

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

Interview with Donald Brook

23 February 2011

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Donald Brook, and his wife Phyllis Brook, on 23 February 2011 in Adelaide, South Australia, by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

About Donald Brook

Donald Brook (1927–2018) was an art theorist and writer. He was also a practising sculptor and an art critic before moving into academia. Brook played a significant role in the development of conceptual art in Australia and helped found the Tin Sheds workshop at the University of Sydney and the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide.

This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.

Interview on 23 February 2011

Deborah Edwards (DE): So the idea is that I wanted to talk to you about your sculptural practice first.

Donald Brook (DB): There you are. There is perhaps the last surviving residue of my sculptural practice sitting out there [gestures outside].

DE: Indeed, I have this early catalogue [for a Donald Brook solo exhibition in 1967], which I thought was excellent.

DB: Oh, yes. It was Max Hutchinson.

DE: He wrote the introduction?

DB: No, he didn't. I wrote it.

DE: That answers the question. Very interesting to see.

I thought I would begin in a very practical way – and forgive me if some of this obvious – but for the record and for the transcript it would make some sense to have it endorsed in this interview. So you were born in Leeds [in England] in 1927, although I don't know the exact date.

DB: I was born on the 8th of January 1927 in a back-to-back row of houses in an industrial slum in Leeds. I have been one of those very fortunate people who profited from the emergent meritocracy and got scholarships and moved up in the world.

DE: [Quotes] 'A cultural wasteland of lower middle-class environment where artistic ambitions persisting into maturity were taken as evidence of insanity.'

DB: Oh, that's interesting. Where did you get that from?

DE: From this 1967 catalogue.

DB: Well, yes, we moved up into the lower middle class. You see, my father got a job as a travelling salesman.

DE: OK. Then you write, 'In an attempt to conceal the malady I studied engineering'. Mechanical engineering?

DB: No, no, electrical engineering, communications. It was a lively time just before the war. The cavitron had just been invented and radar was on the horizon. Computers weren't ready yet but that sort of thing was about to happen, and I thought all of that very imaginative and important and worthwhile.

DE: Did you actually finish the degree, and was it in 1944, 45 or 46?

DB: No, I didn't because I had really wanted to be an artist but that wasn't an idea that one could take seriously under those conditions at that time. It was a perfectly fanciful thing. Nobody did that.

DE: How then did it come about when you look back on it? Were you a Leeds gallery visitor?

DB: Oh, yes.

DE: So you found your way to art very early on?

DB: Yes.

DE: As a teenager?

DB: No. Earlier at school. I think probably through my early art teacher, Doggy Bolland, I remember he was called. He was a teacher, and a tentative post-Cézanne modernist, and he had a very bohemian lifestyle in Bradford with a woman to whom he was not married. And this attracted me enormously. I thought this was really the way to live.

DE: A wild card in Leeds.

DB: Yes, so I befriended him and would have liked to become an artist myself but it wasn't realistic. I had to do something concrete, something real. I had to have a job. So I took to engineering and communications was the most imaginative sort of thing available, and gradually I realised that I couldn't hack it, and it wasn't what I wanted to do. I had been deferred from military service while I was doing it.

DE: Was military service compulsory?

DB: Yes, conscription was in place during the war, and I was deferred whilst doing engineering but I gave it up, so that meant that I was no longer deferred and I had to go into the army, which I did, and I was then conscripted for what was called at the time 'the duration of the emergency', 'D of E'. That turned out not to be very long because the war in Europe ended, and the war in Japan not very long after that. It was only about two years until the end of the emergency, and this worked out wonderfully well for me because, on being demobilised, the further education and training grants became available for ex-servicemen to go to university. They were available for university study only. This was a bit of a problem because universities by and large didn't have art courses. There were only two in England: Reading and the University of Durham.

DE: That's why you found yourself at the University of Durham.

DB: I went to Durham, where Lawrence Gowing was professor.

DE: So it proved not to be a high price. It sounds like the price for wanting to become an artist. Leaving an engineering degree [during conscription] was a pretty high price to pay, but in the end it worked very well. We had a scheme here too and a significant number of ex-servicemen went to East Sydney Tech[nical College, now the National Art School, Sydney] to study art on it.

DB: I think there was a similar thing. I think it was more general. I think it was not restricted to university study here but an art school.

DE: An art school. So was Lawrence Gowing absolutely wonderful for you or was he absolutely appalling?

DB: No, no. I found him absolutely intolerable. He was a very, very tall man who loomed over one and he had a speech impediment and he dribbled out of the corner of his mouth and he had festoons of saliva that he would collect on his sleeve and wipe himself as he spoke.

DE: That is revolting.

DB: I found that fairly repulsive but not as repulsive as his ideas which seemed to be extremely narrow and limited. We didn't get along at all well.

DE: When had you decided to become a sculptor?

DB: I think almost immediately, as soon as I got into the art school. It was a five-year course in those days, a five-year degree course, and I think I got one year remitted because of work I had done. I had made a lot of things, done a lot of drawings, and made things, and at the interview I got admitted to the second year. So I did only four years to the honours degree.

DE: Right, so just to go back then a little. You were drawing and modelling? Carving?

DB: Yes.

DE: As you were doing your engineering degree? And then in the army?

DB: Yes.

DE: So who were you looking at then?

DB: Oh, I can't remember who the models were. I think there was, you know, early wartime people – Graham Sutherland, John Minton, [Christopher] Richard [Wynne] Nevinson – you know, the English pre-war, rather technically insipid modernism, which of course Gowing and co, with his cohort of people from the Euston Road School, and [Walter] Sickert's students, tended to continue.

DE: Can you remember what magazines you were reading then? Were you devouring *Art Now*, for example?

DB: I can't remember what magazines. *The Studio*. I think that was the only one.

DE: And so you were carving, modelling, and from 1949 to 1953 you could have been welding in a post-war art college, couldn't you?

DB: No.

DE: Not yet?

DB: No. It was a very classical training. It was two days a week life drawing and life modelling. I've got photographs of the sort of stuff I made in those days.

DE: I know Rosemary Madigan, and remember her telling me she was at the John Cass College in London around 1951, and they had introduced electric drills to the carving classes which she found a bit revolutionary at the time.

DB: In the early 50s? Don't think so. This seemed to come in at the end of the 1950s with Tony Caro and those people.

DE: She may or may not be remembering correctly, I suppose.

DB: My sculpture teacher was [JR] Murray McCheyne. He was a Scot and his influences had been mainly Scandinavian and he passed on to me an affection that was not really very long lasting for some of those people – Kai Nielsen, Gerhard Henning, [Einar] Utzon-Frank –

rather formal figurative sculptures. In fact I went to Denmark in my final year for a while to write a thesis on one of them. I've forgotten which one. Murray McCheyne was a very practical chap. He thought that sculpture was a sort of trade in which it was very hard to secure a living and one of the best ways to guarantee an income was to become quite good at lettering because there was a lot of work in the gravestone industry.

DE: A rather unprepossessing start to your sculpting.

DB: Yes. He did publish a paper once, something to do with the golden thread in art history, which got up my nose years later and I published an article opposing it. I've always been disrespectful of my teachers.

DE: Reasonable enough by the sounds of it. So you finished the course there though?

DB: Yes. My external examiners were Robin Darwin, principal of Royal College [of Art, London] at the time, and Henry Moore. So I got to know Henry through that. He was very nice. I got a good degree. I got a first and I got a chancellor's travelling scholarship from the university to study Archaic and Cycladic sculpture in Greece and Crete.

DE: So you were one of a small elite focusing on sculpture, I assume, as opposed to the majority dealing with painting.

DB: Ah, no, there were about a dozen students in the sculpture department and, in my year, there would have been perhaps six in the final year.

DE: So you had succeeded in excess of adequate, and the idea of your trajectory was not to engage with McCheyne's monuments, not a stonemason, but what?

DB: I was influenced then by the prevailing mood of post-war humanism, people like Germaine Richier and Reg Butler and [Alberto] Giacometti, of course. People like that were my models and I joined into that. I was almost a contemporary of those people. They were quite young at the time. That's the sort of thing I really wanted to do, and was doing, and continued to do right up to the 1960s in Australia when I was making things like that [points to a work]. There was a competition at the ANU [Australian National University, Canberra], for a sculpture for the courtyard of University House and that was my model for it. They appointed Lyndon Dadswell as the expert judge so that was rejected. It wasn't even considered.

DE: It wasn't Henry Moore, was it? I'm not sure what they put into the courtyard then. There is not a [Arthur] Fleischmann there, I don't think.

DB: At the time they didn't put anything in. I don't think it was an act of hostility to sculpture. It was just an indifference to the arts at the ANU then. I actually negotiated for the university, because I knew Henry. I had maintained a relationship with him. I wrote to him and told him about this wonderful new research school in Australia where we didn't even have an undergraduate school. The ANU was purely a research school in those days – social sciences, physical sciences, medicine – and there wasn't a lot of money. That isn't actually true, it was quite well-funded but there wasn't any money for works of art, and I asked if it would be possible to let the university have a significant piece of his for the university grounds for a reasonable sort of price, and he agreed. He offered quite a big reclining piece, and sent a photograph, for very little more than the cost of the bronze casting. And the university wouldn't come at it, it was too much, it was too expensive and they didn't like it anyway.

DE: OK, pretty embarrassing. Just to go back to Moore. In those years in Australia, and even before those years, it was the aspiration of most art college sculpture students to become an assistant to Henry Moore, and there was a quite strong ant-like line of Australians from East Sydney Tech who went to Moore, going right up to Ron Robertson-Swann.

DB: Yes, he went there briefly.

DE: Was there a similar view in England? Henry Moore was an external marker for you. Did he come to the college to see if there were people he wanted to have as his assistants? Was that part of the agenda for you?

DB: No, no. It was just that he was acting as an external examiner, that was all. I don't think he was recruiting assistants. I'm not sure then that he had any then. He might have done. I went off independently anyway. You see I didn't want to do Moore's kind of thing. My thing was quite different to Moore's and I went to Greece and I started making a reputation of my own in London.

DE: You applied for a scholarship and got it. It wasn't the British School in Rome. It was some sort of equivalent?

DB: My letter of introduction was for the British School in Athens, for Crete, but I never went there as I remained constitutionally hostile to institutions, and I wanted to do it my own way, do my own thing, and I thought the school was much too academic and dismal for my taste. So I never went there, just simply wandered about Greece and Crete drawing and making little models and sketches.

DE: For a couple of years? And chasing down Cycladic sculpture? What was behind that interest?

DB: They were marvellous things, you know, these votive things they hung in trees, but it wasn't that I wanted to do that. My own work wasn't like that but I enormously admired the patience, you know, getting the carborundum from Naxos and rubbing and rubbing and rubbing, making extraordinary wonderful shapes. I loved it and also it was a complete liberation, a new sort of life, Mediterranean, after a childhood of poverty in Leeds.

DE: For the record, it was a degree course for you at Durham University and you had to put in the standard sort of 'Royal College' suite – life drawings, a set of life drawings, often hands, a draped figure, a nude figure, a three-dimensional draped figure, three-dimensional nude figure, that kind of thing?

DB: Yes, all through the course but the final examination with the three external examiners consisted of mounting an exhibition of sculptures. I can remember six or eight or ten works which we all did.

DE: And were you carving?

DB: I think I had a wood carving. I can't remember. Mostly it was modelled and fabricated work.

DE: And a dissertation?

DB: Oh, yes, but that didn't come along in the course of the work. I don't think the dissertation was a part of the final examination. I can't remember. It may have been.

DE: There were three examiners. Do you remember them? You have mentioned two. Who might the third have been?

DB: Robin Darwin, Henry Moore and who was the other one? Victor Pasmore, of course.

DE: Oh, OK. And they hadn't been warned off you by Gowing?

DB: Oh, well, we just had a sort of stand off, we just ignored each other.

DE: OK. You were in Greece, then lecturing in sculpture. I found somewhere a note that you then spent a year in Paris, and I got the impression that it was maybe just straight after a year or two in Greece.

DB: Yes. I came back from Greece and went to establish myself as an artist in Paris, which was the correct bohemian thing to do and which, of course, was quite impossible.

DE: Had you met [your wife] Phyllis [Brook, nee Don] then?

DB: No.

DB: I didn't know anybody in the French art world at all but I had a friend from university, a very close friend called David Mercer, who was a dramatist, [who] was living there. He became very famous. He became a distinguished dramatist, beginning with television work in the late 1950s, worked with Don Taylor and very new BBC television drama, and then became a success in the West End and started to make films. He made films with Joe Losey. He wrote the script for *Voss* – the only one that Patrick White actually liked – and he and Joe Losey came out to Australia to make this film. It was all set up and they were flying about and looking for locations, and it was all going to happen except that there was a hiccup over the cinematography, the camera people. The unions insisted on him using Australian camera people and he had his own camera people and there was a face-off about that and it just broke down. Losey wouldn't back down and neither would the Australian unions so *Voss* was never made. But the reason I mentioned David is because he had married a Czech woman with an uncle who had an irrigation business in Paris and David and his wife, Yitka, were living in Paris. Yitka was working for her uncle and supporting David. Do you remember the film *Morgan*? That's one of David's. A man in a monkey suit creating mayhem over a broken marriage.

DE: I don't.

DB: Well, anyway, they were in Paris and so I managed to sort of hitch onto that and Yitka got me a job with her uncle doing design work for the Société CIAM as it was called. It was an irrigation company. So that's how I sustained myself in Paris whilst I tried to establish myself as an artist, but I had no contacts with the French art world and made no headway. I had no money and I couldn't get a studio and I hung on there for a year or more and then went back to London to try again there.

DE: Right.

DB: And, again in London, because I had gone to art school in the north of England, I didn't have a peer group in the London system and I couldn't get a teaching job in any of the schools. Anthony Caro had told me – I went to talk to him one day about this – he said that for every job that is advertised in London schools, we have 20 or 30 applicants for, and among them there are two or three in between whom there is nothing to choose, and you will be one of these, but if there is one of our own ex-students and we know him, you are not going to be in the running.

DE: Yes.

DB: So it was like that. I couldn't get an art school job.

DE: And really that would have been the only option for anyone interested in a sculptural practice. You had to have some other job.

DB: That's right.

DB: So I got a job with a company that made props for the film industry. I made the armour for *Alexander the Great* for Richard Burton and things like that. We had a sort of loft workshop in the Seaton market and I would get the dimensions of Richard Burton or whoever it might be and I would make a life-size model and make a clay model of Greek armour on this person and then take thick plaster casts and put them in a kiln and dry them out and fill them with latex, make rubber moulds and then vulcanise this and make a hard version of the armour, and then paint it realistically, and Richard Burton would do this stuff and go and conquer the known world in it while sound effects off stage were making clanking noises with tin cans.

DE: Indeed. As a part-time job or full-time, five days a week?

DB: Well, full-time, 16 hours a day for ten pounds a week, I think.

DE: So, doing your own work at nights or weekends or not at all?

DB: That's right and I had nowhere to work. I was just living in a rented room. I couldn't get a studio, and it was at that time I met Phyllis.

DE: So, actually quite hard times.

DB: Yes, we both went to the same cafe for lunch.

Phyllis Brook (PB): Yes, he and David sat down where I was eating and that was that.

DB: Phil was a dancer and her rehearsal studio was just around the corner.

PB: So I said, 'Come around and see me, or see us, dance'.

DE: You were a ballet dancer or a modern?

PB: Modern. So David and Donald, they came around and sat and watched people sort of running up and down doing their thing. We had a famous German teacher.

DB: Phyllis told me immediately that she wasn't going to leave her husband for me.

DE: She lied.

DB: She lied.

DE: So then you two were together but things were horribly hard?

DB: Oh, absolutely horrible but I somehow or other scraped together bits of work and I managed to do things somehow and I started to get exhibitions.

PB: You got a thing from Africa, didn't you?

DB: Yes, that had happened. That's right. I had misplaced that. That was before, or was it when I came back from Nigeria? I got the offer from the Colonial Office, as it was in those days, for a teaching job, because Nigeria was still a colony.

DE: Yes. Had that come off the back of a commission that you got in Africa or that came after your year or two in Nigeria?

DB: I had come back from Greece and I'd come back from France and I was working in London. I was working for Richard Dendy and Associates who made film stuff. We used to make all sorts of things and animals, domestic animals with a bladder inside and a tube and an insulated bulb to secretly make them breathe because the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals wouldn't allow animals to be under the hot cinema lights. It was alright for people but it wasn't good enough for animals, so we made the things like that. In the midst of this I somehow got the opportunity – I can't remember why somebody recommended me for this job – that was going at a new art school at what was to become the Ahmadu Bello University [in Zaria, Northern Nigeria].

PB: You're forgetting Digswell.

DB: No, Digswell came after Africa. Digswell is still to come. And you came out to join me in Africa for a while.

DE: And so re[garding] the offer from the Colonial Office, did you want to be lecturer in sculpture? Was it a combination of desperation and adventure?

DB: Yes, well, to have an income, a regular income doing sculpture, a workshop and everything.

DE: So setting up a practical sculpture course?

DB: Yes. And it was lovely. I loved Africa, I loved Africans and Nigerians. Zaria was marvellous. It was a great experience. I was very happy with all that. I fell out, of course, with the college, as you might expect.

DE: No [laughter]. Because they wanted an extremely traditional course or because the winds of change were ...?

DB: Well, there was a lot of complex political ideology going on at the time about education. Nigeria was being prepared for independence and the official word was that, in preparation for independence, Nigerian educational standards should be strictly comparable with those, indeed they should be exactly that same as, those that prevailed in the advanced Western world, in England in particular, so that architects, for example, would take the examinations of the Royal Society of British Architects. They would do all the necessary studies about snow loading for roofs! And in visual art, in pottery for instance, they would make pots with the very latest electric kilns and techniques for porcelain making etc. This was for people who were going back to teach in African villages with no electricity.

DE: OK, and so no modification of the ...

DB: Of the English.

DE: Which would be the same out here too, I suspect. Wouldn't it have been in any colony?

DB: Yes. I believed, you see, that they should learn something useful and I helped in the grounds there by building mud kilns, wood fires and things like that and the college didn't approve of that. We also had a little bit of byplay which was irrelevant to the serious educational issues, that the wife of the principal of the college imagined that she was a sculptress. She also imagined that she was a distinguished soprano, and imagined that she was an anthropologist, and she elected herself to be a teacher in the sculpture department, with no qualifications and no talent, and everybody around the place said that this was alright and it's just the way she is and it doesn't matter, but of course being as I am, I objected to this and there was eventually a commission of enquiry called to investigate this.

DE: Her employment?

DB: Yes, and it was found that she was not qualified or a suitable person to teach in the department but that, under the circumstances and for the sake of the harmony of the college, it would be better if my contract were not renewed.

DE: So your first taste of the way things work in colleges?

DB: Well, yes.

DE: So that was it?

DB: That was that and I finished after two years, and I would have gone on. I was very happy with being there.

DE: Had you thought that the outcome might be different or was it a point of principle? You thought that it was possible that she would be told to go?

DB: I have always been extremely naive and idealistic, and I still am, you know. I thought that right would prevail and that justice would be served and all would be for the best of all possible worlds.

DE: Right. So it was a shock then, that the status quo was very firmly maintained?

DB: Yes, it took me a long time to become equally a cynic.

DE: I found it a fairly rapid process through university. It is interesting because it sounds to me like you'd come from being one of the shining lights of your college and then having to deal with the practical problems. I'm assuming you have got a family for whom your career has become inexplicable by this stage as well? Or were they now supportive?

DB: No, my parents had no interest in my career, except one of distant horror, until I became a real professor.

DE: That you weren't earning a sort of normal livelihood? So if the contract wasn't renewed and that was a two-year contract, you were then thinking ...?

DB: Well, I had to go back to London after two years and try again to establish myself, which I gradually did. I got things together and I began to have shows. I had a show at Woodstock Gallery. And John Berger came to see it, and he was quite enchanted and very effusive and told me that he was going to give me the whole of his essay in the next issue of what he was writing for at the time in *The New Statesman*.

DE: How would you describe the works in that show in London? That's your first solo show in London?

DB: Sort of post-war humanist. That is a typical piece, that tall piece [pointing to a reproduction].

DE: Any of your Nigerian model? It seems to me you were modelling heads and doing life studies in Nigeria.

DB: Yes, but I wasn't able to bring any of that back with me, I couldn't afford to anyway and mostly the things I made I gave to people and left there. I didn't bring anything back.

DE: Although you had some in the 1967 show so maybe they were from another collection.

DB: I think they were photographs.

DE: Oh, not the actual pieces themselves?

DB: Yes, not the actual pieces.

DE: OK.

DB: I was beginning to make a kind of reputation, and Berger was going to do me proud. You know, he was going to launch me on the English stage, not the international stage. So he leapt onto his motorbike that he leaned outside galleries that he was visiting, and dashed away into the thick of the traffic, and crashed and broke his leg and was in hospital for a month. And by the time he came out, it was all over. My exhibition was finished [laughter].

DE: He hadn't written a review?

DB: He hadn't written a review but that didn't matter because I was getting good press anyway. The art critic of the *Manchester Guardian*, as it was in those days [now *The Guardian*], was a great supporter and several other people and I got a recommendation to a thing that was being established called the Digsweil Arts Trust, being managed by a distinguished educationist called Henry Morris in Hertfordshire. It was part of the new town, the post-war English expansion of thought and education and general cultural well-being and so on. There was to be an art centre established near the new town of Welwyn Garden City, in an old Georgian country house beside a 12th-century church, with 19th-century chestnut plantings. It was all magnificent, and lots of distinguished up-and-coming people were involved. Hans Coper was one – he was our immediate neighbour – and Ralph Brown, and Peter Collingwood the weaver, and all sorts of people and I got to be one of these. And somebody actually built a wonderful studio, paid for a studio for me, because there wasn't a suitable studio on site. It was a custom design and I'm very much ashamed to say it was Phillips Tobacco [Godfrey Phillips Tobacco Company, now part of Philip Morris].

DE: Surely one wasn't ashamed in those days?

DB: I smoked in those days. I smoked 40 cigarettes a day.

DE: So that would have been fabulous, in the sense that it was carte blanche to go and create.

DB: And that's when I took up my acquaintance with Henry [Moore] again, because this was in Hertfordshire and he was only just a few miles away, so I visited him there.

DE: Did he admire your work?

DB: I don't think so. I don't think he ever admired anybody's work, and in fact it wasn't a great friendship or anything. There's no way any such relationship could develop really because you couldn't have a conversation with Henry. He wanted to tell you things and that was really all he wanted to do, and the people who went as his assistants, of course, were quite happy about that. They made him into the deity that spoke, and they didn't expect to be listened to themselves so that suited them well, and I wasn't in that kind of relationship anyway. But at least I had enough of a relationship to be able to write to him from Canberra to try and get a sculpture on the cheap for the ANU.

DE: Who were your sculptural cohorts or associates, or was it very much a sole practice?

DB: Ralph Brown was at Digswell then.

DE: So you found that time at Digswell everything you had wanted?

DB: Yes, it was great, except that whilst I was showing and getting reviews and being highly thought of, there wasn't any money because nobody was buying anything, and that was the thing. The deal provided living accommodation and studio but it didn't provide any money. And we got poorer and poorer.

DE: Phyllis, were you still dancing?

PB: No. It was too far out of London.

DE: So actually you couldn't continue your profession?

PB: Well, actually I got my dance teacher to make me some dances and Donald used to take me in the back of his car and I used to go to different places and dance. I used to go and do a two-minute spot and I got paid and I had to take all my sheet music with me which I never got back from the orchestra because they were all drugged, and they used to play so fast sometimes. Sometimes I got my music back and other times I didn't, so it was a bit fraught.

DE: Yes.

DB: We had it forced upon us, the bohemian lifestyle.

PB: It was rather nice. One day we were digging in the garden or was I digging?

DB: Oh, this was coming to Australia. Are we there yet?

PB: Yes.

DB: The thing about Digswell was that while it was wonderful in all other respects, the one respect that ultimately mattered – of being able to buy food and stuff – was sadly deficient. We had absolutely nothing.

DE: There wasn't a teaching component?

DB: Well, I got bits of teaching in art schools around, just casual teaching, and I occasionally sold something and I occasionally got a commission for a portrait head. Local gentry would commission a portrait head and give us a brace of grouse as well so we were able to eat, and the Conservative party paid me to make a portrait of Winston Churchill for their offices; things like that.

DE: I wouldn't have thought public commissions were anything but thin on the ground either.

DB: There were a few things. I got a commission for a housing estate somewhere in the south of England, quite a big mother and child group, which I made. I don't know where it is now, whether it survived or not. And also Loughborough Technical College commissioned a sculpture called *Wall*, about four metres high. I did that. I got a few commissions, but it just wasn't enough to sustain us.

PB: And then this African commission ...

DB: Yes. The prominent person in the Enugu branch of the Ahmadu Bello University, Dr Henshaw, died and his relatives commissioned me from Nigeria because of having been known there. They wrote to me in London and asked me to do a life-size or slightly over life-size bronze, so I did that.

DE: Did you go back out with it or was it just sent?

DB: No, no, it was sent to Port Harcourt. I looked recently and I can't find any record of it. I think it must have been destroyed in the post-colonial inter-tribal warfare, you know.

DE: OK.

DB: It had to be just so. They insisted that Dr Henshaw – he was a medical doctor – had the very latest pattern of stethoscope. So I had to go to a medical supply company and borrow one, the latest pattern of stethoscope, to incorporate into this bronze that was cast at the Morris Singer Foundry where they were doing quite a lot of work for me at the time. I got one huge commission for the new Ministry of Civil Aviation building in London. There was a property developer who was persuaded by the authorities to put up the money for a large sculpture to go on the wall of the new Department of Civil Aviation, and I did a pre-catastrophic Icarus figure.

PB: You've got a picture. Look at that.

DE: Relief.

DB: Yes, yes, a relief. It was enormous, eight metres across, a very big bronze, the biggest bronze Morris Singer had cast.

DE: They haven't kept any of their records. I remember going to what is left of Morris Singer Foundry a decade ago to see if we could research Australians earlier on who were all sending over to Singer because there was nowhere to cast here. They just didn't keep anything.

DB: It all fell apart.

DE: Was that a model in relief? Then a plaster cast? And then bronze?

DB: Yes. It was to go up on the facade, high up on the building.

DE: And so it was in situ up there?

DB: No, it wasn't, because [the developer] was shown a photograph of the model for final approval, purportedly just a formality, and he objected to the penis. It had a penis. And he insisted this be removed or covered or fig-leaved, and I said no.

DE: The public commission path is strewn with the corpses of sculptors, isn't it?

DB: Well, mine was. Anyway, it fell through.

DE: That's interesting. So you wouldn't modify it?

DB: I wouldn't modify it, no.

DE: So you lost money, quite a lot of money, surely?

DB: Yes, it would have been very useful to me.

PB: To have had that to show. It would have brought in more work.

DE: Indeed.

DB: Yes, well, it would have put me in the league of [Jacob] Epstein and all these people.

PB: He is his own worst enemy.

DB: But there you are. I was always idiotic about these things and I still am.

DE: In the end it is appalling that property developers who are paying are the ones who actually shape commissions like that. But indeed it has been the history of public commissions, hasn't it? From beginning to end. And I guess it's the exception that it's not like that. Was that [for you] a further blow to the practice of 'sculptor', as time was moving on, wasn't it?

DB: Morris Singer kept it for years in the foundry in the hope that somebody else would take it or whatever, but eventually I think they ran into hard times themselves and they just had to cut it up and melt it, to use the bronze.

DE: Yes.

DB: So that didn't happen. And then I was thinking, naturally, about sculpture and moving on, I think, intuitively, long before it became a viable enterprise. I started to make a sculpture by digging a hole in Digswell in our front garden. Just digging a hole. And I had no idea really what I was doing. It just seemed to me that this is what I wanted to do. And this hole was deep enough to be above my head. One Sunday, I think it was, when Phyllis came out with *The Observer* and said, 'Look, if you really want to go to Australia, why don't you write to John Passmore at the Australian National University?'

DE: You either dig to China or you dig to Australia from England?

DB: Yes. Because [Phyllis said], the university, ANU, is advertising for people to do post-graduate research in all branches of the humanities. This struck me as being a very good moment for this because we didn't have any money, and also for years I had been intellectually engaged with the business of artmaking as well as physically or practically engaged with it. I really did want to try to understand what it was all supposed to be about. Why, for goodness sake, is one thing preferred to another? Why should it be better like this than like that?

DE: Were you already writing?

DB: Yes, oh yes.

DE: Had you been publishing or just writing basically for yourself?

DB: No, I hadn't been publishing philosophy. I had been writing fiction, things like that. I'd done quite a bit of philosophy because I had another university friend called Stanley Eveling, who was an authentic philosopher and he had gone to Oxford after being at Durham University with David Mercer and myself. Really the three of us were inseparable at the time, and I had been to all the philosophy lectures for the philosophy degree course, and talked about that with Stanley. Although I hadn't formally qualified in philosophy, I was well read in contemporary philosophy by then.

DE: Which would make you highly unusual at the time.

DB: Yes, certainly amongst artists.

DE: Indeed.

DB: And within the art world there was nothing of the kind. So I wrote to John Passmore who was professor of philosophy at the ANU, whose name was in the advertisement, and said I would like to spend three years just thinking about what I was doing. And he said, 'What are your qualifications?', so I sent him some of my writings, unpublished philosophical writings about the visual arts, and he seemed very happy with that. He wrote back immediately saying that the university would be very happy to have me.

DE: And you were a first-class honours student from Durham.

DB: Yes, and with post-graduate work already completed in Greece.

DE: That was the post-graduate qualification?

DB: Yes.

DE: But it wasn't formalised? It was a scholarship that was like post-graduate research?

DB: Yes. This was supposed to be the study at the British School at Athens that I had neglected to attend and gone about my own business. So we packed up.

DE: It's a very peripatetic existence over a decade, isn't it?

PB: Yes, but it seemed like a good idea.

DE: Until you got to Canberra? Was Canberra a shock in 1962?

DB: In the early 60s there were 30,000 people in Canberra. You knew everyone by sight.

DE: Was the observatory there then? Stromlo?

DB: Yes, Stromlo had just begun.

PB: And there were so few people there. They had film shows three times a week. We used to go along. There were a lot of philosophers there.

DB: Once in a month. It was a wonderful education in philosophy though.

DE: Was it?

DB: Yes, because they had plenty of money. The government at that time – [HC] Nugget Coombs was behind all this – really wanted to bring Australia kicking and screaming into the real world and Coombs saw to it that the research school was first class, and we had visiting philosophers from over the world. World luminaries were invited to come and spend six weeks or three months or two years.

PB: What did he do for you? What did Coombs do for you?

DB: Oh, I did a commission for him.

DE: Oh, did you? Because he organised Commonwealth Bank commissions too, I think.

DB: Yes. It was all very informal, you know. We had people like Karl Popper come and Stuart Hampshire. They all just came and sat in the tearoom.

DE: I don't think I've ever heard that Karl Popper came to Australia.

DB: Yes, yes.

DE: So you were attached to the school of philosophy. You did your doctorate. I have read it [*The criticism of sculpture*, Australian National University, 1966]. It was fascinating.

DB: Oh, you found it?

DE: Yes, I did. Yes, I read it several months ago. So you did that for three years. Did you have to take on any teaching responsibilities?

DB: Yes. The school of general studies was established during the time that I was there and a philosophy department was established in the school of general studies. Peter Herbst was in charge.

DE: Oh, yes, I know the name.

DB: And I taught in the philosophy department in the school of general studies while still being a graduate student in the research school.

DE: Who were the students? Are we talking about people from outside Canberra? It must have been very small.

DB: It was very small, yes. You mean the school of advanced studies? No, we had about eight or nine graduate students. Eugene Kamenka was on the staff and Bob Brown, and several others. Amongst the students was Maxwell Wright.

DE: So a very productive experience?

DB: Yes, oh yes.

PB: I was working in the garage of Larke Hoskins.

DB: We still had no money, you see. That would be the story of our lives. When we first got to Canberra we were put up in University House and it turned out that my scholarship had the University House expenses deducted as well as the tuition and all the other fees and everything so we didn't have to pay the university anything but, after the University House expenses for living there, we had one shilling a week of discretionary spending.

DE: Lucky Canberra wasn't a big place.

PB: I looked for a job. There was nothing I could do in the university. I went to Larke Hoskins and got a job there. It was wonderful, I mean really, I met so many people.

DB: They were advertising for a bowser attendant and Phil didn't even know what a bowser was.

DE: So they took you on?

PB: It was fun. Whenever there was a thunderstorm I used to run away and hide because I was terrified and there was a whole line of cars waiting for petrol and I wasn't there.

DB: I used to come down from the university if there was any thunder and man the bowser because Phil had gone to hide. They sponsored all kinds of things, Larke Hoskins, including motor racing, and they had a store full of 40-gallon drums of methylbenzene which is, you know, the very high octane racing car fuel. Phil used to go and hide under it during the lightning.

DE: Hiding under the drums wasn't sensible so running away from the bowser probably wasn't too wrong. Did you do that for quite a while?

PB: Yes, when the underground storage tanks needed filling up underneath the tankers, I had to climb up right on top of the truck. I had to make sure they had the right amount of petrol, I'd just look in and it looked full.

DB: They're cheats, you know, those guys who bring those big tankers.

DE: No, I didn't. Oh, so they sent you up the top. A bit unusual for a woman then, wouldn't it have been? You might have had quite a reputation amongst the university crowd.

DB: She ran a little tea club, and people used to ask how they could join it.

PB: I had to make tea for any of the people who were waiting for their cars to be serviced.

DE: So your own practice, Donald. Had you decided that it was three years where you were thinking and not doing? Actually, I think you said Nugget Coombs gave you a commission, so perhaps not the latter.

DB: He was the chancellor of the ANU at the time. It was he who gave me my doctoral bonnet. We had assumed when we went to the ANU that it would be three years and then we would go back to London and I would resume my practice. That was the assumption, but we liked Australia by the end of three years, and a number of things happened. One was that Max Hutchinson ...

PB: Oh, there was a minister who liked writing. Donald used to do a critique for the galleries, and this minister liked him. He said, 'Don't go back, we'll find you a job here'. I can't remember his name. He was a lovely man.

DB: His name was Dick Kingsland, CEO of the National Capital Development Commission at the time [Richard Kingsland was actually head of the Department of the Interior 1963–1970], and he found all sorts of things for me to do. There wasn't an art gallery in Canberra, no civic art gallery at all at the time. Coming from Civic you would go over the bridge and on

the right-hand side there was a largish civic building, the Albert Hall. It was the only substantial public space available.

DE: But the Commonwealth would have been acquiring artworks by then, wouldn't they?

DB: Oh, yes. But Dick Kingsland asked me to – I don't know how it was put originally – but it ended up that I designed a set of collapsible screens with walls and lighting and everything to turn this space effectively into an art gallery, temporarily, demountable and re-usable, and put on major exhibitions for Canberra that otherwise wouldn't have come. *Recent British sculpture*, for example, was one that I did. I also did a [Sidney] Nolan exhibition [*Recent paintings (1964–65) by Sidney Nolan*, presented by the Australian National University and the Department of the Interior in the Albert Hall, Canberra, 26 August – 8 September 1965]. I set up a room. He'd just done a series of women in hats. I made a big octagonal room and filled it with flowered wallpaper and put those women with hats all around, and generally I did a sort of curatorial-cum-handyman-cum-whatever.

DE: You had already started to write also for *The Canberra Times*?

DB: Oh, yes, well before that I'd been asked to write a review for *The Canberra Times*.

DE: First thing after you arrived?

DB: Yes. I was the *Canberra Times* regular reviewer. The editor was Jack Waterford. No, my immediate arts editor was the editor of the paper, John Pringle. He later went to *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

PB: Ah, yes, the Englishman.

DB: He had been on *The Observer*, and he knew me or knew of me from London, and asked me to write for *The Canberra Times* and then as it happens – jumping ahead a bit – then he was promoted to editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and he asked me to go and be the *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic later on, and that happened to coincide with some other things, like the Power Institute, but that might be jumping ahead a bit. Back to Dick Kingsland and the exhibitions that I mounted there. They wanted an art school. Everybody wanted to have an art school in Canberra, and all they had was a little dismal branch of the New South Wales Department of Technical Education. All the education in the ACT at the time was run by New South Wales. And the New South Wales Department of Technical Education had a bunch of sheds in Canberra where they taught pottery and amateur drawing classes.

DE: My impression is that people like Dadswell, who were on that National Capital Development Commission judging sculptures to go into public spaces, also taught down there as well.

DB: Who was going down?

DE: Dadswell.

DB: Dadswell, yes. He was everywhere, as a sort of adviser, but he didn't teach in Canberra. He was a nice man.

DE: He had a Fulbright scholarship in the early 1950s and went to a lot of art schools in America and completely changed. He came back with a slightly reductive view of Bauhaus principles, which translated into students turning taps off and on as experiments in the early 1960s at East Sydney Tech, for example, or by that stage it had probably changed to the

National Art School. I assume that at this time you are starting to limber up on something which seems to me to be a very strong platform of yours, which is that things can't change unless the art institutions are up to scratch, and they're clearly not.

DB: Well, yes, but that was a notion that was very locally applied in Canberra. It was specific to the circumstances. I needed an income, a regular income. I didn't have one. There was this little school that purported to be a sort of art school run by the Department of Technical Education. Canberra wanted to get out from under New South Wales and have its own set up and Kingsland asked me if I would take over this school and begin to make something sensible out of it. But this was a very fraught project because, of course, he had no rights on the matter. It was New South Wales that had all the rights, so there were some very delicate negotiations going on, and Kingsland hoped that by paying my salary, it would get me appointed as head of this thing, two rooms and a shed, and indeed he did get it agreed to but they still wanted to run the thing their way. They didn't mind my being head of it as long as I did exactly what they told me from Sydney and, of course, that created intolerable tensions because I didn't want to do anything of the sort. The first thing I did when I got there was to survey the situation and write a report on it all, which is available somewhere. I could probably even find a copy. But I reported on how unsatisfactory the present situation was and what would be needed to improve it. For example, I noted that the alleged library of this alleged art school consisted of six or eight dog-eared volumes on a windowsill, including how to draw trees and things like that. So this was perfectly absurd. One of the things we should do is have a library and we should begin with a grant adequate to buy, say, 1000 volumes, which is a very small library.

DE: Yes.

DB: But this was taken in Sydney as absolutely outrageous and I was dubbed a megalomaniac and inspectors were sent to suppress me.

DE: This is still while you were engaged in PhD studies?

DB: No, I had finished.

DE: OK.

DB: This is what was keeping us in Australia. These tantalising bits and pieces of possibility, developing the civic gallery scene, getting an art school going.

DE: Had you decided by that stage that this might be exactly where your career path lay?

DB: Yes, we were taking it one day at a time more or less.

DE: Yes, but very firmly wanting to be in an art school?

DB: Yes. The gallery business opened up a new possibility. Dick Kingsland called me one day and said, 'Look, we've got this shop in Manuka with a lot of paintings there that have been collected for the Commonwealth over a period of years and they're all just leaning up against the wall and nobody knows what there is or whether it's worth anything'. 'There are some good pictures,' he said, 'but the polities have all got them on their walls in Parliament House. There is this stuff in the shop in Manuka, and I could find you a job making a survey of this and developing a catalogue so that we know what the Commonwealth does actually possess.' This would be worth doing, even though, as he pointed out, it was a job at the bottom level of the public service, level 15 or level one, or whatever. I don't know whether it goes up or down but it was nowhere in the public service. But, he said, 'We've got to look forward. We really are going ahead in Canberra in the ACT. We are going to have a public

gallery, in fact, we are going to have a national gallery one day and whoever takes this job and does it satisfactorily, is going to be the director of the national gallery.'

DE: Well, what happened?

DB: So, I thought about it for a bit. I took advice from people and they said, 'No, it's absolute rubbish. If you start at the bottom of the public service there is no way you can progress to the level of being equivalent to something like the director of the national gallery. There is no way you can make that kind of progress because the Australian public service is deeply committed to the seniority process, and there will be several people who have been longer in that department or doing that thing than you have and they will get this promotion, you won't. You'd be down the bottom level of the public service cataloguing these pictures for the rest of your life'. And I thought that sounded true, so I said, 'No, I wouldn't do it'. So they looked around for somebody else and there weren't many people, you see. The only other person that they could find who knew anything at all about pictures was a lad that Max Hutchinson had had as his counter-jumper for his business in Sydney. Max was quite an entrepreneur and he'd started having exhibitions of popular pictures, the Murrumbidgee at sunset in watercolours and so on, in the foyer of a motel in Canberra, and he sent this lad up to flog these pictures for him. He was the only other person who had any kind of track record at all. His name, as I remember, was Mollison [laughter]. He took it and, lo and behold, what happened! Dick Kingsland turned out to have been right and knowing doomsayers about the Australian public service turned out to have been wrong.

DE: Regrets?

DB: No. It isn't me, I'm not a curator at all.

DE: I didn't know that [James] Mollison had been attached to Max Hutchinson.

DB: Yes, that was his experience.

DE: That is incredible. [Before moving to Canberra in 1969 as executive officer for the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board and exhibitions officer in the Prime Minister's Department, Mollison had been an education officer at the National Gallery of Victoria (1960-61), gallery manager of Gallery A, Melbourne (1964-65) and director of the Ballarat Art Gallery (1967-68).]

As you were starting to write art criticism, were you starting to travel? You were doing these while you're doing your PhD, weren't you? You had already become an art critic?

DB: Yes.

DE: And you are critiquing – forgive the ignorance, I don't have *The Canberra Times* articles – just the local?

DB: Local, yes.

DE: OK, so you're critiquing some of your own shows? What else was on? Not much?

DB: Hmm, not much. There was the Nundah Gallery [Studio Nundah] that ran and, later on, what is her name set up the little sculpture gallery [Lesta O'Brien, Australian Sculpture Centre]. As I get older my memory for names and dates gets worse and worse.

DE: Well, I think both of your memories are fantastic.

DB: Riek Le Grand was the Dutch lady who ran the Nundah Gallery. The Canberra Sculpture Centre, I think then called the Sculpture Gallery, set up soon after and there were two or three little things, and they were annual exhibitions, the Daramalan Annual Art Exhibition, for example.

DE: OK, and Rosalie Gascoigne would have been there at the time, involved in her Japanese flower arrangement.

DB: Yes, yes. Yes, she was.

DE: And it was through that role, I think, that Tom McCullough invited you down to Mildura and you judged Mildura [the Mildura Sculpture Prize] in 1967?

DB: Yes.

DE: Yes, so that might be running along ahead a bit too. Just in terms of Canberra and your thesis. Who was your supervisor?

DB: Formally speaking, John Passmore, not to be confused with the painter John Passmore, as you know of course. Bruce Benjamin. You know Roger, of course, don't you?

DE: Yes, I do. But is Bruce his father?

DB: Yes, Bruce was Roger's father. He was an analytic philosopher from Oxford who knew a lot of the people that I had known in England, Stanley Eving and so on, and he became my supervisor, although he was only about my age, and we formed a good friendship. They had a big house. They were rather wealthy, the Benjamins. They had one of those Melbourne brewery money things.

DE: I do think Roger inherited that house, didn't he? Because I think he is renowned for having a fabulous house.

DB: Yes. [In fact, the house, owned by Roger's mother Aubrey Benjamin (nee Cohen of the Carlton United Brewery family in Melbourne), was sold in 1982 and Roger bought it in 1999, selling it 2010.] Alex Jelinek designed the house and there was the granny flat behind. Bruce became ill, he got testicular cancer, and we were asked to go and live in the granny flat, rent free, of course, and Phyllis looked after the children. Then Bruce died and we stood in a sort of locus parentis relationship to the Benjamin children, including Roger. Roger was a schoolboy.

DE: Goodness me. I only saw him about a month ago at an exhibition at the Nicholson Museum.

PB: We knew the Nicholsons.

DE: Oh, really.

[This is followed by a personal conversation.]

DE: Earlier you explained that you wanted to come out here for three years to think about ...

DB: Yes, to think about art.

DE: This is what you are committed to before you come out. The investigation of the problems connected with appraisal and criticism of sculpture, particularly.

DB: Yes.

DE: That had come out of the way your practice was being viewed in England: who was reviewing, what the reviewing premises were, that sort of thing?

DB: I was very struck by the fact that attitude and styles changed. Things that some people admired enormously were detested by others. I was concerned to know why this should be so. Was it all really just as flimsy as fashions in clothes or marketing? And it seemed to me that if that was the case and it really was like that, that it wasn't worth a serious person's attention. It's very deep and ignored. It's a great fundamental question.

DE: Indeed. At the same time having thought about possibilities for an art college job, if one was set up. And then Tom McCullough got a hold of you and invited you down to Mildura, so you went down there and judged it. Were you meeting a lot of Australian artists in Canberra?

DB: Oh yes, yes.

DE: OK, because there wouldn't have been terribly many practising there at that stage.

DB: Tom McCullough's caravan in his backyard in Mildura, that was nice. I didn't meet a lot of Sydney artists and almost no Melbourne artists. A few were coming through. I got to know Bob Klippel and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Jules de Goede was somebody that I helped toward fame and fortune. He'd been an amateur artist in Canberra and I spoke highly of him in a review in *The Canberra Times* and this encouraged him and he went on and went to Paris and worked in [Stanley] Hayter's studio and became quite famous and successful in London. He died recently and sent me, in his will, this little thing over here.

DE: I noticed that on the wall.

DB: Jules de Goede whose initiation into the real art world was through my review of his drawings in *The Canberra Times*.

DE: What a lovely thing to have.

DB: Yes, nice of him to remember me so generously.

DE: I have to ask about Max Hutchinson, how you met.

PB: He was a bit of a crook. He actually helped us when we first came. He gave Donald money each week. It wasn't really enough to live on.

DE: He seems to have been a most charming entrepreneur and I don't know what finally went wrong in the end for him in New York. He seemed to be very successful there for a while but, as you say, there was always a bit of shadiness in the wake of his dealings. So who knows.

PB: He had children by various girls.

DE: Annie Lewis, who took over Gallery A in Sydney after he'd gone to New York, commissioned someone who spent about a year and a half researching Gallery A. And they published in Sydney last year and had an exhibition at Campbelltown Art Gallery [*Gallery A Sydney 1964–1983*, Campbelltown Arts Centre], but Janet Dawson refused to show in it because she thought it did not give enough credence to Max Hutchinson.

PB: She was a bit unpleasant, actually.

DE: She went in as a businesswoman, I think.

DB: Yes, she was 'Concrete Constructions'.

DE: I was interested to know your relationship with Hutchinson and when you first met him because I get the impression around 1967 you were part of a network.

DB: Yes, Gallery A. That picks up also with the other things, like Dick Kingsland and the travelling exhibition organisation in Canberra. The taking over the little art school in Canberra was another thing, and Max approached me to join his stable, based on the European and the American model which was popular at the time, with the dealer paying a regular salary to his selected people, collecting the work, selling the work eventually, and then recovering his money and his profit later on. That was the business model.

DE: Yes. Klippel, I think, did that too.

DB: Yes. The problem was, of course, that Max didn't pay.

PB: He paid a bit.

DB: He paid a bit at first, like any shonky investment company.

DE: Right. But he was an entrepreneur, as you say, and it was pretty exciting times in Gallery A. Is that how you met Clem Meadmore? And did you come across Janet Dawson and Bob Klippel and that set of interesting late modernists?

DB: Yes, that was right, by showing at Gallery A in Sydney and in Melbourne, and by getting on the whole rather dismal reviews [scene]. You see nobody knew about the kind of thing I was doing or nobody liked it or nobody wanted it, and anyway I was a Pom.

DE: You were starting to move into the linear works, weren't you, which Bert Flugelman described to me as metaphysical pieces. He read them as extensions of your philosophical investigations into the place of man in the universe. He is the owner of one, which I have seen at his house.

DB: Yes, that's right. That wasn't popular at the time in the 1960s. Artists here were sticking with Australian figurative expressionism or they were going to American-style abstraction.

DE: So when had the catharsis come for you? What are we looking at for the dates of your transition? By 1965?

DB: I was doing my own thing and it was not being particularly well received. Certainly there was no way in the long run that I looked like being able to make a living out of it.

DE: Well, not in Australia. I think one had less chance of making a living in Australia as an artist than almost anywhere.

DB: Not in Australia, no. I wasn't even being promoted as an important artist by the critics, particularly in Melbourne. They were quite hostile.

DE: Was the 1967 show critiqued in Melbourne and Sydney?

DB: Yes.

DE: Bill Wright remembers that 1967 show. Do you know Bill Wright, William Wright?

DB: Yes.

DE: He was a young painter at the National Art School and he left when he was 19. Anyway, he remembers the 1967 show.

DB: I had two or three shows at Gallery A, I think. One in Sydney. One in Sydney and Melbourne. One was called *Serious games in relief*. It was entirely relief sculptures.

PB: That was Canberra.

DE: That's right, actually. 1966 seems to have been your first exhibition in Australia, solo.

DB: I think that was at the Nundah Gallery in Canberra.

DE: Yes, and that was *Serious games in relief*.

DB: I ought to speak with authority on these questions, shouldn't I? In fact, my memories are just as bad as everybody else's.

DE: Then in 1967 at Gallery A in Sydney and Melbourne. What happened with the Canberra Art School?

DB: They sent an inspector. Things developed badly. We were at cross-purposes. I wanted to make a serious art school out of this. They wanted it to remain part of the New South Wales Department of Technical Education with the seniority principle, the most senior plasterer in charge.

DE: That's how Frank Lumb got to be in a remarkable place at East Sydney Tech.

DB: Quite so, and obviously this was not viable and it just fell apart and they sacked me and tried to not pay my last month's wages.

DE: Right.

DB: And a lawyer in Canberra, pro bono, went after them and made them pay.

DE: So that disappeared off the horizon.

DB: That just disappeared off the horizon and then we're getting on in 1967. We're getting on now to a situation where I was really looking for a regular source of income, and I saw two advertisements almost simultaneously that looked promising. One was for the art school in Auckland at the university there with Paul Beadle ...

DE: Oh, goodness. Who you knew? Had you come across him?

DB: Well, I knew of him and I met him there. They wanted me to go and take over from him. He was about to retire. They wanted to appoint me at the level of senior lecturer and they said, 'Don't worry because you will have a professorship in two years'.

PB: Somebody said, 'Don't go there because you will never get out. You can't get out.'

DB: I wasn't worried about that really, but it's true.

DE: Like New Zealand is a one-way street?

DB: Yes. But at the same time, there was the advertisement for the new Power Institute opening at Sydney University and I applied for that as well. And, in fact, after appropriate negotiations, I was interviewed and considered for both of them and then offered both of them.

DE: By Bernard Smith [for the University of Sydney]?

DB: Bernard Smith had been appointed first and he was very influential in making subsequent appointments. It was, formally speaking, an appointment by the academic appointments committee, the faculty of arts appointment committee, but Bernard's word was more significant than anyone else's. And I knew nothing to the contrary about Bernard at the time. I had read *Place, taste and tradition* and the Pacific book [*European vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850: a study in the history of art and ideas*, 1960] and they seemed to me to be competent and interesting, and he struck me as being a perfectly plausible scholar and had a nice wife. And I was quite happy to join him, except that they were offering a lectureship only, and I said, 'Look, I've just been offered an associate professorship in New Zealand, with the department head to come in a couple of years. I don't think that's good enough', so they actually upped it to senior lecturer.

DE: Right.

DB: And compared with the kind of earnings we'd had up until that point – pittances and bits and pieces here and there, scraping along – the idea of having a regular academic income seemed good. It also seemed good that I could pursue my genuine intellectual interests because I really was still concerned about these philosophical and theoretical questions and teaching them. Researching the meaning and purpose of art struck me as being a very worthwhile sort of thing to do. I wanted to do it and I took the job. Coinciding at the same time, the editor of *The Canberra Times* was appointed by Fairfax to be the editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, so he said, quite independently, knowing nothing about the University of Sydney or Auckland, that he was going to take over *The Sydney Morning Herald* and would I come as the art critic. He wanted to get rid of Wallace Thornton. So that all coincided.

DE: So that was fabulous.

DB: Yes. So I said yes, sure, of course I will, and did. So at the beginning of 1968 we moved to Sydney. We didn't have a house ready at the time and we got Margaret Olley's place on loan temporarily.

DE: Good lord!

DB: A dismal place. It was wet.

DE: It could only have gotten more dismal in the ensuing decades, I would think.

DB: We weren't there very long. We found this little house in Glebe and started up at the university and it all seemed that it was going to be absolutely wonderful.

DE: What was your brief in terms of lecturing?

DB: The understanding was that we would begin with the art of the 20th century. This was a bit of a fiddle, you see. What Bernard really wanted to do – it became clear to me over a

period of time, I didn't know it at first, I should have done, but it took me a long time to work out he was a typical Melbourne University art history, Courtauld sort of person – he wanted to make the Power Institute into a European art history department, and he rationalised doing this on the grounds that this was the only way to secure international academic respectability for the Power Institute. His test for whether we were succeeding was to be – he said this explicitly – was to be whether our graduates would be accepted for post-graduate work in European art history at the Courtauld. That was the brief of the department, but I thought, typically, that I could subvert this, or go around this, or go my own way within this, because our practical brief was to teach painting, history, theory, whatever, by Bernard, architecture by David Saunders, who was filched from Melbourne, and sculpture, me. I had no doubt that I could introduce theory and philosophy of art as well, because it obviously made sense to do that, but it made no sense to Bernard and, indeed, in the end, when I developed philosophy courses expecting to generate some theory of art, I was forced by Bernard to teach them, with David Armstrong's consent, in the department of philosophy. They were offerings by the department of philosophy that were made available to the Power Institute students, you know, as a concession, but they weren't officially part of the Power Institute's teaching.

DE: Why not?

DB: Because it was not history of art, you see.

DE: OK.

DB: I must tell you, if you don't know it, the David Saunders story.

DE: No, I don't really. I know he went then down to Adelaide.

DB: Yes, indeed. David and I both got to hate Bernard so much that we wanted out any way at all, and he took the first job that he got the chance to get, which was as professor of architecture here [at the University of Adelaide] and I followed him with the first job I got the chance to take outside Sydney which was the new department at Flinders [University, Adelaide]. So, by accident, we both ended up with our own departments in Adelaide.

DE: And Bert Flugelman had come down from the Tin Sheds before that as well, hadn't he?

DB: Yes, and Flugelman as well. That was because he had been struggling along, he just got a tutor's pay at the Tin Sheds and it was very insecure, and he was selling a bit, although not very much. It was very irregular, and his life was altogether extremely insecure, [with] the polio and everything, and we persuaded him that he absolutely had to get a regular job with a decent income and they advertised the job in Adelaide at the art school, which was a regular job. He didn't want to go, he didn't want to leave Sydney, but we twisted his arm and he finally thought that it was a good idea so he went on to Adelaide ahead of me.

Well, back to 1968 and Bernard. There was then the issue of getting some connection between art history and theory teaching and the practice of visual arts, and I had always believed that an art school should be in a university because that had been my own experience. I had been to an art school in a university and, although I disagreed with everybody, it did seem to me that it was the best environment. There were people thinking at these places about philosophy and history, and there was a great library and all the things that artists should be interested in. There was serious research and sciences going on. I believed that universities were the place to put artists. I don't know if I believe this anymore but, at the time, I was a great advocate of this, and there was not in Australasia a single art school in a university except for the small one in Tasmania.

DE: I wonder whether even that was still an advanced institute of education or something similar at the time.

DB: Anyway, that's what I was working for.

PB: Can I mention a very good thing that happened in Sydney, where they had repeated lectures during the day for people to come in at night, for anybody to come in and hear the same lecture. So they used to do it twice in a day.

DE: So if you lectured at ten o'clock you lectured again at 6pm?

PB: Yes.

DB: That first course that we put together while relations were still good between Bernard, David and me consisted of a lecture on painting on Mondays by Bernard, and one on architecture on Wednesdays by David, and sculpture on Thursdays by me. So right through the year, there were only three of us teaching.

DE: In 1968? And probably that's when Joanna Mendelssohn went in as one of the first intake, I presume.

DB: Yes. I think that was quite a good course.

PB: And it was very popular.

DB: We repeated it in the evenings, the same lecturer, and anybody who showed up and showed up regularly – we had a little bit of paper to fill in for it – would, at the end of the year, get a certificate to say that they had attended the course. They didn't get a degree or diploma.

DE: The beginning of mature-age student courses virtually?

DB: Yes. So we filled one of the Merewether lecture theatres, which held about 250 people, three nights a week for the whole year in the first year. And I believed in all that. I thought that was great.

DE: Where was the Power Institute physically located?

DB: It was in the Merewether Building which was part of the economics department. We got a suite of rooms on the first floor.

DE: And so there wasn't any collecting going on then?

DB: Oh, the whole collecting thing is a different saga.

DE: And that was later than this.

DB: No, no, it was simultaneous. The [Power] Institute was set up and supposed to have three branches – the teaching department, the Power library, and the Power collection – and the deputy director of the Melbourne gallery [National Gallery of Victoria], Gordon Thomson, knew a bit about contemporary art and was quite a forward-looking sort of person – I met him and liked him – and he was tentatively signed on to be the Power curator. He was given some money and sent off to Europe in advance of taking up the appointment, and he went around and he collected a lot of stuff, mostly early optical and kinetic work, and bought some of those South Americans – Gregorio Vardanega and artists like that. This is not in thread,

it's across the thread, but the stuff that he collected I curated, along with Harry Seidler, into an exhibition in Harry Seidler's new tower to open the tower, to launch it. It was an exhibition curated by Harry Seidler and myself with the material that Gordon had collected [*Power Bequest exhibition: an exhibition of the first overseas purchases of the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Sydney, Exhibition Centre, Australia Square, Sydney, 26 February – 15 March 1968*]. It was quite good, interesting stuff and it fitted very well, of course, into Harry Seidler's notion of modernism. It all belonged together very nicely.

DE: That was quite a bit later?

DB: No, that was early on in 1968 or 1969, probably 1968, right at the start. But back to the main thread. It was expected that Gordon would join us in 1968 full-time as a curator and David and I were looking forward to this, to a cooperative relationship with him about what to buy and what use to make of stuff. But it fell through for a variety of reasons, prominent amongst them was, I believe, the fact that Gordon found he couldn't transfer his superannuation. There was a problem between states in those days. I ran into the same problem when I left New South Wales to come to Adelaide. I couldn't get my superannuation back out of the New South Wales government. All I got back were my own contributions, no employer's contribution, no interest, nothing.

DE: The thing happened to me in the late 1980s so it was still going then, when I moved from Queensland.

DB: But look, I thought it didn't matter because in those days your final superannuation was a proportion of your final salary, and since I was coming to Adelaide as a professor and that was going to be the top of the range for an academic salary anyway, it didn't matter, I thought. Until three years later when they changed that from being a proportion of final salary back to being based on length of service.

DE: And that affected those already on the scheme?

DB: Yes. So I lost the length of service, you see, from Sydney, which meant the super I got when I finally left was pretty dismal.

DE: So he ended up not coming up.

DB: So he ended up not coming up and the job was advertised again and Laurie Thomas was the prime candidate for this job.

DE: I didn't know him but I've read quite a bit of what he's written. I thought he had some common sense.

DB: Yes, but intellectual flabby and emotionally driven. He was no kind of scholar or intellect and we were all very much against that, and I agreed with Bernard about that.

DE: Yes.

DB: And Bernard was in trouble about it because there was a push, you see, on the university council to get him through. Sydney politics, academic politics. The problem with resisting was very difficult and Bernard actually stood up like a man and did the only principled thing and said that he wouldn't tolerate this if they appointed Laurie; he would resign. It was all so new. They were just making it up as they went along. They didn't want a lot of disturbance so they said alright, so it was then advertised again, and the same push within the council then wheeled up [Elwyn] Jack Lynn as the next candidate.

DE: He must have been a teacher, I think, beforehand. He'd been in the Education Department.

DB: He was. He was an art teacher at the Sydney Technical High School.

DB: Anyway, they wheeled up Jack Lynn as the candidate and Bernard couldn't pull the same stunt twice. It just wasn't politically possible so he was lumbered with Jack, we were all lumbered with Jack, and that was it.

DE: Well, I think he was there for a very long time actually.

PB: He quarrelled with so many people. He wouldn't let the staff see the pictures. He just locked the gate.

DB: We had no input whatsoever into the collection.

DE: I think he just went on a trip a couple of times a year or something and just got what he wanted, and isn't that part of the feeder that became the problem that ended up having power and money over at the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney]?

DB: That's right. So there we were steaming along in 1968 and, back to an earlier theme, I wanted to get an art school into a university and I didn't see why Sydney shouldn't be the prime candidate, but Bernard was absolutely dead set against it, and they had out a mate of Bernard's from Manchester University to write a report on this. And he wrote the report that they wanted saying that it wasn't appropriate to have practical teaching in the university.

DE: So you were pushing for it?

DB: Yes. So was David Saunders and all of the rest of us, you know, the minnows of the time. Terry Smith was our tutor in those days. He was just a puppy from Melbourne, very obliging and amiable, and we had Jocelyn Gray as slide librarian.

DE: Jocelyn Gray. I remember that name.

DB: So we latched onto something that seemed like a very cunning strategy indeed. They had always had at Melbourne, as part of the art history course, teachers come in to show the students the practical methods of the Renaissance painters, and we said we ought to be doing this and Bernard, of course, went along with this quite happily on the basis that this was the Melbourne model. Our students were going to get occasional instruction. It wasn't a qualifying part of the course, it was just for the good of their minds. They were going to get occasional instruction in the methods of the masters, and that's how the Tin Sheds got going.

DE: And you founded that with Marr Grounds, didn't you?

DB: Yes.

DE: Who'd just come into the architecture department.

DB: That's right, because Marr, like me, had been to a university art school in America and had similar views to mine about the whole thing in those days, and he wanted to do this within the architecture department, to get much more hands-on stuff. David Saunders and I wanted to do it at the Power Institute. We had this tenuous basis in the Melbourne historical precedent that brought Bernard begrudgingly onside but, of course, our intention was to subvert that entirely and to grow the Sheds into a serious practical teaching department. And

part of my plot to do that was to recommend Bert [Flugelman] to Bernard as a suitable teacher. He was really quite skilful in a number of contemporary techniques.

DE: Very practical, hands on.

DB: A very practical, very handy man.

DE: I think he said to me that he was a practical man, but that he'd met you both, perhaps around 1964, or maybe around 1967 or 68, when he was doing a commission for Kurnell oil refinery, doing relief panels, and you were introduced to him by Hutchinson? Anyway, you came down into the studio.

DB: No. There was a potter we knew in Canberra who was the wife of Gus Fraenkel, who was the head of the CSIRO. Margaret Fraenkel was a potter who had been a friend of Lucie Rie, who was the working partner of Hans Coper who was my friend at Digswell. Well, Margaret Fraenkel said, 'I hear you're going to Sydney next weekend. You must stop in at Sturt College' – which is halfway to Sydney from Canberra; it was a teaching college where Les Blakebrough had a pottery – 'and you must meet my friend Les Blakebrough because he's a lovely man'. So we did that and we thought he was great. We got on famously and Les said to us, 'Since you are going onto Sydney, you must meet my friend Bert Flugelman', so we went along and met Bert, who was at the time making big concrete panels and, as I remember them, they must have been three metres perhaps by two, thick and hugely heavy. They were in concrete. It was an enormous job lifting them and securing them. And I'd been into this kind of thing for years, back in England. I was making public commissions and because people couldn't afford bronze, I was using fibreglass reinforced cement fondu.

DE: Already, over there?

DB: Yes.

DB: You brush in the fine slurry for the surface to make the fine surface and then put in fibreglass and then you mix cement fondu and put that in and then another layer of fibreglass on top of that, and you end up with a concrete shell that's only 1.5 centimetres or two centimetres thick.

DE: And fibreglass doesn't expand out. So 20 percent of the weight?

DB: Oh, ten percent of the weight, and with minimal steel reinforcement. Just a ring around the whole thing to hold it together. So I taught Bert how to do this.

DE: That's right. He said you said to him something casual like, 'These aren't load-bearing, are they?' And he said, as quick as a flash, 'Yes they are, yes they are', but then thought later, 'Oh my god, no, they're not'. And you said, 'Because if they weren't, of course you'd be doing them in fibreglass'. So, yes, I think that was an epiphany.

DB: Fibreglass cement, that was the thing. It was a concrete surface as he had originally planned.

DE: Yes. So he was fine to come in to the Tin Sheds, and I think it was only for a minimal period of time, but it grew to be something rather amazing, the Tin Sheds. Not quite under anyone's control entirely, it seems to me, but that was the late 60s and into the 70s.

DB: We got in these engineering students. This took me back a long way in my past. David Smith.

DE: The Optronic Kinetic people, which had a sad ending with one of them. Flugelman said that they were really fascinating fellows, but one of them had too many magic mushrooms or did something, and just never was the same afterwards.

DB: No, I think that's an exaggeration.

DE: Oh.

DB: David turned out to be gay and spiritually motivated and he drifted off and joined a community of dancing monks in Scotland [actually an Anglo-Catholic community in East Sussex called the Anchorhold]. But we saw lots of them long after that.

DE: So who was the other one then? Was there another one?

DB: Yes, there was. It'll come to me.

DE: I actually think I might be able to tell us. Jim McDonald?

DB: Jim McDonald, that's right. This is *The feathered room* [shows photograph]. That was my office in Sydney University.

DE: That has been 'kineticked' by the Optronic fellows.

DB: Yes, they got in over the weekend with chicken feathers.

PB: When we got in there, the smell was awful.

DE: It would have been March 1971. So the Tin Sheds came jointly under the architecture and fine arts departments, and I think that continued all the way up until when I was there in the early 1980s. And it was precisely on that platform that the Tin Sheds was explained to me as a student. These were practical courses you were expected to go and do, but, of course, they weren't part of your degree.

DB: Ultimately we failed to get that.

DE: Because of the department itself? What about architecture?

DB: Well, architecture always was a practical craft as well. They didn't need to get a school. What practising architects do is incorporated into the department in the way we wanted to get what practical artists do incorporated into our institute. It always had been to a large extent. It was just that Marr didn't think it was sufficiently imaginative and freewheeling and creative, the practical work that architects were doing. They were doing perspective and things like that.

DE: Yes.

DB: Marr wanted them to think of architecture as they thought of sculpture.

DE: So, who else came along? Were you at the Tin Sheds a lot?

DB: Oh yes, I thought of it very much as my world. I spent a lot of time there, encouraging people and helping Bert. Knowing the artists who were coming there – Tim Burns, Noel Sheridan and all the people who moved on eventually from there and made their own reputations.

DE: What was your sense of the Sydney art world at the time?

DB: I was trying to point people in the direction that they absolutely didn't want to go. They wanted either to go along roughly the path that Bernard pointed towards of Antipodean mythography, the establishment of an Australian identity, a figurative expressionism, all of that. That was one direction. And the other was New York, American internationalism, and I believed that neither of these was the right way to go. The right way to go was to think seriously about what art is, never mind whether it's Australian or not, and never mind whether it's currently fashionable in New York. But hardly anybody wanted to think like that. Some of the artists did but the authorities didn't. The university didn't, the educational authorities didn't, the galleries didn't. There wasn't any money in it, you know.

DE: No, but there was an increasingly lively or interesting scene, wasn't there, around say Watters Gallery? I suppose we're moving from the late 1960s into the early 70s now. I must ask you later about Watters Gallery.

DB: It's only a difference in degree really. Frank [Watters] was a lovely man and much more imaginative than Rudy Komon, but basically they are art dealers.

DE: Yes, and that's the interesting thing, I guess, about Sydney, and it makes your point about an art school and art institutions. Why did New South Wales not have the kind of art school that was the centre of experimental art in their way that Victoria did, and indeed, at one time, Tasmania?

DB: Because they were originally part of the Department of Technical Education.

DE: That's got to be it finally in the end, doesn't it? So you have a commercial gallery [Watters], it seems to me in the late 60s and early 70s, carrying quite a lot of the weight of experimental three-dimensional art. That's a strange thing.

DB: And, of course, under the economic constraint that they could only handle as much of it as would give them sufficient income to keep going. It had to be marketable. Nobody could afford just to go broke showing stuff that they thought was important.

DE: Absolutely. And that, I suppose, is one of the quandaries of post-object art, isn't it? Which is what you start to move into. Maybe this is a good time to discuss the [Clement] Greenberg talk ['Avant-garde attitudes: new art in the sixties', the first Power Institute lecture, in 1968], because I was interested to know who actually brought him out. I guess it was Bernard Smith, was it?

DB: Bernard did, because Greenberg was essentially conservative like Bernard, an art historian believing that art has a history that is driven by its own internal dynamic.

DE: Indeed. The Greenberg position.

DB: So he brought Greenberg out thinking that this would be a fashionable contemporary touch to his own platform of art history, and also it would please one branch, at least, of the notional Sydney avant-garde, the New York school people.

DE: Indeed, and a kind of coup on those terms.

DB: Yes. Bernard was very smart, just ego driven [laughter].

DE: But it backfired a bit, didn't it? I have a sense from a number of artists – Janet Dawson is one – that this was the case. Out he came, you took him out to dinner afterwards – this is

again according to Flugelman – trying to have him open up on his position, engage in an intellectual discussion, which he refused to do. The sense I have from some of the artists I have spoken to over the last decade is that it was a deflating experience for people. It was unconvincing.

DB: Oh, except for those who were already sold on mainstream modernism.

DE: But even Dawson would have been in that category. I think she would have been part of that sort of milieu, and she said she and her cohorts found it very unconvincing.

DB: Yes, I think she was just a little seduced by the Australian mythography thing, you know an art of our own, not American. It would be anti-Americanism that drove her rather than ...

DE: Yes, maybe that's right. So, why did he come?

DB: Greenberg? Haven't we just talked about that?

DE: No, we talked about why he was invited. But why did he come over?

DB: Oh, well, because he was failing by then. His dominance was really over in America. It's just that they didn't know in Australia that it was all over.

DE: Like aging rock stars? When they're touring here, we know that they are over.

DB: That's right, but he was still exerting an influence here.

DE: What do you think the general reaction was? What sense did you get then?

DB: Well, people were a bit nonplussed, you see, because Greenberg wasn't a fool by any means, he was just wrong, but he wasn't a fool and he had quite a lively mind and he looked around and he thought that the most interesting stuff, if you were just going shopping in Australia, was the local mythography, the kangaroos, rats and stuff like that.

DE: You're not making that up? That was exactly what he said?

DB: No, he actually said that. He found what was going on here, apart from the mainstream modernism, was this 'Antipodean' art that was really quaint.

DE: Quaint was his word?

DB: Yes.

DE: Right, so Bernard Smith might not necessarily see that as a triumph. I'm not sure whether quaint would be the word he'd want to attach to it. How surreal!

DB: Barry Stern thought that it was great. He was flogging all the stuff that was quaint, you know. Greenberg gave him his blessing. Greenberg went to Barry Stern's gallery and really thought it was lovely.

DE: How fabulous.

DB: It was his taste in kitsch.

Then there was a problem, you see, about the next lecture. That was first Power lecture in 1968 and there was the problem about the next one. Obviously it had to be some kind of a

response to Greenberg or had to take note of what had already happened. I don't know any of this for a fact, it's pure speculation, but I think that Bernard did one very nice, one rare thing that can be attributed to him, a very generous thing. We'd lost our child at that time. We had a child who was murdered in 1968.

DE: Oh, I am sorry. Good lord!

DB: And it was extremely distressing, of course, and Bernard asked me to do the next Power lecture and I think it may have been because he thought it would give me something to really concentrate on and think about and some purpose in life.

DE: Yes.

DB: I don't know this. He never said this or explained himself and nobody has ever explained why I was asked to do it.

DE: But you were invited.

DB: Yes. Bernard invited me to do the next one and I think that was the reason, don't you?

PB: I don't know, I really don't know.

DE: Does he already know that you and Marr Grounds are cooking up a bit of an art school storm if you can do it?

DB: No, I don't think so, no, because it was late 1968, early 69, before we even got the thing going, so we were still on good terms. We hadn't fallen out over discipline, government and his authoritarian style and the refusal to let us have any input into purchases of works and the refusal to acknowledge theory within the department and insisting that it be taught in philosophy in the philosophy department. All these things.

DE: In retrospect that must have seemed such a strange thing to him and everybody else, wouldn't you think?

DB: I can tell you the David Saunders story. David had a senior lectureship in Melbourne and was expecting a readership and Bernard asked him to come to Sydney as a senior lecturer, and he said, 'Well I am expecting a readership here', and Bernard said, 'Oh that's alright, we'll see to that within the first year here'. So David coasted along on that quite happily and, after a couple of years, notice came around about the applications for promotion to readership and he went to see Bernard and remind him that he had been promised this promotion and Bernard said, 'Oh no, I couldn't possibly support an application for a readership, you don't have a PhD', which was, of course, outrageous because nobody did in architectural history in those days. Architectural history was, certainly in Australia, a new discipline.

DE: Yes, in fact, I think Lloyd Rees was wandering over lecturing in architecture not long after that.

DB: That's right. I mean David had a good first degree in architecture and a masters, I think, but he didn't have a PhD, and he was a very gentle, very nice man and unprovocative, not at all like me, not at all combative and difficult, and so he said, 'Well alright Bernard, I'll enrol for a PhD under your supervision and we'll do it that way'. And Bernard said, 'Oh no, we couldn't possibly do that. You couldn't do a PhD in art history because your first degree is not in art history. Your first degree is in architecture'.

DE: So what was the agenda? Was it to get rid of him?

DB: No, no. It was just Bernard's mind. People don't know what Bernard was like. So David enrolled in the architecture department for a PhD.

DE: Oh, OK.

DB: Which he got, of course, quite quickly. His was a significant story, and it was ridiculous.

DE: But not the readership?

DB: Oh, yes. After he got the PhD he was able to apply for a readership but ... Oh, wait a minute, no he didn't, because by the time he got that degree, which was really irrelevant, the chair [of architecture] in Adelaide had come up and he applied for that and got it.

PB: Bernard had refused him again after he got the degree.

DE: The reason why he couldn't get it?

PB: Yes.

DE: So there were clear signs for him that he wasn't going to prosper under Bernard.

DB: Yes, yes.

DE: So he made the wise decision then and moved on.

DB: And me too. And then of course, when we both got to Adelaide we found that Bernard had intended to retire the next year anyway. But none of us knew that. If only we'd known that, you see, we could have stuck it out and we could have had a really first-rate department there. We could have made it into a leading world centre.

DE: Would the university have supported you? When was COFA [College of Fine Art] set up at the University of New South Wales? It did eventually happen. It made sense.

PB: David Armstrong supported you. He would have supported you if you'd stayed on there.

DB: Well, David Armstrong was one of my external examiners for my PhD and so was Ernst Gombrich.

DE: Oh, goodness.

PB: He was lovely, Gombrich. He had a very nice wife. We had them to dinner one night. She was an American girl, very simple. We said, 'How do you get on?' She knew nothing about what he taught or anything.

DB: I got on well with Joe Burke and he was one of my referees for Flinders University, Adelaide. After relations soured and we began to openly quarrel, Bernard said vindictively that there was no point in my applying for a job anywhere else because it didn't matter where in Australia I applied, they would ask him and he would prevent it. But apparently he didn't succeed at Flinders, whereas Joe Burke did as a referee.

DE: He was always extremely highly regarded, wasn't he?

DB: Yes. I once had lunch in the Melbourne Club with Joe [laughter].

DE: A high point. Surely you looked very closely to see who was on the street as you went into the Melbourne Club.

DB: So we've got the Tin Sheds going.

DE: Well, I think we've got past Greenberg, haven't we, and what sort of effect or non-effect he had? I mean Greenbergian theory didn't work for sculpture anyway, did it?

DB: It was very conservative, very old-fashioned. He thought, like Australians in the 1950s, that art was painting.

DE: This notion of the resistance of the medium just fell apart when you started to have to explain that in terms of sculptural mediums, it seems to me. So it strikes me that maybe for the sculptors or contemporary artists working in three dimensions, he wouldn't have been convincing, would he?

DB: No.

DE: So in that sense he didn't have much effect on those sorts of artists – Flugelman, Tim Burns, Noel Sheridan and David Morrissey, people like that. To get back to Mildura. You took students down from Sydney University to Mildura in 1971. There was impetus, moving from 1967 when you would have seen mainly late modernist work, to new transitions. They would have been in place by 1971.

DB: Mmm.

DE: 1971 might have been when Flugelman did his performance in the wire house with Julie Ewington. So did you become part of that Mildura milieu? Marr Grounds certainly was.

DB: Well, I was in there. I wasn't showing any work but I was talking all the time to everybody about what was going on.

DE: When did you stop making sculpture? Why did you stop making? Is it somewhere between 1967 and 71?

DB: When we moved to Sydney I think I stopped making things.

DE: 1967, 1968?

DB: I built a studio in Canberra and lost it when we moved to Glebe and I was so absorbed anyway in getting the Tin Sheds up and going, and doing *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and writing for publication, publishing papers in the philosophical journals, stuff that was more permanent than the ephemeral journalism, so I was doing that as well.

DE: *The British Journal of Aesthetics*?

DB: Serious journals outside the local art world.

DE: So did your practice erode away in that context, or did you make a deliberate, a conscious choice?

DB: A fairly deliberate choice.

DE: You probably had the option of working in the Tin Sheds.

DB: Yes. I chose not to make things myself.

DE: Yes, OK. And regrets?

DB: Not really. I began to think I just liked making things and there is no particular reason why they should be sculptures. They can be houses, chicken sheds, whatever. I make things. I build walls, you know.

PB: It's relaxation.

DE: So in that sense you collapsed that gap between art and life.

PB: He's a mind man.

DB: Also, I convinced myself that works of art have no logical or intrinsic relation to art, to the concept of art. Works of art are just objects with a function within a certain branch of the entertainment industry. That's all they are. Well, not *all*. It's fascinating and wonderful and all the rest of it but it doesn't have any particular relation to art. Art is something else. Art is concerned with memetic innovation. You haven't read my latest book, have you yet?

DE: No, I haven't. What is it called?

DB: It's called *The awful truth about what art is*.

DE: No, I'm sorry, I don't have that yet. Where can I get that?

DB: I can give you a copy.

DE: Our library could buy a copy because I don't believe our library has it. We could do that. [The book is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales library.]

[Break in interview]

DB: Yes, we just got past Bernard asking me to do the 1969 public Power lecture [titled 'Flight from the object'] and I saw it as an opportunity to point a different way, not only from Greenberg who was immediately on people's minds because of the 1968 lecture, but also from the fading Antipodeanism of Australian mythography. Something entirely different and that's what 'Flight from the object' was all about.

DE: I'm wondering whether it was one of the first formal outlinings of post-object art in Australia. It's very early and well before a lot of people in 1969. In those terms, I think you outlined seven different ways contemporary art was fleeing from the object.

DB: Yes, that was a kind of tediously philosophical taxonomy. That it was seven is not important. It might have been eight or nine or whatever. It's just that people were talking about objects and objecthood all the time in the art world. The object was the big deal but nobody was making it really clear what they meant by something being an object, and I teased out at least seven things that could be meant by saying that something was an object, with the alternative of the thing not being, in each of these senses, an object at all.

DE: Did artists at the time or people in your circle at the time, 1969 ... Did people know about Fluxus?

DB: It was not well understood, and I got practically no feedback.

DE: What did you think the impact was?

DB: It seemed to me to be zilch. No commentary, no reviews, no arguments. Nobody going into print saying this is nonsense.

DE: Who turned up?

DB: All the world and its sister-in-law. A huge audience.

DE: All the critics, the Sydney contemporary players?

DB: Yes, yes.

DE: OK.

DB: I was quite famous. I've stopped being famous [laughter]. I used to be much more famous.

DE: You were very famous! And I think, for quite a few, they didn't understand what you were saying.

DB: That was the problem, yes.

DE: I think there was a significant under-theorising about art, if you like. That's the impression I get from what was going on at the time. So what you've got is art historical study and, of course, what you said about Bernard Smith, that also can't involve any sort of theorising or philosophy but that's a very different thing anyway from contemporary art practice – and where's the theorising from that coming from? The Victorian College of the Arts?

DB: It doesn't come from anywhere. Because people are still not making the crucial distinction that disrupts all thought about all these issues, and the crucial distinction is this. People use the word 'art' habitually as if it meant the class of works of art. Art is all the works of art that there have ever been and, of course, the new ones get added to the class of works of art as time goes by. And that's what art is. The class of works of art. And, of course, the class of works of art changes because it incorporates new things. It's rather an interesting class because while it embraces new candidates and their roles within the class, it's not very good at dropping them off. So that things can get to be works of art that weren't previously considered to be works of art, like heathen idols from Nigeria, for instance, or Aboriginal art, whatever, but they can't get dropped off. Nothing ceases to be a work of art unless the concept changes and that ought to be a hint to people that there is something seriously wrong here. In a way they're on the right track to think that it's an expanding concept but they don't see the logic of it. They want to stop it short of including everything because they want it still to be a negotiable marketable commodity, something that can be put on show and bought and sold and all the rest of it. Now the contradiction that's bedeviling people's thought about this is implicit in this distinction that I set out originally to draw: that the word 'art' is used as if that's what it meant – the class of works of art. But it's also used as if it were a universal and dividing category. People say art is what it always was. But you cannot say art is what it always was *and* art has a history and it changes. You can't say that. It's flatly contradictory and people will not see the contradiction and work out how it's happened, and what they ought to be saying that will make sense of it.

DE: Well, that's very difficult to make sense of it, isn't it? If one can't even define what it's not, it's also very difficult to define what it is.

DB: Well, you can say what art is.

DE: Can you? Beyond saying that what art is *is* art.

DB: Yes. You can say what art is and what it's not, and all of this is quite independent of the question of how you classify things as works of art.

DE: OK.

DB: Quite independent. There is no logical connection. There is only a contingent connection.

DE: Yes.

DB: As a matter of fact, a lot of works of art are made by people who are toying with the idea of what art is, or trying to make art and, in some cases, succeeding but not in all cases. In most cases, not. That is a contingent connection. But it's treated as if it were a necessary logical connection. As if works of art had to be imbued with emanations of 'arthood'. People still say that you can tell which things are works of art by intuiting somehow or other whether they have this intrinsic value, you know, this aesthetic goodness or this beauty or whatever it is. Whatever it is that art is, does this thing have it or not? And I intuit that it does and you intuit that it doesn't, and we have a bit of an argument about this and one of us succeeds in the marketplace: I get to put it in the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

DE: Well, one of the problems is that so many artists are precisely on deck with that, the notion of intuiting.

DB: Yes.

DE: Yes, significant form or aesthetic quality.

DB: Yes. All of those were definitions of art and it was held that works of art are implicitly objects that satisfy this essential or necessary condition for being works of art.

DE: This set of convictions had come out of, well, long ago for you in England, but you matured this platform over the three years you were in Canberra?

DB: Yes.

DE: And so you had established a set of convictions that have remained constants for you?

DB: Well, in moving in this direction it hadn't really become completely clear to me until 20 or 30 years ago. It's a slow process because we are bound by language: it commands our thought so powerfully that I for decades slipped from thinking of art as an eternal category to thinking of art as a class of objects with certain characteristics. That's the slip that people are making. I made it and, of course, I was talking to and arguing with people who were deeply in the grip of this confusion and a lot of the time I was trying to use their language to clarify the point I wanted to make for them, but in using their language to do it, I'd become even more confusing.

DE: To them?

DB: To them, yes.

DE: Who were, generally, practitioners?

DB: Generally practitioners but sometimes not. For example, I had an interesting debate one time with Peter Sutton. I tried to talk about art in the way that he was talking about it and, at the same time, still to make the logical points that I wanted to make, but that only confused him because he said, 'You said whatever so you are in contradiction!', when I wasn't at all. I was just trying to help him by using words in his way.

DE: So were we any more or less or similarly informed or misinformed in Australia than elsewhere? Do you subscribe to the long-held view of Australia as an artistic backwater?

DB: People are just as smart and similarly cultivated in Australia to anywhere else. This is universal. I'm not preaching a doctrine that's well understood in America, for example. It's just as badly understood.

DE: No, but you have made the point that Australians are other-directed rather than inner-directed and that seems to me, in terms of looking at the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s, a fairly clear point.

DB: Yes. I don't know whether I still want to say that. It's a sort of rather gross sociological observation based on no clear evidence. I'm not quite sure why I would have said that. But no doubt I did.

DE: I think it was an article from the 1970s, certainly from an overseas journal because it was a discussion about where Australia was at at that time, and I think you were saying there were a whole range of caricatures that people had about Australians. We were inner-directed racists, for example. It took six weeks to have a magazine come over on a ship, and less time as soon as planes flew, so I've never understood exactly why we as Australians would be less informed. It's just whether we chose to move in certain ways or not. That's the question, isn't it, rather than this lag theory?

DB: Yes. Absolutely right.

DE: But having said that, can you remember what art magazines people were reading? *Studio International* seems to have been a sort of bible.

DB: *Artforum* from America – very influential.

DE: And when the *Situationiste Internationale* came to the fore, with their 15-odd broadsheets, were people getting a hold of those, do you think?

DB: They were and, of course, by the time of Inhibodress, *Flash Art* was going then.

DE: And you weren't tempted to be involved in Mildura 1973 or 1976? By then it was starting to be very much performance and time-based work.

DB: I think I took students over in 1973 while I was still in Sydney.

DE: With Flugelman? You would have driven over.

DB: We drove over in cars with loads of students in every car and also a bus. I think there was a bus hired. But then in 1974 I was here [in Adelaide] and I had to set up this department and I was totally absorbed in trying to establish the department at Flinders [University].

[This is followed by a discussion about the circumstances surrounding the department's set up.]

DE: You still had a very strong commitment to raising the standard of art education in Australian schools. So with the Experimental Art Foundation, I think I read somewhere that you said that it was set up dedicated to the conviction that the distinctive centre of the concept of art is the experimental role that it has in human life.

DB: Yes, that's right.

DE: And promoting the idea of art as radical and only incidentally aesthetic. So that's 1974?

DB: Yes.

DE: That's pretty radical then. So you got Visual Arts Board funding to establish it?

DB: Yes, we got Noel Sheridan.

DE: Bert went up and asked Noel Sheridan if he would become the director?

DB: Yes.

DE: And how did that work out?

DB: Oh, wonderful. Noel was a lovely man, clever, and understood very well what it was all about and what was needed and he had, as I didn't, great social skills and a wonderful personality and people liked him and were easily persuaded by him. He could sell things but, if I tried, I could alienate people, so he was just marvellous.

DE: Where was the foundation physically?

DB: Oh, he started in the basement of the old jam factory in Payneham Road.

DE: OK. So this was an extension of the Tin Sheds, wasn't it? It wasn't actually like the Tin Sheds because it was much more of a link between the artistic community and the university, I presume. You still had students going there but there was a whole program that was being run at the Experimental Art Foundation that was well beyond Tin Sheds, wasn't it?

DB: Well, the Tin Sheds was the best I could do about getting the ideas that I had into practical realisation within the University of Sydney.

DE: Yes.

DB: I got to Adelaide and wanted to do the same thing. There was no prospect at Flinders of getting the Tin Sheds going on the campus. You see, like Sydney, it was all much too embryonic at Flinders. We hadn't even got a department, and so I decided that the thing to do was to set up the nearest thing that I could get to this, in the town, with the help of the people considered to be radical artists, or people who were, anyway, sympathetic to a point of view like mine. And that amounted really to Phil Noyce, the filmmaker, and Ian North and Clifford Frith and Bert Flugelman and myself. We were really the initiators. Phil Noyce was then a tutor in the department of drama and cinema at Flinders.

DE: That makes perfect sense. Generations of university students went through the fine arts department at Sydney Uni and what happened at the Tin Sheds had a huge impact in terms

of radicalising them. What happened with the EAF [Experimental Art Foundation] at the time? Did it have the same effect on the students?

DB: Same thing, yes, yes. It's changed, of course.

DE: Now it's a venue for exhibitions and installations.

DB: An artist-run space of a rather conventional sort.

DE: Vernon Ah Kee opens there tonight, I think, along with an Indigenous video festival at Samstag.

DB: The death knell, as far as I was concerned, was getting a new building which was a white cube and was opened by the Queen [laughter].

DE: But that's capitalism and the Empire for you, isn't it? It actually engulfs its enemy and it digests it and spits it out.

DB: I don't have the capability, the lability, flexibility of mind, I don't have the sheer intelligence to work with it. I'm the kind of stupid person who works against it.

DE: That makes perfect sense.

DB: That's what I've always done. I did that. I worked against capitalism. I'll tell you a funny story. I was invited to lunch at a new swish restaurant on the lake when they dammed the little, muddy stream [in Adelaide]. They made a river 300 metres wide and two centimetres deep. A very grand restaurant overlooking the water opened here and I was invited to lunch at the grand restaurant by a man who ran a hugely profitable business. He had an immense amount of money and he told me that he was interested in culture and he wanted to put some of his money to cultural purposes, and he intended to give it to the Art Gallery of South Australia but he had heard rumours about the Experimental Art Foundation, that it was interesting, and would I tell him about this and sell him the Experimental Art Foundation to, in effect, become the recipient of his millions. So I told him all about it and he seemed to be ready to come on board until he said that, of course, he expected a seat on the board. And I told him, for one thing, it doesn't have a board and, even if it did, he'd be the very last person who'd be on it.

DE: So that was the end of that.

DB: So that was the end of that, yes.

DE: Would he have been trouble on the board? He couldn't have been contained and manipulated and shaped?

DB: There wasn't a board at first. There was a bunch of us who talked about ideas to do with the arts and he wouldn't know where to start. He had no idea.

PB: You could have just taken his money.

DE: That's right.

DB: He wanted to run it you see, to help run it.

DE: He wanted his own space or something?

DB: And that would have meant, for him, turning it into either a money-maker or the cultural equivalent of a money-maker, a noise- and prestige-maker that would turn to his advantage.

DE: Just a point of judgment then. Around about that time, who were you looking at as the most interesting artists? You wrote some reviews about Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr, and Noel Sheridan you clearly admired. Marr Grounds – he was around during those years doing central Australia sojourns.

DB: He was more conservative as a sculptor.

DE: Was he?

DB: Tim Burns.

DE: Tim Burns, yes. He's actually recently had a show here, hasn't he?

PB: Yes. He was down here.

DB: David Smith. I published an article in the Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet last year or the year before in which I argued that the most important or the best work of art made by an Australian over the last four or five decades was a work by David Smith, the gay dancing monk.

PB: What about *The cubed tree*?

DB: No, no the *Entropy* work.

PB: You've got a picture of that, haven't you? A photograph?

DE: I thought *The cubed tree* was one of the entropy ones.

DB: Well, lots of them were entropic, they were all captivated by the idea of entropy, but this particular work that I'm describing is called *Entropy* and it consisted of David Smith on a beach in Cornwall. We were on study leave at that time and I was staying in Cornwall briefly and David Smith showed up. He used to do that. He used to make a bugle sound.

PB: About four o'clock in the morning we heard this bugle sound. David Smith was coming!

DB: I was up on the cliff with a camera and down below was this huge expanse of perfectly white, beautiful beach, and David Smith had written in the sand in big cursive letters the word 'entropy'. Now, you understand about entropy? How it's concerned with organisation and disorganisation and probability and likelihood? The most likely thing in the universe is that it would be completely undifferentiated, that it would be like a beach of featureless grains of sand. Nothing on it that distinguished any part from any other. That would be total entropic dissolution, practically to zero, or a metaphor for that. The most unlikely thing in the universe is that there should be life, that there should be human life, that there should be intelligent life, that there should be language, that there should be speculation about the universe, that there should be a realisation of the nature of entropy as a fundamental principle. It's a kind of pinnacle of intellectual achievement. It's just astonishing that the very idea of entropy should ever have crept into any universe. So you have this written in the sand. The sea is coming in and one wave comes over this and extinguishes it entirely. So you have the most unlikely event in the universe and the most likely event just caught in the sequence of a single wave. It's so beautiful and so profound and such a wonderful thing. Nobody cares. I tell people about this and they say, 'Oh yeah, but what about so-and-so's paintings in the whatever gallery'.

DE: But it had a profound effect.

DB: It had a profound effect on me. Nobody else saw it. I photographed it and I published the photograph and I've published articles about the photograph, and I've argued that this is a significant work of art by an Australian artist and yet he has absolutely no place whatsoever in Australian art history. No Australian art historian has ever heard of him or mentions him.

DE: No, but you know the *Black box* at Oyster Bay hasn't been accommodated into the annals of Australian art history either, has it? I think Julie Ewington first told me about it and I asked what it was, and then asked Noel Hutchison who said, 'You won't find anything written about it anywhere, you'll have to go and talk to Bert Flugelman', and so I taped him about that [ie recorded an interview for the Art Gallery of New South Wales archive] and my suspicion is that there isn't much anywhere else. Daniel Thomas has written about *The cubed tree*, hasn't he? So there is some kind of documentation about that. Anyway, the *Black box* actually sounded amusing, a fabulous happening where Flugelman had to turn the lights off and get the girls clothed again, desperately worrying about whether the vice squad was turning up.

DB: It was a bit like that. Your point is a good one, that these things just pass by the art world, and the art history world in particular, as if they didn't exist.

DE: It's in people's lifetimes. It would be interesting to know more about it, and that's partly why I am here. I'm interested to know, in the context of your teaching, whether anyone was paying attention to Aboriginal art at that time? In Sydney, there was an absolute love affair with New Guinea in the 1950s and 1960s, for a whole range of good and bad reasons.

DB: That's what I wanted to happen, you see. I wanted to have the art of this region being studied, and it wasn't being studied anywhere. It was one of my priorities when I got to Flinders to appoint somebody to run it.

DE: Adelaide is the historical gateway to the desert, at least on anthropological terms.

DB: I got a chance to make an appointment and I appointed a perceptual psychologist to the department. I thought that was what a visual arts department needs, a perceptual psychologist.

DE: I can imagine how it went down.

DB: If you're going to take a serious interest in visual arts, perceptual psychology is one of the disciplines that ought to be brought to bear on it. What on earth has a knowledge of the names and dates of the Italian painters got to say about matters of real significance?

DE: Or slide tests on those at the end of the year.

DB: Yes. And then I got another appointment quite quickly because of the student numbers increasing and I appointed Vincent Megaw to study the art of this region, in particular Aboriginal art and particularly the art of the Western Desert. The early academic work on the art of the Western Desert in this country was all done at Flinders University by Vincent Megaw and Janet Maughan. And we got artists down.

PB: Those Western Desert people they came to see us. We didn't know what to do. They just sat there.

DE: So who was the perceptual psychologist?

DB: David Sless.

PB: What happened to him?

DB: He moved on. He went to Sydney to do something in a government department about signs and the organisation of systems with appropriate visual signage. How to make people understand things.

DE: Did you have a great deal to say about what went on at the EAF? It was a collaborative business?

DB: Yes.

DE: And do they have archives of what went on there? Did Noel keep good archives of what the program was?

DB: No. It was very ramshackle.

DE: So where would they be? They're not in the South Australian Library [State Library of South Australia].

DB: No. There were three moves, you see. We moved from the jam factory. The local council took more interest in the upstairs of the jam factory, which was craft. They loved basket-making and weaving and glass blowing and pottery, so that became dominant upstairs. An upmarket craft shop. And so we moved out from our shabby basement to a shabby disused tyre factory.

DE: Were you still getting Visual Arts Board funding? Were you having to grub for VAB funding every year?

DB: Oh yes, yes. Then it moved again to the Lion Arts Centre and started to be respectable and was opened by the Queen. By then I know I regarded it as completely shot.

DE: When did Noel Sheridan leave?

DB: I can't remember. It must have been 1975 he came and did three, four or five years.

DE: And, what, just had enough of it?

DB: Then he went back to be director of the National College of Art in Dublin.

DE: Alright, OK. But then came back out again?

DB: Yes. Then he came out again to go to PICA [Perth Institute of Contemporary Art]. The Perth people wanted to be in the act that began really with the Tin Sheds and then the Experimental Art Foundation and they wanted PICA to be like that. I went over a couple of times at their invitation to talk to them about all of this and they got funding from the Western Australian government, and they somehow or other talked Noel into going there to run that for them. So he did that. He quite transformed art in Western Australia.

DE: And then he sadly died there in Western Australia, I think. Very suddenly.

DB: He got cancer.

PB: I rang up on the day he died [12 July 2006]. I rang up his wife Liz to talk and he answered the phone. And the next thing she sent me a big picture of him in a holdall, dead. It was the most gruesome picture. It was very shocking.

DB: It was a beautiful picture.

So there you are. Noel toed and froed a little bit between Ireland and here. He went to PICA twice and then went back. He took leave from Dublin on the basis that he could go back at any time, which he eventually did.

DE: So, are students starting to take courses in Aboriginal art [when you were at Flinders] or [was it] more like a research position for Megaw?

DB: It was incorporated into the teaching.

DE: Well, that's an Australian first too, isn't it?

DB: Yes. There were two things I promised to do. I let the European art historians who had been appointed before me go on teaching their European art history. I didn't interfere with them at all. I told them to go for their lives. But I also incorporated into the degree course other options which included, notably, theory and philosophy of art, psychology and archaeology, anthropology and the art of this region, particularly the Western Desert. This was taught by the various people we appointed.

DE: Apologies for my ignorance, did Flinders have a large anthropology department?

DB: It didn't have an anthropology department at all. Vincent was quite a remarkable person. Do you know anything about him?

DE: No, not much.

DB: He'd been a young fellow in the archaeology department at Sydney University when I was appointed to the Power Institute in 1968. His PhD work and specialisation was in Celtic but he had all the appropriate disciplines for studying work of an unfamiliar kind, and Vincent was a clever lad indeed. He was appointed very quickly from Sydney to the chair of archaeology at the University of Leicester in England. So he was professor of archaeology at Leicester when I advertised a lectureship in Aboriginal art at Flinders.

PB: He was desperate to get back to Australia.

DE: Was he?

DB: Yes.

DE: But also interested in Aboriginal art?

DB: Yes, so he gave up the chair at Leicester to come to a lectureship. He had a reasonable expectation, of course, that he would get a promotion very quickly at the university because of his history and achievements and publications and, indeed, that did happen. We were able to promote him to senior lecturer quite quickly and then to a readership and, when I left, he took the chair.

DE: Right.

PB: Is he still part-time?

DB: Yes. He still uses facilities that are available to him.

DE: So he took over the department when you left because you then left Flinders and you went to Western Australia?

DB: No, we went to Cyprus.

DE: Ah.

DB: I did retire. I was at retirement age when I left.

DE: So when was Western Australia?

DB: Western Australia was after Cyprus.

DE: Oh, OK. Megaw teaching Aboriginal issues is really interesting. I guess, had there been articles written about that?

DB: There's an enormous amount published. People don't read the stuff.

DE: On the fact that Flinders was doing this when no one else was?

DB: Oh, nobody ever wants to give anybody credit for anything that they're not doing themselves. You know how the machine works.

DE: Yes, I guess that's true. So you stayed as chair until 1989.

DB: Yes, 17 years. From the beginning of 1974 to the end of 1989. Is that 17 years?

DE: And your jurisdiction over the Experimental Art Foundation? Who came in after Noel?

DB: Louise Dauth, I think.

DE: The one who ended up in Parliament House in Canberra?

DB: Yes.

PB: What was she doing in Parliament House?

DE: She was curator of the collection. That's a big change. Did it change over the course of the time?

DB: I gave up after four or five years. We originally had a group of like-minded people who ran the thing by talking all the time and arguing. We talked and argued with one another about what should be done on the basis of shared understanding, or a broadly shared understanding, about the fundamental nature of art, which was, if I can say without sounding boastful, principally the view that I had been advancing about art – memetic innovation etc. Or I had been articulating this idea, but the others had the same or similar idea; it was not exclusive to me in that sense. It was, anyway, a shared idea. As it grew and became more successful and had more people in it, it began to require day-to-day management, funding rituals, opening times and programs of lectures, all the administrative routine things that go inevitably with any institution, even quite a small one. And I couldn't afford to seem to be

autocratic and, therefore, had to at least put on some show of being democratic, and therefore it invented itself a council to which members could be elected.

DE: Right.

DB: And then, within a very short time, elected members began to see it not as philosophically driven by an idea about what art is, but a democratic institution in which everybody's idea about what art is is equally valid, and we got a tremendous push, particularly from people who were seeing art at the time as being essentially in the service of some political cause, that as being the ideal thing. So we got a Marxist push and a women's push for women's art, and if it was to be a democracy and if 70 percent of the committee were women who wanted women's art to be promoted then that was what we had to do. And I was not opposed to any of that. I support the women, I support the Marxists. It's just that this wasn't the way I had conceived of art. So I had to either take a Gaddafi-like stand about this and mow them all down like dogs, or just walk away. There's no alternative, so I walked away and left them to it. You can't argue against democracy, can you?

DE: No, you can't argue against democracy. And this might be part of it, because you said, at one point, I think it was in the 70s, that: 'The idea that art was going to liberate itself from the arena as status toys and useful investments quite often brought to the surface individually therapeutic or socially utopian programs which were finally fairly uncomfortable'. And that, I suppose, fits in with what you were saying about the EAF. Hasn't that tendency only intensified in the last two decades?

DB: Yes.

DE: I don't know whether it's reaching its endgame.

DB: Well, it's had the consequence for me that, in effect, I've walked out to the periphery of the art world, if not over the edge. I just don't bother any more. I don't go to any gallery openings or any of that stuff. I go on writing in the same way.

DE: You moved further into a kind of philosophical investigation in the 1970s, which was the decade of the conceptual art notion that artmaking is a set of contentions or philosophical interventions. And then it transmuted itself into a whole range of other things. So, there was a parting of the ways in that sense.

DB: Yes. I think when I just gave up on the EAF and left it to itself, from then on I've been moving out of the art world, except to the extent that I can't be removed from it because I insist on writing about it and commenting on it to that extent. But I'm not in it. I'm not a player.

DE: I was going to ask you what you thought about Terry Smith, who talks a lot in this new book of his about the definitions of contemporaneity, in comparison with the narratives of modernity which we have now moved beyond. We now live in the aftermath of modernity. And I was going to ask you what you thought of that notion.

DB: You see I can't bear to read Terry, that's the trouble. I would have to read the book in order to comment sensibly about it.

DE: You would. But that book will go into every syllabus, art school and university in America and Australia over the next couple of years.

DB: Yes.

DE: Can I ask you about [Ludwig] Wittgenstein? Can you tell me why was he so enormously popular with Australian artists? It seems to be I can't read one letter to Tom McCullough or one broadsheet or one exegesis on a happening or whatever, without his name being mentioned, between 1969 and 1974.

DB: It was briefly fashionable before French theory came in and those theorists became the names, instead of Wittgenstein. The people who talked about him had no idea what he was saying at all. They just didn't know whether they were talking about the early Wittgenstein or whether they were talking about later Wittgenstein, about the philosophical investigations.

DE: And he turned upon himself anyway, didn't he? So you didn't find it a particularly well-informed conversation?

DB: No. It was impossible to have a conversation with artists about this.

DE: Who were sprouting the name at the drop of a hat.

DB: Yes. It was meaningless. He was the most significant philosopher of the 20th century and remains so. There is no question at all. But, you know, it's a lot of work.

DE: Well, indeed. But why so influential? How did it filter down in Australia?

DB: What about Stephen Hawking and *A brief history of time*? There were 14 million copies of *A brief history of time* and I have the page folded over at page three.

DE: I actually remember reading that book and I had about ten seconds where I understood the meaning of the universe and then it closed over again.

PB: They say that even if you forget it, you haven't really, it's there.

DE: No, I actually remember my brain straining to grapple particular concepts. You see, quantum physics is where I have to say goodbye and go and do something else.

DB: It's a bit like that with Wittgenstein.

DE: But is it?

DB: Yes, yes.

DE: So maybe artists were looking at the Art & Language people, who must have really gone into him, and just mouthing the terms, you think?

DB: I have not read any Australian artist or art theorist who has shown the slightest signs of having seriously even read Wittgenstein, never mind having understood him.

DE: Well then, interesting that it had such an effect. It strikes me as more so than anyone else, than [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty or [Roland] Barthes.

DB: Because the local versions are all in translation anyway.

DE: And actually everyone cited [Jacques] Derrida, didn't they, for a decade, maybe in a similar way.

DB: The only bits of French theory, you see, that are any good are the bits that are lifted out of analytical philosophy, out of Wittgenstein really.

DE: I wonder if we could end on the art criticism then. Actually I was going to ask you a bit about Watters.

DB: Well, just let me fill in first very quickly. We went to Cyprus after leaving Flinders in 1989 and built a beautiful house there.

DE: So the idea was that you moved permanently?

DB: Yes, we were going to live there forever.

DE: Why Cyprus?

DB: Oh, it's central Mediterranean.

PB: Because a friend of mine wrote and said that she went to Cyprus and she kicked a stone and saw its history, so we went. We built a really lovely house overlooking the Mediterranean.

DE: So you actually built it?

PB: Not ourselves, we got a builder. They were building it while we were still here finishing off.

DB: I designed it.

PB: It was all glass and you could see the Mediterranean. It was just beautiful.

DE: So how long were you there for?

DB: Well, only three years altogether. It turned out to be rather difficult to live there for a variety of reasons.

DE: Very hot?

PB: No. It was lovely. We were in a village and English people used to go and retire there and they were horrible people.

DE: Oh, really?

DB: English expats.

PB: Everything was in a loud voice. 'We don't like this and we don't like that.'

DB: And they were complaining about the bloody Cyps.

DE: Oh, really?

PB: Yes, they thought they were superior.

DE: OK. So you didn't want to be a part of the British colony.

PB: No.

DB: And we couldn't really make any rewarding social connections within the village because of the cultural difference. Even the language you see. I could speak. Well, I had a long history of association with the Greek world going way back and also I'd been every study leave, every three and a half years throughout my academic career, I'd been back to Europe.

PB: We'd go to the islands or to different places in Greece. At the time Donald's superannuation hadn't come through and it was getting very tight and we had to come back and, just as well we did, because there were crooks fiddling our superannuation. Do you remember?

DB: Yes. The dollar went down and the Cyprus pound went up and once again we didn't have any money at all and couldn't live and Phyll didn't want to learn Greek.

PB: I wanted to come back. I had a spiritual teacher I wanted to be with and so I had to come back. That was very strong.

DE: To Adelaide?

DB: The thing was we had decided that the only place we could go back to was Australia. There was no way in the world that we would go back to England. We hadn't thought of ourselves as English for a long time, no matter what we sound like. Sydney, we simply could not afford.

[This is followed by a discussion about not wanting to return to Adelaide.]

We had never been to Western Australia and we had a couple of friends who lived there so we thought, 'Well, why not? Let's try Fremantle', so we did.

PB: And it was very pleasant. We lived there for ten years.

DE: Oh, OK. Were you able to sell your house in Cyprus?

PB: Yes. An Englishman came along. He gave us exactly what we asked for. He saw it and thought it was beautiful. He was an Englishman who had been working in the Middle East.

DE: Have you ever been back?

PB: No. But a friend goes there, and I say, 'Have a look at the house', and she does, and she speaks to the people and says it's very beautiful. When we went, everybody gave us plants.

DB: We took Australian gums.

DE: And gums do very well over there, don't they?

DB: Now they're wonderfully well grown.

DE: You have a lot of energy, because when you set up in Fremantle, didn't you build a house there?

DB: Yes, we did. Well, converted one. I found a place in an industrial suburb between the mettwurst factory and a steel fabrication yard and extended a little house with a studio/shed.

DE: I had business with a potter over there a few years ago.

DB: I kept on writing there, and then *Artlink* had its 20th anniversary and Stephanie [Britton, the editor] invited me to give the 20th-anniversary lecture for *Artlink* in Adelaide and we came over to do that at the Mercury Cinema and at dinner afterwards, after the lecture, Stephie said, 'You ought to come back to Adelaide, really, in spite of everything, because all your friends are here and we know exactly the place where you ought to be. They are starting an ecological community in the middle of the city.'

DE: And she was precisely right then, wasn't she?

DB: Yes. It turned out to be right. So we came here.

DE: And, so, that's eight or nine years ago.

DB: Yes.

PB: Being two blocks from the market is wonderful.

DE: The house is pretty remarkable. The temperature is remarkable. You'd have no idea what's going on outside.

OK. Just one last thing then if you can bear it. You as an art critic, how you fared. You wrote very regularly. There are lots of peer-review journals including *Leonardo*, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, *Art International*, *Studio International*, *Art in Australia*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Nation Review*. Was *Nation Review* 1973? How did that come about? You have explained the *Herald* and *The Canberra Times*. How did *Nation Review* happen?

DB: Patrick Cook was in it, Mungo MacCallum, Phillip Adams. I can't remember. It was fairly radical for the time. In fact, I think the first word of the first article I wrote for it was the first time that the word 'fuck' had appeared in print in an Australian paper.

DE: What? It got through the sub-editors?

PB: But I've never heard you say the word or put it in print. Ever. Why should you have written it then?

DB: I can't remember now. But for some reason. But anyway there you are.

DE: They're fabulous reviews. I also like what you do because you also had a discussion about philosophical or aesthetic matters, and then you put right at the bottom the little bit – almost parodic – about what's on at the time. But there isn't writing like that now.

DB: I've never been interested in going for people, I'm always going for the idea of the thing.

DE: Yes. But pulling no punches.

DB: I made a lot of enemies doing that. But that's not why I gave it up. I just gave it up as part of my backing off from the art world and taking a serious interest in art instead of in works of art.

DE: It would also be very time consuming though, I would think. If one's having to come up with something every week.

DB: Yes, and especially if you work seriously. I used to go to a gallery and sit in front of something for a long time trying to make something come into my head that would make sense in relation to this object. Twenty minutes, half an hour in front of a work and so it takes a long time.

DE: I think a lot of critics don't do that. There isn't the time to do that. It seems too that you had the same optimism and idealism that your artist colleagues had in the late 1960s and 70s. I'm not sure where that came from but, for everybody, it's such a marked aspect of art production and discussion about art in those years, and it's not here any longer.

DB: I know where it came from. It came from 1945, from the election of the Labour government in England after the war. Getting rid of [Winston] Churchill, getting the health scheme, and the idea that there really was going to be a new world, that people would begin to talk sensibly and intelligently about how to live together, and that everything was going to be different. In 1945 we thought that's how it was going to be, and there was a wonderful future. And, of course, there wasn't. All of that faded, and then suddenly around about 1968 it all happened again. It all looked ... And I thought, 'One mustn't be pessimistic about this', that the world really is a source of all possibilities, including the best, and it can be wonderful.

DE: That also disappeared for people by the late 1970s, I guess. Certainly by the 1980s.

DB: Yes.

DE: So what's your view generally about where it has gone since then? Because it's almost impossible to make sense of where we are.

DB: Well, I don't think the art world is into anything adventurous at all.

DE: No.

DB: The real action is in nanotechnology and microbiology and things like that, some of the sciences and, of course, it's all too late anyway because, without wanting to sound excessively millennial, I'm quite sure the thing is finished. It's all over. The world as humans have potentially enjoyed it is finished, within 50 to 100 years at the outside. Recent scientific papers suggest that 50 years is probably the limit but well before that we'll have collapsed into water wars and billions of starving people and insufficient food.

DE: I wouldn't like to think that.

DB: Well, I don't like to think it.

PB: So the world would be like boat people. People going from place to place looking for food. And there would be rising waters.

DB: They'd be looting one another. Capitalism simply cannot continue. The world is a finite resource and capitalism is based on growth, on continuing and increasing exploitation, and it looks as if it can go on for a long time, and so it could because the world is big, but there is a limit and we're now just about at that limit.

DE: Which means there's got to be some enormous lateral change, doesn't there?

DB: You can't see it happening. You look at Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott and can't see it happening. When you can spend \$27 million on advertising to save yourself \$60 billion in taxes, that's what you do. They all do that. And they'll do that until the whole thing comes

down in smoking ruins. I think we've been so lucky. We've had the best bit of the world, with the most prosperous time.

DE: Look, I hope not. I hope that's not the case. In world terms, we've lived in a very tiny slice of life which China didn't dominate. And it did before and it will again, and what that will bring, who knows.

DB: It's not going to have time. I wouldn't mind China dominating actually.

DE: I can't be so sure about that. I can't be absolutely certain but I don't know enough.

DB: They have the most developed social policies of any capitalist country at the moment. They are running a form of state capitalism in which they are trying to make life tolerable for as many of their billion people as they possibly can with the minimal wastage of resources, and they are using rational means to do this. They are doing the best they can under the circumstances.

DE: They do also have extraordinary censorship.

DB: Oh, yes.

DE: All of those sorts of things, and the divide between the haves and the have-nots is getting even greater.

DB: We've just fallen into a little bit of the jigsaw where people who are not protected by wealth or privilege have been able to manage quite well, to live comfortable lives, secure. Comfort simply on the basis of something that might pass for merit, working hard, being diligent, being reasonably smart, whatever. We've had the opportunity to do that and most of the world's population for most of human history has not and isn't going to have in the future.

DE: That's certainly true. I think about that in terms of being at universities in Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I lived through a bubble. It was called free education. That was a bubble that was just an inch ahead of me and closed an inch behind me.

DB: Me too, just got in under the wire and bang, the gate came down behind.

DE: As depressing as that is, it is true. Well, I've taken up virtually your whole day. But I'm very grateful and it's been a real pleasure. Have you been back to England much?

PB: I used to do so every year. We'd go to England and then we'd go to Greece and we'd go to all the places we liked. But we haven't done that for the last two years. I don't think we'll travel again now at our age.

DE: Well, thank you again.

[End]