

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

Interview with Tony Coleing

20 July 2011 and 22 April 2015

This is an edited transcript of interviews with Tony Coleing on 20 July 2011 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and 22 April 2015 at the National Art School in Sydney, NSW, 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 Tony Coleing

Tony Coleing (born 1942) first attracted national attention as a sculptor with his works in the 1968 exhibition *The field*. In 1980, he represented Australia at the Venice Biennale with a series of installations characterised by humour and social comment. He is also a prolific printmaker as well as producing paintings and drawings.

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 20 July 2011

Deborah Edwards (DE): Apologies about being pedantic, but what is your exact date of birth?

Tony Coleing (TC): July 1st 1942.

DE: You were born in Warrnambool [on the Victorian coast]. You are from a farming environment?

TC: No. My mother's side was farming. My father worked for the Nestlé's factory. He was a chemist there. Hence we moved around to different places.

DE: You were schooled in Warrnambool?

TC: Partly and partly in Maffra in the Gippsland, and Smithtown in New South Wales. Maffra High School through to Year 5 perhaps. I was 15 when I came up to art school in Sydney.

DE: In your early years, then, you knew you wanted to be an artist. Was it the classic trajectory? Drawing early, for example?

TC: Really early, basically always.

DE: Was your family supportive?

TC: Not really.

DE: Are you an elder son? The younger son?

TC: I'm the youngest, with an older brother.

DE: So your family wasn't particularly supportive but you did it anyway.

TC: Yes. My father just thought traditionally – take a job and do your art at night. It wasn't that he was completely opposed to it, but that that was considered the way to do it.

DE: Often in that context, which is not an unusual one, artists have said to me that they trained as commercial artists.

TC: Exactly. No, I wasn't interested in commercial art. I just thought I would go out and do labouring and get money that way, after I left art school. But I was only at art school two years.

DE: You were young at 15 to come up. Were you a bit of a gadabout?

TC: I was.

DE: Full-time at the National Art School. Those years are, I believe, 1958–59.

TC: Yes.

DE: Why Sydney and not Melbourne?

TC: My father got the move to Sydney. He moved up and I came up at the end of school time, at the end of fourth year, and he and my mother were already here.

DE: So you were living at home when attending art school?

TC: Yes.

DE: You studied painting. At that stage it was still a three-year diploma course, and one year specialising if you wanted. You would have done one-year introduction, and then you chose painting?

TC: Yes, and yes I think so, for painting

DE: Who was teaching there then?

TC: John Passmore. He was the best teacher I had.

DE: I didn't realise you studied under him. Those who have been constitute almost a clique, don't they?

TC: Oh, I don't know.

DE: Was John Olsen there at the time?

TC: I don't remember him. The only one I remember ... her name will come to me. Vernon Treweeke was there. I think Wendy Paramor might have been there then but I didn't have contact with her at that stage. Would that be right? A bloke called Johnny Bell who was a well-known artist at the time and used to model at the Cross [the Sydney suburb of Kings Cross] – a little like Rosaleen Norton ...

DE: The one known as a witch?

TC: Yes, the witch one.

DE: I don't know very much about the National Art School in the 50s. Most of my research has either been earlier or later.

TC: Tom Thompson was also a painting lecturer there.

DE: Was Godfrey Miller still there?

TC: If he was, I didn't know him. Virginia Mayo – do you know her name?

DE: No, that doesn't ring a bell. How did you find the art school?

TC: It was good, but I was too young. Fifteen is too young to be going to an art school, I think.

DE: Because most people would have been appreciably older?

TC: Yes, but also that you hit somewhere else when you are 15. Everything is all over the shop. Things weren't that flash at home. All that kind of stuff.

DE: Is that why you left?

TC: I didn't get any financial support from my family, from my father, I suppose. It was cheap enough to go there – only three pounds for the first year and five pounds for the second year – but you still had to survive. My father was being difficult. Things weren't particularly good. But I enjoyed it. First year was a little boring, with the introductory stuff, but in second year I began to enjoy it.

DE: Did you have a teacher taking you for modelling and sculpture in your introductory year, maybe Lyndon Dadswell?

TC: I can't remember doing any sculpture there. Sculpture only really started for me when I came back from England.

DE: My sense is that by 1959 design-oriented Bauhaus-style instruction had come to East Sydney Technical College [now known as the National Art School], partly on the basis of processes Dadswell discovered on a Fulbright scholarship which took him to design schools in America over 1957–58.

TC: It was nearly all traditional, really. You had to draw from bowls of fruit, still lifes etc. There is nothing really wrong with that. You have to be proficient with these things if you want to go ahead. But it wasn't terribly exciting. The only one who was good for me was John Passmore. He was encouraging. He didn't care what you did; the more you pushed it, the better he liked it.

DE: He must have liked you because he seems to have been very polarising.

TC: He was a funny fellow, but I got on well with him.

DE: And your painting came along with him.

TC: Well, I thought it did. In retrospect it probably wasn't all that good, but he gave me a good go.

DE: Anyone teaching you any art history?

TC: I don't have any memory of that.

DE: At 15 I guess you weren't starting to read art magazines like *The Studio*, were you?

TC: No.

DE: So between 1959 and travelling to England in 1963 ... How did you get to England actually?

TC: By ship. That was the only way really. Air travel was incredibly expensive. It was a P&O ship, *Strathmore* or something like that. I don't recall it being cold there so it was probably summer when I arrived.

DE: So before that, between 1959 and 63, I found a note which said that you laboured in Queensland.

TC: Yes, I went right up. I did the whole thing, bummed around North Queensland, working in every sugar cane and tobacco farm I could.

DE: Horrible work, tobacco picking.

TC: Yes, horrible. Then I went to New Zealand and worked in meatworks etc.

DE: Ah yes, you were in New Zealand in 1962. Did you have any connections with any artists over there?

TC: No.

DE: So for three years you walked away from art practice?

TC: Yep. I might have been dabbling at home, but no art practice really.

DE: So what was in your mind? That it hadn't worked for you? That you needed a break from it?

TC: That I had to get some money together so I could continue with it somewhere down the track.

DE: The idea of going to England in the early 1960s is still perhaps marginally stronger [for aspiring artists] than the USA.

TC: In retrospect it would have been better to go to America. But that was the big thing. My father was English so I had some sort of entrée. That was the place to go at that time. Had I thought a little more about it I might have gone to America, because New Zealanders didn't go to England, they all went to America at that time. You look up anyone my vintage and you'll find that they went to America.

DE: That's strange. In some ways they are more British than the British.

TC: The artists I know went off to America.

DE: Well, by the early 1960s there is a split here. I think Frank Hinder was one of the earliest Australian students to go to America and he did so in the 1940s. [Hinder was studying and working in the United States and Canada from 1927 to 1933.]

TC: [Robert] Klippel went there.

DE: Yes, true. He came back from England and then got himself to America. People like Bill Wright, who would have been at the art school around 1959, went to Europe and America. He got an Italian travelling scholarship.

TC: [Brett] Whiteley did the same. He got an Italian travelling scholarship in the 60s. The Prix de Rome, something like that [actually the Italian Government Travelling Art Scholarship].

DE: Before you left, you had gotten the money together.

TC: I had enough and thought, 'I have to get into my artmaking'. And I didn't want to do it here. I wasn't going to go back to art school. It was another place to go to. I thought I would give it a go.

DE: Some people might have gone back to art school.

TC: I did go back, to night school, figure drawing, which was alright for five minutes but it wasn't getting me far.

DE: I am starting to have a sense of the schism between what you might have wanted to be in contemporary terms and what was going on at the art school. Was that feeding into it as well?

TC: No, not really, I didn't know a lot. Obviously I didn't know a lot about contemporary art at the time. I went into galleries and saw things and thought I could do that, which gave one some hope. Some of my friends were already in England. Vernon Treweeke had gone over. He was the one I was most in touch with to begin with, and then I met a number of others over there, like Royston Harpur, Whiteley was around, Rollin Schlicht, Mick [Michael] Johnson, Tony McGillick.

DE: You met them all in England?

TC: Yes.

DE: Were you going off to commercial gallery shows before you left?

TC: No, I'm just thinking back. Macquarie Galleries were going. I'm not sure where that fitted in, but I used to go there a bit, and to Frank McDonald's [Clune Gallery]. He had [Charles] Conders and all of the Australia stuff.

DE: You went to England by yourself.

TC: Yes.

DE: Did you go with an idea of going to an art school there?

TC: No, just to find somewhere to live and find a studio and start to work. I had enough money to get there, not enough to get back. And with my father being English, I could go in and out as I wanted. I ended up in Ladbroke Grove and there was quite a community of Australian artists there. [Colin] Lanceley came over a little later. We used to occasionally go around to each other's studios to see what we each had done over the week. That was a good learning curve. Plus there were all of the galleries, the commercial galleries and the public galleries.

DE: How did you find the British scene? I am assuming that at this stage you have made a decision to be a painter. Were you technically proficient by now?

TC: Yes, a painter, and no, I was terrible. Vernon Treweeke had been there for a while and he came in one day, and I had been slogging away at a painting for a week or two, and he said, 'That's shit', and he got the paintbrush and went 'shhhttt' [gestures], straight through the middle. I thought, 'Jesus!', but it was a fantastic lesson. Get out and loosen up!

DE: What had you been trying to do?

TC: I guess I was just a bit too stiff, too formal. It was figurative work.

DE: Post-Cézanne-type work?

TC: I really can't recall.

DE: Do you have any of this early work?

TC: I have a couple of early drawings but I'm not sure about any paintings.

DE: When did you move into printmaking?

TC: I did a few monoprints in England but I didn't do any lithographs or etchings until I came back.

DE: Who was there in England, English artists, who was interesting to you?

TC: I guess Francis Bacon. I watched his shows grow from early on and I thought they just got better and better. They looked good at the time.

DE: He would have been a star by then.

TC: He was coming up and up. I also liked Jeffrey Smart, who was showing in London at the time. I wanted to buy one, and I just didn't have the money. They were about 600 pounds, way beyond me. [David] Hockney and that whole school which came out of the Royal College. Peter Blake, Peter Phillips. I met Hockney. He just lived around the corner. He was very generous with his time. He invited me around for a cup of tea. He was just another bloke around the place then. He didn't have any pretensions. For me, it was a bit of a pity that he didn't just push on from those early works and just keep pushing it around, because I think he just got a bit easy-going – that's my view.

DE: Do you like the Art Gallery of New South Wales' recently purchased Hockney [*A closer winter tunnel, February–March 2006*]?

TC: No, I don't like it, nor do I like the *Grand Canyon* [*A bigger Grand Canyon 1998* in the National Gallery of Australia collection]. They're not good, they're not grand. I would like them to be grand.

DE: So England wasn't a disappointment in any way? This was the swinging sixties.

TC: No, not at all. I learnt a lot. The swinging sixties: I was in the middle of it

DE: I have that impression. So you painted in England and Europe over five years, from 1962 to 1968. Did you travel much through Europe?

TC: Not much. It was all money dependent. I went to Amsterdam, Paris. I was around the galleries all the time in England. When I first went to England I thought they should just bulldoze the place down. My appreciation of architecture was nil, or it was Danish or something. That was as contemporary as I got. And it took me a year or 18 months to appreciate a Georgian building. And then I started to deal in antiques and bits and pieces.

DE: To make a crust?

TC: Yes, exactly. I also dealt in paintings.

DE: And something else? Decor?

TC: Yes. I also worked for the Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square, in London.

DE: How did that come about?

TC: I'm not sure. I knew some theatrical people. I married a theatrical woman, an English woman there. Not a good move. I can't remember whether that's where the Royal Court came in. I was doing backdrops and scene drops.

DE: It's been a tried-and-true money-maker for artists for a long time, hasn't it?

TC: Yes. And I liked the scale that you got in the theatre, that was fun.

DE: How long did you do that for?

TC: Some years. I can't remember now, but for quite a period.

DE: And how did the dealing go?

TC: That's where I developed, in the end, a very good eye for quality paintings. I dealt a lot in watercolours and in paintings. In fact, I used to buy things from Sotheby's and take them down to Portobello Road and sell them down there, because people would think, 'Here's an interesting picture!' Sometimes you could pick something good up at Sotheby's for ten pounds. And I had a little business clearing houses, like a rag-and-bone man. People wanting to clear out attics etc. That's where the whole antiques thing came from.

DE: Any speciality in antiques?

TC: Not really.

DE: Did you set up a premises?

TC: I did have a shop at one stage. And I used to run on Portobello Road. Every weekend I'd be at those markets at 4am. And I'd go to the East End markets.

DE: How was all of that?

TC: It was OK. You are working for yourself.

DE: At this stage you are in your early twenties?

TC: Yes. And I found that fur coats were the go. I went up to the Midlands and bought a whole truck of fur coats, which turned out to be fake, they were synthetic, so I gave up on fur coats.

DE: 'Pretty adventurous' is a description that has often been used for your sculpture. I have seen one report that you started to experiment with plastics and sculpture during this time, the implication being that you started to create sculptures in England. In 1964 you exhibited at the Royal Institute Gallery, and then in the same year at the *[Young] Commonwealth artists* exhibition at the Whitechapel.

TC: Do you have the catalogue for that?

DE: I'll have to find them. I am assuming you exhibited paintings.

TC: One was a painting, an abstract painting, at the Royal Institute exhibition. Was the other one a kind of construction? I'm not sure.

DE: When did you move into abstract painting?

TC: Probably after Vernon Treweeke ran a bloody paintbrush through my painting! [Laughter] I'm not sure but it was around that time.

DE: And it is possible that you exhibited some kind of construction at Whitechapel?

TC: I'm trying to remember if there was a construction or not.

DE: Are they the only two exhibitions during your time in London?

TC: There was another one at Heal's Gallery. Heal's was a department store and they had a gallery attached to them. I'm not sure if they still exist. An Australian lady was the director of it, can't remember her name [Alannah Coleman]. I exhibited something there. I can't recall anything else.

DE: Australian artists would not have expected to sell work in London, I should think.

TC: Well, Whiteley was selling well with Marlborough and, a little later on, Colin Lanceley. He came in the middle of the time I was there. He had a profile there. And, of course, Jeffrey Smart, but he was coming from somewhere else. But he sold well then.

DE: Was it a competitive scene there for you all?

TC: It was a bit competitive. There was a small group with Tony McGillick.

DE: And [the conceptual art group] Art & Language?

TC: Well, that was off entirely somewhere else. That was none of my understanding about what was going on. I think they came over from America.

DE: Did you have a sense that there was an enormous amount going on?

TC: There was a lot going on, there was no doubt about that. In amongst all of that the [Robert] Rauschenberg show came to Whitechapel, which I thought was absolutely fantastic, but then they followed up with a Jasper Johns show not long after, and that just blew me out of the water, that was fantastic. I think you will see that around that time Whiteley started to do a few Rauschenberg-looking things. Some of the major shows that impressed me were [Pierre] Bonnard and [Edouard] Vuillard. They also bowled me over, and a show of sculpture by [Pablo] Picasso. I had no idea how much sculpture Picasso had done, and I couldn't believe it, it was just fantastic. I think perhaps [Anthony] Caro was also making a name for himself around then. And I always liked [Eduardo] Paolozzi – I thought him fantastic and I still think he's good.

DE: In retrospect, I wonder if he looks a little more eccentric than he looked at the time.

TC: Well, he looked pretty eccentric then. When you look at those digital prints especially, they were pretty good and I think they still look good.

DE: Klippel met Paolozzi when he went to London in 1947–48. He just turned up and knocked on the doors of commercial galleries and asked them, 'Who is good?', and someone told him that Paolozzi would be a good person for him to contact and wrote him a note for that and they met up. I guess that's the way one did it, and one wasn't rebuffed.

TC: Yes, I got into a few of the artists' studios, people well known at the time, abstract painters, although don't ask me who they were.

DE OK. When you were about to come back ... Actually concerning the plastics, you can't remember whether you worked in plastics then or not?

TC: I can't remember, but if I did it would have been with melting plastics, I think. That would be all I could think of that I might do.

DE: So you were starting to think that you might be interested in three-dimensional work?

TC: I did when coming back to Australia on the ship. I had had enough of painting. I was through the whole abstract thing I had been working on. I thought that the abstract thing wasn't really me and that there were much better people than me doing it. And I came back here. Central Street [Gallery] had recently begun, perhaps they had been going for a year, and I walked straight back into stuff that I had been seeing in England, and I wasn't interested. And I thought the thing that I know the least about is sculpture, so perhaps I'll have a go at that.

DE: It seems quite strange, given the extraordinary proliferation and ranges of work today, to think of large groups of artists all working in a similar way.

TC: Yes, but they did.

DE: I guess the idea was that there was a dominant aesthetic and you would move through that

TC: Of course.

DE: But it's not the case anymore.

TC: Yes, it makes it a good chance that you will find something interesting there. But it's been going on for a long time. Artists of the 19th century would come back and paint in the style of whoever.

DE: You are limbering up in your career in precisely those years when there is a transition from modernism into whatever territory it is that we now occupy under the general rubric of conceptualism, and yet one goes through art school with certain aspirations.

TC: If you had decent teachers there, who had had wider thinking, other things might have happened, but you didn't. That is not a criticism, it was understandable. And when you have the whole pop art movement starting, that knocked a lot of the abstract stuff out. It was good, refreshing, just another way of looking at art.

DE: With the whole environmental movement, the happenings etc, Tony Cragg?

TC: Tony Cragg came out here [to Australia] for a while. And of course I enjoyed the work of David Smith. I thought he was fantastic.

DE: So was your interest in sculpture partly a traditional one, with the idea of a lineage through the 20th century? The reviews about your work here, from the beginning, show you occupying an interesting position in critical terms, because whilst you are object-based, you are also seen as postmodernist, it seems to me. Critics in the 70s, like Terry Smith, Donald Brook, find you very interesting as someone who straddles both, ie both the object and post-object artist.

TC: I can't stop in one spot. I can't just do a [Clement] Meadmore and put another twist in it.

DE: 1965 you worked in Iceland as a fisherman for six months, which always appears in your CVs; I guess because it is wildly exotic.

TC: Yeah, right.

DE: How did that happen?

TC: I needed some money, and the jobs were available from England. It was better money than I could get in England. And not only did I become a deckhand, but I also took on cook, which gave you an extra five pounds a week.

DE: OK, you returned here in 1968 ...

TC: Married.

DE: Did that have an effect on you coming back, on deciding whether to go to America from England? Was America a possible choice at the time?

TC: No, not really. Mick Johnson was there for a while, I think. It vaguely went though one's head because people would come back and say how fantastic it was, as they would do if they had gone to Italy. It might have been fantastic.

DE: I'm not sure how good it was for Klippel in New York. He met Richard Stankiewicz, but he also had to work as a storeman and packer, and then was trying to do bits and pieces and had various disasters. Although I think he did get around a bit in the New York scene. Sandra McGrath says in an article not long after you return, that it was only on the boat back that you decided to seriously devote yourself to sculpture.

TC: Yes, that's right.

DE: What were you thinking you might achieve?

TC: I didn't know what I might achieve.

DE: To set yourself the goal of being a sculptor in Australia at the time was to set yourself on a path of hardship in certain ways.

TC: I knew that, but I just thought I would give it a go. I thought that if I was coming at it from a position of not knowing, then I might come up with something reasonable. And the other thing I noticed when I first got back was the landscape. I had not appreciated the landscape here. I'd taken it for granted, and I thought it was pretty good. I had never seen the landscape like that. It took for me to go away and come back to appreciate it.

DE: You settled in Sydney?

TC: Yes.

DE: You were soon exhibiting. Can you remember exactly when you got back in 1968?

TC: Only that I think it was towards the end of the year.

TC: Did you know many people here?

TC: Vernon Treweeke was back. I don't think I knew anyone else much.

DE: Where did you set yourself up?

TC: Firstly in a little cottage in North Sydney, which is now a multistorey building. I'd have to think about where after that.

DE: And you had a studio.

TC: Yes, I hired a place right up on the north shore [of Sydney], somewhere near Palm Beach.

DE: So 1968 seems to have been a very important year for you. Could you have come back earlier in that year? Even 1967?

TC: Did I start to show at Gallery A then? I was five years away, and I think it was 1962 that I went to England.

DE: There is one CV which says that in 1962 you were in New Zealand and went to England in 1963.

TC: No, I think that's wrong. I went to England in 1962. [Coleing's typescript biographical notes in his file in the Gallery A archive say that he worked as a labourer in New Zealand in 1962, travelled to Europe in 1963 and returned to Sydney in 1968. His first solo exhibition at Gallery A was in 1969, though he participated in group shows at Gallery A in 1968.]

DE: In 1968 you were in the *Young contemporaries* exhibition at Farmers Blaxland Gallery, you were in *The field* in August–September 1968, you were in a couple of Gallery A shows, and then you won the Kolotex award [in 1969].

TC: That wasn't bad, was it? [Laughter]

DE: So I think you might have been back end 1967 or beginning 1968. The salient thing is that the *Young contemporaries* show was on in March, so unless you sent work back from England ...

TC: No, I didn't send work back.

DE: OK, the ship took six weeks, so perhaps leaving at the beginning of 1968 at the latest. Can you lead me through that year for you? I think you might have joined the Contemporary Art Society soon after you arrived.

TC: Yes, that was [Elwyn] Jack Lynn. He was good, fantastic at running that thing. He was enthusiastic. I am trying to remember when I was with Gallery A.

DE: You had your solo show in Gallery A in Melbourne, 1968, called *FronDESCENCE*. [14–26 April 1969, Gallery A, Melbourne, then 19 August – 6 September 1969, Gallery A, Sydney]

TC: I must have been with Gallery A in Sydney before that, because I joined Gallery A Sydney. I just happened to be in there one day, Vernon Treweeke was there, and Max Hutchinson.

DE: Did Treweeke show with them?

TC: Yes.

DE: He may have introduced you?

TC: He did. He said to Max, 'You should take on Tony Coleing', and Max said, 'You're on'.

DE: You showed him your portfolio?

TC: No, not a thing. He said, 'You are on \$20 a week', something like that, and I said, 'You will want to have a look at my work'. And he said, 'No, if Vernon Treweeke thinks it's good, it's good enough for me'. I couldn't believe it.

DE: Meadmore was long gone by then. He advised Hutchinson for a while. By that stage Ann Lewis was there, Giulia Crespi, Christine France ...

TC: Meadmore was advising Hutchinson in Melbourne.

DE: It was a roll for you, wasn't it? You decide to concentrate on sculpture. Did you put a sculpture into the *Young contemporaries*?

TC: I can't remember. I could have a catalogue; that's possible. Where does the Kolotex one fit in?

DE: That's a little later. 1969. And the Art Gallery of New South Wales received the Kolotex award-winning work, so we have your *Line*. It was remarkable to be included in *The field* only six months after being back, wasn't it?

TC: There were sculptures in that show. Yes, that was remarkable.

DE: So I guess the ball starts rolling after you join the Gallery A stable. You were in a couple of group shows with them in 1968. I have your Art Gallery of South Australia file, and your TMAG file as well.

TC: What file?

DE: Tasmanian Museum and [Art] Gallery file.

1968, March, you were in the *Young contemporaries*. August–September 1968, you were in *The field*, which travelled to the Art Gallery of New South Wales [from the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV)] in November. But the Kolotex award doesn't have a date on it in this CV. September–October, you were in the *Arts Vietnam* exhibition at Gallery A. November, you were in the Contemporary Art Society exhibition at Farmers Blaxland Gallery, and then November–December you exhibited at the Alcorso-Sekers travelling art scholarship. So seven or eight exhibitions in your first year back. How did *The field* come about?

TC: John Stringer and Brian Finemore were up here [in Sydney]. They came up from Melbourne looking for work for the show.

DE: That was shortly before the exhibition! These days those selections would be done 18 months beforehand.

TC: I can't remember what the time span was. I know someone did pass my name on as someone to come and have a look at. I can't remember who that was, but for whatever reason they ended up in my studio and liked what they saw.

DE: Were you prolific when you came back? You plunged into the sculpture. Were you still painting?

TC: I don't think so.

DE: Printmaking?

TC: No, I don't think so.

DE: The reviews started rolling in from that time also. Patrick McCaughey gave you a very good review for *FronDESCENCE*.

TC: Well, that was a Max Hutchinson title for it. I thought we might have called it something else. He called it that.

DE: Major reviews starting that year. So Stringer and Finemore came to see you.

TC: Brian was a nice fellow, and a very gay fellow.

DE: And very horribly murdered, not too long after that time, I think.

TC: He was a very gentle person. He was a good curator too.

DE: He seemed to have a very strong influence on all curators around him. John Stringer was also, I think, an excellent man. Did you make a particular work for the show? [TC indicates 'yes']. Did you go down to Melbourne for it?

TC: Yes.

DE: Did you meet a lot of the artists there? Was it the first time you might have met Janet Dawson, for instance?

TC: I can't recall when I first met Janet Dawson, but somewhere around there. Janet was, I think, running the Gallery A print workshop at the time. She had a studio upstairs there, as did Peter Powditch, I think, in Mary Place. And an Avoca sculptor called Bobby Brown was running the print workshop.

[Break in interview]

DE: How were you positioning yourself at this time? What was your trajectory? These were years when everyone was beginning to theorise their practice to some extent.

TC: I never theorised my practice as far as I know.

DE: Hmm, OK, then what became your aim sculpturally?

TC: Just to make things really. Another part of my artmaking. I just see the whole lot – printmaking, photography – as part of the whole of artmaking. I get a bit tired sometimes of working in a particular medium. Sometimes I want to change medium and see what I can do with it.

DE: In the terrain of artmaking that is relatively uncommon, isn't it?

TC: It is and that's where I run into a few problems, because no one, including myself, knows what's going to turn up at the next show.

DE: From round 1968 into the early 1970s there is a whole lot of discussion about the dematerialisation of the art object.

TC: I never got into that. This would all have been coming up through Terry Smith, and Art & Language.

DE: And Inhibodress.

TC: Which was excellent. They did some great things.

DE: Peter Kennedy from Inhibodress was also doing his light sculptures at Gallery A at this time. I guess you got to know those guys?

TC: Yes, I did and I liked a lot of what they were doing, it was interesting.

DE: It does appear to have been a pretty stimulating milieu, although you did say things at the time about the gap, the time lag, between what you had seen overseas and what was going on in Sydney.

TC: Yes.

DE: The comments from the critics about you at this time seem to revolve around the idea of your stylistic eclecticism and the idea of the playfulness of your work, the latter of which appears to me to have somewhat dogged your art. I think it's a slightly lazy term for what you might have been doing. James Gleeson in 1971 commented on a darker side of stylistic eclecticism, which struck me as quite interesting and almost central to the kinds of transitions I am interested in. His view was that, looking at your work – which he thought excellent – he was still concerned that there wasn't one idea that had become a sustained exploration. What that partly hints at, I think, is the transitions everyone was having to make between object and idea, and the way sculptural practice was changing. Clement Meadmore did have a sustained idea. He dug the trench and went right down.

TC: Yes, that's right. I couldn't do that. As far as I can see – and it still goes – I can just get to a point when I am happy with just that exploration that I have done; I don't want to push it any further. You can get to a point where you can go on and on and maybe get a little bit out of it. But I have got what I want out of it, and I don't see any point in continuing that. There's better abstract painters; I'm never going to achieve that. There's better conceptualist artists; I'm never going to achieve that. Just do the little things that you want to do. You can't go past [Marcel] Duchamp for me in terms of conceptual art. It is very difficult to get beyond that, if you take him at his broadest. It is easy enough to branch off and do little bits but that doesn't interest me very much.

DE: So you are too restless intellectually or aesthetically to stay with one thing for long.

TC: Yes.

DE: But, on the other hand, recognising your artistic superiors and that being off-putting?

TC: Absolutely, but not off-putting, I just don't see the point. Someone had done something much, much better, so why bother? Klippel gave me my best lesson in sculpture. I was just talking to him ...

DE: You met him when you came back?

TC: Yes, I knew him well.

DE: I didn't know that.

TC: Because he was with Gallery A?

DE: Yes, he had some shows with Gallery A. He'd also been at Hungry Horse [Gallery].

TC: I think I probably met him at Gallery A. He was always around the galleries. I think when I had that show of wiry things, he said, 'Why don't you come around to my house and have a cup of tea'. I knew nothing much of Klippel at the time, though I knew he was well-known.

DE: He would have been much older than you.

TC: Yes, much older. So I went around there and he said, 'Would you like to have a look at some of my drawings?' And I said, 'Yes, that would be great'. He had a stack of drawings, going back to the mid 1940s, somewhere around that period. And I didn't get past more than the first or second one. His concerns were what I was struggling with, with my sculpture. I mean, they were linear things in the landscape. It was a very gentle way of him saying, 'Hang on, I've been there before. It might not be the same but ...' It was a great lesson, because that made me then say, 'OK Tony, you have to study your history', and I did. I started to read a lot because it was a great lesson. I had approached my sculpture from a point of not knowing. Here I was thinking naively that maybe I could come up with something a little more interesting than what may have gone before, because you have no preconceived ideas ...

DE: But that's what the critics say you are doing in 1969–70.

TC: Klippel had already been where I was trying to be. I was thinking that I was doing something reasonably unique. I hadn't seen that kind of thing before, because I wasn't well-versed in it, and I certainly wasn't well-versed in Klippel's works. So it was good, it was a fantastic lesson. It was after that that I began to look at the history of sculpture and sculpture-making. I could not stay with my head buried in the sand. That was just silly.

DE: Did you actually see much of Klippel's work at that time?

TC: Well, I did in his house then. He had studios all over his house. And then I got to know him, and I used to try and help him out scale-wise because he couldn't get over the way I worked scale out. Because he couldn't get beyond ... I would say to him, 'You have to blow things up a bit', but he would go from that to that [gestures small to slightly larger]. That was silly to me. You want something to be substantial.

DE: Both Klippel and Meadmore were producing drawings in the 1960s of monumental sculptures in landscapes, but they were drawings only. Meadmore's were like skyscrapers, 50 storeys high; Klippel's less so. I recall Klippel saying that he went to the tip at Tempe [in Sydney's inner west] and looked at enormous machine parts and he contemplated stacking huge things together with cranes but was just terrified that they would fall on people, but also he couldn't move beyond the notion of the artist's hand. I think it remained always important for him that things were on a human scale, with all the marks of his hand on them. By the 60s though, sculptors are moving away from that. You are called a lot of things at the time – a pop artist etc – but Patrick McCaughey said that you managed to avoid stylistic eclecticism by 'arguing an agglomerate identity for sculpture'.

TC Do I? Well, there you go.

DE [Quoting McCaughey] 'Where before our expectations for the unity in sculpture sprang from the clear relation of parts, sympathetic volumes or readily decipherable rhythms, Coleing substitutes quite deliberate incongruences.'

So if Gleeson is finding a lack of a unifying style perplexing, McCaughey, Terry Smith, Donald Brook are seeing it as positive and contemporary. Does this also then become part a philosophy of artmaking that is more conceptually based?

TC: Not for me. It's just the way I do it. It could go any way, but that's just the way I do it. I don't go in with any thinking it through. Obviously I am thinking about the work.

DE: They are inventive in terms of their material base too, aren't they? Did you do any technical sculpture courses, welding etc?

TC: No, I learnt a little bit of welding myself.

DE: Did you work in any sculptors' studios?

TC: No. The only time I've worked in a sculptor's studio is my collaborative works with Stephen Killick. I've worked a number of years making sculptures with Steve Killick.

DE: Who were the 'young contemporaries'? An offshoot of the Contemporary Art Society?

TC: There would have been Alan Oldfield, Guy Stuart, the Central Street mob [among others].

DE: Did you get to know the Melbourne scene at all?

TC: Yes, I did. I showed in Melbourne a couple of times. Melbourne Gallery A. I got to know people there and in Melbourne.

DE: Did you watch the critics? What was the general consensus regarding Donald Brook?

TC: I was always surprised that Donald Brook seemed to be interested in me, because he was always coming from the academic side of things, and I never saw my works in that context.

DE: He trained as a sculptor, and I have seen photographs of the things he produced in England early on and they were quite classic, traditional.

TC: Yes, but he wanted to deny all of that here.

DE: Yes, he wrote a lot on the dematerialisation of the art object. In that context did you attend the *Black box* installation/happening of Bert Flugelman's at Oyster Bay? A kind of environmental performance piece, I think around 1968–69.

TC: No, not that I can recall.

DE: I think Donald Brook may have been encouraging Bert Flugelman into performative pieces and he went on to do some semi-object, semi-performance pieces at Mildura. I can remember photos of a kind of open-plan house.

TC: That's right, and I think he buried one [work] in Canberra.

DE: Yes, one of the stainless steel tetrahedron works [*Earthwork* 1975].

[Mentions the Alcorso-Sekers travelling art scholarship exhibition and Christo]

TC: I worked on the Christo thing [*Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia* 1968–69].

DE: Were you one of the described 11 official volunteers?

TC: There were heaps of volunteers and I got to know Jeanne-Claude and Christo reasonably well. Gunter Christmann was there. I can't recall who else.

DE: How did you hear about Christo coming out?

TC: I got to know John Kaldor a bit. Maybe he bought a piece of mine, I really can't recall now. It was all pretty active around that time. And then the Biennales [of Sydney] began to come in.

DE: The general view is that it [*Wrapped Coast*] not only put Christo on the map but was a defining moment for contemporary art in Australia.

TC: It was fantastic.

DE: In terms of what sculpture was, do you think it engendered discussion around that topic at that time?

TC: My memory of it is very positive. I don't remember anyone being negative about it.

DE: It was endlessly described, at the time, as the largest sculpture in the world. Did it give rise to a whole discussion about sculpture or three-dimensional practice?

TC: I don't recall it did, no.

DE: Perhaps an event that percolated in different ways?

TC: Yes, I think it was something that happened and people enjoyed it and then, I think, it went away.

DE: Were you pondering on the whole commercial thing at the time like, for example, Mike Parr, Tim Johnson and Peter Kennedy were? Did you regularly visit Inhibodress?

TC: Yes, of course. Yes, I went to all of the galleries. I thought they were fantastic. I can still remember Peter Kennedy and the light bulb works; they were great. I have a few problems with some of the Mike Parr things but that's OK.

DE: Were you ever heading in that direction?

TC: I've done a number of performance things, just when it suited, when it turned up or felt right to do them.

DE: OK, the Transfield Prize. According to these biographical notes, you won it in 1969.

TC: Did I? I don't think I did. I exhibited once or twice in it, but I didn't win it.

DE: OK, the notes must be wrong. [In 1969 Ron Robertson-Swann won for *Sydney summer* and Coleing exhibited *Sprint*.]

TC: I know two of the works that were in it. One was a big blow-up spirally thing, and then there was another one made out of wax. They were both sculptural. With the wax one, you walked up the stairs and there was a viewing platform. It was big.

DE: I don't know a great deal about the Transfield Prize.

TC: Bill Clements won the Transfield Prize one year, with a beautiful little work made of string and Xerox things, on nuclear disarmament. [In 1970 with *Ready for 6th August*]

DE: There were a few sculpture prizes at the time – the Comalco prize for stainless steel sculpture [Comalco Invitation Award for Sculpture in Aluminium].

TC: Yes, I think I went into that one once. [He took part in the 1970 Comalco exhibition.]

DE: At this time, the late 60s, early 70s, along with all of the conceptual stuff, there is also a greater interest and more money being devoted to sculpture in public places. The whole sculptural landscape is beginning to diversify. You are able perhaps to straddle both, but as it begins to bifurcate there aren't too many people left with feet in both camps. Did you have a sense of that re yourself? I think Peter Kennedy is another person in the same frame, Tim Johnson perhaps also.

TC: Yes, Tim Johnson was always interesting. *The field* show knocked the whole Olsen-type school out. John Olsen was very supportive, by the way. I sat down with him one day when *The field* show was on and he said that he really enjoyed it, that it was good to see, he could see the writing on the wall. That came through, then the abstraction came through, then pop art came through, and by that stage the landscape painters were almost gone.

DE: There was not much coming through on the minimalist front here.

TC: Not much, no, and actually there wasn't much pop art either. Richard Larter and only a few others.

DE: Mike Brown? Colin Lanceley?

TC: I never saw Lanceley as a pop artist, Mike Brown more so. It seemed to miss us, which was good in a way.

DE: Were you starting to read all of the art magazines at the time: *Artforum*, *Art International*, any others?

TC: Yes, of course I read them. I think I even brought some *Artforum* and *Art International* magazines back from England. They were expensive magazines at the time.

DE: Were you starting to sell?

TC: Max Hutchinson was very good at selling sculpture, not big money but there was some.

DE: And the National Gallery of Victoria purchased your *FronDESCENCE*.

TC: Yes, they did. My main buying has been institutional. I don't have very much in the way of private buyers, I never have had.

DE: You had a show, maybe 1971, where you exhibited maquettes of works which could have been scaled up. And what happened to your work *Norwich Union*?

TC: That's at Jim Baker's place in Brisbane. They wanted to pull it out of the space here – York Street? [actually O'Connell Street, Sydney] – and they rang me and I said, 'Give it to me, I will have it if you don't want it', but Jim Baker said he would take it, and I don't know what he paid for it but they shipped it up to him. As is my Mildura [Sculpture Triennial 1970] piece, *Wind construction*; it is also up there with him.

DE: So even when Jim Baker went belly up and his collection was dispersed, he kept these?

TC: Yes, he had them before that.

DE: Tom McCullough was extremely keen to get *Wind construction* permanently for Mildura. What happened? The council was against it?

TC: Yes, McCullough was keen. The council was against it. The council hated McCullough and therein lay a problem. But Tom McCullough set up those first shows [for the Mildura Sculpture Triennials] and Mildura was fantastic. He just expanded it into [exhibiting works from] Asia and some from Germany and America, and New Zealand always had a strong contingent, and it was a really good thing. But for whatever reason he put the council off-side.

DE: A lot of people have said that Mildura became something of a think-tank for sculpture and sculptors over this time. Your first one was with *Wind construction* in 1970. I figure you would have had to be there for weeks to set that up.

TC: Yes, I stayed there for weeks.

DE: Who did you get to know there, and who were your main sculptor colleagues? Kevin Mortensen? Ti Parks?

TC: Yes, Kevin. I still keep in touch with Kevin Mortensen and Ti Parks.

DE: Bob Jenyns?

TC: Yes, though I didn't see a lot of Bob.

DE: When and why did you move to Watters Gallery around 1973?

TC: When and why did I go to Frank Watters? That's a good question. I don't know. Maybe Max [Hutchinson] went to New York and the woman who took over [Gallery A, Ann Lewis] was not the same.

DE: Can you remember how many Mildura shows you were in involved in? You were in 1970, 73, 75, and then after that I'm not sure. There was a lot of stuff that happened at Mildura towards the end, but there was one in 1978, and then I think the 1981 [one, known as the Australian Sculpture Triennial] was down at Melbourne.

TC: At the Monash Campus? I went there but I am trying to remember if I had something there. I know Kevin Mortensen did his performance work there. I took photos down there then. I don't recall where they are but I will probably have them.

DE: You made big, ambitious pieces for Mildura, especially with *Wind construction*.

TC: I didn't think they were ambitious but I liked making the big things. I liked working on the scale.

DE: How did you underwrite them financially?

TC: With great difficulty. [Laughter]

DE: Can you remember what you had there in 1973? Perhaps that was *To do with blue*? That is a series from around 1973–74. [Coleing's 1973 Mildura exhibits were *To do with blue 4*, *T Tree* and *Gnomes on the loose*.] The big one that the National Gallery of Australia got is dated 1975.

TC: That [*To do with blue* in the National Gallery of Australia collection, which was shown at *Sculpture 75* in Canberra then at the 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial] was never the right scale. It should have been twice the size it was, but I couldn't afford it.

DE: Did you make good sculpture connections at Mildura?

TC: I don't know. I still have trouble with public sculpture, big sculptures. The only one that I think works is the Antony Gormley, *The angel of the north*. That is the best piece of public sculpture I've seen. It's fantastically well placed and it's a great scale. And that's why I've stopped absolutely having anything to do with public sculpture. Because of the constraints – firstly the financial constraints, and all the constraints of the councils and everything else.

DE: This is one of the quandaries for sculptors. If you want to produce large or ambitious works you can generally only do so by commission, either public or private, and then you run the gauntlet of all of those problems. And the idea of site specificity is a tricky one – so many public sculptures are moved.

TC: Yes.

DE: But I assume there was a certain amount of idealism for you in doing these things in the late 1960s and early 70s, and I presume there was also a politic attached for you?

TC: I don't know, there probably was, but in what way?

DE: Ah well, that you wanted your pieces to be in the public domain, to be enjoyed by people and not in corporations, for example.

TC: Naively I probably did think they would be good in the landscape somewhere and that people might like them. I must have thought that.

DE: Having a show, like you did, of maquettes to scale up is both practical and an indicator of an interest in producing works for large public spaces. And at that time, the same time as the debates about conceptualism, there is a lot of interest in sculpture in public spaces and in commissions from corporations. Was that something of a false rosy glow for sculpture do you think?

TC: Yes, there was quite a lot around. And they [governments] brought in that one percent or two percent of the costs of buildings had to be devoted to artworks. I don't know exactly when that came in, but when you got down to the reality of it, they would say, 'We want three balls placed like this'. It got silly, I couldn't bear it.

[Followed by comments on public sculptures]

DE: Can you remember the tenor of discussions around sculpture at Mildura?

TC: There was a lot of discussion.

DE: What did you get out of it? What did it do for you? How did you contribute?

TC: I don't know how I contributed to it but, by and large, most of the artists who were there thought it was a great thing. You had all the lawns taken up with sculpture, then into the flats, the river flats, and then into the town, you could take over shops. I don't know of anywhere else that did that. It was unique and gave you a huge amount of possibility for things you could do, which weren't available at other times.

DE: You had a fledging federal arts board wondering what to finance, and this was also a regional project. Also it coincided with a period where art schools are flourishing, in Melbourne particularly, where for example, John Davis was heading up an art school tackling three-dimensional art in really interesting ways, although I don't think it was happening up here [in Sydney].

TC: Melbourne has always been good. Mildura was centrally located, of course, from Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney.

DE: You would drive down and camp there.

TC: Yes.

DE: And did you get to know Tom McCullough well?

TC: Very well. He was so enthusiastic. And he did a Sydney Biennale. I might have been in that one. [Coleing did exhibit in that biennale, in 1976.] I was in the Nick Waterlow one [the third biennale, in 1979].

DE: Did you go back to Europe for two years over 1970–71? That is what one set of biographical notes says.

TC: I might have gone back to England for a brief visit, but definitely not for two years. One of those prizes, it might have been the Alcorso–Sekers ... It was the Italian one. It gave you a trip back to Italy

DE: The Flotta Lauro Prize. You won that in 1971.

TC: Yes, the Flotta Lauro. So I was back over there at that time, for a little while.

DE: It gave you money for travel?

TC: It gave you a fare and money to travel. Flotta Lauro was a shipping line. They had a prize for sculpture, and a painter prize. The painter [Guy Warren], who came from Wollongong, well known, was also on the ship.

DE: OK, 1970, the Norwich Union House commission. How did that come about again?

TC: No idea.

DE: Well, your Gallery A show in Melbourne was maquettes for larger sculptures and was on in September. Maybe it came from there?

TC: Can't remember.

DE: Can you describe it for me?

TC: It was like a broken pipe, like a spring frozen in time, I suppose. Pretty simple.

DE: Was it fabricated?

TC: Yes, at Transfield here in Sydney

DE: Who installed it?

TC: Don't remember.

DE: Did you paint it?

TC: I might of. I can't remember whether they did or I did.

DE: Your *Wind construction* was yellow and blue?

TC: It was a lot of pastelly colours and I painted that.

DE: OK. So you didn't have any particular theories concerning public sculpture. There was an article in the magazine *Aspect*, volume 4, autumn, 1976, anonymously written, that said there was consensus among critics that a great deal of your work was concerned with social commentary.

TC: That would be right.

DE: But not your sculptures?

TC: No, a lot of the sculpture was. I had sculpture shows at Watters that were about social commentary, nearly all social comment, constructions with plastic bits on them, and stuff I had bought at shops. The writer could have been Sandra McGrath.

DE: This writer also said that you have a disregard for the accepted proprieties of the past and present. True or false?

TC: Could be true.

DE: OK. How did you go into the Contemporary Art Society?

TC: I liked the CAS at the time. From memory I think it was the only thing like that around that was going. There was discussion. It might have been up at Farmers Blaxland Gallery once a month.

DE: It sponsored *The situation now* art and discussion of July–August 1971 [subtitled *Object or post-object art?*]. You are in a *Situation now* pamphlet, in an interview with Terry Smith. Can you recall that?

TC: No, I don't recall it. I might if you prompt me.

DE: OK. Basically I think Terry Smith was ...

TC: Waffling? [Laughter]

DE: He taught me at university, you know.

TC: That would be right.

DE: Now why would that be right? He led me into Marxism.

I have a copy of *The situation now* interview that I can send you to. You basically reiterated a commitment to the object, but you didn't want to be pinned down, and that there was a conceptual basis to your work. I think that worked very well in the context. That, on the one hand, you were a maverick, not belonging to any one group, but for all of that, consistently positively reviewed. I am not sure I have found any negative reviews of your work. Actually just one, a guy, Ross Lansell, in *Studio International*, related to Harald Szeemann and John Kaldor's Project No 2 of 1972. Szeemann raced around Australia in 13 days, chose seven artists – you were one of them – and had an exhibition at the NGV. So Ross Lansell ...

TC: He was hanging out with Mirka Mora at the time. He was negative, was he?

DE: He said he didn't think it was your best work.

TC: I think from memory that he was supportive on occasions, but I don't recall that one. Was it a springs work?

DE: Not sure.

TC: I thought that the Szeemann thing was shown at the gallery up here, at Bonython's. My memory is of it as something at Bonython's.

DE: Maybe it went to both. [The exhibition was at Bonython Galleries, Sydney, 29 April – 13 May 1971, and National Gallery of Victoria, June 1971]

OK, curators like classifications. I know you don't like to classify your art, but if you were forced to, is there any descriptor you would use for your sculptural oeuvre? Or perhaps a better way to put it is, are there any elements that you have viewed as consistently central to sculpture?

TC: No. I consider the works like *To do with blue* to be formal sculptural practices, but my main interest is in social comment.

DE: You got an Australia Council Visual Arts Board grant in 1973. I have read that it was apparently to go to art schools in Great Britain and then do a study tour of Japan.

TC: I didn't ever do it. No. Something happened, I didn't go. I didn't get the money and didn't do it.

DE: Do you know Stelarc?

TC: Yes, I like him and I think he's done some great things,

DE: Ken Scarlett was his teacher. I also found a reference to you receiving a grant to write a book on Australian naive painters.

TC: Yes, I was going to do that.

DE: So it didn't happen?

TC: No.

DE: Is that an interest you share with artists like Bob Jenyns?

TC: Yes.

DE: Why is that?

TC: I think it is a real, pure type of art, it is coming from nowhere within the art world. It is making marks, whatever they may be. I have always been interested in mad houses, whatever ...

DE: The notion of an unmediated artistic expression?

TC: I suppose so, yes.

DE: Any relationship to your own work?

TC: No, I don't think it has anything to do with my work. It's just something I have enjoyed in general terms. What is the museum in Lausanne? The art brut museum [Collection de l'Art Brut]. If I am ever in the region, I would go visit there. I am pretty broad in my likes. I don't restrict it to one thing.

DE: Is the fact that it is right outside the art world, as you say, a positive?

TC: It's not that it's necessarily a positive. It is just the way it is. You are more likely to see something that you don't know about in a context like that than in a context that you do know about – not that I'm looking for anything in particular, but a lot of those artists put their works together in very interesting ways.

DE: OK. You were also in *Object and idea* exhibition in 1973 at the National Gallery of Victoria.

TC: OK, I know the work. I had birds flying around in bird cages.

DE: What was the reaction to that?

TC: I think fairly positive. I like the work, I still like those works.

DE: What about the *Wit works* exhibited in the Mildura Art Gallery in 1974? I can't find any reproductions of these.

TC: No, I remember the title, but no ...

DE: OK. *To do with blue*, a sculpture seven metres high at the National Gallery of Australia [NGA], Canberra, made from steel and wood, and for many people this is the archetypal Tony Coleing work.

TC: There's no wood in it. Only the model is wood. The seven-metre-high one is steel only.

DE: OK. It is part of a series of works which was first shown at Watters Gallery in October–November 1973.

TC: That's possible. I believe you.

DE: Can you run through the genesis of the series? How did it come about?

TC: [Shows a photo of another work in the NGA collection, *Yellow cake*]

DE: Yes, that work's fantastic. I saw it when I was in Canberra at the gallery, but I have never seen it exhibited.

TC: I saw it exhibited in the Venice Biennale.

DE: Was it James Mollison who was responsible for the purchase of them?

TC: Yes, I think it must have been Mollison.

DE: He was at the gallery in 1975 when it was acquired, and he was into large commissions for the NGA site.

TC: I don't think this was commissioned. I think I just did it for the show. I paid for that myself. It was made and fabricated in Kempsey [on the north coast of New South Wales].

DE: Were you at South West Rocks then?

TC: Near South West Rocks at Stuart Beach. No, I would have been in South West Rocks then.

DE: Why did you leave Sydney in the early 70s?

TC: It was a long time ago. I would have been up there from 1975.

DE: But you had been enmeshed in a pretty active art scene here. It was a step away from that.

TC: That's right.

DE: There is a story that's not on this tape. But OK, anyway ... [Looking at photos of making *To do with blue*, which feature Coleing's young son, born in 1973]. You made this full-scale work in Kempsey and then transported it down to Canberra?

TC: That's right. It came down in pieces. It's not that big. It should be twice as big and there should be more of it, which I would have done if I had the money.

DE: Our maquette [in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection] is denser; there are more cloud forms.

TC: I did a series of them. Your maquette might be for a different one. There are a few things on the thumb drive that I brought down that might be useful there.

DE: OK, but the work is not an unqualified pinnacle for you?

TC: No, to me it's an unresolved one because I haven't built anything like that to the scale that I would like to see it at. So to my way of thinking it's unresolved.

DE: Do you still have those aspirations sculpturally?

TC: Not really, because I know the restrictions on it. I know how difficult it would be. I don't think you would ever get anyone up to do it. Have you seen the little maquettes for the alternative war memorials?

DE: No, but I've heard of them.

TC: Little soldiers blown up [in size] basically. Patrick White wanted to have one of those blown up.

DE: Well, Watters offered some of them to the [Australian] War Memorial.

TC: I think they might have some of them. I couldn't get anyone to blow them up. Patrick was prepared to fund it, but I couldn't get anyone to take one on. I would have liked to see one of those scaled up, marginally larger than life size. Scale is a funny thing, scale is weird.

DE: Is that something you have always been aware of?

TC: I think so. Mildura was good for that because things were in the landscape. Many people have tried to place things in front of a landscape or building, and it didn't work. Those more formal type of sculptures. I think that's what happened after they got rid of Tom McCullough. They got Michel Sourgnès in and he went right back to the formal things. That's what he brought back to town.

DE: Yes, I think he was meant to be a complete antidote. I have read somewhere that for many Mildura participants, their works were dwarfed by the landscape. They couldn't quite visualise the scale of where their work was going to be placed.

TC: That's right. I've always been interested in scale. I think scale is important. I think Bob Jenyns might have had a little winged figure that he just sat in the landscape and it looked fantastic. And Kevin Morton had large coils which looked like elephant poop in the landscape and they just worked.

DE: Into the 70s, were you having much to do with your sculptural colleagues after moving up the coast?

TC: Well, obviously you are out of the loop a bit.

DE: Did people visit?

TC: Yes, Bruce Latimer and those sorts of people, and that's where I began to do the collaborative prints, of which I have done a huge amount.

DE: Are we starting to look at an erosion away from sculpture for you?

TC: Probably. Small-scale sculpture I still work on but I'm not interested in the large things.

DE: Was *To do with blue* then the last of the big works created up there?

TC: Possibly. I don't think there was much after that, because my whole attitude to sculptures in the public landscape, public sculpture, has altered quite a lot. I am still in different minds about the point of it, why to have public sculpture. I would just as soon look at a gum tree in most cases. Perhaps that comes from living in the country, but I don't want my landscape interrupted by something that I don't like. I think a lot of art is made for the cities; it is city-based.

DE: There is a move for more works in the urban public spaces now, I think – a giant Thancoupie pot in front of the NGA, a giant Bronwyn Oliver sculpture in the [Adelaide] CBD Hyatt – a flurry of activity with artists now, with architects.

TC: I saw one [public sculpture competition] in Perth that was advertised for a million dollars. That is good. That is starting to look good, to look like someone is a bit keen to have something there. Previously, when I was doing those public sculptures, you might have got \$5000 or \$10,000 and that included having it made, a commission coming out of it for your gallery, getting it transported, getting all of the insurance sorted etc etc. You would end up going backwards. There was no conceivable way you could make money. The only way you might make money was if they bought the maquette for a couple of thousand dollars. To go through that pain. It is an insult really.

DE: In 1975 you were in the exhibition *Survival kits* at the Ewing [and George] Paton Gallery in Melbourne.

TC: There was a very good Ti Parks work in that show. I moved quite a lot between Melbourne and Sydney. Kiffy Rubbo ran it [the gallery] and then Janine Burke.

DE: And Judy Annear was there too.

TC: That's right.

DE: And perhaps Tim Burns?

TC: Tim Burns was in New York for a long time. He must have been involved in Mildura, because he blew a few things up there, I think, and maybe then went to New York. I think he is back now and living in Perth.

DE: By the mid 1970s you had been described as having work that was involved in formal sculptural concerns and work concerned with social commentary, with an aversion to stylistic predictability. Did that continue through the 70s?

TC: Probably. There wouldn't have been many more of the formal things made.

DE: There seems to be an oblique interest in surrealism amongst Australian sculptors, surrealism or dada. I don't know whether you would consider yourself part of that trajectory at all?

TC: Not really.

DE: You were painting and drawing throughout the 70s.

TC: And printmaking started to come into it then too.

DE: Have you done any teaching?

TC: Not really. A little bit when Adrian Hall asked me come over when he was running the sculpture department at Sydney College of the Arts. Jim Allen was head of it. I think he had known Adrian from somewhere else and he got Adrian in, who I didn't know at that time, and Adrian was fantastic in the sculpture department there.

DE: So he got you down from the north coast?

TC: No, I must have been living here, I can't remember. I must have been back in Sydney. I've been up there now, on a permanent basis, for about 15, 17 years.

DE: So in the 90s you were back in Sydney?

TC: Yes.

DE: Still showing at Watters. When did you move to Utopia Art Gallery?

TC: That is only relatively recent, in the last five years.

DE: After the Alice Springs prize [the 2004 Alice Prize]?

TC: No.

DE: Chris Hodges [at Utopia Arts] had your month-long residency show in 2006, I think.

TC: I went from Watters to Ray Hughes. I was with Ray Hughes for years. I showed with him in Brisbane before he came to Sydney. Then he bought the [Rudy] Komon [Art] Gallery, and I showed with Ray Hughes Komon, and then we parted company. Mr Hughes got too much like Mr Hughes.

So I left Ray in the first or second year he was at Komon, before he moved over to his current spot in Devonshire Street. Somewhere along the line I might have had another gallery. I showed with Andrew Baker in Brisbane, Charles Nodrum in Melbourne, Helen Maxwell in Canberra. I think there was a gap in Sydney.

I am halfway between Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie, and Port Macquarie regional gallery is where I've just had a show.

[Followed by a short discussion of the Port Macquarie gallery]

DE: What was the work in your show?

TC: I showed some of the works I had shown at Utopia, and I was with Steve Killick because we did a full joint show previously, all sculpture. This show was both of our separate works, and then we collaborated on two works, one big and one small sculpture.

DE: And what has happened to those?

TC: They are in their storeroom wanting to get out.

DE: Bert Flugelman. Did you know him well?

TC: Yes, I did. He was a very nice fellow.

DE: Were you still hanging around with Vernon Treweeke when you returned from England?

TC: No, I've only had very little contact with him because he went psychedelic and to hippy land. He's not a good communicator and I'm not a particularly good communicator and his art went somewhere that I'm not interested in.

DE: How would you describe your sculptural practice or position from the mid 70s to now? You are clearly still interested in exploring things in three-dimensional form.

TC: Yes, absolutely. Steve and I did a little work, it started off more two-dimensional than three-dimensional, and then we just ripped it to pieces and it worked out really well in three dimensions. I work really well sometimes with people that I know and he's one of the ones I can bounce off.

DE: I should think that collaborative work is difficult to do.

TC: I've done a lot of it, and the only one that was difficult was ... I can't think of his name. He was with Watters and he was a reviewer and a poet, a well-respected poet. He came from a totally non-art background. It was a difficult collaboration.

DE: Do you know Aleks Danko?

TC: Yes, I did in the early part. All those people, Danko, and Joan Grounds.

DE: It's an uphill battle to talk about sculpture as a separate category now, don't you think?

TC: Yes, totally, and that's why all of the prizes are silly.

DE: I think the whole prize aspect of making art has some people off-side.

TC: Yes, that's right.

DE: It is too simple to say things have come full circle but the kind of diversity that is going on now – notwithstanding artists like Ron Robertson-Swann who want to have a distinct category of sculpture ... He is a very smart guy and he argues a strong line, a well-worked-out line on why we should say there is a distinct category called sculpture in art.

TC: He is [Anthony] Caro or Caro-based and his view is that that is the way sculpture should be.

DE: Well, you do have very well-respected contemporary artists such as Richard Serra who do fit into that category.

TC: And they are very beautiful. I don't have an argument with any of that. Anish Kapoor makes some beautiful things.

DE: What then does that mean?

TC: It means that there is no one way. Good things are good, and you work out your aesthetic, I suppose.

DE: How do you do that with three-dimensional work?

TC: The only way I can see that is by having a full understanding of what you are looking at, within a history of what has gone on before this – understand where the work came from.

DE: There are also things like scale. There are sensitivities that you have to have to make a successful three-dimensional work, aren't there? Are they quite separate sensitivities from creating two-dimensional work?

TC: Probably not. You've still got to have tickling around in your head somewhere what makes something right, what makes it wrong, and that applies across the board, when you get down to it. What is quality? What is not quality? How do you define quality? It doesn't matter if it is not well made in lots of cases. You just see something there. You know that.

DE: Well, it's very hard to articulate, and when you try, you stray into connoisseurial territory, so they are tricky questions. But some artists making three-dimensional works do maintain the separation, even if they are not formalists. They believe there is a separation between three-dimensional and two-dimensional art in this respect.

OK, so your teaching ...

TC: Yes, I taught a little at Sydney Art School [Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney] and a little at Tasmanian Art School [Tasmanian School of Art] as a resident artist-cum-teacher. A number of times I have been down there. I could do my own work but I had to have contact with students.

DE: Was that when Geoff Parr was presiding down there?

TC: He probably would have been, but Bob Jenyns would have been head of sculpture at the time. Have you got Glen Clarke down as a sculptor to talk to? He is a good one. He showed in a number of the Mildura shows. He was teaching in Tasmania, but he made some pretty interesting works. He might have moved to Victoria.

DE: Just in terms of looking at what was going on, do you see any large differences between the 1980s and the 1970s? Did you have a sense of the large changes which took place in three-dimensional making?

TC: I don't have a large sense of that. I think now, with the Asia-Pacific influences, there is a lot of diversity coming in, which is good. But as to what is going on, I don't think you could nail it now. It must be incredibly difficult for students coming out of art schools now to find out how you find your own way. It must be very hard.

DE: Times have changed. Lots of students have expectations that they will have their first solo show three months out of graduation.

TC: That might be their expectation.

DE: There is also no longer the idea of the ten-year studentship.

TC: No, that's all gone. You have the internet now and people set up and can do very well with websites. A lot of people are involved in multimedia.

DE: Well, you are too, aren't you?

TC: Yes, I do bits and pieces. I like to keep up with it all if I can. I love new technology and I love playing around with computers. I'm not going to restrict myself and have a paintbrush in my hand all the time.

DE: You are painting?

TC: Not a lot. I am mainly doing computer work, but I am getting back into the painting a little. I'm happy about that.

DE: The Venice Biennale. Can you tell me about that? The three of you, in 1982 [actually 1980].

TC: Yes, me, Kevin Mortensen and Mike Parr. That was Leon Paroissien [director of the Australia Council Visual Arts Board].

DE: How did it come about?

TC: With great difficulty. [Laughter] There were certain people who tried to stop it ever getting off the ground. Anyway that's another story

DE: Was it the first joint Venice venture of artists?

TC: I'm not sure. I'm not sure of what came before it.

DE: There is still a lot of art-world jealousy about Venice.

TC: I think it has changed now.

DE: How did it work for you? Did you have a curator who put you forward?

TC: Mary Shaw had something to do with it. I think she might have been the commissioner. She may have been on the Visual Arts Board at the time. I'm a little fuzzy about that. Her father was partners with Franco Belgiorno-Nettis. I'm not sure if anything came through that way. I can't remember how I got asked to do it. I don't know who put me up.

DE: You made work for it?

TC: *Australian native plantation* was the one I had down in Adelaide, but it wasn't exactly the same as that one. In Adelaide you had to go and get your 'native' and plant it in the garden. This [in Venice] was just a plantation of 'Australian natives' [in the form of concrete Aboriginal figures and koalas], with little sculptural garden gnomes. I also had my Vegemite stall selling Vegemite sandwiches [*A great Australian bite*], and my yellow cake stall [*Who wants to be a millionaire?*] on the other side. And then I ran into all the trouble selling Vegemite sandwiches because they said the man around the corner selling other Italian sandwiches was disadvantaged so they closed me down – you couldn't sell things, blah blah blah – and then Leon Paroissien came through and said, 'I can't see why you would be doing yellow cake, this is horrible' and they tried to close me down on that. I got no help from them, none.

DE: Really. On what basis should 'yellow cake' have been closed down?

TC: On the basis that you should not put in a political work. They said no one would understand it. Everyone understood it. All the European people who came through all knew exactly what I was doing.

DE: How were the other artists? Were they supportive?

TC: Mike Parr? He didn't say much. He was doing his own thing. Same problems. He was cooking his fish in hot water, I think, but Mike was alright. Kevin had his own problems too because he was naked doing one piece. There were a few problems there. He was often in a trance when doing his performance, and a photographer came up and said, 'Can I take your photo?', and Kevin just whacked him. They tried to close him down too. So the Australian Pavilion wasn't travelling so well at that time.

DE: So what was the wash up in the end?

TC: The wash up was that the Vegemite stall had to close, Kevin kept going, and my yellow cake stall had to close down. I closed it, but what I did was take orders – I didn't fulfill them – [although] I think I might have sent one or two off.

DE: How long were you there?

TC: I was there for two months.

DE: You were put up [in accommodation]?

TC: Yes.

DE: And what was the general public reaction to your work?

TC: I think it was good. Certainly the Vegemite sandwich stall was an interesting one. Selling the sandwiches, you got the classic, 'Oh god, I haven't had a Vegemite sandwich for three months!' I got fresh bread every day from the baker down the road. The Europeans couldn't handle it at all. So it was interesting. It was the juxtaposition between it and the other elements.

DE: Did you get many reviews?

TC: I don't know about the Italian newspapers but I think Sandra McGrath may have written it up, and maybe Nancy Borlase.

DE: Not something you would necessarily repeat?

TC: I liked the work. I thought it had a bit of a bite to it. I thought it was a good social comment, as was the plantation of 'Australian natives', although it was harder for the Europeans to get their heads around. It just sat quietly there on its own. I thought the response was good, witnessed by the number of orders I got. I got a lot of orders. I could say, 'Look, you say they don't understand it, but look at how many orders I have here'. I probably still have the [orders] book at home somewhere. Anyway, it was a good experience. Because the whole nuclear issue and selling uranium to Europe, they don't like it, and probably wouldn't like it even more so now.

DE: Did you document it? Was it filmed?

TC: There are photographs, but I don't know of any filming.

DE: I should look in the VAB [Visual Art Board, Australia Council] archives and see what documentation there is.

TC: There won't be much on me. But Mike Parr? [Laughter] I could not believe it. He was there at the same time I was over and he pulled out his archive. Christ!

DE: Well, that's right. But it would be interesting in our context of wanting to set up a Coleing archive [at the Art Gallery of New South Wales] to look into it. Final thing: in terms of the works we have in the AGNSW collection. Your *Plastic landscape*, an anonymous gift in 1970.

TC: I am surprised that you would even take it, because it wasn't what you would call a standard sculpture.

DE: It got very good reviews, and I am assuming that this is the time of Daniel Thomas.

TC: Daniel was supportive.

DE: You were getting wall-to-wall positive reviews.

TC: I can't recall anything ever being bought by this gallery [AGNSW] of mine.

DE: There was the purchase of three etchings.

TC: Not, as far as I know, from me.

[The Gallery purchased Coleing's sculpture *Hide and seek* 1970 in 1975 from auction and prints *Untitled* 1970 in 1974 from Gallery A, Sydney; *Something old, something new* 1983 in 1984 from Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane; *Tahiti, perle du Pacifique* 1984 in 1986 from Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney; and *Untitled* 1987 in 1989 from the National Gallery of Australia.]

DE: How much of your past work do you hold?

TC: How much do you want? Yes, I do have quite a bit.

DE: I don't like small-town stuff [said in reference to Coleing living in a country town]. I couldn't bear it.

TC: I have very little to do with it. I am very much my own person. I'm out of the city. It's a lot easier for me. I have a group of friends I go surfing with, but we don't socialise. Just meet them out in the surf, say hello, that's it. If you want to get anything done, you meet them at the beach – one might be a carpenter etc. It's easy, there's none of that pressure. It is nice to see the season changes. It's subtle but they are there. I like it, it suits me. You don't have the same needs. I said before that a lot of artmaking is city based. When I had that old warehouse over here [in Sydney] it was chock-a-block with art, floor to ceiling. Because I used to collect a lot of work. I gave a lot of student shows. I remember the first thing Max Hutchinson did for me was fantastic. So the best thing you can do for an up-and-coming artist is buy something, so I had a lot of useless art hanging around and, of course, very few carry on the practice because it is hard going.

DE: It is a landscape of small returns really. You have a large studio up there?

TC: Yes.

DE: In your estimation does the Art Gallery of New South Wales have a major work of yours?

TC: No, apart from *Line*. I like *Line*.

Interview on 22 April 2015

DE: We didn't discuss Marr Grounds last time. I've been to visit Marr Grounds recently. He's just lost his [driver's] licence and is somewhat stuck at Tanja [in southern New South Wales]. I found him extremely charming.

TC: He can be very charming. That's good.

DE: He had an excellent memory. We spoke a little about you. He basically said you were a good mate of his, though he hadn't seen you for a long time, that you had the old cigarette factory warehouse together and worked together on the 'Ave a go' projects, that you were the prime movers of it, I think.

TC: He was, before me. He ran it one year, and then I ran it another year.

DE: Did you meet him in 1968 when he first arrived here [in Australia]?

TC: What date? You've got to be joking!

DE: Maybe, but I always expect you guys to have very good memories. OK, he arrived in 1968, you came back in 1968, back in the same year. He set up the Tin Sheds with Donald Brook, so I thought it might be around the time you met.

TC: No, I don't think I knew him as early as that. I knew him around the edges. It would have been a little later. I can't remember the circumstances. He was with Joan [Grounds] and they had built their new house, and I went over there.

DE: You lived in the old cigarette factory?

TC: Yes, of course. I found the factory, General Tobacco Trading Company [in the inner Sydney suburb of Paddington], and it was still trading up until I bought it. It was a deceased estate. I didn't have the money to buy it on my own, and originally I brought Geoff Brown in but he bailed, and Marr came in because he was looking for a warehouse-cum-whatever at the same time. Around 1972 maybe.

DE: How did that work? I thought you might have come together through your left-wing politics?

TC: I'd always been a bit left, and Marr too.

DE: A bit left or a lot left?

TC: It depends on the day. It depends on the issue. I can be fairly left, but not radical. I go to protests, to marches, anti-nuclear, Aboriginal issues.

DE: How did your association with Marr work?

TC: There were three floors, we each had a floor and did what we wanted and then the downstairs was our income.

DE: How long did that last?

TC: Off the top of my head, around 15 years maybe.

DE: Really? So when did you go up north?

TC: Maybe 17 years ago, but I always had my place, a block of land, up there. It was part of where I grew up, that was a part of my time.

DE: So you have been going up and down to there since the 1970s?

TC: Yes, and then in the middle of all of that I lived in the Torres Strait for six or seven years.

DE OK, why was that?

TC: I liked it. The Torres Strait, not the Northern Territory, but at the top of Queensland. I would live there for six, seven, eight months and then come back for four. It was during the time I was in the factory, late 70s, into the 80s.

DE: And when you finally sold the factory, did you sell it to Ros Oxley?

TC: We sold the factory to developers.

DE: Would you describe Marr as a close associate of those years?

TC: Oh, reasonable. We kept our distance. We came together on art things.

DE: You were interested in Aboriginal art quite early on, weren't you?

TC: Not as early as I should have been, no.

DE: None of us were, were we?

TC: Well, Tony Tuckson was. Clive Evatt was the one who really made me look at it. I went in there [to his gallery] and I said, 'I can't understand it. I'm really more interested in New Guinea art', and he said, 'Forget the New Guinea art, look at Aboriginal stuff', and it took me a while but I did. What was the gallery called?

DE: Hogarth Gallery.

TC: That's right, but he had a Hogarth before this one, didn't he? I think he moved from somewhere.

DE: I have only known the Hogarth where it is [in Walker Lane, Paddington], up near the hospital. But it seems everyone in Sydney, particularly sculptors, were into New Guinean art in the 1960s.

TC: That's right. The Germans who came over, and others who came over for the Biennales etc, were all buying New Guinean art, not Aboriginal.

DE: We mentioned Vernon Treweeke last time but didn't really go into him. He sounds like he was a very influential figure for you. For a start, he slashed one of your paintings, paint-wise in London, which sounded pretty cathartic.

TC: It was good.

DE: After being furious?

TC: No, I didn't get furious. But I did have a strong reflect on what he'd done. I did get a shock because I had never had that. Just to recap, we did have a few people who would come around every few weeks and critique. He just walked in and picked up the paintbrush and went slash.

DE: I think you also said your connection to Gallery A came about through him.

TC: Yes. He had gotten back here before me. He said to Max, 'You should look at Tony'. I was put on \$20 a week, to come out of any future sales, of course.

DE: You had made the decision on the ship back to focus on sculpture, and I assume that Treweeke had been recommending you as a painter?

TC: As an artist, I think.

DE: It was intriguing last time that you came across as a maverick and eclectic, and you come across as intellectually restless, you are interested in challenges. But how did you manage to do so well so quickly when you got back? Who were you looking at? Where did *Plastic landscape* come from [for example]?

TC: I just liked playing around with different materials. That's why I like it on the computer as a tool. You can instantly change things in a split second. You can have a dozen things going in a minute, which you can't do with any other medium. It's not as immediate as that.

DE: So it might suit you best?

TC: As another tool. I still like to draw, to paint, to sculpt. I don't make many things at the moment, but I haven't discarded it by any means.

DE: Do you keep tabs on what is happening three-dimensionally?

TC: Probably not as much as I should. Because I'm in the country, it's a little harder. I look at things on the computer occasionally. I keep in touch with Steve Killick and he throws a few things out. Have a look at this, a look at that.

DE: For you to read or look at?

TC: Yes. He's good like that. I get on well with Steve.

DE: Who were your main associates?

TC: At that time?

DE: Yes.

TC: I used to go to Donald [Brook's] place sometimes.

DE: I can't remember if I asked you last time if you went to the Clement Greenberg lecture at Sydney University in 1968 ['Avant-garde attitudes: new art in the sixties', the first Power Institute lecture]?

TC: Yes, I did go to that lecture. I am wondering if there were two?

DE: I think there was the lecture and then a large dinner or party afterwards. A lot of people seem to have gone to it and then had very divided reactions. I can't predict what yours would have been, but I guess I would say anti?

TC: I think I found it difficult to comprehend what he was on about at the time, possibly, I don't know.

DE: But you knew what was going on?

TC: Yes, I knew what was going on. But when I taught at the art school, Adrian Hall got me into that. I respected him as an artist; I still respect him as an artist. At that time he wasn't head of school; he had been brought over to teach in the sculpture department. I'm pretty hopeless with dates. It was ongoing for quite a while, in sculpture.

DE: You're teaching part-time?

TC: Yes, and it was fantastic at the time because he went off into performance art and had the students doing a whole range of things they had not done before, had never even thought of before.

DE: And was that your first teaching gig?

TC: Yes. I was very scared of taking that on, because I am not good at getting up in front of people and trying to tell them what to do – ludicrous – but I found that my role was to look and maybe encourage and maybe suggest other ways of doing things.

DE: You could talk about your practice too?

TC: No, no way. I still don't talk about that much.

DE: Yes, I had some reductive questions last time – like, 'What drives you?' – that I notice you didn't answer.

TC: It's in the genes.

DE: Questions like, 'What would you describe as most important to you artistically?' – reductive questions but they can be informative.

TC: Nothing.

DE: Right, OK. You said last time, 'Look, I came back on the ship and I just thought I would give sculpture a go'.

TC: Yes.

DE: But it was a very serious go, and a very successful go, and you were then grabbed by the critics because you were striking new notes, and then you were in *The field*, so it was an extraordinary success which came with 'just giving sculpture a go'.

TC: It was just one of those lucky breaks.

DE: No, no. There would have been a lot of people trying for those 'lucky breaks'.

TC: Bob Klippel was good for me. Did I mention that?

DE: Yes, you did in the sense that he delivered a slightly gentle lesson. OK, were there people you admired overseas? Were there people you were looking at three-dimensionally? Were there people who affected you in England?

TC: They didn't affect me. I mean, I looked at it, abstract work, I had a play around with abstraction, but I have always been ... When I look back, I came to this school [NAS] when I was 15, and when I look back, it is all figurative and it is all social comment.

DE: So intellectual curiosity, or even just curiosity. Wouldn't you say that might be a central description for anyone looking at your work?

TC: Probably. I don't believe in any one type of movement or type of painting. They all have their ups and downs. I like Bonnard and Vuillard. I went to a show of Bonnard in London and it just bowled me over, and then a show of Vuillard came along and he was better – I didn't believe that anyone could be better! If I was given the choice of choosing, I would probably choose Vuillard. And equally Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg. A Rauschenberg show also came on while I was in London and again, I was bowled over. And then a Jasper Johns show, and I thought, 'This is where Rauschenberg came from'. I didn't realise that until I saw them. And he was again better perhaps, in that sense. A bit more original.

DE: Was your group of associates very interested in this kind of work? You are talking about becoming a serious artist at a time when many artists had a massive swing away from such

modernist enterprises. The swing to conceptualism etc. That brought with it a relatively black-and-white scenario for many. You were either a conceptualist, ie avant-garde, or you were conservative – and which one were you going to pick? For example, I remember reading a review by Terry Smith of works by Peter Kennedy – his luminal sequences installations and his performance *But the fierce blackman* – and Terry wrote that Kennedy's luminal works were fine, but the performance was the rich vein to tap, not the light installations, and that was simply on the basis, it seems to me, that it looked more avant-garde.

TC: Well, that was Terry at the time.

DE: Yes, but you stepped outside of that, and loved a Bonnard show. Where did that all come from?

TC: I've always had a strong sense of myself, I think.

DE: Is that what allowed you to remain immune to such whole-hearted conversions? Did you hear or use the term avant-garde at that time?

TC: No, I've never used the word, and never really seen it.

[This is followed by DE and TC recapping their discussion of Max Hutchinson describing Coleing's show as 'FronDESCENCE']

TC: Max Hutchinson was a risk taker, but he was the only dealer passionately interested in sculpture at the time.

DE: He had that strong connection with Meadmore. I think that's how he found his way there.

TC: What I was going to say before about Adrian Hall and me going to work at the college is that I think 50 percent of the marks were about theory and 50 percent practice. I found that one difficult because I had some students there who were total theorists and they gave me their papers to read and I really struggled. They did not make much sense to me, I felt I wasn't qualified to do this. Equally, I tried to fail some people, and that was an absolute impossibility, and that upset me.

DE: So you found that difficult. Did you start to try and read up on theory?

TC: No, because for me art is visual. Art theory is a whole other area that is way away from how I should look at something. It doesn't interest me at all. I am happy to read art histories and art biographies. Ian Burn I respected, and Nigel Lendon, but they were all into it.

DE: I think they had all been strong Marxist theoreticians and moved into semiotics. From our current perspective and its diversity, it is hard to understand how such large swathes of individual artists would be swayed by one theory in the 1960s and 70s.

TC: What disappointed me when I came back ... Central Street had been set up by Tony McGillick and Rollin Schlicht; I think they were the originators. They brought hard-edge back. I had been through that whole exercise by the time I got back, it was long gone, and I had gotten into figurative works again, and I came back here and saw all the hard-edge colour-field stuff and found it all boring.

DE: You didn't want to be involved in Inhibodress with Parr and Kennedy. That didn't interest you?

TC: Not particularly. Because I'm not one for groups. But I enjoyed what they did.

DE: Just plugging a few gaps. We talked about your involvement in *The field* last time, but not your impression of the whole show.

TC: It was good. It was an acknowledgement that there was different art going on here. I think I told you before that I ran into John Olsen and he said, 'Let's go and have a talk', and we did, and he said, 'I understand what's going on. You people are just going to displace where we have all come from', the whole landscape thing, and he said, 'I think it's great!' He was very supportive.

DE: A generational shift, except that it didn't really happen, did it? That kind of process was starting to break down, wasn't it? There were people producing self-consciously 'avant-garde' art in the late 60s and early 70s, but isn't that starting to break down by the mid-late 70s? Certainly by the 1980s all those ideas about the avant-garde seem dated, don't they? Capitalism has swallowed up all of you lefties.

TC: I think it's all good because since *The field* show, it is true that everything goes. It's gotten to that point and I think it's great. That's one thing that I couldn't tell students enough: look at your art history, see where you are coming from. They had a whole colour-field art movement resurface in New York a few years back!

DE: I think in the 1960s much was underpinned by a real sense of optimism that things could change. I don't think that is the case now. I think it is all about individual practice, isn't it?

TC: You are probably closer to it than me. I don't know. I looked at the new tapestry work at the Gallery [Grayson Perry's *Map of truths and beliefs* 2011 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales] and I thought what a great work. Maybe in Europe there is a possibility of making some change. I do wonder whether that type of work that he is doing, and plenty of others, do make people think a little. I don't know whether we, here, are all a little distant. It's hard to say. I was at Utopia [Art Sydney] the other day and people were coming in and some of them were actually buying things, and Chris [Hodges, Utopia Art Sydney's director] said, 'It's just starting to pick up again', and I had had no sense of that. I thought buying has largely gone out the window.

DE: Wendy Paramor. You mentioned her last time. I am wondering if you knew her well.

TC: Yes, I knew her a bit. I used to go out to her place a bit, out in the western suburbs.

DE: Did her work interest you?

TC: I liked her as a person and I respected her as an artist, but I didn't want to own a Wendy Paramor [work], but she played a role.

DE: What kind of person were you in the 60s and 70s? Just give me an idea.

TC: Rough around the edges. There was a Transfield Art Prize at Bonython Gallery and I made a big platform which had steps going up to it, and six or seven or nine wax panels that went along it. You had to walk up the stairs to view it. That photo you have there is, I think, from that time. I knew Franco Belgiorno[-Nettis] would go up to have a look at it, and I made the steps just high enough that he would bang his head on the ceiling, and he did.

DE: So you were mischievous. Are you adversarial?

TC: You have to have a bit of humour in there. In what way do you mean adversarial?

DE: I'm just asking for four words [for you] to characterise yourself.

TC: I'm not silly, let's put it that way.

DE: Would do describe yourself as knowing yourself and what you wanted then?

TC: Yes. I still like exploring my art. I'm not going to get bogged down in one thing or another or another. It's not my nature. If I make something, half a dozen, 18, 20, I then want to move on. I've explored that area. That's why I think Duchamp was fantastic. He did something and then let everyone else try and work it out.

DE: You don't think he was a little arid? I am not sure I find him as convincing as many people do ...

Tony McGillick. Did you see him much when you came back?

TC: A little bit.

DE: David Smith. I found it interesting that you said you very much admired him.

TC: Yes, I do very much. He was principled. He knew what he wanted. To my way of thinking he was genuine in what he did, and he worked hard at what he had done. Fantastic. You know his history, and in his personal life he didn't even compromise much there. He said, 'I am going to the bush, to live and make work', which was what he did. He was very restrained. I don't need to explain his works to you. When you see a David Smith, you know it is a David Smith.

DE: That sometimes comes of going narrow and then going down.

TC: Yes. You always know a Meadmore. But to me, Meadmore is just 'put another twist in there'. It wasn't really much of a challenge towards the end. I found David Smith more interesting than I found Meadmore, a lot more interesting.

DE: Julio González was also very much admired by sculptors around that time. Jack Lynn. Was he a strong advocate of your work? Like Sandra McGrath.

TC: She was very supportive. And Jack Lynn, to give him his due. He would never say much. I used to go and listen to his lectures. I used to be part of the Contemporary Art Society.

TC: There was a woman, perhaps from Brisbane. I had a crack at her because she was stupid in some of the things she wrote. In one of my invitations I think I reproduced what she had written and then crossed out a whole lot of stuff.

DE That would be fairly provocative.

TC: She deserved it.

DE: What about provocative. Is that part of the lexicon? Were you interested in being provocative?

TC: I don't think I ever thought about it much. Maybe in being a little left-field, a little humorous in a work. I don't think I intentionally set out ... Did I? I don't know.

DE: Are you able to sum up your philosophy of artmaking? No? OK, OK. Were the 'Ave a go' projects very important to you?

TC: They were fun, they were good because you never knew what you were going to get.

DE: But the co-operative venture, that was very important to you?

TC: It was good. It was hard work, believe it or not, hard work.

DE: Was there a sense of subverting the system, the commercial system?

TC: No, not for me. It might have been for Marr, but, no, I don't think there was anything we were subverting, just offering another alternative space which didn't cost anything, and which was a challenge. To put something into that sort of space was difficult. You had to think about it. Some of the things that went in there ... My arrangement would be totally different from other people's. I tried to hang my own show, with Chris or someone, and he would have to say, 'Get out of here'. I'm one for sticking things all over the walls. I don't care whether they are high or low or where they are. So was it Daniel Thomas who, when he came in to the AGNSW, rearranged all of the works all over the walls?

DE: That was the 'Salon hang' perhaps, floor to ceiling. What about artistic ambition? Can you say what your artistic ambitions have been?

TC: There haven't been any ambitions. Just to make art. That's what I do. I don't see that as ambitious.

DE: But you must have ambitions about it, even if it's simply resolving the artwork.

TC: You can only get so far and then your brain has had enough. You always paint the same painting; you never paint a masterpiece, there is not such a thing. There is never an end to it. You just keep moving. Plenty of people have said before and I agree with that.

[End]