secure loans for a lot of the galleries down there, and we were able to secure that. That helped us renovate our space. And all the money that was going into the gallery, I mean, the more money we had -- we were like artists; right? So we thought like artists. I mean, we didn't think like business people. The more money we had, the bigger projects we did, the more advertising we did, the more we'd want to do. So as the money was coming in we were spending it, making everything bigger, which was not about building a solid business but just like doing more, having more fun, while it could last; right? And it sort of went along like that. I mean, that's when David came in. It was around that time in 1984, and at that time we were attracting a lot of really big name artists, especially from uptown. And we'd say, like, why do you want to show with us? And it was all because we got so much press. And the press was part of just the fun and the difference of it. Even the design of our gallery on Avenue A had these sort of like slanted walls and had this Frank O'Hara cornice that ran around the top, and a zebra-stripe painted office. It was kind of, there was a lot of eye candy. And then there was Gracie in her crazy outfits and me and my flamboyancy, and the two of us – it just made like a whole trip. I think sometimes people would just come in to just watch and see what we were going to do and who we were going to talk to. Forget about the art. So it really like a scene. And we weren't thinking about it too much. I mean, it was all blended in between the art, what we were doing, our friends, the clubs. It was kind of like all one thing. And it was happening so fast that we never had time to really pull back and look at it until the whole thing started crashing down. Part of that was the economy; some of it had to do with AIDS. And the other part was real estate. [16:45]

DK: So just a couple of things about what you just said. The circulation of images was through press about the gallery?

RS: Yes, because when it started, when this gallery thing started happening, you started getting a lot of press people, particularly the Europeans are very adventurous. And they were just photographing stuff that was happening in the park, and photographing stencils around the buildings. Then they'd see a storefront, and they'd walk in and see art and they'd start photographing that. So it was all just very – it became this vibrant neighborhood that just attracted photographers. Right? To photograph everything, the streets as easily as the gallery, as easy as some nut performing on the street, to the bums, to the drug addicts. It just made really interesting editorial photography, and I think it got circulated so much, through so many press things. Because it wasn't only an art thing. The art thing came in. It was just like

DK: So not just reviews in the *Voice* but an editorial in a fashion magazine published in France.

RS: Oh, the fashion magazines were down there dressing us up and putting us in *Vogue* in their outfits. Because the landscape was kind of very picturesque. Groups were coming down there to be photographed for album covers. It was just like a, it was a very vibrant, visually enticing neighborhood, the whole thing, and the people in it. And it just made a lot of pictures. And I

think that kind of spread in a very viral way and pulled more and more and more people into the neighborhood. [18:20]

DK: And so then just to put a fine point on it, comparing a gallery, like the interior of your gallery, versus the interior of a gallery like Milliken in Soho, you talked about the colored walls as a major difference. Were there other sort of architectural or design differences between those two galleries, just for instance?

RS: Well, the East Village storefronts, the earlier galleries, were very small spaces. I mean, they were what? Ten feet wide and twenty feet deep; so it was like being in a large living room. It was no comparison to Soho, that were really kind of like a space like this. We had these narrow, very intimate spaces, and our office was kind of like right there. So you'd walk into the gallery and then there was like a little separation between the wall, so if Gracie was talking on the phone and you were standing in the front of the gallery, you could hear the entire conversation. So it was very intimate. It wasn't like you were walking into a business. It was like you were walking into a studio, more like an artist's studio, or more like artists. One thing that I talk about a lot that happened from the very beginning is that the galleries operated also as social spaces and network for information. So an artist would drop by and they'd talk and they'd hang out for like three or four hours. It wasn't like we had lots of collectors running in and out doing business. So a lot of our time we were just spending our time talking to artists about what we could do, what was happening, what they'd seen that was interesting, what was happening with the space that was opening up around the corner. Would it be a gallery? Who was doing drugs? Who was going out? The usual kind of stuff, but it was all about the community. So there was this whole network of information constantly being spread. But they were very much social centers. I mean, we even became like a day care center for part of it. The neighbors would say, "Can we leave our kids here and can you watch our kid?" There was a neighbor upstairs; we'd say, like, "Fine," and we'd get to know the kids. So, there were things like that happening. It was very comfortable and friendly and everybody was kind of in it together. I remember in those days, if a collector came by to see us, we'd like call the other gallery and say, "Oh, we sent this collector over to you. You should really meet him." That happening today? Everything's like really competitive. I mean, when I talk to PPOW, they talk about the competition, and I don't remember it being that way. I remember it being very open and sharing. But that changed after a while; it did become much more competitive. But it wasn't really like that at the beginning. I mean, if you were interested or you saw something happening, even when we were setting up installations, if someone walked by and said, "What's happening?" you'd say, "Come in and help; we're painting the walls."

DK: So then bringing us to 1984, when you invited David to make an installation in the gallery, how did that invitation come about? [21:25]

RS: I remember David arriving at the gallery. It's very visually distinct to me, because I had my office at the front. We had something called the oak offices at the front and Gracie was at the back, and it was a huge space at the gallery, and the doors went, Bam! Open. And David Wojnarowicz

came in carrying something; right? And dumping it in the back. And I went to the back to find out what was happening. He had just left Civilian Warfare. He had some kind of a falling out with Dean [Savard] about collecting money. David was like, really, if he knew you owed him money, he wanted it right there. He'd get like really, really crazy about that. I mean, most artists would, but David, he was like big and this gravelly voice, and he would start screaming. So he came running in to us, and Judy Glantzman was with him. And they were carrying all this art that they could get from Civilian Warfare, and dumping it on us and says, 'I'm sick of Civilian Warfare. I want you to take care of this for me.' Of course Gracie was like, 'Oh, I love your work! Oh, this is really great!' I mean, it's not like Gracie had not included David in shows before, so we were sort of working with him. There wasn't this tie to his representation. We could have done a show with him at any time. But basically, he was involved with Civilian Warfare, and we were moving on with other things, and in terms of solo shows. And I think we did a Sofa/Painting show on Tenth Street and invited David and he was a part of that. He was probably a part of Gracie's Famous show. So, you know, we had a relationship with him already, and he was part of the social thing, but his commitment in terms of setting up "the shows" were with Civilian Warfare and not with us, until that moment when he came in. So he dropped all this work with us, and we started working with him. And I think, you just reminded me, the first show was this

DK: Was the installation with the *Burning Child*.

RS: With the *Burning Child* that he did, actually, with Greer Lankton.

DK: Okay.

RS: Because David was very helpful and generous with a lot of his friends, because he was getting a lot of attention and starting to make a little bit of money, for what we called money then. If you sold something for $500 it was like, Wow, we're rich! He was making a little money; he was very helpful to a lot of his friends, and he was really close to Greer. So he, I think, the *Dad's Ship* show was something that he did sort of in collaboration with Greer, where he did the child and the skeleton, and then Greer had all of these little figures that were running towards the

DK: I'm going to pull up an image. Maybe that could help us guide our conversation.

RS: I know that when I talked to C. Carr, she couldn't even see it in the image. And I said, "Go to the wall, go down. Do you see that shape that's black, and if you move it a little we see another one . . . ." And then she could kind of see it. Because the photograph was kind of dark. I mean, the difficulty with that show for working in the gallery was that there was this *Dad's Ship* thing that was this drone of a ship. Listening to that all day gets burned into your brain. And I remember, I think Stephen Lack, who's having a show that opens up tonight, had the show in the main gallery, and David Wojnarowicz had the installation in the back.[2] And I remember David had some skeletons from a previous installation because he was storing a lot of stuff in our gallery, that we'd store in the basement. And Stephen found out about it, and he couldn't have a show

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/09/news/art-julian-schnabel-the-carnival-man.html?pagewanted=all

with these human skeletons in the basement. So we moved them to my apartment and I lived with them for, like, years.

DK: Really?

RS: Yes, just so Stephen could do a show. And then this is very -- because Stephen's a very competitive -- so he was always worried about, 'Oh, everyone's coming and spending more time with David Wojnarowicz.' You know. You get that with artists. This idea of doing two things at the same time wasn't always a good idea. So we started working with artists that weren't around at the time, who were like from out of town or something, like Bruce Houston.

DK: And how did you, when did you, end up giving back the skeletons? Just wondering. [25:30]

RS: I had them for a number of years. David just came by and picked them up. And I think he was doing an installation at the Brooklyn Anchorage. He used them in the show that he did with Ground Zero called You Killed Me First.

DK: Okay.

RS: The timeline is very bad. That may have been the first place that he used them, and then when they cleared out Ground Zero they were moved up the block to our gallery and put in the basement, because we had a huge basement to store them in. And then they went from there to my apartment. And David picked them up. I think he did something at the Anchorage where he also used the skeletons. And he picked them up and moved them there. And then they sort of disappeared. I heard that he had chopped one up and buried it. I mean, there are all these stories about what happened to them.

GW: There's one skeleton of an eight-year-old girl in a little wood coffin that's painted. Was that part of that group?

RS: No, I didn't have – I had a child but it wasn't – there were two adults and a child. The child was, I don't know, about that big. That might have been the one that ended up in the coffin, possibly. Because – was it a tiny?

GW: Yes, the skeleton was about maybe three feet long, as I remember it.

RS: Okay. So that would have been the child that I had, that got used into there. The other two, I don't know what happened to them. I heard that one got chopped up, someone told me the story that it was chopped up. I know that they were shipped inside of the cavity of an elephant skeleton that David had imported from Paris,

DK: Yeah.

RS: So that the human skeletons were tucked inside of the cavity of the elephant skeleton. The elephant skeleton was at Keith Davis's loft, and after David had worked and painted on them, they stayed in my apartment. But they were pretty gruesome, so it would have had – they kind

of looked like they had flesh peeling off it, so it would have been from the Ground Zero show. And I felt that was great because if someone were to rob me and come in my front door and see these skeletons, they'd just freak out and leave; right?

DK: That was going to be my question, because I know that they were splattered with blood and paint.

RS: Yes, they were pretty disgusting, but that sort of didn't bother me because it was art; right?

DK: So they were never cleaned at any point?

RS: No.

DK: Because the child skeleton in the Fales Collection is cleaned.

GW: Yes. So but at that point, they weren't clean? They still had flesh on them?

DK: Or paint and blood?

RS: Well, they were skeletons, so he put rubber and stuff on it to make it look like flesh.

GW: I see. So they were clean skeletons presumably, before.

RS: So it was all fabricated. They were clean skeletons, then he painted them and put all the flesh on, and put like shirts, put clothing on them, and splattered probably paint or maybe it really was blood. It probably really was blood.

DK: Apparently it was blood, because it's easier to get that from the butcher.

RS: Yeah, probably cow's blood or something like that, that he used with some of those.

GW: Do you know anything about the origins in Paris, where he bought them?

RS: No. No. I remember when they were shipped because I was asked to come over to help move the whole thing into Keith Davis's loft. And I think, the elephant skeleton is still around. I think maybe Kiki Smith has it?

DK: Supposedly Karen Finley.

RS: Karen Finley; that's right. Karen Finley got it. What did she do with it? Does she still have it?

DK: I'm not sure. It was in Cindy Carr's book, that she took it from him at his request.

RS: Yeah; that's another person we forget about, that Karen Finley and David were also really close. I think Kiki was much earlier. And later, when we were working with David, he was spending a lot more time with Karen Finley, at that point, and Marion Scemama was also in the picture.

DK: Mm-hm. So I pulled up this picture which, I can't get the whole thing on the screen, but

RS: So you can see one of the little dolls here, it's one of the little stick figures wrapped in tape.

DK: Oh. So that's a Greer Lankton.

RS: That's a Greer Lankton. And there are a dozen of them. There's another one in the corner here.

DK: I see.

RS: There's another one here. So you see three of them in the pictures, but they basically looked like they were running towards the skull, or running towards the child. Also the shark [29:55]

DK: And they're all running away from this burning ship that's

RS: Yeah; yeah. And I recall that the skull, when we had to do the price list, the shark was one item, the burning child was another, the painting was another, and the skull actually came with all of Greer's things.

DK: That's interesting.

RS: So whoever bought the skull, the price was so that Greer would get paid for the dolls. And I remember distinctly the collector that bought the skull that also got the dolls. And when we were doing, the New Museum was doing that show, and we wanted to get the skull back, we asked about the dolls, and he'd -- threw them out because he didn't figure they were a part of the piece. He just figured like he didn't really need them because he really wanted the skull. So we said, like, "You have half a piece." That's like part of the – at least he could have put them away, stuck them someplace, but like. We had the same thing when David Wojnarowicz did a huge installation at the Mnuchin's with the cityscape, and then he brought all this junk from the street and put all this rubble in their basement, so there was all this rubble, typical David, with the painting in the background, but I think it had a burning child. And they threw out all the rubble. So it only exists in the Peter Hujar photograph. And we approached them, too. They said, 'Oh, we just thought it was a bunch of junk and we threw it out.' We said, 'No, that was actually part of it.' I mean, if you didn't want it, you could just pack it in boxes and stick it someplace. I mean, they have so much money, that it seemed sort of ridiculous.

DK: Yeah.

RS: But they tossed it.

GW: It sounds like he had very strong feelings about what was and was not part of his installations.

RS: David?

GW: Yes.

RS: Yeah. I mean, when he put something together, that's how he wanted it to be seen and realized. And you couldn't like compromise or fuss with that too much. I mean, when you were working with him, I mean, there were decisions that kind of had to be made, but we were kind of open.

We let him put the sand all over the floor and stuff; it wasn't a problem. And I remember the collector that bought that ship was really bothered that it was so dirty. I said, 'What do you mean, dirty?' That painting was, like, right out of his studio. Then we realized that when we were shoveling the sand, all of the dust was going up on the painting. So when we wrapped it, it had this layer of dust on it. And we, at the point, couldn't figure it out, and then we realized: Ah, it must have been the dust from the sand, which, it likely was. Because everything was – and I remember when he did that installation, we had to – you know, we had a 7:00 to 9:00 or a 6:00 to 8:00 opening, or a 6:00 to 10:00; I can't remember what it was. But we had to keep everyone waiting outside for two hours, because David showed up twenty minutes before the opening, with all of the artwork. And it took him basically two hours to set that up. It was done pretty fast. But everyone had to wait outside until David was finished.

DK: With the sand and everything?

RS: Yeah; yeah. I mean, he had been bringing stuff in all – I guess he had some of the stuff there that he brought in. So maybe we had the ship and maybe we had the child and the shark, but we didn't have the skull and the dolls. And then he had all of these, foliage that he made that was basically cut newspaper on sticks that probably he made with Greer or a bunch of his friends.

DK: And do you remember, did he have sort of sketches that he was working off of? Did he come in with a very clear plan? Or was he moving things around in the space as he was realizing it?

RS: He sort of had an idea of what he sort of wanted. And he would play with it in the space. I mean, he knew that he wanted the ship, and then he knew that he wanted the shark up and the doll down, so he sort of played with it and positioned it and how it sort of made a lot of sense. I remember the gallery was painted black before, because we painted not only the floors. When we had this space, we had painted floors, so we didn't only paint the walls.

DK: It looks like the floor is painted blue; is that possible?

RS: Turquoise; yes. We painted the floor every month, and the walls, in the entire gallery. We did it with our other space that was much smaller. This was like a huge space, and it was like two rooms, because we had an installation room and then the gallery. And we painted that all every month. It was like so extravagant, so I'm thinking, what were we thinking? But when we designed the space, we designed it with floating walls so we didn't have to do any cutting. You could just like roll and not have to worry about – so that saved a lot of time. But that was because we painted every month, so intentionally, we had the floating walls for that reason.

DK: So he was happy with the existing colors of the turquoise floor and the black walls? It wasn't painted specifically for [35:15]

RS: No, we painted the walls black specifically; that's one thing he requested because he wanted it to be dark for the lighting. So when we painted the gallery we painted his room black; right? The turquoise floors, I mean, he didn't really care about because he was covering it with sand; right?

DK: Yeah; it works.

RS: And it's sort of like a water aqua color, so it went with the ship, so. But he was very easy to work with in that way. We had a lot of storage. He always needed a place to store stuff. We always really took care of it. We kept excellent records. We were known for, we paid all of our artists right away. As soon as we got money, they got paid right away. So we had a reputation for that. So we didn't really have any real issues with him. Everything was at the last second. Everything was a big secret. I apparently remember when he did the second show after this, I went over to his studio. He rented a space on 11th Street or 12th Street, and nobody could believe that I was actually in that apartment, because apparently he didn't let anyone in there, ever. I mean, even Tom Rauffenbart knew about it. He said, "You actually went there?" And I said, "Yeah. It was kind of empty with a kitchen." He had these boards he was painting on and I remember carrying a couple of pieces over to the gallery. But no, I think he was happy. He'd disappear a lot. I remember that story where he was in Mexico shooting the film, that film that became so controversial. That would have been after he made all the money from the first show that he did with us, the thing with Forward Motion; right? And he took off to Mexico. I don't even think he was at the opening for that. Like I said, he was very kind of shy, so I don't think he came to the opening, or if he did, he was standing out in the street in the crowd smoking cigarettes. But I don't remember seeing him in the gallery. And I think he took a trip to Mexico soon after that. And he hadn't signed his artwork.

DK: [laughing] That had already been sold, I assume.

RS: That had already been sold. Yeah.

DK: So just before we leave this image, I'm looking at the lighting. If you could tell us a little bit more about how that was arranged. Are those blue Christmas lights?

RS: Yeah, they're some kind of Christmas lights that he dragged in and he put around the borders of the edge and he plugged it in.

DK: And then it looks like there's some lighting in the foliage.

RS: Yeah, this is more Christmas lights that were kind of sprinkled on the inside to sort of light it that way.

DK: And there's a spot, it looks like, on the sculptures.

RS: Yeah, we had a very good track lighting system up above, so we were able to accommodate that. That was pretty simple. I think there was a light on the painting and a light on the child, and the rest was all kind of natural light. And then there's the sound effects of the horn of *Dad's Ship* going over and over and over again.

DK: And how was that played?

RS: It was on a cassette tape recorder, or a boom box, that was buried probably somewhere behind the plants.

DK: Oh, it looks like there was a plaster head in the back, too. You were talking about the plaster heads.

RS: Yeah, that's an unpainted one, but the tape recorder was buried somewhere in there and turned up at full volume, so you'd hear this waaaaaaa, of the ship.

GW: And is that audio recording still around?

RS: It's probably amongst his junk, I would think.

DK: It might be in the collection.

GW: It might be at Fales.

RS: But I don't think it was – it sounded – maybe he -- did David go and actually tape a ship doing that? No; he probably got it from a sound effects record or something. But it was on a tape thing and it was on a tape recorder or boom box that he had tucked back there.

GW: But it was an audio component to the installation; it was very much a part of the artwork.

RS: Yeah. In terms of the tape that was the audio for the sound, I don't think the tape was ever sold with anything. Because the shark was sold separately from the child, and it was all broken up. But there would be an occasion when we might want to put it together, so we'd just get all of the pieces form the various collectors and put it together. But the tape thing; that's a good question. I wonder what happened to the tape.

DK: Thinking about whether it was a sound effects record or something he recorded himself, it was a kind of a clean sound of the ship's horn? Rather than a noisy

RS: I remember it as a clear sound of the ship's horn. I don't think there was any voice or talking on it. I'm sure it was just the sound of the horn, over and over and over and over.

GW: You mentioned before that you had to listen to it all the time.

RS: Yeah. I mean, we had done a number of things where there has been an audio component or a video thing. And you know, you have that, in any gallery that you walk into, where there's an audio or video thing and there's a sound, believe me, the people that are sitting there have to listen to that over and over and over and over, and it burns into your brain. It's kind of really annoying. Sometimes, with some galleries, they'll turn the sound off, and then wait for someone to walk in, and then they'll turn it back on. But with video you can't – well, I guess you can stop it and then start it again. But yeah, it can be annoying, depending on what it is.

DK: So two questions then about installations, bringing things back together, or not. Did David have any reservations or was there any discussion about the fact that these would be broken up into

individual pieces to be sold? Was he concerned about the fact that this exist as an individual artwork in itself as well as a component of an installation? [41:05]

RS: No. His idea was, this whole conceptual idea of this installation. Once the installation was done and people could see it, and he could realize it, he was thrilled. Then we have to come and say: David. Because we have to inventory the individual pieces. So that's the way we sold it. And I don't think we sold the branches or the sand. They probably got recycled. But I'm sure Gracie still has a price list from that show.

DK: I think we may have that, actually.

RS: And it would be, title for the overall installation, and then Greer dolls would be mentioned, with the skull, and the burning child, and *Dad's Ship*, which was the painting, and the shark. Because the idea of selling this as an installation? I mean, I don't think that concept occurred to us at that time. I don't think that was within our thinking, and even if it was, the only people that could buy it would be someone like the person that commissioned the thing for his place, or a museum. And we didn't have those, we weren't kind of at that level or thinking in that way that we should sell this as an installation.

GW: It's a little before artists were doing that, creating an installation to be sold exactly as it was laid out.

RS: Right. And in terms of sketches or something, I think David maybe had it in his mind how he wanted it to look, but it wasn't, like, so precise.

DK: Mm-hm; there weren't installation instructions.

RS: Yeah, there weren't. He knew sort of what he wanted, sort of, and not exactly, in terms of placement. That he would sort of figure out on the spot. I never remember David being particularly fussy about how his work was presented. He was very fussy about how his work was handled. That you took care of it. He was very particular about that, like, you know, the painting should be wrapped, . . . . And we were very good because we had professional racks and he seemed very happy. I mean, Civilian Warfare I don't think had that, so it was kind of like moving up in a way. No, we were very careful and cautious with that. I don't think he was even around when we installed the shows. He kind of left that up to Gracie and I. We'd just sort of lay things out, and put stuff up. I mean, he'd come by and look at it, at some point, but I never remember him being very particular about, 'No this painting has to be on that side . . . .' We did the *Four Seasons*; there were just those four paintings and he wasn't particular about which one was next to which.

DK: Oh.

RS: We just did it so we felt that it looked kind of the best. And he'd come in and say, "Oh, that looks great." He'd be fine, he was fairly easy like that. I think.

DK: He may have really trusted you guys also, because I don't know if he was like that with everybody.

RS: You'd have to ask PPOW.

DK: Yeah.

RS: I know that David – I left the gallery in '88 because of this whole situation with AIDS and I decided I needed to get more involved with that and with the artists. And Gracie had realized that if I was going to leave, then she couldn't have the gallery any more. She was going to close the gallery. Because in a way, the way that the gallery sort of worked was that Gracie was the front person, the gallery had her name; right? She worked with the collectors, did the stuff with the press, handled the business thing of it which she was very good at, selected the artists and organized the program. My job was more working with the artists and creating the feel and the look of the gallery. So I was working creatively more of the time. So a lot of the feel and the craziness around it was me encouraging the artists to push that far. So Gracie would call me the Installation King. So I would work with the artists and throw out ideas and work with them, like that. So I guess she felt that if I wasn't around that the whole sensibility behind the gallery would be lost. Which wasn't true. But she sort of felt that. So she sent a letter to all of the artists that she was closing the gallery. There were a couple of artists that got really upset with that. The one that got the most upset was David Wojnarowicz.

DK: Really?

RS: He was really, really pissed. I mean, some of the artists were bothered by it, but David I remember being particularly angry. And he went to PPOW because __[46:05] was working there at the time. And she and David were kind of close. He really sort of liked and trusted her, so he needed that, so that's why he went to PPOW over someplace else. This is what I heard later. But, I mean, PPOW served him very well. I mean, he's a perfect artist for the program that they were doing. They're really great, great dealers; great, great people; very honest. And in the long run, when I think of what's happened in David's thing, in the long run, it ended up serving him well. And then you know, the gallery didn't close. I wrote a business plan for Gracie and then the gallery moved to Soho, and I just walked away from it. [47:00]

DK: So just sort of finishing our conversation on the installations, since you were involved in the production of this installation and also coordinating, I'm sure, the Mnuchin installation in their basement, how do you feel about reconstructing these installations, given this problem that we've discussed about some of the material was thrown out, some of it was thought of as disposable or replaceable? Do you think it's possible to recreate installations?

RS: David's work in installations had a certain aesthetic and feel. And they weren't so precise. So I think that it was more the feeling that we were after, and the contrast with the work. Like, I can almost walk through a garbage dump and know what would be interesting to David. I mean most of the time he'd just assemble that and throw it in. So it wasn't so precise. He was more

about feeling and atmosphere and that kind of a thing. But I really think he particularly enjoyed the idea of taking this townhouse that belonged to these very wealthy people and dragging in all this garbage. I mean I think David's mind got like into it and I'm sure he dragged in a lot of garbage that he normally would not use. I wouldn't be surprised if there were dead rats and all kinds of things thrown in there. Right? Because he had that kind of a. No, he was very much a visceral person; he responded to things viscerally. And I think he set his things up in that way. And usually when he did an installation, he didn't really direct anything. He always would come in with a group of people or some of his friends, and they'd just play around and did sort of like work in a certain way, and they'd get excited and that would be it. So it was more about the visceral feeling than the preciseness of any kind of thing. And he did rely a lot on people's responses, particularly his friends, to the work. He kind of let them have a lot of, like, input. Like, I remember all of those driftwood pieces that he did that he used in a lot of installations. I mean that just happened because David, when you put him to work he can really do something. But Keith Davis was an incredibly creative person. He was a graphic designer; he worked at MoMA, and he's the one that designed, actually, Nan Goldin's Ballad of Sexual Dependency. He worked on that a lot, and he's done a lot of other MoMA projects. But he was a real fireball, in terms of, he used his loft as kind of like a big arts and crafts studio. There were a number of artists who were using it, including David Wojnarowicz. I mean, it was Keith that went out and got all of the supermarket posters and said, 'Oh, David, look; I found these supermarket posters. Here; why don't you do something with them?' And he had a silkscreen studio there, so then David came up, and, 'Oh, this is really interesting;' and did the drawings and made the. It was totally his idea, but it was totally thrown in by Keith Davis. It was the same thing when they went out to the beach. 'Oh David, let's go to the beach.' David loves nature and the beach. So Keith Davis went out with all of these paints and said, 'Oh David, I brought some paints with me. Why don't you paint this driftwood?' so that David would get into it. I mean, if you didn't have the paints, he'd probably be sitting there looking at insects in cups. He'd be just as happy doing that. Yeah, you know, David, Alan Barrows, his dealer at Civilian Warfare, and myself, and Keith Davis, were all born within like the same three month period in the same year, so we kind of like had a kind of, we could understand certain things about each other in a certain way. I mean, I wasn't really close to David. I connected to him -- he was very distant with me when he first moved in the gallery because it was more like about Gracie; right? He got close to me, the story with me and David was that he came into my office one day when he was going to set up that first show. It must have been *Dad's Ship*. And we started talking and we started getting to know each other, and we sort of talked about Jean Genet. And then when he found out that I had every published edition of Jean Genet and first edition and the original French translation including some offshoots that were published under other titles, he was like, wow, this is really amazing. So then we became really friends. Because he saw that I wasn't, like, just someone working there that was this crazy odd guy, but I actually had, like, an intellect and interests and all of that stuff. And I also had this porn collection, so I traded some of that with him, that ended up in some of his photographs and he gave me a photograph in exchange.

DK: That's interesting. [52:10]

RS: He was very generous. He'd be very generous with his friends. And he was very nice and generous with me. He used to come into the gallery. He typed all of his manuscripts for his books on this thermograph type – it was like a heat transfer, a little portable typewriter. But you didn't need a ribbon in it. You could type and it just heat transferred the letter. But it was on paper that would fade. I mean, the whole thing would go black or brownish or something, and the letters would disappear. So this is what he worked on, because it was light and it was cheap and he could work anywhere. And then he'd come into the gallery and he'd Xerox the thermograph paper so he'd have a Xerox, and then he'd give me the thermograph paper. So I'd have, oh, the original thing that it was typed on. Well, all of those have gone to nothing. I guess if I would have kept them in an envelope in a dark space, they might have been preserved. But, you know.

DK: That's interesting to know, too, that you had a Xerox machine at the gallery and that he would use it for that purpose.

RS: Oh, all the artists would. They'd come and use the Xerox machine a lot. We even did our labels that way. We used to type everything out on an IBM Selectric typewriter, reduce it on the Xerox machine, and then cut it apart and stick it on each slide. That was a thing. And I always obsessed, anything to do with organization or order, so I used to sit there at the front and sort of do this. They used to come in and say, like, they figured I was like, I don't know, the front office desk person or something. And then Gracie would say, 'Oh, you have to talk to Sur.' They'd say, 'You mean the guy that's, like, labeling slides?' [DK laughs] Yeah, that's me. That's what I do for relaxation.

DK: So I guess continuing on our chronology, the next show to discuss would be the History of Collisions in Reverse [*An Exploration of the History of Collisions in Reverse*], which was a painting show, primarily, in 1986? [54:08]

RS: Yeah, that was pretty fast. The paintings went in, they were sold, and the paintings went out. Very smooth. And David wasn't around for most of it. I do remember collectors literally practically going into fist fights about who was going to get which painting. It was a very exciting moment.

DK: So that's the show, he showed up at the opening, but after the work had been all sold. I think that was the story.

RS: If he did, David would not -- if he showed up at the opening, like I said, he was not in the gallery. He would stand outside – because people would stand outside and smoke cigarettes and drinking inside. And if David showed up, he'd show up late and he wouldn't come into the gallery. He'd stand out on the street smoking cigarettes with whoever he was talking to in the corner, and then they'd go off or something. But he wasn't really present. He was never really present like that because he was like too shy and didn't like all the sort of commotion. But the show went up very fast. [55:04]

DK: So this is, I believe that's an installation view of that show.

RS: That's the installation part of it; yeah.

DK: That's who it was labeled in our slide collection.

RS: Yeah, that was a small room where he had *Dad's Ship*. And then in the front room, which was a larger – what is this?

DK: That's what I was going to ask you. That's the larger room.

RS: That's the larger room. You can see the cornice. That's a Frank O'Hara poem that ran in twigs around the gallery.

DK: That was going to be my question.

RS: It's a poem, "Avenue A" because we were on Avenue A. And the poem begins at the front of the gallery and goes all the way around to the offices and comes out at the end, and fits perfectly.

DK: It looks like a built-in shelf with objects.

RS: My god. I must have done that. It must have been a box put on the wall, because we didn't build anything into the walls. It was probably some kind of a box that was hung on the wall.

DK: Yeah, because it would have had to be a false wall. And do you think it was works by him?

RS: What I think it was was that David collected a lot of little tchotchkes. You know that box that he has, the Magic Box, that's all the stuff. And he used to have that stuff piled on his dashboard in his car – stuff hanging and all this landscape of all this stuff. So when I saw the Magic Box, I said, oh, that's all the stuff that I remember sitting on his dashboard. He just collected all these things and objects. And he painted – they became things in his painting, too. So from looking at that, and I actually have no memory of that at all, it would have been a box. It wouldn't have been built into the wall.

DK: Yeah, I can see it better now.

RS: It would have been a box that he had objects on and we just hung on the wall.

DK: Yeah, so we can see, there it looks like a doll, a feather, and a little monkey head, a number of figurines. So these could have been some of the reference materials for images that appeared in the paintings.

RS: Right; right. [57:15]

DK: It looks like this little guy who appears in that painting.

RS: That's why we probably used it. But I can assure you that that was not sold, that was not for sale. That was David's personal sort of thing. I mean, that was, I mean, maybe that was even my

idea. Because I would kind of – to me, it was an interesting way of presenting art and showing things and to make it interesting for the artists and engaging and something to think about. So it may have come out of a discussion. But it's very odd that I'm not remembering that at all, that box thing. But I remember the show went very fast. There was a lot of fighting about it. David was at his height, and then he stopped painting for a number of years, and then did the Four Seasons. And when we did that show, we couldn't sell one painting.

DK: Really?

RS: People didn't even show up to look at it.

DK: Just one year later.

RS: Was it a year later?

DK: I believe so; 1987, The Four Elements. [58:12]

RS: Yeah. Nothing. Nothing. Not boo. I don't even know if we even got a review on that. It was just like he was completely ignored. And we were just like, these are the most amazing paintings that he had done. I mean, we felt this was a jump up from his last show. It was like, when he came in to the gallery with those paintings, because we didn't see anything before it came into the gallery. We just trusted our artists. Oh yeah, you're doing these paintings? Can you have them in the gallery by such-and-such a time? And he walked in with these paintings, and Gracie and I were just completely blown away. I mean, we just like couldn't believe it. But no one was interested. It just seemed like no one was interested. Maybe the thing with the East Village was starting to wane. Was the neo-geo thing happening by the time that show happened?

DK: By '87, yeah.

RS: You know, there was this whole thing that no one was interested in that work any more; they were only interested in like neo-geo. So, people's aesthetics were changing. And I remember collectors saying, 'I don't want work that I can feel, that makes me feel. I want work that makes me think.' [laughing] Whatever that's supposed to mean. So nothing happened with those at all. And Gracie was beside herself. I was beside myself, too. I couldn't really understand it. But then, I didn't really understand when we newbies in the art world, we didn't really understand how the art world works. And you know, it's amazing that, like, in what? Twenty years later? I mean, I think the paintings – did Gracie sell one? She may have sold one to a dealer after the show. And then the other ones were sold through PPOW. Because all of the work was transferred to PPOW. And I think they sold the other works, and they were all brought back together for the MoMA, and sold to MoMA, or given to MoMA. Probably given to MoMA; they don't like paying for anything. Which was wonderful. And I think they're really appreciated now.

DK: Mm-hm.

RS: Like, there was no interest in them. From people fighting over, to, like, nothing.

DK: Interesting. So then in this show, we have the back room in black and the front room in white. Was that a conscious decision?

RS: Well. What happened. When we moved into the larger gallery, I think the first several shows we did, the walls were painted. Then the artists started demanding that they didn't want colored walls any more, because they wanted people to take their work – I had these discussions – they wanted people to take their work seriously. They wanted to see how their work would look in a museum, and a museum has white walls. Right? So, we said: Well, less work for us. I still think we painted them between each show, just to freshen up the walls, it was just like a sort of ritual. But then the colored walls sort of stopped, and I think there was maybe a show in between, like Hope Sandrow had a show and she wanted the walls grey. Buster Cleveland, I remember it being turquoise, the last show that he did in that space. David Sandlin I think painted on one wall. But pretty much, the walls stayed white after that because the artists just insisted. And I remember Marilyn Minter and Christof Kohlhofer didn't like the cornice because, they said, it interfered with people looking at their work. And I'm saying, you can not look at the paintings and the cornice at the same time. You're either looking at the painting or you're reading the cornice; right? And they said, no, it has to go. And I said, well, it's not going. So, you can not do the show, which of course, they were going to do; right? So they came up with this clever idea of cutting foam core that they could wedge in between the floating wall and the ceiling, around the perimeter, so that you couldn't see it. But what happened is, we had ceiling fans. So the ceiling fans would blow the foam core – fortunately it was foam core so it didn't do a lot of damage – sailing off so you'd see bits of the twig cornice coming through.

DK: It's more distracting that way.

RS: And then they would come back and, like, put it up, so that it was clean again. And then the next day it would happen again. It was kind of a joke. And then they sort of gave up.

DK: Were those things that David cared about, do you think? [1:02:50]

RS: David never mentioned it. I think he was just thrilled that we were nice, thrilled we were ambitious about his work, thrilled that he got paid all the time, thrilled that the gallery was getting all this attention. Thrilled that we didn't give anyone a hard time with smoking pot in the gallery. I think that he probably – you know, he probably loved Frank O'Hara. It's a really beautiful poem. I think he liked it. I never talked to him about it, but it certainly was made with twigs, individual twigs.

DK: It looks so great, particularly with his installations.

RS: Yeah.

DK: I had wondered if he had something to do with it.

RS: The only artists that ever brought it up were Marilyn Minter and Christof Kohlhofer, the only ones that got bugged by it. But it's never been mentioned by any of the other artists.

DK: You've talked about how he was kind of hands-off with, except for the installation work, he was hands-off with the installation of the shows.

RS: Yeah.

DK: Did he express any preferences about display or framing or?

RS: You see, his work was pretty simple. It was always framed in its blanks. You just hang it square on the wall. It wasn't intricate where it had components. If it was – there was a piece that was in the shape of the cross – it was pretty obvious. So it's pretty straightforward. The installations maybe get a little bit more complicated, and I think that, with him, was more visceral. If it had that sort of gritty feeling, then he'd get really excited. So I think that's what he was looking for. But no, he was pretty hands-off with his work, as long as it was handled right. And he knew it was in our interest to make it look good, so he trusted us with that. And everyone thought it looked great, so it was fine with him. No, the installations were kind of tricky, but he hasn't done a lot of installations. He did the one at Ground Zero. He did the one in our gallery. He did the one at the Brooklyn Anchorage.

DK: He did the one in the basement, the Mnuchin basement. [1:05:00]

RS: He did the one in the basement; that was for a private collection. Other than that, I don't know.

DK: The Milliken show was kind of an installation, as well.

RS: Mmmm, I think they were all stencil works, on boards.

DK: I thought there was something on the floor.

RS: He'd do these stencil – I never went to that show. He had something on the floor?

DK: Yeah, I thought so. I have some images, probably. And the New Museum installation, in the Decade show. That was the last one. 1989.

RS: Oh, right, right; that controversial Decade show that put Adrian Piper on the map.

DK: [looking up images] There was the Anchorage.

RS: Yeah, those are the skeletons.

DK: So here they're covered in maps.

RS: Yeah, they were covered in maps. Oh, they were covered, so actually, this, you see these things? We also had them in our installation, these branches with the newspaper things on it? So this may have happened – do you have dates on this? Was this before his installation with our gallery?

DK: This would have been after. 1985, his Anchorage.

RS: Okay, his thing with us was 1984; right?

DK: The thing with you was ’84.

RS: Okay. Then it went to this; ’85. So Ground Zero would have been after this.

DK: Yeah, Anchorage was ’85, installation at the Ground Zero was ’85. That was definitely late in the year, as well.

RS: Okay. So I got them from, they went form the Ground Zero to our basement. Oh. Stephen Lack was having a show. This is getting confusing. Because if this happened right after his thing with our gallery; right? That means that these skeletons were in our basement before. Because I remember the thing about Stephen Lack not wanting to show his paintings with the skeletons in the basement, so I had to remove them, and they went to my house. And that would have been when David did the installation, unless it was during his second show? But then he had the front gallery and Stephen wasn’t a part of that.

DK: I believe he got them in ’85, too. He purchased them in Paris in 1985; that was when they were shipped to Keith Davis’s loft.

RS: Okay, so they were shipped in ’85. Then is this the first installation they appeared in?

DK: I believe so.

RS: Okay, so they appeared in here. Then in that same year he used them at Ground Zero.

DK: If they’re the same skeletons.

RS: I’m sure they were the same skeletons. [DK laughs] I don’t think he went out and got new skeletons. There were three, two adults and a child. That much I remember. The child, we know what happened to. Then there were the two adults. They went from there – they were never in our gallery, except in our basement, and they were at Ground Zero. And when I had them and moved them into my house, they were already covered with blood and all that stuff. So it had already been to Ground Zero. So it went from Ground Zero to our basement, then our basement, here. But then if his show was in ’84 and Stephen was wanting me to get them out of the basement for his show. Oh; of course. Maybe it wasn’t the first show when he was showing with David. Maybe it was Stephen Lack’s second show; it must have been.

DK: Okay.

RS: The timeline says that. Because I distinctly remember that Stephen Lack was having a show. When David did the installation, Stephen was in the front room. That would have been ’84. Then

’85, ’86, Stephen would have had another show.[3] And that’s when the skeletons were in the basement and Stephen said, I’m not doing my show with those skeletons in the basement.

DK: Right.

RS: So I removed them into my apartment. Okay. [1:09:00]

DK: Last, general questions that aren’t specific to working with him on these shows but if, in the production of these shows or just in discussions at the gallery, if he talked at all about specific media that he used. We know that he painted on Masonite. We know he used acrylic. We know he worked with plaster and papier maché. If there were any particular conversations you remember.

RS: Judy Glantzman would be good for that. But from what I learned, David only worked with acrylic. He never worked in oils. Right? And I remember, there’s a story that Judy Glantzman recalls where David said, ‘Well, I want you to go and get a tube,’ – he used primary colors basically; right? He’d lay out all the colors and he’d say, ‘Get some black paint, some white paint, and some grey.’ [laughing] And Judy would say, ‘David, if you mix the black and white you’ll get grey.’ He’s like, ‘Oh.’ [they laugh] So, I mean, he’s pretty much a self-taught painter. He worked with acrylics. They were fast. He learned a lot about painting in his technique and stuff like that. He was a good draughtsman, which helps with your painting. But I think he learned a lot about painting from Luis Frangella. He really looked up to Luis Frangella, and that’s who he went to Buenos Aires with and did those paper pieces. So I think Luis Frangella and Judy Glantzman helped him a lot with his technique, but it was acrylic. He worked on Masonite panels. I’ve never known him to work on canvas. Paper, Masonite. I think he liked the stiffness of the Masonite and he could also, I guess, build stuff on it or glue stuff on it and it always stayed very flat and very hard. [1:11:00]

DK: And the heads or sculptural pieces that he would cover in maps, they were just glued?

RS: Yes, just glued. Simple glue that the heads were made

DK: Was there ever any trouble with things peeling off, during handling or?

RS: No, they were pretty glued on there. I think they were probably – did he have a coat of gesso over them? He might have put a coat of, not gesso but.

GW: Size?

RS: No; it’s like a gel medium that you can get in a gloss or a semi-gloss.

DK: Like a lacquer?

[3] Stephen Lack at Gracie Mansion: “Power” 1984, “New Traditionalism” 1986
http://stephenlackart.com/resume.html

RS: It's sort of like a lacquer but it comes in a gel. I think he had that over it to keep it very solid.

GW: A fixative of some sort?

RS: It's brushed on. It's a medium that sometimes, because acrylics tend to go flat, and sometimes artists would put like a gel medium. It's like gel; you mix it with water and you put it over a thing and it sort of puts a little shine, but it also will.

GW: It sounds like a lacquer that would saturate the paint as well. Darken it or make it rich.

RS: Yeah, so it was like that, but anything that David made was like very tight. It was never flimsy. It was always put together really well. If he put a screw in there, he really put a screw in there. And if he put something down, he made sure that it was really down. So I've never known anything of his that's ever had to be repaired or anything that's come peeling off of a surface.

GW: That's interesting. He really put a lot of attention into his construction.

RS: Yeah.

GW: Wanting it to last well into the future.

RS: But I think also gluing stuff down on board where he can press it hard and it was flat, with the movement, it would be much more solid than if it were on a canvas or a paper surface where the vibration or the wrinkling would be more susceptible to possibly something happening and crinkling or something. I mean, there's no crinkle with the Masonite. Right? [13:30]

DK: Yeah. And then, I guess, where he acquired his supplies, if that was ever a discussion with the gallery. I know at PPOW they assisted him with buying supplies at some point later.

RS: David was always simple: wood, lumberyard. The very basic sense of things. He used everything in a very economical way. I think with paper, I don't think that David knew the difference between a Fabriano and a something else; I really don't. He'd just go and say, "I like this paper." You know what I mean? Someone has to say, "Well, David, this paper is better than that." He really wasn't schooled in that. It was very basic, simple. If something was to be framed, it was just like, I just need a simple frame that's black. He never – everything was very clean and simple and practical. I think Peter Hujar was like that, too. His mats were cut a certain size that were unusual for his photographs, and that was because he figured out, because of a piece of mat board, he could get so many mats out of it, and that's how he determined the size. So it's more economics. He would always want it simple, cheap, and easy. He didn't spend a lot of money on materials.

GW: Do you know where he bought his art materials?

RS: In the neighborhood. He'd buy stuff at Utrecht. I don't think it really mattered to him. Another thing that Dean Savard had, was that he worked at New York Central, and he used to provide a lot of the stuff. They'd want something, they'd just tell him what they wanted and he'd leave it

at the shipping room and they'd go and they'd pick it up, and they wouldn't have to pay for it. So he supplied a lot of his artists with materials that way. But I don't think David was really too particular about paints. Maybe at one point he used Liquitex and then he used another paint and he figured oh, I like this paint more. But paint was paint to him. Give him a can of paint and he'd just, like, go to it. So he was using acrylic paints and they're pretty stable. I mean, when he was painting in the piers and stuff like that, I think he was probably using whatever was available.

GW: So he would have selected different materials for artwork that he wanted to last, than something on the wall that's just going to be there for

RS: Because all of his paintings are in acrylic, we know that acrylic is going to last. Right? And he's painting on wood. So. And it was gessoed. So what could possibly happen to it? My sense is, I think that he wanted things to look good, but I don't know if he was really thinking in terms of longevity, because he didn't have that kind of like art school training where you discuss all of those things. If any of those things were discussed, it was discussed with friends of his, and they may have educated him about certain things and said, "David, you don't do this over that." But it's not like he was experimenting too much. It was straight acrylics on a gessoed board, or on paper. I mean, he used, a lot of the stuff that he did on paper was stuff that he peeled off the wall. So, how archival is that?

GW: Found materials.

RS: You know. And the stuff that he was peeling off the wall in Buenos Aires when he did those huge paintings. So, was he thinking about: I need to de-acidify this paper or have it mounted in an archival way? He just wanted it pinned up to the wall. You have to pin it up straight. You have to roll it and be very careful with it because it was art and it was something he invested time in, so he was concerned about how it was handled. But he'd work a lot with found materials. There's a lot of found materials in a lot of his stuff, aside from the paintings, you know, assemblages and sculptures and stuff that he'd make with toys that he'd find.

DK: Well, we've taken about an hour and a half of your time. Did you have any final thoughts or parts of the story that we didn't cover that might be interesting for our researchers?

RS: No, I think there's so much in C. Carr's book and there's so much in the Semiotexte thing with his friends. That book, that Semiotexte thing was really incredible. And plus, I know people who were supposed to be in that book that pulled their stuff out because of what they'd had to say and they didn't want it transcribed and it was like a real problem. But no, I think I'm just really thrilled that there's been such great scholarship done on David. He was a very complicated person, but definitely someone that we all knew would stand the test of time. So it's not surprising to any of us, we're just really glad that it's happened in the way that it did. I think that everyone is really happy for him in that. And I don't know, I mean, if David were alive today, it would be hell, with all the stuff that's going on now with Trump. He'd just be completely beside himself.

GW: He'd be out there in the streets.

RS: Be out there in the streets? Whew. I mean, if he was going the way that he is going now, his career were going really big, he'd probably do something really radically crazy, because he had that sort of like, I don't give a shit any more attitude. With certain things. He was very angry, he was a very angry person. And shy. I think that's probably why he didn't want to – he had trouble engaging with too many people at once. He could do things easier in a one-on-one thing or in very small groups.

DK: Well, thank you so much. This has been such a rich interview. Just, thanks, it was really great.

GW: Thank you. This was very helpful. We appreciate it.

END at 1:20:00