

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

Interview with Ron Robertson-Swann

19 August and 6 December 2011 and 22 May 2015

This is an edited transcript of interviews with Ron Robertson-Swann on 19 August and 6 December 2011 and 22 May 2015 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.

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About Ron Robertson-Swann

Best known for his abstract metal sculptures, Ron Robertson-Swann (born 1941) studied and worked under Anthony Caro and Phillip King in London in the 1960s. He has taught art and was head of sculpture at the Canberra School of Art and National Art School. Painting is also essential to his practice, and his paintings were included in the 1968 exhibition *The field*.

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 19 August 2011

Deborah Edwards (DE): We were talking about Ian Milliss, but we can go back to the beginning if you like ...

Ron Robertson-Swann (RRS): He then started working for unions because that was, I suppose, the logical end in a way to all those Marxists.

DE: I think he might have written something for *Object and idea* in 1973 [the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) exhibition catalogue, *Object and idea, 1973: new work by Australian artists*]. I think he wrote an essay that prefigured his work for the unions, because it was exactly that position. You were placed on the opposite trajectory in the Brian Finemore article [in the catalogue] because it had a diagram showing Cezanne [and then on one side] Picasso-cubism – *The field* and then, on the opposite side, Duchamp-Dada – *Object and idea*. You had been in *The field* exhibition [at the NGV in 1968]. You were seen as being on a different trajectory. It was probably seen as Greenbergian, wasn't it? And [Clement] Greenberg became a very dirty word, quickly.

RRS: Yes, except he was a major influence on my development as a young artist.

DE: Yes, and a large number of others. Even when he came out here [to Australia in 1968], but I get the impression that when he was here the balloon had burst for a lot of people. Janet Dawson said that.

RRS: Yes. I think what happened was he became too powerful, and there was a great deal of resentment about that. I could see that with Robert Hughes. They couldn't wait until he appeared to do something in relation to David Smith's estate, and everyone came out of the woodwork and pounced on him. And in fact, what he did was quite right. And it was over stripping the paint off a sculpture.

DE: That's right.

RRS: But they couldn't wait. I mean, the vileness with which that stuff came out ... And what the paint was, was white undercoat, and it didn't do the sculpture proper service and it was right to strip it off, but they used that as doing something after ... Everyone forgot that, of course, with that sort of art there were industrial processes so, you know, it's not the 'touch of Rembrandt' in that. Also I think what happened too was, up until that point, it was about connoisseurship, insight, judgement, perception, and he was just a lot better than most, and there was no room for anybody in a way. And then with postmodernism, it's liberating, because you can't be wrong. It's amazingly liberating. If even you appear to be diametrically opposed, you're just adding another layer of meaning to the work, so you can't be wrong. How wonderful that you can't be wrong! I remember how tormenting and difficult and challenging Greenberg could be. We'd go around galleries and he'd say, 'What's your favourite work? Why? And why didn't you see that?' It was the most educational thing but it was also ...

DE: So where was he? He wasn't at St Martins [school of art in London]?

RRS: He came to England. A whole group of us at St Martins paid for him. No one would look at our work at St Martins. We were called eggheads. And curiously enough, or ironically enough, we were called conceptualists.

DE: Well, yes, that is ironically enough.

RRS: [Anthony] Caro had met Greenberg in America and Caro, [Phillip] King, [William] Tucker, [David] Annesley, [Michael] Bolus, Witkin, a whole lot of people put in some money, I think basically only to pay his airfare out.

DE: Who was the last one?

RRS: Isaac Witkin. And I was meant to be in that except I didn't have any money [laughs] because I was also the youngest bloke, by quite a bit, so they let me ...

DE: This was basically the teachers. This was when you were doing part-time teaching, yes?

RRS: So they let me in on the end of the queue and he came to my studio. He went to everybody else's studio and we had other meetings and contacts with him and, from then on, I guess – it sounds too American to say – he became a friend [laughter]. A couple of years before he died I was at his place for New Year's Eve.

One of the most magic times for me was going to New York in 1992 to see the [Henri] Matisse retrospective [at the Metropolitan Museum of Art], through the courtesy of Ann Lewis. She gave me a special patrons' entrée where you went in before the public came, and I bumped into Clem, so we walked around the show together, discussing the works, in particular in relation to Clem's book on Matisse in the Fontana publication series, which I think I read when I was 17–18 years old. So I spent a bit of time with him then in New York. For me, that just about topped everything off.

Historically for me that was very important because there used to be a little shop in Rowe Street [the Notanda Gallery and bookshop in Sydney's city centre, run by artist Carl Plate] where the Hotel Australia used to be. We used to buy art books there. There was a Fontana pocket books series on art. They were tiny, inexpensive books. [Shows a book] 'Pocket library of great art, Fontana.' This is where I first came across the writings of Clement Greenberg.

DE: Oh, right. So were you able to buy all of them?

RRS: This was written by ... And I didn't understand Matisse but I was very young. I'm 16 [at that time].

DE: This is a very good reason to start at the beginning. You're 16, which makes it 1957. You were born on the 20th February 1941. One source said you had an itinerant childhood. I don't know if you want to comment on that?

RRS: Itinerant? What does that ...?

DE: That's what it said in one of the biogs. One says you grew up in Bellevue Hill [in the eastern suburbs of Sydney], and one of the others says you had an itinerant childhood.

RRS: I have to look up 'itinerant'. I thought that meant going place to place.

DE: It does.

RRS: I grew up in Bellevue Hill. The house was always there.

DE: How many kids?

RRS: Three.

DE: Three boys?

RRS: No. An older sister, myself in the middle and then Campbell, and he's eight years younger than me. So he wasn't really that much in the picture in a way. When I left for Europe he was in short pants. But my mother kept sending me off. We had great friends, the Powditch family.

DE: As in the Peter Powditch family?

RRS: Yes. We sort of shared parents, in fact. It was during the war. The Japanese mothership of the midget submarines fired some shells off Bondi [in 1942] that landed in Bellevue Hill [laughs], so my father shipped the family off to a place called Bundarra in the middle of nowhere that the Japs wouldn't have even ... And that's where they met the Powditch family. [Bundarra is a small settlement in northern New South Wales.]

DE: OK, so your mother and the children were sent off during the war. You were five or six?

RRS: Yeah. Campbell wasn't even born, so it was just Jacqueline and I. And then we go and stay in a hotel in Bundarra, and the Powditchs were the Johnson family, which was the maiden name of Dorothy. They had sawmills. So they met pushing prams. Peter Powditch and I met in prams. And they [the families] became lifelong friends. So wherever they went after that ... Peter Powditch's father was in the war. He was in New Guinea.

DE: What did yours do?

RRS: He was in the air force. They were in Bundarra, then they had a place in Eungai Rail, a saw mill. Then Sawtell on the north coast [of New South Wales], where we went for our holidays. And then when he came back from the war, Peter's father was a town clerk, and so, like high school teachers, you would be a town clerk in a minor town and then you could be a deputy town clerk in a bigger one, so that's probably where the itinerant comes from, because I went to school at Sawtell, Murwillumbah, Cootamundra ...

DE: With them? So you would actually go away for long enough periods of time that you would be boarding with them and at school?

RRS: Yes. My psychiatrist asked me to think about that, that it wasn't rejection from my mother [laughs], that she couldn't wait to fucking get rid of me under any pretext [laughter].

DE: What did your father do after the war?

RRS: He went into the merchant navy, mostly catering for shipping lines.

DE: So he was off-shore?

RRS: No. He was what psychiatrists call an absent father. He was here but he would be away for a month or three months and then come back and then off again.

DE: OK. So was Peter Powditch a bit older than you?

RRS: No, I'm about 18 months older than Peter.

DE: So did you influence each other in your careers? As in going into?

RRS: Yes.

DE: Because the first question to ask is the one that's not ever in any of the biographies, which is: how did you get your way to, and why did you go to, study sculpture under [Lyndon] Dadswell [at the National Art School in Sydney] when you were 16, and I think it was at night time, so I'm assuming you had a day job?

RRS: I finished my schooling two years too young.

DE: You were precocious?

RRS: 'Ish'. A daydreamer but when I did manage to focus I did do OK. And there were some accidents in that too. I mean, your birth date, sometimes you start a little bit earlier.

DE: But you were intellectual from the beginning, I'm assuming.

RRS: I wouldn't have said that. But I was curious. I never achieved great or wondrous things ...

DE: Academically?

RRS: Yes. So, I just went through it. I think that was the mistake, actually. You know, you can be smart but I wasn't mature enough to really ... Two years at that age is quite significant.

DE: Yes. So you were spat out of high school at 16.

RRS: Fifteen. My parents gave me a year or so to muck around, do odd jobs, do whatever I liked. There was a history of the military on my father's side of the family. I was actually two years too young. I went into the citizen's military forces, which was because it's Scottish family on my father's side, and so I was in the Black Watch at 16 but I should have been 18.

DE: Thinking that you might like a military career?

RRS: Yes. That's what my father would have liked me to do.

DE: But you were already interested in three-dimensional something?

RRS: No ...

DE: Well then why would you go and study under Dadswell?

RRS: It was a night course ... Oh well, Peter and I used to go out into the bush and play with things, old bones, and we'd paint them and re-put them together. But I mean I think too much is made of that sort of stuff.

DE: [Robert] Klippel would disagree with you. He'd say it all came from producing model ships when he was six, trying to put them into a glass bottle [laughter].

RRS: I rest my case [laughs]. Who uncorked the bottle? That's mean but it's meant to be funny. I know that a lot of that imaginative world that I lived in certainly still does play a major role in what I do and the sensibilities of that. I now describe my upbringing as benign neglect, because you had breakfast and then you'd have to come home before dark or they would ring the police, and I think they had no idea where I was [during the day]. They didn't have to worry.

DE: There have been amazing cultural shifts anyway in those terms, haven't there? I lived in the bush early and we were just seen in the morning and seen at night and you were just in the bush. I remember doing all sorts of things; certainly making fires was one of them ... So you found your way to the National Art School quite young.

RRS: I did a night class with Dadswell.

DE: And Dadswell had come back from his Fulbright scholarship in America and was full of Bauhaus-style exercises for art classes, at least Bauhaus as it was translated by American art colleges. Under Dadswell were you still doing some modelling? I would think it hard for him to let that go. But aren't you also, under Dadswell, being told to turn the taps off and on, and check the flow, and see if something appeals to you three-dimensionally in those terms?

RRS: Yes. It wasn't quite as broad as that, but yes. Then I ended up meeting a few people like George Rickey, who Dadswell was friendly with. So it was George Rickey, who's got a second life after he's died. I met him in Germany, in Kassel at *Documenta*, and he remembered Dadswell with great fondness, so he must have caught up with Rickey in teaching one of those institutions on a Fulbright scholarship.

DE: OK. So what did you get out of it? You stayed. It was night classes for two years.

RRS: I was just curious. I was actually looking to do something with my life, and the army was one career. Napoleon [Bonaparte] was an early childhood hero, and when I suggested this to somebody, to some counselling I was doing at the time ... All these women have taken me to counsellors to get me sorted out [laughter]. I think it was called transactional analysis. And you had to do homework, so I resented doing homework. [They asked], 'Who were your heroes?' So when I said Napoleon, that was the end of the counselling actually because everything got projected in the wrong way without bothering to ask. And then if I turned up in a double-breasted navy blue jacket with gold buttons that was proof. And I was meant to walk around with my hand here and being a little bit crazy, and even my wife was hoping they'd discover ... I just said that I had an understanding at that time of why I liked Napoleon and it was because he was a commoner. He had to fuck the church and the state. Napoleon did that by becoming a general, and he crowned himself emperor because he took the crown out of the Pope's hand and put it on his own head, so it wasn't the church crowning him. And I thought if I'm going to make anything of myself I have to do something like this [laughs].

DE: So to be simplistic, anti-authority?

RRS: No, just using authority as a means of achieving something as an ordinary man. Australia was a cultural desert. How do you find a voice? So for me it wasn't anti-authoritarian, I don't think.

DE: It's become fashionable now to say we were a cultural desert. We went along with the time-delay theory so that anything that came to these shores came a good decade or five years after it had been seminal somewhere else etc. Now it's become much more fashionable to say that's wrong: that you could always get the Fontana pocket series, you could get *Art International*, even if you couldn't see things in the flesh. But you would subscribe to the view that it was a very proscribed scene, and there wasn't much access to what was going on overseas. Even in the late 50s?

RRS: No, I don't think so. A lot of the books were black and white, and in the beginning I wouldn't have even known about [*The*] *Studio* art magazine, let alone *Art International*. It was only when I came back to Australia in 1968/69 that that's what was happening then, not in the 50s. It was isolated. Dadswell was one of the few people who encouraged you to

focus outside of that but even if you got a hold of those magazines it still seemed another world.

DE: You weren't hanging around the various bohemian haunts at the time? The influx of European psychiatrists into the Cross [Sydney's Kings Cross] at the end of the 1940s into the early 1950s and various hangouts, cafes and various places ... Is the Push ...?

RRS: I'm at art school when I go to the Push. But foreigners were quite familiar because Bellevue Hill had a great influx of foreigners. There were the delicatessens and the fruiterers and George's in Double Bay was one of the first espresso coffee machines in Sydney. But an artistic world was a little bit ... My only connection with anything artistic that related to painting – [Russell] Tas Drysdale.

DE: What was the connection?

RRS: He lived in Double Bay [also in Sydney's eastern suburbs] and I was a friend of his son, Tim, who committed suicide. So that's the first time I even thought it was possible to be an artist. It wasn't that there weren't things going on. You didn't have a concept of making your life as an artist. Maybe I wasn't broadly enough read?

DE: There would have been nothing on Australian art on any kind of curricula or high school you would have done and probably not much art anyway, so ...

RRS: The interesting thing is, in fact, that if you were dumb, they sent you to the art classes.

DE: I should have seen that coming, or something similar. Yes, so, they were the light-on subjects.

RRS: Otherwise you'd do maths, physics. Only if you were really a problem child did you go and do ...

DE: Yes, the creative classes. So who else was in the Dadswell classes that had any impact or effect?

RRS: The model. Peter Wright was in the class with me.

DE: We can't underestimate that, can we, as a catalyst to going to art school, in a small way: the model?

RRS: Yes. Everybody always talks about their genius and their flair for art and their early interest. I only wanted to expose myself to moral danger. Art schools had that tinge of ...

DE: Exciting and bohemian.

RRS: And it was sex-driven to a very large extent.

DE: Yes. Someone recently made it quite clear that they had never seen anyone naked, let alone a woman, and so life-drawing classes were kind of an epiphany in those terms as well, particularly if you were 17 or 18, I presume?

RRS: Yes. Getting laid was a serious problem. You had to marry someone! [Laughs]

DE: Yes, right [laughs]. But painting and sculpture. You go into sculpture, Dadswell, but you've always been a painter and so what you've implied, perhaps, is that you were already painting?

RRS: No. I mean, I did things at school but I probably didn't regard that very highly. I mean, I used to love making maps in geography. Maps were ... I did some technical drawing and stuff like that but that didn't seem like art, but maps you were allowed to colour in.

DE: There's a logic to them as well which is clearly attractive. OK, so you were doing sculpture with Dadswell, modelling and those Bauhaus-type experiments, but that doesn't sound like it particularly grabbed you because you describe your epiphany as coming when you had Caro.

RRS: No, that was a different sort of epiphany. No, I just loved Dadswell's exercises. I went and did those night classes ...

DE: And you thought that was fab.

RRS: I thought, 'This is it'. This was something I was looking for. I was looking at lots of different things. One of them was the church.

DE: So you had the Christian phase?

RRS: No, I was just curious about what you could give your life to. I just looked around me and everyone was a businessman of one sort or another, and I realised that all businessmen are the same, the whole process was still the same. Maybe if I'd started to have sex earlier I wouldn't have bothered with this stuff [laughs]. But I was looking to do something with my life. I looked around at everything, however happy or unhappy people were, it didn't seem to be what you wanted your life to be about.

DE: Would you now align that to a kind of post-war zeitgeist? There were a lot of people who went back on the repatriation scheme, people who before the war wouldn't have even conceived of having a life as an artist but the ground had completely shifted ... But there's no question that art school attendances went up through the 1940s and 50s – mostly women, funnily enough, but I guess a lot more men too.

RRS: That was part of the reason.

DE: That you find yourself there? That was girls going off to do something before they got married, wasn't it? Anyway, I should think it was cathartic to be under Dadswell, because he was a man of integrity and he was a seeker, but also at the end of his life, he thought his eclecticism may have been problematic for him and that his teaching may have diminished his art. What do you think?

RRS: Yes.

DE: Was his eclecticism partly because he didn't feel confident enough in his own practice?

RRS: It may have been a mixture of that and of the art scene of the time, which didn't receive anything other than the more modest things he did. I also think he had a sense of modernism as divorcing itself from architecture and its civil role, and he wanted to both reinvigorate and to bring them together.

DE: He was very successful with his modelling.

RRS: I saw the most extraordinary self-portrait of his at the National Portrait Gallery [in Canberra], 'The knickerbocker' [*Self portrait in plus fours* c1939]. He was a really good modeller.

DE: Did you see much of his own work during the course at NAS? You probably didn't because the teachers didn't seem to show anyone anything.

RRS: No. It's weird. When you go back to [Pablo] Picasso's *Guernica*, he had it in his studio for eight years or something. Having shows was ... They were, like in Japan, in department stores, David Jones and a couple of other galleries.

DE: True, but then they had studios. A lot of those guys had studios at the tech – East Sydney Technical College [now the National Art School, Sydney].

RRS: That was the generation earlier that were allowed to do that. Then the TAFE got proper and they were trades ... Because East Sydney Tech had butchers and bakers and candlestick makers, and if they started doing their operations that would have been corrupt. They'd have been running their own businesses and using that ... So then Dadswell had to get permission from TAFE to do commissions. That completely changed from Rayner Hoff and that lot when they were doing things in the studio and it was seen as part of the apprenticeship.

DE: Yes, he had a studio in [the Sydney suburb of] Point Piper, in old stables, I think.

RRS: Yes, that might have been the Fairfax's. Very early on I helped him do the maquettes for the windows at ANU [the Australian National University] there. They were sculptural screens, which I soldered up at the Point Piper studio.

DE: How many were in Dadswell's class? Peter Wright was one.

RRS: Ian McKay, Mitzi McColl, Irene Broadhurst, Starr Jenkins and Bill Clements were also there. They formed a dynamic group and we all learnt a lot from the interaction.

DE: In the night classes?

RRS: No, only Peter Wright and I did the night class briefly before we became full-time. Ian McKay had come from Adelaide, where he had studied under John Dowie. Ian was a brilliant modeller.

DE: When did you do the course? 'The biography sheet says 1957–1959.

RRS: It was probably two and a half years.

DE: But you didn't finish the diploma?

RRS: No, because Dadswell got permission to do an experimental course as a result of his Guggenheim [Fulbright] scholarship. He got permission to do it but it didn't have a qualification.

DE: Oh, you're the first person to tell me that. I assumed you could still come out with a diploma.

RRS: The diploma in those days was five years.

DE: That's true. But you could be fast-tracked as well, couldn't you?

RRS: No, not as far as I was aware. I wasn't in that scheme. I did the experimental course with Dadswell and that involved me doing other classes, painting and drawing. Ceramics, under Peter Rushforth, who was a wonderful teacher.

DE: Who was the main painting guy there in 1957? [Frank] Medworth?

RRS: There was Godfrey Miller and [John] Passmore.

DE: Oh, was [John] Olsen around? He must have been around in 1957?

RRS: Who was around? The man who always had terrific-looking women. He was a critic.

DE: Paul Haefliger?

RRS: No. He was a rigger bugger and had a studio. He was an artist but also a critic but he really never did anything as an artist. Wallace Thornton!

DE: Oh, was he good-looking?

RRS: Oh no, I didn't think he was that good-looking but he got good-looking women. I was looking to find out what those mysteries were [laughter]. And briefly there was another artist [Thomas Gleghorn] who then went to Adelaide but he had the most fantastic signature and I thought, 'If I am to be a serious artist ...'

DE: I must practise my calligraphy? [Laughter]

RRS: His signature was like that of Bernard Buffet, the dreadful French artist. He had an extraordinary signature and I think he copied it from that a bit.

DE: So then you went to London. Dadswell would have been directing students to London, but by the mid 50s you had greater choice. The Italian scholarship was being offered so there were some people going to Italy, and some people were going to America.

RRS: Most people were still going to Europe and still to London, and the Slade School was the one with the great reputation.

DE: Still in 1957?

RRS: Yes, but when I went there it was well and truly dead. There's just a time lag of about five years, I think. Five years before they develop a serious reputation and they often hold at five years after.

DE: Godfrey Miller would tell you about 25 years. He went in 1922 or something and lasted six months and said it was completely dead and its heyday must have been in the 1890s. So you went over to enrol at the Slade?

RRS: Yes.

DE: So by the end of your last year you were doing full-time one year, going during the day? By 1958?

RRS: By the middle of 1957, I think. The next time you could go in I went in after the night classes, and I can't remember the sequences.

DE: So it's possible you were two years full-time and six months night classes?

RRS: No, the night classes were just one project, as I remember. That was it.

DE: Oh, so quite brief.

RRS: Yes, quite brief.

DE: I thought it was mostly night classes. That's why there needs to be a definitive biog.

RRS: Peter Wright and I got sacked from George Patterson Advertising.

DE: That's what you'd been doing during the day.

RRS: Yeah, I was a trainee executive with Peter Wright at George Patterson Advertising. That was acceptable to my parents. You were just a delivery boy in a grey flannel suit. I think we had a fight and I threw a dart at somebody [laughter].

DE: How did you support yourself then when you were doing the course full-time? Were you still working part-time?

RRS: Well, when I went home and announced to my family – and I thought they'd be seriously delighted that I'd actually found something that I really wanted to do – they were mortified.

DE: You were still living at home? You were 16.

RRS: Yes.

DE: That took you by surprise?

RRS: No, that took them by surprise. I was disowned, disinherited, and given 24 hours to leave the house. My father wouldn't speak to me. He sent me a letter impugning my sexuality and my politics, meaning I was both a poofster and a communist – they were synonymous then [laughter].

DE: So Australian.

RRS: I was stunned that they'd reacted like that because they'd given me the freedom and the spirit to investigate all those things and when I came up with something they were a little taken aback. But my father wasn't that stupid because when I went to the National Art School half of them were poofsters and communists so I thought, 'Oh well, he was half right'. But there were also lots of middle-class girls.

DE: And Dadswell, of course, was a fine, upstanding respectable soldier. Affected by war. He had shrapnel in his brain permanently, I think.

RRS: You could never come up behind Dadswell. You always had to approach him from the front. It never went away.

DE: Godfrey Miller the same. He was horribly shellshocked. He went to psychiatrists and counsellors forever. And who knows whether some of the attraction to anthroposophy and theosophy was related to that because he liked the idea of curing oneself. And I think he went off to speech rehabilitation as well because he was either wounded or so psychologically traumatised that he didn't speak. There was a generation of men like this teaching you.

RRS: And they didn't say anything. This was partly where my curiosity came from. Anything serious that happened, children were excluded. Even sometimes with more formal dinners, children sat at another table. Very unEuropean.

DE: It was cultural, as well. The Scots.

RRS: Yes, very cultural. But that was the whole Australian ethos, because most of them were Scots.

DE: A lot of them. And a lot of them were Irish. I thought you were Irish by descent.

RRS: Well, Kashell's name is Irish, but that was [because of] his uncle. [Kashell Robertson-Swann is Ron Robertson-Swann's son.]

DE: So, you had decided, probably about halfway through, that you were going to go to London, because that's what any serious artist did. And the stakes were quite high for you now because your split with your family or the tension with your family was related to the fact that you continued to study art.

RRS: Yes, now and then I was a bowser boy, and I was washing dishes and it was hideous because I was a little bit spoilt and the reality shock of ...

DE: And you were the oldest boy.

RRS: Yes. And I think I was probably meant to ...

DE: Be the military boy.

RRS: Yes, change the family's fortunes or extend the family's fortunes in some way, by reputation if not by wealth.

DE: Yes, well, you would have done that. When did your father die?

RRS: Well, we made up about a decade later, when I came back, and it was partly because I had the only grandchild, so that was an ameliorating factor.

DE: We're rushing ahead but by 1969, one year back, you've made a splash, a big splash.

RRS: Yes. If they saw your name in print ...

DE: I assume that was a panacea to ...

RRS: Yes, you weren't a wastrel. Lots of people did go to art school. However ridiculous I saw it at the time, it wasn't without reason.

DE: It wasn't entirely foundationless.

RRS: Yes.

DE: Did you go for the travelling art scholarship?

RRS: There wasn't really anything for sculpture.

DE: [The New South Wales] Travelling Art Scholarship. Barbara Tribe got the first one [in 1935]. Rosemary Madigan, 1949 [actually 1950].

RRS: Really. OK then, it may have gone out of fashion. By the 1950s it didn't seem to be on the horizon because we were doing such experimental things. Well, I have to admit to not being quite as visionary as it sounds about going to England. I had met somebody who was about five years older than me.

DE: An art student?

RRS: No, a colour consultant. This must have been after the war and everybody's fortunes were changing, and every major paint company had a colour consultant, and I met this colour consultant, they called her 'Pamastic Pam' [laughter], and she had a green Goggomobil Dart [a car] which was painted the same colour as her nail polish, and she was on television and advised people to create a flamingo pink feature wall, for example, and colour their whole houses for them and that sold the product.

DE: So something like a cross between a colour consultant and an interior designer?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And she was going to England?

RRS: I met her when I was probably 17 and had an affair with her. In fact, I was living with her and she found it increasingly more difficult and, in fact, embarrassing to be with a teenager [laughter] and she decided that she would go to Europe. Apart from the adventure of Europe, also escaping me.

DE: But you decided you'd go along?

RRS: I got on the same boat [laughter]. I wasn't going to give her ...

DE: The satisfaction of disappearing [laughs]. All right, but anyway there would have been an expectation, if you were viewed as substantial, which I assume you were. Dadswell took you under his wing?

RRS: That was very oblique.

DE: Yes, but if you were off at the stables helping him with a commission, that's the club you joined, and that would have helped propel you overseas for the next phase of your training which, at the time, would have been considered a decade long. There would have been a strong view that if you wanted to be an artist you would have a long period of studentship.

RRS: Yes. The idea that you might have a solo show, or teach, was so far into the future it didn't actually come into consideration. What I was aware of was that you had to go overseas to finish your study. Even if you did five years here, you still had to go overseas.

DE: Yes. Were you happy with what you were creating? There were probably end-of-year student shows. You would have had the chance to be in two of them?

RRS: No, no student shows.

DE: OK. What were you making?

RRS: I'd started welding.

DE: OK. Dadswell wasn't taking welding?

RRS: Yes.

DE: He was? He must have taken a welding course.

RRS: No, not a course. I mean then it was just oxy-acetylene welding. We built a big screen and it was a group exercise and the screen was divided up and we all had a section of that screen.

DE: To weld up?

RRS: Yes.

DE: OK. You would have plaster casting too?

RRS: Portrait modelling, life modelling and casting.

DE: Still doing that?

RRS: Yes. Well, it was a struggle because Ian McKay was a very talented modeller, really good because he'd studied in Adelaide before coming over and I think he was a few years older than me as well. But I liked all the abstract exercises that Dadswell set.

DE: Were you reading as well? Dadswell wasn't an art historian or art theoretician. Perhaps [John] Kaplan was still there? He was interesting, wasn't he?

RRS: Yes, he and Harry Nicolson.

DE: Ah yes, he wrote a lot about you. Didn't he write the Newcastle essay [for the catalogue of the 1975 exhibition *Ron Robertson-Swann survey 1965–1975* at Newcastle City Art Gallery]?

RRS: Yes. HD Nicolson. He was head of what was probably called liberal studies at East Sydney. I think that was when people who had dropped out of school or didn't finish could go and do their matriculation or leaving certificate. So he and John Kaplan were friends.

DE: Kaplan was the librarian?

RRS: Yes, and they had little informal groups. One of them was about philosophy – Kant to Cassirer – because that was one of Dadswell's serious limitations.

DE: You attended these informal groups?

RRS: Yes, and that group of people who were interested in a broader range of things. Dadswell actually discouraged you even to look at other people's art. It was strange. I think it was a romantic vision that through different ways of approaching things you would come up with something new and fresh and original. I think it's misguided and I think art comes out of art. I think that was one of the slightly off-centre things Dadswell got involved in ... Teachers didn't share a lot of things in those days. He was Mister Dadswell. And you were never late for class. I remember being late for class once and going home instead of walking in late.

DE: You were also on the very young end of studentdom. There may have been people in their twenties who might have had more familiar relationships perhaps?

RRS: I don't think so, actually. I might have just been too naive and not seen those things but I think they were still regarded ...

DE: I never felt convinced about what Dadswell picked up in America. I didn't get the impression he was totally convinced, other than a response to the changing times and having a responsibility to the students. What came out of it for him were those paper works. Was he doing them by then?

RRS: I think they were later. Those paper things in their appearance could be seen as coming directly out of the screens he did for the library of the ANU. They really have that feel about them. He also designed that pond opposite the Australian Museum and then there's the things at the Commonwealth Bank [on the junction of George, Market and York streets in Sydney] that are transitional works between abstraction and the figurative ...

DE: Yes, they are generally described as soft cubism. I remember he put up a commission with an architect to do a huge obelisk in the park [Hyde Park, Sydney], which had abstracted incisions on it, slightly decorative, which was seen as too challenging, so he was given the option to come up with ...

RRS: The design for the pond.

DE: And I think the architect was mostly in control of that, it seemed to me.

RRS: Yes.

DE: OK. So you decided that you had to go to London and you enrolled at the Slade?

RRS: No, I just got on the boat and went. I was naive as hell. Then I went to the Slade when I got there.

DE: You didn't get Dadswell to help you? You didn't discuss what you were going to do overseas? You didn't have introductions to other artists?

RRS: I could be doing him a disservice but I don't remember.

DE: Actually, I don't think by then he could have even given you any introductions.

RRS: Probably not. I had friends, extended family, people I already knew. Christopher Jacovides who was a designer who went out with my sister at one stage and I think he gave me an introduction to Barbara Hepworth.

DE: Your sister hadn't pursued an artistic career? What did she do? Did she become a professional?

RRS: She wanted fame without actually doing anything [laughs]. She was a good dancer. She suffered the fate of a good-looking sort.

DE: Married someone fabulously wealthy?

RRS: She thought she did at one stage. A family connected to the Queen of Parma or something. She went to Italy and then couldn't leave the house without an escort. For a wild Australian girl that was too much. But she lived there for a while. I remember her coming back. She was so gorgeous in white pointed shoes, very high heels, and flared dresses.

DE: Sounds seriously chic.

RRS: Yes, but she'd paid a high price for that [laughs].

DE: So you're 19 and have gone to England. You didn't have the return fare?

RRS: No, I didn't have that much money.

DE: So, to make your fortune, you've enrolled at the Slade.

RRS: No, I went there to look at it and I thought, 'Jesus', because the sculpture thing seemed to be in the basement part of the school. I couldn't see myself fitting in. I couldn't see that anything that I'd done with Dadswell, that I found most exciting ... The things I found I wasn't that good at seemed to be the things they were doing at the Slade, so Ian McKay would have been happier at the Slade. Then someone mentioned St Martins, which wasn't such a famous school, that I hadn't heard much about it, and I went there for an interview and got in, much to my surprise. I did actually end up with a letter from Dadswell saying that I had done this experimental course.

DE: Was it reputed to be more experimental? It wasn't as establishment, I guess.

RRS: It wasn't as establishment. I couldn't quite tell the difference except that it seemed a lot livelier. They did the NDP, which was the National Diploma of Art, and that involved two figure compositions and life studies and things. I was surprised they let me in because in those days nearly everybody lied; they all said they were studying art in order to teach. That was making your endeavours – this decadent idea of being an artist – that was how you justified it. When I went to London I just said I wanted to be a sculptor. I didn't care much about being a teacher and I thought if they won't accept me on my terms then I'll find somewhere else, and those were the very reasons they took me, because I was independent and bloody minded about what I wanted to do. I didn't know at that stage that I was being interviewed by Frank Martin, Anthony Caro, Phillip King, because they weren't ... It wasn't Sir Anthony Caro then.

DE: But you were interviewed by those guys?

RRS: Yes.

DE: So you went into their course in 1960?

RRS: No, it was 1962. I went to England and I looked around at all of those things. I think emotionally I thought I was going home. There was still the remnants of that, almost a subconscious thing.

DE: Can you remember the boat you went on?

RRS: I think it was the *Aurelia*? It was an Italian boat. The boats were great things.

DE: So you got off at Naples first?

RRS: Egypt. Djibouti. The smells ...

DE: It went through the Suez?

RRS: Yes. You want to know about claustrophobia? Get inside the pyramid.

DE: Yes, the Great Pyramid of Cheops. I got to the entrance and couldn't go in. I'm claustrophobic.

RRS: Well, I'd been in submarines in the army doing beach landings.

DE: So how did you find St Martins?

RRS: Very exciting, because in a funny sort of way it picked up a little bit from Dadswell.

DE: You'd already decided to be a sculptor with Dadswell. That's a very nice testament to Dadswell in the end.

RRS: Oh, yes. I owe him a great deal. He literally was an inspiring teacher. And it wasn't through the false charisma of a lot of these sorts of 'spiritual people'. It was the most straight-talking, it was the critical work. That was real to me. He judged the thing. He said what was working, what wasn't working. There was so much arty-farty stuff going on and I couldn't make sense of it. I wanted to make sense of the world and I couldn't make sense of it.

DE: But there are affectations in everything.

RRS: Yes, but that's what I was trying to cut through. It had to make sense to me.

DE: So, you found another set of teachers whose aesthetic judgements you could also trust, who are working in ways which seem to be radically innovative.

RRS: There is what Caro was doing and how it eventually was viewed. By the early 1960s, Caro was modelling those figures.

DE: Those are the first things you saw? Late 1950s?

RRS: Yes, I saw them in a dictionary of British sculpture and I was so excited that a teacher of mine actually had something in a book. Now everyone's got a catalogue. But then I hated the work. They looked seriously grotesque to my taste at that time. He was doing life modelling. He was my life-modelling teacher the year that I went there as a post-graduate student.

DE: We have to just get this right. According to [Ken] Scarlett, it says in 1960 you're London, in 1961 you're in Athens and by 1962 you begin post-graduate studies.

RRS: I'm in London in 1960. I find it's really difficult to survive. The English are somewhat rude and snobbish. I met an American friend of mine, John O'Kane, a classic scholar, and we decide to go to Athens in 1960. I left London after a few months and went to Athens. I went with Anne.

DE: Anne?

RRS: Anne was the girl trying to escape me. She is Kshell's mother.

DE: I figured she escaped you?

RRS: No. They don't get away that easily [laughter].

DE: So you pursued her, and she was with you in London and came to Athens as well. So you married?

RRS: We came back to England later and married.

DE: What did you think you were going to do in Athens?

RRS: The romance of it. It was all the great sculptures. As I understood it from my education, Greece was the cradle of Western civilisation and democracy.

DE: Had you landed and gone straight to the National Gallery [in London] and done those pilgrimages everyone did? You wouldn't have seen much modern sculpture in any of those institutions.

RRS: No. The Tate gallery, apart from the Turner wing, wasn't one of the great galleries of the world. It was a bit like the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It was very dull and quite provincial and probably suffering the same complaint as the Art Gallery of New South Wales with the trustees doing some purchasing.

DE: Did you go to Paris?

RRS: Yes. On the way to Athens we'd met a Dutchman on the boat so we went via Amsterdam and that was extraordinary, seeing the Rembrandt museums.

DE: Were you a serious reader then?

RRS: Now I am. No. More looking, and keeping alive. The really difficult thing was just keeping alive.

DE: The colour consultant was able to work?

RRS: She did very well here but in England it was difficult for all of us. She got executive jobs but they paid peanuts in those days.

DE: Where did you live?

RRS: One of the first areas was Swiss Cottage. There was another guy with us, Gene. A fantastic Victorian studio apartment with beautiful blinds, where you could control the light coming in. A massive big room downstairs, with a mezzanine floor with bedrooms.

DE: Swiss Cottage was an area in London?

RRS: Yes, near Hampstead. The rent by Sydney standards seemed ridiculously inexpensive. We hadn't got jobs then so we didn't realise they paid peanuts yet so all of a sudden we were in a luxury apartment with a year's lease and seriously running out of money. I think we made the excuse that Anne was pregnant and we had to go back to Australia so the very kind landlord allowed us to escape without penalty.

DE: Were you agonising about what sculpture actually is at this time?

RRS: No.

DE: Because you felt you had got a sense? The parameters of sculpture seemed quite firm for you?

RRS: It was more of an internal struggle. It's much later that I begin to get a view of art history and what the prospects of those developments are. At that point I'm just trying to get

the skills and understand what I might be about. No great vision. One should be suspicious; the more famous you become, the more your vision retreats to your childhood. I had some naive ideas about what artists were. I wasn't sure for a long time if I was an artist. Because the major figures were Henry Moore and Jacob Epstein, people like that.

DE: [Elizabeth] Frink. Was she a name on everyone's lips?

RRS: She taught me. She was at St Martins very briefly. She was very handsome. She was a marvellous woman but I think she was a little intimidated by St Martins and left.

DE: So by mid 1960 you go to Athens.

RRS: I'm there for a year at least. I go to the third cemetery in Athens and attempt to learn to carve.

DE: So how are you making ends meet in Athens for the year?

RRS: Teaching English illegally. And Anne was a nanny. We were living seriously poorly. We lived at Anafiotika, just near the rock of the Acropolis, and then we moved to Amarousi, where all the potters lived. I did some designs for some of the potters.

DE: But you wanted to stay?

RRS: For a year.

DE: What about the language?

RRS: It was a bit difficult but not too unfamiliar because I'd seen a bit of ancient Greek before. And it's a language that looks strange to begin with but the more familiar you become the more it becomes part of your language.

DE: So you worked with stonemasons and potters in Athens and by mid 62 you decided to go back to London and to art school. You were still under 21, weren't you?

RRS: Yes, I still didn't know my arse from a hole in the ground, but I had reasonable intuitions about picking up from things that I saw. I didn't know much intellectually but I knew 'that person is genuine', 'that person's not talking crap'. I knew when there were serious endeavours. I had good intuitions about what was serious. That's why I stuck with St Martins. There were people I met that sometimes I didn't like but I knew they were serious and had something to say.

DE: So full-time at St Martins. How did you support yourself?

RRS: Anne worked, and I worked. I had a range of jobs but mostly I cooked at a cafe called The Troubadour.

DE: You were a long time. Were you intending to come back? The standard was to stay away two, three years, but you were away eight.

RRS: I never had a plan.

DE: You must have had a plan. If you had a serious endeavour such as to be a sculptor, you must have at least wanted to be a successful sculptor in your own terms, in whatever form that took.

RRS: They're ambitions, not plans. One's about prophecy and the other is just taking things as they unravel.

DE: I'm not sure if you can have ambitions without a plan attached.

RRS: That could well be why I fucked up! [Laughter]

DE: Not that you did. OK, so you got yourself back to St Martins and you're working and cooking. The course is stimulating and it's what you want to be doing and you're only 21, yes?

RRS: Yes, you feel immortal. You've survived. We only had three-month visas in Athens. We used to hitchhike to Istanbul to get our passports stamped. No one went to museums [in Athens]. The Acropolis was an abandoned site. I found a whole area where there were fragments and I started to try and put the fragments together and match them up to see if I could make a figure.

DE: Was there a sense of contemporary sculpture there?

RRS: No, that's why I finally went back [to London]. As much as I was enjoying the warmer climate in Greece I knew that I was interested in, however naively I saw it, modern art. I realised when I met some students at the academy in Athens, they did abstract art secretly. Otherwise they were just copying carvings with pointing machines. Some were curious about modern art but forbidden to do it. And I did a couple of portraits that kept me alive.

DE: Where was [Eduardo] Paolozzi around then? Was he making a big splash?

RRS: Paolozzi was a much bigger name than Caro then.

DE: He was doing pop abstracts. So you were going around to look at exhibitions?

RRS: Yes.

DE: What were you seeing?

RRS: By the way, The Troubadour was actually much more important at this time. This cafe run by a Canadian. It was one of the few places you could get a decent cup of coffee in London. The food was simple but good, which was unusual for London. We were not long out of rationing. You have no idea how impoverished it was. There were still bomb sites in London. This cafe was extraordinary, everything in there had a rustic charm. You couldn't see the ceiling for all the musical instruments that were hung. The walls were covered in keys.

DE: So, very bohemian.

RRS: Very bohemian. There was a sign above the till saying, 'The customers are here solely for the amusement of the staff'. When you worked in London you were almost a servant, not an employee. And I found that a bit difficult.

DE: Did you have a temper?

RRS: A bit, but mostly I was more cheeky. I was confident and they thought I must have been something of their class, if not confused [laughter].

Interview on 6 December 2011

[The interview starts with a general discussion about French post-war, postmodern intellectuals.]

RRS: If you build a straw house and you blow it over and everybody claps, they have already forgotten it was a straw house, not a real house, and that's what they do. It's all convoluted stuff and it's all based on a proposition to begin with which I find seriously faulty. It may be poetically unravelling wondrous things, or appearing to, but at the core of the proposition it is corrupt, so they are not that intelligent, I don't think. They are clever, but they are all basically dialectical materialists. It's all simple stuff. And if you think [Josef] Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot are good people then there is something seriously wrong with you.

DE: I don't think any of them would subscribe to that view, surely?

RRS: Well, you have in the middle of the 19th century that German philosopher-sociologist Karl Marx and he wrote that: one, religion was the opiate of the people; and two, in relation to art that there was no sensation. That was a delusion. So he is saying there is no feeling in art and what makes art good is how it is going to change society or change the world in a very particular way. There are all those ugly things where millions and millions of people are murdered and lives were put in misery but that's still at the core of what they are about. And I don't think that art changes the world in that way. And I think they have perverted art, and so, for them, art, politics and life, there's no difference; it's all merged into one ugly romantic vision. So I do think that if they haven't grasped that, they haven't grasped a lot.

DE: That strays onto territory that I think we should discuss because it would be interesting to get your take on what has happened, and what has gone wrong, I suppose.

RRS: That is certainly at the heart of it for me, that's where it divides.

DE: Yes, because you remain a formalist.

RRS: Yes.

DE: And the work is self-sufficient.

RRS: I suppose even the word 'formalist' is a device of the Left, because what they mean is 'merely formalist'. There is really no such thing as formalist. The only thing that is formalist is a critic who declares themselves a formalist critic but no artist is a formalist because form and content should be, in great works, indivisible. It's a bit like the Fauves. The 'wild beasts' was the name that journalists taking the piss out of [Henri] Matisse and company gave them. Formalist is a similar thing. So is the word 'contemporary' – most dishonest.

DE: Indeed I think one of the myths of conceptualism is that the story of art from the 1960s onwards is the story only of the shape and development of conceptualism; as though, for example, art wasn't conceptualist in any way, shape or form before the 1960s. I find that ludicrous, but I think the whole situation now is almost impossible to read. On the one hand, there has never been a greater interest from artists in history; on the other, there has never been a greater amnesia. All of those cosy historical tools have just been thrown up in the air, and the 'contemporary', whatever that might be, seems impossible to define.

RRS: Well, I think it's another term of the Left, and it's divisive in the way it's used. It's a bit like the use of the word 'sceptic' in relation to climate change; it has become seriously loaded. I am not considered contemporary. If they put it in inverted commas, that would be

OK. They don't. So if you say you are not interested in contemporary art, they say, 'So you are only interested in dead male artists of the 19th century'. No! It is a political term, not an art term.

DE: I've only encountered it in terms of art. It was ever thus, wasn't it? And the Right has its similar strategies.

RRS: I think you have to go back to the beginning, that's where it comes from, that's where the split is. I think what you are saying is that a lot of people take up a position and they don't even know where it comes from. So, if I told people they were supporting Pol Pot, I think they would be traumatised but, in fact, that is the dynamic core of all of the things they are following.

DE: Another view is that minimalism was, for example, the final end game of the 'formalistic', to use Bernard Smith's term, high modernism, and the reaction against that was, reductively, conceptualism. That is the standard line, isn't it?

RRS: But it doesn't say enough. It's wrong, it's sophistry, it's not there. I don't know how many times I have heard someone talk about their work and I have had to say, 'Stop, show me where that is in the work'.

They are stopped in their tracks. It's not there. And sometimes if it is there, it is merely as a token and can't be read into the work in the way they are suggesting. You have to go back and trace all of that through. I know some aspects of those things appeared to happen but going back further, to St Martins School in London, we were called egghead conceptualists. The so-called heart of what is now called formalism, which is Caro et al, in relation to Greenberg, we were called conceptualists.

DE: By who?

RRS: By everybody else in the school and a lot of people in the art world in London.

DE: And why?

RRS: Because it looked way out. It looked like you thought something up in a particular way. It was so different. That's when, to my memory, that's where the word 'conceptualism' came from – trying to accommodate what some people at St Martins were doing in the sculpture department. And we were called conceptual artists because it was different, from Henry Moore if you like, and that's the only way they could accommodate that difference. And we were called eggheads.

DE: So you're to blame.

RRS: Possibly. I'm not sure that I was one of the eggheads, though I had ambitions to be. Caro read engineering at Cambridge and Phillip King languages at Cambridge, Bill Tucker history at Oxford, Tim Scott was an architect who'd worked for Le Corbusier. Art schools aren't usually full of people like that – a middle class with a decent education that would discuss things in a way that you didn't normally hear things discussed in relation to art. Sculptors in particular, apart from Lyndon Dadswell, were to me people who walked around dragging their knuckles on the ground.

DE: That was like the view of the sculptor as the artisan, which lasted into the early 20th century, I suppose. But these guys, and William Tucker of course, were all applying themselves to the question, 'What is sculpture?' Klippel felt that he was producing severely abstract work but he never lost the sense that he was part of a great tradition, which he was

adding to, not breaking with. That is something that starts to dissolve, doesn't it? There's no longer that sense that you are part of a tradition that could go back 3000 years. The whole question of what sculpture is, is one that is taken up and then has a domino effect, doesn't it?

RRS: That's like the baby and the bathwater stuff. We actually only understand art through conventions. Conventions are both enabling and restricting, and the simplicity of a lot of people was they didn't get that, and it's that struggle, that tension between the great traditions, that you would have the great ambition to contribute to, but in order to contribute to them you had to rattle the bars a bit and push towards the entrance; so that's the enabling and the restricting thing that creates the great tension in good art, it seems to me, and that's what they threw out. They had to be avant-garde.

DE: Why though? Why at that time? People had to be avant-garde in the past.

RRS: I think the speed of it, the number of people going through institutions with ambition just ramped it up to a point where they threw the baby out.

DE: It certainly became very easy very quickly to vilify Greenberg, and if you go back and read Greenberg it's fascinating stuff and very nuanced.

RRS: He was a seriously wonderful man. He was probably close to being a great man in some respects because, while he was a wonderful man, he was a difficult man. He taught me more about art than pretty much anybody else, and that includes Rembrandt, Goya, Jackson Pollock and David Smith.

DE: While you're at St Martins where are you at in relation to your sculpture? What's starting to happen for you and what happens when you come back?

RRS: Hindsight can always make things look tidier and better understood and visionary [laughs] than the grasping confusion, more like the fumbling of early sex, with some excitement thrown in, than how cleanly you would have to put it. With the help of Dadswell ... Dadswell had an analytic mind and he was interested in problem-solving in a way, and that can be said to have its limits, but when you're a teenager your vision isn't necessarily that profound and the problem-solving can grease the wheels to get to things and get your mind working and engaged. When I went to St Martins they gave the post-graduate students the first abstract exercise that they'd ever given and they were very anxious about it, which surprised me as a student. The fifth-floor window of St Martins overlooking Soho with all the extraordinary rooftops – they said make a sculpture out of that. Normally Anthony Caro was my modelling teacher, and Phillip King and Anthony Caro gave us this project with some fear and trepidation, and because of Dadswell I was able to get an idea about it and get it to try and work, and I made a cityscape of spaces.

DE: Out of what material?

RRS: Steel. I'd already been welding steel at Sydney. The Bernard Smith thing gave me the shits, because Bernard Smith's notion – and in some circumstances it was probably close – but [in Smith's estimation] you'd go overseas, you'd pick up the latest trend and you'd bring it back and you'd regionalise them for acceptance, but my privilege was that I was at the beginning of something. I was at the beginning of creating the trend so that when I came back the Donald Brooks of this world were saying, you know... But Caro wasn't Caro then. He'd probably made about three sculptures by the time he was setting this project. I think by the time I finished my post-graduate year Caro may have made seven abstract sculptures and I'd made five. And only three-quarters of the way through did I actually see one of his.

There was a sort of parallel thing going on and it was at the centre of something new. And that's how I got to meet Greenberg.

[Break in interview]

DE: What happened at the end of your two and a half years with Henry Moore? [Robertson-Swann was an assistant to Moore at Much Hadham, Hertfordshire, between 1963 and 1965.] Was it just time to go? Did you not want his assistants to become entrenched? Was it difficult working conditions?

RRS: It was a bit isolated out there, although you would bump into Lord Snowden and Lord Clarke, Gordon Bunshaft, who commissioned an enormous amount of Henry's sculptures. [Shows a photograph] That's me getting a lesson from Henry.

DE: What sort of days did you put in?

RRS: The English were lazy. I worked very hard actually, eight-hour days. Particularly in the winter, it got a bit nippy.

DE: Were you just looking after yourself? Was it communal? Were there lots of discussions about sculpture if there were up to seven assistants?

RRS: But they're all working on separate things. When they get large like this [indicates a photo of a sculpture], they're in pairs. That's the three-way piece [in photo]. That's getting prepared to do a larger one. I make this by myself from the original one, then Derek comes in to help me make the big one.

DE: Right. And at each point is Henry Moore coming by and saying good, good?

RRS: Not much actually. And I start devising better ways of doing the enlargement. You take three measurements in space at 90 degrees to each other to establish a point in space, so this is the thing from the inside [in photo]. Every one of those points has got a number on it that corresponds to the number on the surface of the maquette and then you start putting the skin.

DE: And how many months are we talking about, on something like *The arch* piece [which began with a 11cm high maquette in 1962 from which were created multiple editions up to six metres high]?

RRS: Maybe two or three months.

DE: The potential is for problems at every single point, isn't it?

RRS: What happens is when you change the size of something you actually perceive it differently. So you start to make changes, in fact, to make it look like the maquette. [Shows another photo] This is going off to the foundry. This is Hermann Noack from the Berlin foundry it went to. And this is Henry and I just finishing some of the details as it's lifted off its base.

DE: Did you travel to Germany to do anything with the casting?

RRS: No. Only once did we travel to Belgium. [Shows another photo] There's the baby one I'd get from Henry and then I'd have another assistant to help me make it.

DE: Yes, and as you say you have to start making changes in order to make it look like the original. So, any problems, any contretemps with Moore about works like this? Or, in the end, had you proven yourself capable of doing this and were basically let go?

RRS: Basically let go. In fact, in the very first large one I worked on, which is the locking piece with Isaac [Witkin, showing another photo], the circumstances were a little weird, and I was a little mischievous.

DE: I bet you were but that wouldn't be all bad?

RRS: I don't think so. There's me on Mary's roller skates that I'd found. [Shows another photo]

DE: So you were both living in this cabin [indicating the photo]?

RRS: Yes.

DE: So what does Anne, your wife, do while you're doing this?

RRS: Not much. Bit boring for her. There were a few people around there that we became friends with. One of the funniest things for me was that in the beginning I was very enthusiastic about doing the job. I mean I had reserves about his sculpture but, doing a job for me, the way I was brought up, even if you're a waiter or a dishwasher ...

DE: You like to do a proper job.

RRS: Yes.

DE: Also you're doing the time-and-motion studies in your head, continuously working out more efficient ways to do it.

RRS: At one point, two or three of the English assistants take me aside and say if I didn't slow down they were going to send me to Coventry, and I'd never heard the phrase before so I thought I was being rewarded [laughs] because Coventry Cathedral, which was so badly bombed during the Second World War, was rebuilt with Henry Moore and [Graham] Sutherland. And then they thought I was being precocious and they were going to bash me [laughs] because they were having a go at me for working too hard and too fast. So they were going to send me to Coventry. They thought I was being facetious but I actually didn't know what they meant by 'send me to Coventry'. If it wasn't for Isaac, who was a great bear of a man, who was my sort of protector, I think, I would have had a more difficult time. One or two of them wanted to kill me by the end.

DE: Seriously?

RRS: One did chase me with an axe once [laughs]. Poms from the North mostly.

DE: Were there a few of them who had no aspirations at all to be artists but were working as artisan assistants and that was the end of it, in which case you'd expect them to be there for years, or was Moore interested in actually giving young sculptors experience that was going to enable them to move on?

RRS: I think that was Moore's original intention but I think that got confused as the years went on. I think somebody like Anthony Caro had a great time and Moore would lend him books and they lived a bit further down in the village and sometimes have chats at night. Tony talked about Henry Moore being his sculptural father, and that was not only a historic

context, that was quite a real one in relation to the time he worked for Henry. I came about a decade later. Now he's probably the most famous sculptor in the world, and things start to change, I think. And I had this fight with Caro and then Caro went to see him over a serious incident.

DE: Between you and Caro?

RRS: No, between Caro and Henry. Then Caro more or less apologised to me that things had indeed changed. He thought I was being a little bit harsh and insolent in my opinions about Henry because it was such a marvellous experience for him, but then he had to encounter Henry ten, 12 years later on over something Henry was pissed off [about] and then Caro realised there was indeed a significant change. I think by the time I'm there we're servants working for the master. He used to not talk with us but drop phrases of wisdom which we were meant to pick up. He'd talk about the scissors in Matisse's hands making those last cut-outs and how there must be genius in his hands, and I'd say there were no brain cells in the fingertips I was aware of [laughs].

DE: Australians might be hard workers but then we also have problems with authority. That's a cliché but as with all clichés or generalisations there's some truth in it, so there would be something about authority that would be problematic, I suppose, particularly if it's worn ostentatiously; and those are the stories about Moore by that stage, that he becomes a portentous individual.

RRS: He was saying sensible things. I didn't ever have a problem with authority. I wasn't bowed by it. I had a fairly authoritarian father ...

DE: Well, didn't you have trouble with that?

RRS: Not so much, and I was in the army for a while, so none of that of itself worried me. The bullshit worried me. But nor was I daunted. If the bullshit was coming from Joe Bloggs or Henry Moore, bullshit was bullshit. I wasn't bowed by it, as it were.

DE: It was more the class thing?

RRS: The class thing in England I reacted to.

DE: What happened to your own work in that two and a half years?

RRS: I didn't get to do much of it because I didn't have the facilities there. Henry loved it to be a little bit primitive, for all the money. The accountants would be pulling their hair out, telling him to spend money, and he wanted it to remain absolutely simple and very basic. We carved those things with bloody hand axes, cheese graters, and he didn't like us wasting plaster.

DE: Right. That's very much a survivor of war, poor son mentality, isn't it? Next Depression's on its way. Most people would think the facilities there would be absolutely ace and then [envisage you] heading back to the cabin and being involved in your own work, even if that was welding, though it sounds like you wouldn't have had much equipment.

RRS: No, not even electricity down to the studios. In those days you had to have something like three-phase electrics in a tiny shed. He didn't want you to work five days a week, because he didn't want it to seem like people were merely producing things. But there weren't any proper facilities. That's when I started painting more, in the back room of the cottage.

DE: So, seriously, what did your wife do? Couldn't get work in the village?

RRS: No.

DE: So the end came?

RRS: I think we got the offer of a studio in London.

DE: You must have started to feel that you'd learnt enough or learnt what there was to know in two and a half years.

RRS: There were some people who needed longer than most, but that [period, ie two and a half years] was about the cycle of an assistant.

DE: I guess you wouldn't want someone doing that kind of work, like that *Arch* piece, once and then disappearing. You would want them to do it two or three times and master it. But then I suppose you were involved in doing that kind of work while already knowing that that wasn't where you personally were going to be heading.

RRS: I was already on my path and if I showed works in the same show that I had done at St Martins now, they would look continuous.

DE: So that also put a limitation on how long you wanted to be there?

RRS: Yes.

DE: So you parted on good terms?

RRS: Not really. Only because ... Organising a pay rise was a terrible affront, a bitter blow to him. He had no idea what a struggle it was to live in those circumstances. He thought he was doing us a favour and he was in some respects but we also had to live as well. That's where he was disconnected from the real world in a way. But there were a few other incidents too. Hilton Bedford-Stockwell brought in an air pistol and I think one or two maquettes lost their head.

DE: At your hand?

RRS: I don't know that I did that. Hilton did, I think. And then when Henry would come up to us and say [mimicking accent], 'Well lads, you know I'm trustee of National Gallery; I'm off to London', and when he said that I'd declare sports day and then I'd tell all the English assistants that, while I was a rather poor specimen, just by virtue of being Australian I could beat them at anything they wanted. I had a surfing competition, where Henry and his wife Irina [Radetsky] had made some undulating little hills on their estate, and they had a tractor lawnmower and all the trolleys we'd pull the sculptures along on I'd put them all on like a train and they'd all have to stand on the trolleys while the tractor pulled them along. Of course all the Poms fell off. My great victory, which mystified them still I think, was a spear-throwing competition. They were all sculptors so they went to the north side of an oak, cut out a sliver of wood and carved it beautifully and put eagle's feathers and weights and made these beautiful spears and they went half a mile up the paddock and came galloping down and thrust them into space. Two of them dislocated their arms. I thought they'd never seen a woomera before so I just had this really ordinary spear/stick ...

DE: A broom handle? [Laughter]

RRS: A broom handle. And I had a little woomera stuck in the end and I'd go 'flick'. It always went twice as far as any of theirs. They would cut another tree down only to take it from the core [laughter] and this went on and on, and in a moment of absolute bravado, Geoffrey, one of the more demented North Country assistants – we all rode pushbikes between the studios – and I just said, 'Oh, you're so inadequate. I'll show you something', and I just flicked my spear and he was a long way away – I couldn't believe it was happening when it was happening – but my spear went through the front spokes of his pushbike, stopped him in his tracks and he flew over the handlebars.

DE: At least the spear didn't go through Geoffrey.

RRS: No. I was aiming for the thing but I didn't believe that it was going to happen [laughter], and that's when I was chased through the forest with an axe.

DE: And did Henry Moore hear about this?

RRS: I think Henry Moore got to hear about some of these things obliquely and I think he got sick of the English being beaten at every possible turn.

DE: Were any other Australians there at the time you were?

RRS: No, but some came later. I didn't leave as one of his favourite assistants.

DE: So you were trouble but very good at your job.

RRS: Yes.

DE: Did you actually talk to him about putting into place more efficient ways of scaling up?

RRS: He actually didn't want to know about them. He selected the works which were to be enlarged. He would give me a maquette, about the size of your fist. I would then enlarge that to perhaps a foot high, then I would get another assistant and we would together enlarge that one to the size of this room. The baby ones we cast in bronze were millionaires' paper weights. He made all those choices. And one of the things that we engaged in most was the texture of them at the end. And we had sessions. When there was a clear blue sky the senior assistant would stand with Henry some way away from the sculpture and another couple of assistants would slowly turn the sculpture and we'd check the profile of the sculpture and the forms against the sky.

DE: This is in plaster?

RRS: Yes. Then we'd mark where there was a slight dent, where the thing wasn't absolutely perfect in its form, because Henry's idea of the knuckle thrusting up from the inside was essential to his work, so we'd double-check that. We'd have two or three sessions like that.

DE: And you'd be carving back or scraping the surface back?

RRS: Yes, serious refinements.

DE: What happened with the patinas?

RRS: The patinas. We did some old patinas there but during my time we mostly sent them off to the Hermann Noack's foundry [in what was then West Berlin] and he did a beautiful gold patina, and Isaac Witkin and I – he was a big man and I was very slight – we tried to get him drunk once in Brussels to give us the formula. I think I had to be carried to my room and

he was hardly pissed [laughter], so that was unsuccessful. But that traumatised Henry too because he was to meet the Bank Lombard, which was to get the *Locking piece* [1963–64, cast c1964–67]. And that went up in plaster, and we had faked the bronze – I believe that's what we're doing there [shows photo]. We had faked the bronze in plaster to try it at the front of the bank, and someone had made a mistake, someone organising the accommodation for us in Brussels. It was the Asquith Hotel or something like, the swishest hotel in Brussels, and obviously Henry had a suite, but there had been some misunderstanding and Isaac had a suite and I had a suite [laughter] and when Henry found out he couldn't contain himself, but it was too late and he also didn't want to embarrass himself by refusing to pay, but I think he would have been happier if we were in a broom closet; he thought that was appropriate. Then the sculpture went on to Berlin and then there was a little bit of patching to do from all the travelling and all the plaster that ... [was dented]. But the more serious artistic problems were ones that Isaac and I fought over. When Isaac got the maquette and he did the 'this size' one [indicates photo] ... and there was a sort of all-over texture, and you can see how these things that fitted into here [indicates photo] were all polished, and Isaac and I were fighting over, 'this was a shaft' and what striations went in there and what would give a sense of twisting by being polished and not, so they were fights, but not with Henry.

DE: That's interesting. But then where would Moore be in the end, if you had the battles?

RRS: He'd approve it. There was one thing. I think he showed us some texture on the end of this [indicates photo], which he had put some saw cuts in and then roughly hit it with some plaster but see all these details were things that Isaac and I had some strong disagreements about. See where Henry's working here [indicates photo]? That's fake. Henry would come in and get photographs taken on the day we were all off.

DE: Yes. That's time immemorial, isn't it?

RRS: Yes, that never bothered me. The photographer had to wait to see Henry sometimes and he'd come down and talk to us and we'd go through all the photographs because sometimes he took photographs of us occasionally and we'd say, 'That was last Friday'. I remember... that big thing at the Lincoln Center in New York, a hideous sculpture, that knife-edge thing. They were cutting that up to take it to the foundry in Berlin, and they had film crews because it was quite a massive thing. I think they expected some great big mechanical saw to come in and cut the sculpture, and in fact we had to do it with piano wire on the end of broomsticks. We'd just wrap the piano wire around the broomstick and hold it and cut through like that [gestures] and it caused the least amount of waste. You could hardly hear it and there was no dust and all the film crew started. At one stage there I was behind the sculpture going 'schw schw schw' and throwing dust in the air [laughter] so they could get a good shot. They were things I thought were funny, but they were some of the things that unnerved Henry.

DE: There was a lot of showmanship by this stage, wasn't there? The grand master.

RRS: Yes. Here is the *Atom piece* [shows photo] and that is Escillier Denning, an Israeli artist. He was a lovely man.

DE: So did you keep in touch with them all?

RRS: No. Actually one I did. Isaac I stayed in touch with because he was a friend before I went there.

DE: Were you leading a slightly schizophrenic life, in the sense that you were going back to London regularly and hanging around Caro and his mates, or was it really two years stepping sideways? If you were not able to do much sculpture ...

RRS: I think you have to bring survival into it and this is where it blurs with that. However small amount of money we were being paid, it was feeding us and paying the rent wherever we were. Staying alive in London in those days was tough. Cold in the winter, and tough. There might have been occasions when I didn't get to see Tony [Caro] and those people very much. Sometimes it was more [David] Annesley, because Tony was 20 years or more older than me. All that stuff is only now just starting to level out.

DE: What is happening to him in those years? He's taking off like a skyrocket, isn't he? And Phillip King or maybe he was a bit later than Caro? Bill Tucker?

RRS: Phillip King a bit later, but yes, Caro, and there was a closeness. Bill I never liked.

DE: His book [*The language of sculpture*, first published in 1974] was pretty good.

RRS: Yes, his book was really important, but he didn't like me and I didn't like him. I think we nearly came to blows once and I've always ...

DE: Not particularly liked him?

RRS: Yes, because he is not a nice man. The book was, I think, written on a scholarship from Leeds University and it came down to a shortlist of two. Tucker won it over me. It was going to be a year at Leeds University as an artist-in-residence, but I think the sculpture world's better for it because I would have made a series of works, but he wrote that book and I think that was such an important book.

DE: So at the end of two and a half years with Henry Moore, did you think, 'Well, someone will sharpen the axe', or was it time to move on?

RRS: It was more a case of time to move on. I'm so good with axes as well as spears by now, and I am slightly fearless, [but] I was never that much of a rebel! If I was a rebel it was because I thought I was born to rule [laughs]. I didn't go around shaking my fist at people. I think that's why I got away with what I got away with in England.

DE: Yes. You also had serious intentions. You're not surfing every day, so I'm sure that would be recognised as well.

RRS: Tony did think at one stage I went too far by threatening the governor of the Bank of England. There were drinks at Lord Dufferin's and he [the governor] sat back in a chair and lent back into a Morris Louis painting, and I asked him politely – I didn't know who he was, by the way – and he more or less tried to flick me off in a dismissive way, and he didn't give a fuck about the painting, so I grabbed him by the neck and told him I would stick his neck up his arse, and that's when Tony said, 'You could have pulled him back from the painting, but telling him you'd stick his neck up his arse is just going too far'.

DE: Yes, indeed. So what were you thinking when it was time to go? Were you thinking of going back to London? Or thinking it was time to travel in Europe again? Thinking it was time to go home? Thoughts you must be thinking about what the path [to being a sculptor] is going to be. The path is going to be hard. It's probably not going to be financially remunerative. You are maybe grappling with those things and also thinking, 'The path's not going to be in England. It's not like I'm going to be a permanent expatriate, because I don't like the climate enough, I don't like the class system, although the capacity for sculptors to prosper in Australia is not very good'.

RRS: I know this will be frustrating for you but I don't think like that. I never thought [about the future], I don't think there's much point.

DE: But you give the impression of thinking about the future. You give the impression of being highly rational, maybe impulsive too. Highly rational, with a bit of a temper, and a certain amount of impatience. I guess my assumption is: if you choose to be a sculptor, there's a whole lot of really serious decisions related to that that don't allow you to float, because you will sink.

RRS: Well, maybe that's been my failure, because I don't. I mean, I contemplated going to America and I think it was a mistake not doing it but I had a young child and that would have been kind of like starting again.

DE: When was Kashell born?

RRS: 1965.

DE: When do you come back to London?

RRS: 1964. I really like Americans. I really like the Americans I meet. I feel at home with Americans – Ken Noland, Jules Olitski, Clement Greenberg, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler.

DE: I didn't know you met Robert Motherwell.

RRS: Yes, at one of the more famous parties I went to where Princess Margaret was stoned out of her brain.

DE: Meeting Americans in London. Yes, you went back into a swinging scene, didn't you, after your enforced isolation. But you had a wife and young child. There is an offer of a studio in London. Are you still doing occasional teaching at St Martins?

RRS: Yes, and then I got a job as head of studies at East Ham [Technical College]. It was what they call a foundation school. In England – and I still think it happens – you did a year or two at a special college and then applied to the college of your choice, so you did a foundation course. And the success of those colleges was measured by how many of your students got into their first choice, so if you stopped being able to do that the college got into trouble, so it was a very demanding teaching job.

DE: Are we talking about foundation colleges feeding only into colleges of art?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And that came about through various contacts? Your contact is largely Caro and the guys from St Martins?

RRS: Yes, and just getting a reputation.

DE: So you come back with the idea that you want to do your own sculpture.

RRS: Yes, I always wanted to do that. All of these things ... I never had an ambition in teaching or ... They were all survival things but I was still passionate about them and how well they were done [but] I never wanted to be the head of a college. Someone had seen me teaching and invited me to teach at London University, Goldsmiths College. They had quite

a famous educationalist called Anton Ehrenzweig and he died and in the interim they asked me to come and do some of his teaching, so that was a real compliment.

DE: So you were teaching practical courses in sculpture, but were you also starting to teach philosophy and art history?

RRS: Yes.

DE: So how long did you do this for?

RRS: About a year.

DE: So that's a relatively large teaching load. Do you find that you're able to do much of your own work? Less painting?

RRS: No, I kept painting and sculpture together. Sculpture sacrificed colour a lot. I tried a lot of experiments with colour and they didn't give me the same fulfilment as colour in painting. I didn't think of career paths [at the time] but I had the privilege of having a couple of sessions where Greenberg came to my studio with Noland and Caro and did a crit on my paintings and sculptures. That's what was at the core of what drove me. Things went from work to work, not career. I may have thought unconsciously, in the back of my head, that a career might eventuate but I didn't actually ... A lot of people say, 'If I show here and I do that and I get an article ...' No, I never [did that].

DE: But there must come a point when it might be nice to not have to do the dishwashing and actually have your passion pay, where you reach a point in life and doing what you love also gives you a means to survive.

RRS: Very few people could do that. And that's why it wasn't such a big deal [to me]. Tony was still teaching but Tony comes from a banker's family. His father was a banker but he still had to teach. He loved teaching but there was a time when he *had* to teach. There weren't many examples out there.

DE: So Moore was the exception.

RRS: Yes. And even Henry Moore's first assistant became head of sculpture at the Royal College. Phillip King had to continue to teach. He was teaching relatively recently, for god's sake. I know Ken Noland didn't do much teaching, but at that point he was doing really well selling paintings. Maybe Larry Poons. But not many of them did it in a grand way that didn't have to be connected to some institution. Jules Olitski at Bennington College. They all had to. Some did it because it was healthy and good for them to do it, but also because it was necessary at certain stages in their life.

DE: If you believe in the law of finite resources, the time you spend in teaching is time you lose in working.

RRS: Henry Moore was quite explicit about that. But someone like Frankenthaler came from a wealthy family and then she married Robert Motherwell who came from a wealthy family, but there weren't many people like that

DE: So what are you focusing on? Exhibiting?

RRS: Work.

DE: I think even in the 60s artists were still thinking in terms of a long apprenticeship, nothing like today where there's an expectation among many students that they should have their first exhibition within a year of joining art school.

RRS: And then a survey show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

DE: Were you being mentored slightly, do you think?

RRS: I think there was some mentoring going on, which I wasn't entirely aware of because of my facetiousness but I think if I look back there was some. Even towards the end of my stay at St Martins as a post-graduate student, I stopped being a student, in my mind. I was already making works which I am happy to show today. There was a sense of me being very confident on one hand and very insecure on another. And I don't know how to discuss those differences sensibly.

DE: Do you have a conviction that that combination is probably a productive one?

RRS: Possibly.

DE: So to quote Harry Nicolson: 'In London in 1962–68, [Swann] produced his first successful forays into sculptural integrity and what a time it was, first years of marriage, great galleries, new city, new talks, significant artists, financial troubles but through it all the pursuit of art with a relationship between the parts as geometric shapes is the source of character of the entire work.' Is that adequate?

RRS: Yes, very adequate actually.

DE: I think he then goes on to say, or maybe I have extrapolated, that it was not with the same kind of interest in asymmetry and construction as Caro, and this is why you've always been described as a 'classical formalist', because of your interest in balance. Is that what you've ascertained is the core of your art? There are a lot of abstract artists who decided that abstraction of itself was the only relevant form for the modern age, the contemporary age that they encountered. Do you have that kind of idea?

RRS: No, that's what I object to in the other area. They are telling people what they should think or do, how life should be. I can only do what I do to the best of my ability and that has to follow from its own place, I'm not projecting onto it. I might hope that it does something but ...

DE: But you understand that you're also a creature of your time and culture, and so the kind of aspirations that you have that manifest themselves as highly individual and perhaps deeply introspective are also products that are time and culture specific, so in that sense it also becomes a question of how much of that culture you absorb, how receptive you are to those larger nuances.

RRS: Yes, but lots of other things were going on at the same time too, and that seemed to me to be the choice that I'd made, to go in my direction. There was [also] a little bit of something informed behind it. A little bit before art I was intrigued by the thinking of the Greeks, by Pythagoras and the notion that under nature was geometry and those relationships seemed to be very important to me.

DE: They were central to your teachers. Sydney was converted, in the form of its creative people, to those notions of mystical mathematical systems in the universe, so from Frank Hinder to Roger Kemp to Godfrey Miller, even to Passmore, to Klippel, whether it was Zen or theosophy, it was hugely influential, I think, for that generation. They are the generation that

is teaching your generation, and so my view is that part of the reason those are important to you is from those who taught you. That too is very culture specific.

RRS: Yes, and the influence of the age still there while I wasn't, at Sydney University with John Anderson. People who had an influence on me, like Harry Nicolson, were Andersonians. Clive James, who I think has turned out to be one of the most wonderful intellectuals of his time actually. He's not well and I am terrified he is going to die. His *Cultural amnesia*, a collection of essays, is brilliant. I was in England then, when he was first on television and doing things, and he was witty and well-informed but [it was only] when I started to read his reviews, then his collected essays, apart from his *Unreliable memoirs* [that I realised his brilliance]. Then, of course, he is the boy from Kogarah. This is also brilliant – Simon Leys. His real name is Pierre Ryckmans, the sinologist. He wrote an introductory essay in Murray Bail's book on [Ian] Fairweather. Here is somebody who is a devout Catholic so, for me, to survive something like that ... This is something that appeals to me [quotes from book]: 'Many people know the usefulness of something useful, few know the usefulness of something useless'. Art in my view is quite properly useless. And they want to put art into the service of another thing. Art *is* a thing. That's where the whole divide is for me and it does come back to dialectical materialism.

DE: Maybe so but then how do you feel, for example, about Peter Kennedy's performance at Inhibodress in 1971 where there's taxi interference blaring over a speaker, and he screams into the microphone, and people can come and go for 24 hours, and like a lot of performance it starts to segue into the whole definition of what is sculpture and what is art? Is that fine?

RRS: No. You know why? Because it's theatre, that's why.

DE: OK. So this is the beginning of spectacle culture, fair enough. That's a position too.

RRS: It might be good theatre too. Mostly it's not. I don't think anyone's going to go pay and see it. They're often bad. They're other forms not good enough to be shown in the usual way getting a free ride in an art gallery.

DE: Is the problem the dominance or is the problem that it starts to encroach on a field that previously it couldn't encroach on? One doesn't have to stay with hard and fast definitions, does one? Do we care that there's some art that has those sorts of aspirations? Or do we hold to art as being defined by its uselessness?

RRS: The only thing I can do is talk about my feelings when I experience things like that, because you can't be prophetic about art, it seems to me. Recently I've been lucky enough to do a lot more travelling than I've done for a long time, for many years, and the good things are even better, and all those other things that I thought were interesting, fade. They are one-liners. So I am constantly being reinforced by the most moving, engaging things that happen to me. Still [Paul] Cézanne, if you like to go back that far. It's still a really beautiful Robert Motherwell print. All the other stuff just looks a bit pathetic now. It fades.

DE: The scribbled notes for someone's performance piece that are now ensconced in a glass cabinet in the Trocadero in Paris can't have the same impact.

RRS: It's in denial of what it was meant to be. I mean, all of these people made those works originally because they couldn't be sold, and now they're all selling photographs.

DE: That's one of the ironies, isn't it? And wasn't that irony something that overpowered Ian Milliss? I think he went off to become a union official because he took that politic to its logical

extreme. That's what Ian Burn used to say, that the logical end of this position was to actually leave the area entirely, so that's a quandary.

So you are getting a sense of the landscape of contemporary culture at that stage. You have an analytical mind, you have spent time at St Martins, you've been with Dadswell, you've seen Henry Moore: all of that provides a kind of layered landscape of what the choices are, and then of course you wish to follow what suits you best. So you want to exhibit. That was one thing that you wanted to be doing in the late 60s?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And how did that pan out? Where do you exhibit?

RRS: It's what was available in those days too. There were certain shows like the *Young contemporaries* and the London Group and stuff like that when I was a student in London that I got into and they were a big deal. And then I started showing at [John] Kasmin's gallery [in London]. And I had a really important show in Munich [at Galerie Heiner Friedrich]. It's a bit odd because it was called *Four British sculptors* [actually titled *British sculpture*], because Germans didn't see me as any different from the Brits, because I was in London. That was with Phillip King, Bill Tucker, David Annesley and myself.

DE: When was that?

RRS: I'm not good on years, I can't remember. It was about 65 or 66. [The exhibition was held in 1967.]

[Break in interview. There is a discussion of Robertson-Swann's archives.]

RRS: [Regarding his teaching method] I run my department as first amongst equals. All I have to do is make all the nasty decisions, but otherwise I am first amongst equals, and interestingly a lot of people don't like that; they don't want to share in some of those things, although I cop everything that is seriously negative. I say this is my call when I can see that everyone is divided and there could be some serious ramifications. I guess that is what I am being paid for. They get disturbed because I include technical staff and everybody.

DE: Some people become habituated to certain systems and find it hard to break out of them.

RRS: Some people love authority.

DE: The wrong people are always in those positions.

RRS: The sociopaths.

DE: That aside, who organised that Munich show?

RRS: A private dealer called Heiner Friedrich from Munich who was fascinated by the beginnings of ...

DE: Egghead conceptualism?

RRS: Yes! What I figured fairly early on, when Daniel Thomas first came to my studio, and when Heiner Friedrich came to my studio, that bits of steel painted in bright colours was 'fucking wow!' Daniel did that. And then when I came back, Tony Coleing used coloured Perspex and that was more 'way out' than coloured bits of steel, and Daniel went to the next

and the next, and it seemed to me that Daniel never got any one thing properly enough to say ... He just went on to the next novelty, the newest looking thing, without understanding what the things were about.

DE: Tony Coleing came back to Australia in the same year as you. He is an interesting, maverick sculptor. I am not sure that he has done sculpture in a while.

RRS: He still shows at Charles Nodrum [Gallery] and it's all environmentally driven.

DE: He is interesting.

RRS: No, I don't think so. Because what he did was that. He did blow-up sculptures, then he did installations. He just kept doing the next thing. None of them stood up. Look at them now.

DE: We can. They weren't just novelties. His *Plastic landscape* [1970], which we inflated a few years ago at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, looked good. No? OK, you are entitled to your view.

RRS: [Looking at a photograph] This is a group show at Kasmin's. Kasmin's showed Morris Louis, Anthony Caro, [David] Hockney was the odd man out, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Robert Motherwell, Frank Stella.

DE: So it was excellent to get there.

RRS: Yes. A weird thing happened. This work [indicates photo], which was bought by Alan Powers. He and his father were major contemporary collectors, and it used to hang under an enormous Barnett Newman on the floor.

DE: What was it called?

RRS: *Contact*. It turned up at the Adelaide gallery [Art Gallery of South Australia] and they're putting it in their new hang. It's been given to them or they've purchased it. No one told me how they came across it but I've been talking to them on the phone about restoring it and how it should be painted.

DE: What colour was it?

RRS: It was a deep maroon and under here [indicates place on a photo] was bright orange. It was like a red-bellied black snake lifting up.

DE: How were you painting them?

RRS: With marine paint in those days. I keep forgetting how old I am. The only bright colours that you could buy, because houses were painted in such dull colours at that time, was marine paint, so I used to paint with marine paint.

DE: Did you ever use the place three doors down which has a sign out the front, 'Get your hub caps painted'?

RRS: I know the guy but he does powder coating and powder coating isn't waterproof. The one sculpture I had powder coated was an indoor piece. Also it puts too much of a slimy skin on the surface.

DE: OK.

RRS: I did another show which was contemporary Australian painters and sculptors which toured Europe, Germany.

DE: 1963?

RRS: Yes, I had just finished post-graduate [studies].

DE: Who organised that? Was it the Australia Council, or what were they called, Australia House?

RRS: I don't know. [*Contemporary painting and sculpture by Australian artists in Europe*, also known as *Australian painting and sculpture in Europe today*, Städel'sches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main, 1963, was organised by expatriate art dealer Alannah Coleman.]

DE: So were you staying in touch with Australians in London? Were you in touch with the older guys? Would Dadswell have given you entrée to Oliffe Richmond?

RRS: Not entrée but I met Oliffe Richmond and I think that might have been through the Henry Moore connection or someone else. Oliffe Richmond was a truly lovely man and he was struggling. He really 'bought' British sculpture of the 1950s.

DE: He did. That sort of humanist, expressionist post-war work. I think that was probably when he was at his best.

RRS: There's a beautiful sculpture of his at Kröller-Müller Museum [in the Netherlands], a really fine work [*Striding man II* 1960, cast 1961]. But he was really beginning to struggle. You know those slightly awkward works that have been shown at Watters [Gallery in Sydney]?

DE: The tripod works?

RRS: Yes, awkward but he was making a desperate effort when I knew him. I could have been a little nicer [to Richmond]

DE: You weren't unpleasant?

RRS: Oh god, no.

DE: But you could have taken up overtures?

RRS: Yes, but I am still relatively young, I think. And in a funny way this show [indicates *Contemporary painting and sculpture by Australian artists in Europe*] fucked up my career. This went off and then the most important show for this kind of sculpture came up. It was called *The new generation [1965]* at the Whitechapel [Gallery in London]. This is the show that made Caro and company famous – well, the generation after Caro. And I had no works to go in the show because they were in Europe so ... And then, along with Michael Johnson, I won a painting prize [in the John Moores Painting Prize] in Liverpool. [There is no record of Johnson winning a prize.]

DE: Michael Johnson was over there at that stage? Do you know him? How did you meet?

RRS: I think I met him and Brett Whiteley at Hill End [in New South Wales, Australia].

[Looking at a photo] Here's the Liverpool art gallery where Johnson and I won the painting prize, which was judged by Greenberg, at the Walker Art Gallery.

DE: So, 1965.

RRS: They were minor prizes, because Greenberg didn't give a major prize to anyone under a certain age.

DE: There are certain cumulative effects for this kind of award and exhibition exposure, don't you think? And whether you're conscious of it or not, you start to be positioned in a certain way, and it's all looking like it was a good way.

RRS: Yes, it was called *Three sculptors* as Kasmin's in 1966 [looking at catalogue] and it got some reviews in *Art International*. That is *British sculpture* [looking at catalogue], Gallery Heiner Friedrich, Munich, Maximilian Strasse.

DE: And did you go over to Munich?

RRS: Yes, and I think he went on to have a very big contemporary gallery in America and funded something of those projects like [Walter de Maria's] *The lightning field*.

DE: Are you starting to get sales?

RRS: Yes, well that was the nice, old-fashioned idea. I found Max Hutchinson a bit of a bodgie when he came to see me in London. They bought the works. In order to have the show they bought the works.

DE: That's a bit unusual, isn't it?

RRS: No, that was what Europeans did. All those early exhibitions of Cézanne and that generation of artists – the galleries purchased their works until they had enough to have a show.

DE: Were there British reviews of this show?

RRS: No, but there were German ones. That was 1966.

DE: So all of this augurs well for you?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And the critiques that Noland and Greenberg are doing in your studio are useful?

RRS: They were really inspiring.

DE: Are you reading a lot and starting to become conversant with the theory about what you are doing?

RRS: Not really. Very selectively.

DE: Are you reading all of Greenberg?

RRS: Well, Greenberg only had *Art and culture*.

DE: And articles. You're reading *Art International*?

RRS: Yes, and *Artforum*. *Artforum* and *Art International* were the serious magazines.

DE: They were starting to rehearse all of the arguments or debates which become central for the period. What you say is very interesting. By the mid 60s you're an 'egghead conceptualist' but by the late 60s you're not, nor is Caro or King. Conceptualists are something else again, and it suddenly becomes Fluxus and performance and ephemeral works. Were you starting to get hints of all that when you were over there?

RRS: Yes.

DE: It's interesting because you're controversial, Henry Moore is still controversial, at the same time that you guys become new stars. And then there's more controversy again. There's another avant-garde, if you like – not that I'm suggesting Moore was avant-garde.

RRS: He was to the general public.

DE: So it's just happening rapidly, isn't it? When does it start to be a context in which one can no longer parcel things up neatly? The system's no longer working in the way it had been working. Art schools would have told you that there was a certain process and your teachers were operating under that process, and that all starts to disappear.

RRS: At St Martins there was more open discussion and debate about those sorts of things. In art schools here [in Australia] nobody spoke about the general circumstances people were in. They taught you the trade of art, if you like. There were some discussions about what made some things better than others. There were some discussions about other artists and their contribution but never in the way you're framing things now. Nobody spoke like that. When I was here, to have a career, to be a teacher, was inconceivable, that I was a teacher very rapidly after that, but at that time I was still desperately trying to get my head around it; to be a practising artist, it was only beginning to dawn that you can do it.

DE: Yes, but having said that your conviction about what you wanted to do had already caused a schism in your family and so you already had a clear commitment to that path.

RRS: Yes, but I didn't see a career side to it.

DE: OK, and you were young enough to probably not worry too much about it.

RRS: Yes.

DE: But again, early on you got married and have a child so it's a strangely complex and contradictory milieu, isn't it?

RRS: Yes. The consciousness of some of those things, certainly it had to be there, but I know I'm aware there was no planning. Here's an example: it was only about six years ago that I found out that those monographs on artists were paid for by the artist. I just assumed that after a certain body of work there'd be critical pressure sufficient for someone to want to write about.

DE: So you're idealistic?

RRS: I fight idealism because I think that philosophically that's a minefield of stupidity but certainly as a young man, before I understood more philosophy, I was an idealist. To be more precise, when I was looking for something to do with my life, I saw people around me, family and friends and extended family, in business. It all looked the same to me and I could

not see that that was something worthwhile living for. So, there was the army, and that was a dedicated thing; there was the church; and there was art. Those things were the three things different to everything else I saw. It was really, in a sense, the church or art. Some of my sexual drives certainly got rid of the church very quickly but it was idealistic like that, that you gave your life to something that was more than you. So it was very idealistic, and the unconscious strains of that went through for a very long time. Because Australia was a weird place to grow up in the 1950s.

DE: That makes sense. And you were savvy too, by that stage.

RRS: I'm getting there.

DE: Even if you're being a smart-arse down at Henry Moore's, there's a certain level of savviness there.

RRS: Yes, I knew about woomeras [laughter]. There was a bit of shithouse cunning under the surface.

DE: So why do you come back? Colin Lanceley stays in England, has early success and ends up staying for about 18 years. Michael Johnson stays for quite a long time. What pulled you back? [Looking at archival material] What is that?

RRS: That's the Leicestershire Education Authority. They had one of the most important collections of painting and sculpture, sculpture in particular, and a major work of mine was in their collection and they had a show at the Whitechapel.

DE: OK, so what pulled you back?

RRS: People start becoming famous around me – Caro, King, Tucker – and the intensity of the exchange gets muddled. We were really penetratingly critical in the best moments in each other's studios, but then when something's just been sold or it's 'in the collection of', that started to not be so passionate [anymore].

DE: Also you are the younger element in this circle of four or six. Are people less interested in hearing that kind of penetrating criticism from someone younger as they are becoming more successful?

RRS: It's oblique. It's not, 'Don't you dare'.

DE: No. It's just the dynamic changed.

RRS: That, and it was still cold, and it was the lack of sunlight which really does have an effect on me. In fact, I can suffer mild depression sometimes. I would get up in the dark and go to bed in the dark. Here I'm used to going to work and then coming home and then going to the beach for a surf before dinner. Another thing was I was teaching my three-year-old how to swim in the Serpentine, which was a muddy pool, and if he found out I learnt to swim in Bondi or in Redleaf Pool, I think he would have been a little resentful.

DE: And what about Anne, your wife? Was she working?

RRS: On and off at various jobs. It was survival and we all mutually supported each other, and she came from a generation – she is five years older than me – where you did support your husband. Nonetheless, I didn't demand that sort of thing. No one would accuse me of being a feminist but on the other hand ... Except for people in the Push, women were still generally treated badly. I didn't. I have a reputation, because I like women. I might have

been a bit of a sleazebag [laughter]. The really bad things I am accused of, I would have had to live three more lives to fit in. It is mostly feminist propaganda, that I found largely insulting.

DE: Was there starting to be pressure from your wife to come back?

RRS: No, I don't think so. The sunlight got to me more. There were people that we were very close to in England, but after eight years you do start to see home as a little more glowing than it was when we actually came back. Greenberg had just been here [in 1968] and he said, 'Don't go. There's not enough millionaires and too many philistines'.

DE: So you didn't go until Greenberg had been there? He was a guest of the Power Institute.

RRS: When Clem came back he mentioned ... I knew bugger all about Australia after a while. All my friends were English and American. I went to a rabbit warren where Colin Lanceley lived and Klippel was there, with Cynthia [Byrne, his wife], who I was a student with, knitting baby socks, and they were all selling stuff back in Australia. They were like an inverse colony and the artists I thought were really interesting, they thought were threatening.

DE: Who were they?

RRS: Caro, Noland, Morrie Louis, Frank Stella, Jules Olitski; they didn't get any of that. When I first met Michael Johnson he thought Ellsworth Kelly was the great abstractionist – not bad, but a seriously minor abstractionist in that field – so I introduced him to Caro.

DE: So what was the final catalyst for going? Did you get the offer to teach at the National Art School?

RRS: No. Two people came to see me. Daniel Thomas and Max Hutchinson.

DE: So Daniel Thomas had heard of you? Australia was paying attention to you in England?

RRS: Yes. I think this was written by Daniel Thomas. [Reads from an article, actually written by John Olsen] "London waits for a new Nolan." 'If Australian artists showing in London during the Commonwealth Festival were concerned with the critical reception they need not have been worried.' John Olsen was there, Colin Lanceley, there's me and my post-graduate year work, Vernon Treweeke. That was in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 30, 1965.

DE: OK, so Daniel Thomas came to see you.

RRS: Yes. And Max Hutchinson, who was a dealer I probably should have gone with. Some of the things that went on at the gallery I would have found a little unprofessional, but he looked like a middle-aged bodgie.

DE: I thought he was meant to be ebullient and charming?

RRS: But he was like a bodgie. Most of the dealers I knew in Europe were Jewish or Armenian – that's what I thought a dealer was – and this bodgie turned up and he was enthusiastic and he promised me everything, none of which he probably would have organised anyway but, nonetheless, I couldn't believe him. And then Rudy [Komon] turned up and he was mid-European at least [laughter], even if he was professing to be a Catholic.

DE: So Rudy turned up in London too. What are they doing? Spruiking?

RRS: Actually I think Clement Meadmore had told me, 'Don't trust Max'.

DE: So you knew Meadmore? He went to New York in 1963.

RRS: Yes, but I'd been to New York and I'd met Meadmore, probably in London as well.

DE: When did you go to New York?

RRS: That's when I came back. So I must have come across Meadmore in London.

DE: So they were visiting you with the prospect of enlisting you for sales in Australia? But not necessarily wanting you to come back for that. You could have sent work out?

RRS: To my memory it never got to that level. I think they were only interested in it if I came back, because you really had to be here. Most art stuff is provincial. When I had a show in New York the dealer said, 'For us to go forward you have to come and live here'.

DE: That was after you came back here?

RRS: Yes. I was the first Australian painter, I think, to have a work reproduced on the cover of *Art International*.

DE: When was that?

RRS: We'd have to go find it but it was close to 1968 [actually *Art International*, volume XIV/1, 20 January 1970].

DE: So the dealers turned up and said, 'We have a place for you in our galleries'. That must have been encouraging.

RRS: I was showing in more major galleries in Europe than what they had so I think I could have chosen whatever dealer [I wanted].

DE: So there's enough success already for them to be sniffing around. Are you starting to feel more positive about the prospects of a career in sculpture as opposed to painting? You are also on the cusp of the most extraordinary interest in three-dimensional art, which has occurred over the past four decades. The dominant form now, if there is one, is something that involves the three-dimensional. There is so much installation work being done by everybody – although I know [you will think] that this not sculpture [laughter].

RRS: It's not *necessarily* sculpture. In the end, for me, there's only two types of work: good and bad.

DE: That's interesting. I remember a Sculpture by the Sea symposium about ten years ago where you ran a relatively hard line on what sculpture is, and my impression then was that there was the qualitative analysis, but I thought you had a stronger view about what actually constituted 'sculpture'. I thought you might have held to that. Are there any definitions of sculpture you hold to? If not, then it doesn't matter if the artwork is sculpture or not.

RRS: I think it does matter if it is sculpture, but you can't be prescriptive, and you can't be prophetic.

DE: So whether it's a success or not has a great deal to do with whether you are successful in the three-dimensions?

RRS: Probably. I mean you've got Rosalind Krauss's 'expanded field'. It's just funny how over time how things look ordinary and they weren't as way out as they appeared. I hold to the conventions of art, and in order to keep that alive they have to change. I think some people have just gone for the change itself, which I would call novelty, rather than some deep commitment. I don't think Matisse tried to be way out. I think he was probably in many ways a very conservative man. His art drove him to things which he was reluctant to even embrace himself, in some respects, and that's where I think the best art comes from. I see too many artists today sit down and work out 'what is the most way-out thing I can do in order to establish myself' and that's where I find they've lost the plot.

DE: But how does that differ from any other time in history, including the Renaissance? There have always been opportunists. Artists are carnivorous and they feed off other artists. There have always been careerists. Maybe the art market has certainly blown it up to a larger scale but I don't think it's changed the essence of what's always gone on, has it? Or do you think it has?

RRS: No, I think something has slipped. I'd like to describe it better but I'd have to think about it for much longer. I mean, I thought Caravaggio would have made Fred Cress, as a careerist, look a bit sick.

DE: I'm not sure how many good career moves Caravaggio made. Wasn't murder one of them? [Laughter]

RRS: I've come close [laughter]. But somehow there remains a difference between Caravaggio and Tracey Emin. About two years ago I was having a conversation with Caro in the studio and he said, 'They amaze me. They have such a gift of the gab. Tracey Emin has her own newspaper column, and what's more she admits she knows nothing about art and people think that the honesty of that is so staggering that she must be...' And the next best speaker I hear is Antony Gormley. He speaks so well! He gave a key note address in London at the National Gallery, I think, for a sculpture conference. He was brilliant, and I am thinking, 'He has not been trained as an artist; he has a good education', and it sounded like Cambridge to me. And he spoke brilliantly, with great erudition; not great honesty, but with great erudition.

DE: He is perhaps the smoothest speaker I have heard.

RRS: I don't know any artists, otherwise, that are so well educated and who speak so well. And then I started to see the structure and it is highly structured. He only mentioned artists who he wanted to align himself with, to be seen historically, and he didn't mention Anish Kapoor, because Kapoor had just won the Olympic thing over him [a sculpture commission for Olympic Park for the 2012 London Olympic Games], but he did mention him obliquely by saying he [Gormley] made this wonderful sculpture with a double helix, *The meaning of life*, but because it was going to take more than 45 seconds for ambulance people to reach someone if they had a heart attack at the top of the thing [it was not chosen], whereas Anish Kapoor's had a lift in it, with a restaurant on top [laughter], but [Gormley] never mentioned the name Kapoor. I think he was educated at Cambridge and has not been trained as an artist at all.

DE: He is his most remarkable best asset in selling his work.

RRS: Because she [Emin] is at the furthest end. She reveals. When something finds its end, then it shows more about what it is. I think she can be used as an example of what this is all going to look like in the end. Is that wishful thinking? I am serious but ...

Interview on 22 May 2015

[Ron Robertson-Swann's son, Kshell Robertson-Swann, participates in this interview.]

DE: So we left off where you were just coming back to Sydney, but we didn't discuss teaching. Your post-graduate year at St Martins was 1962–63. Did you have Caro and King at St Martins as your post-grad teachers?

RRS: Yes.

DE: Do you want to describe the ambience there?

RRS: It was kind of an unofficial post-grad year, and unlike institutions now that have accredited programs, it was really just run by Tony and Phillip. In the beginning, to see where we were all at – because it was an international mix of Australian, English, South African, Portugal, Israeli [students] – we started off doing some classes, modelling from life, drawing. And one night a week was an experimental class where individual people were asked to create a theme for the other students. So we were being tested to see at what stage we could be let go to go and do our own thing.

DE: And was it constructive?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And were you getting a dose of art history and theory too, because within about a year you were teaching art history?

RRS: Not really. I was reading. They were enormously well-informed people you were dealing with and that was all part of discussion, and there was a lot of discussion. But there were no art history lectures as such.

DE: In 1965 was St Martins becoming politicised?

RRS: No, it did later, about 1968–69. Michael Le Grand was on the cusp of that. He went to St Martins.

DE: How is Michael? He is in Canberra?

RRS: He is OK. He has always been a Canberra person. His mother had the first commercial gallery there [Nundah Studio]. She showed Donald Brook who did his PhD at the ANU.

DE: He explored [Martin] Heidegger and [Ludwig] Wittgenstein in it, I think.

RRS: Heidegger would have been popular, and also Wittgenstein – the early tracts of his, not the later ones, were influential. One favourite phrase of his for me is that 'works of art are unsayable'. That for me is quite profound. He means literature as well.

DE: So you found the post-grad year interesting, useful.

RRS: It was exciting.

DE: These are optimistic years. You're filled with excitement about the function of sculpture? The prospects for being a sculptor?

RRS: I was just excited about sculpture, full stop. Not what I could do with it. Not whether I could make a career out of it. Those things – and I'm still suffering as a result of this naivety – rarely entered my head. I just got totally turned on by sculpture and that, if you like, gave meaning to my life.

DE: Though you were still very attached to painting?

RRS: Fairly close, yes. There were little gaps because they've never gone parallel. I started painting more again, because it was so full on at St Martins that I didn't have a chance to paint or a place to paint either. When I went to Henry Moore's I started painting again because I had a bit of space.

DE: That's interesting. Did you say that at Henry Moore's you were commuting out?

RRS: I was for one part. I lived on the estate for a year or more. It was a bit isolated but it gave us some space.

DE: How did that come about? Could you apply to be Moore's assistant? Was it word of mouth? Did he scout out at the art schools? Or was it the hard-working nature of Australians who had been there?

RRS: I think the first one might have been Alan Ingham, or Oliffe Richmond. One of them was there with Caro. You wrote to Henry Moore. He didn't scout for anything. At that time he was the most famous artist in the world, apart from Picasso. He almost never wrote back to you for three months, and then if you were lucky you got an interview, and then you weren't employed for a couple more months after that.

DE: Was it a verbal contract and a handshake?

RRS: Yes.

DE: Did you get paid a salary or was it just room and board?

RRS: You got paid a salary but he was mean. He was tough but Henry had a tough life. When you are the seventh son of a coal-mining family in Yorkshire ... He was enormously cautious and careful about money. I later found out, through Phillip King, that at one stage Henry was the richest self-employed person in England. I think he threatened [Margaret] Thatcher to go offshore, and she backed down.

DE: So when you worked for him was it part-time and you were starting to teach?

RRS: He never wanted anyone to work a full week. Sometimes it was two and a half days or three days a week.

DE: Which is how in 1965 you can start to teach at East Ham?

RRS: Yes. I first taught at St Martins, because I was one of the best students of that group. There were a whole range of awards and prizes but not often for people who weren't English. I didn't fit any of the categories and I think that [teaching job] might have been a small consolation. But there was a degree of confidence [in me] because I'd done the experimental classes and I was one of the best students.

DE: What were the experimental classes like?

RRS: Just a group at night. Someone would say 'music' or just a word or whatever came to someone's mind. This was truly experimental. It was over the top. Somebody just had a sheet of paper and tore it up the middle. It's a bit like what became performance art, experimental to that extent.

DE: And so what did you start teaching?

RRS: First year. Modelling and exercises.

DE: And was that your first time teaching? How did you take to it?

RRS: Yes, it went OK. I was an arrogant little shit. And I found that Frank Martin was asking the students how I was going and I was so offended I told him to get fucked.

DE: These days, of course, you just have to wear that. These days you're asked to fill out a form, rating your teacher's performance.

RRS: It's like Newton. Newtown would talk to himself in front of the blackboard and then get distracted and wander off. They'd sack Isaac Newton! The one key thing in all of this that I'd like to go on the record is that all of this is making me sound like a bright young man but without the experience of being taught by Lyndon Dadswell I'm not sure I would have been able to conduct myself with knowledge and confidence about teaching and being analytical about works. A lot of people who went to St Martins left under the pressure [of it]. I just felt that it was a continuation of the critical nature of teaching and art, and that I was imbued by Lyndon. He was a brilliant teacher. A lot of brilliant teachers in the painting department, like Passmore, became mythological, they were gurus, but Lyndon Dadswell was explicit. He tried desperately to explain what was working and what wasn't and why, and coming up with ideas about how you could find new ways of seeing things. So when I went to St Martins it was almost like a continuous thing. There was a change of gear.

DE: Indeed. I don't know how much of an intellectual Dadswell was.

RRS: That's where the gear change was. I don't think he was an intellectual but he was really intelligent about art. Not the theory behind art, just in front of works. That's the really important thing. He could say, 'If you lift that bit that will let in some space and the whole thing will start working better'. That's the sensibility and the analytical thing that helps people better understand the nature of art. And he was generous.

DE: He seems to have been very generous, humble, experimental in the sense that nothing was censored, I don't think, but that was partly because ultimately he seems to have been driven by a seeking that never finished. I don't think that he felt he had found his path artistically by the end of it.

RRS: No, and then he resented all that work he did as a teacher and I found that a really sad conclusion. For me too there's an issue where he called himself a sculptor and designer. This was trying to fit in in the godforsaken desert that Australia was in the 1950s.

DE: Ultimately it's a diluted form of Bauhaus philosophy that sends itself through America by the 40s and 50s and then he goes over there on a Fulbright scholarship. He went to a lot of design schools instead of art schools. I think many artists toyed with the idea of artists being designers for an industrial society.

RRS: They thought that might be the way of the future. On the other hand, I think it's incredibly silly to try and be prophetic about art. Art's where artists take it, not always where artists dream about taking it.

DE: Yes. Klippel's view was that he was creating in decades where, for the first time in human history, art didn't have any relevance or function, and that was a source of huge pessimism and he just had to reconcile that with himself. But he would have preferred to have been working in an era where there was a social function for art. He felt that art was no longer relevant.

RRS: I think all of that is a romance. I think it would be very nice if some of those things were to come about or be true. It is a very isolating experience being an artist working alone in the studio. On the other hand, I never had any of those thoughts. I actually feel that people who entertain those ideas are deeply unsure of their artistic feelings.

DE: I'd have to say that, in relation to Klippel, that it is palpably not the case.

RRS: I would say it is, but there you are. In art there are no principles and so you can only talk about certain insights and that's not necessarily true in general or for everybody. But I do feel that a lot of people who have romances about those things are unsure of what they're doing.

DE: I think there are myriad ways in which people feed their creative drives.

RRS: I do want Dadswell's name to be in here though because some of the others that survived had to make a massive leap, and I felt like this was a change of gear but that I was on the same road. It was the critical thing in the studio that a lot of people couldn't cope with – someone pulling your work apart and putting it back together again to demonstrate something about the nature of your work and the nature of sculpture. Dadswell wasn't an intellectual but all those people in the change of gear were. Caro had read engineering at Cambridge, King had read modern languages at Cambridge, Bill Tucker read history at Oxford, Tim Scott was an architect who had already worked for Le Corbusier.

DE: And that would have contributed to the excitement.

RRS: Oh, it was for me. In Australia, apart from Dadswell and a small handful of people, sculptors were seen as people who walked around dragging their knuckles on the ground. They certainly weren't intellectuals.

DE: Still then?

RRS: Oh yes. Painters used to call us monumental stonemasons.

DE: I always thought that was a late 19th-century thing, and [Auguste] Rodin had countered that.

RRS: Not in Australia at East Sydney Technical College. That was still how you were viewed a little bit in the sculpture department.

DE: So you liked teaching. Did you try and simulate Dadswell's mode of teaching, a mode about encouraging curiosity?

RRS: Yes, I was imbued with it. I didn't think, 'I should do this'. I was just imbued with it. I drew on a lot of his ideas for projects, to find ways to get through to students to demonstrate things. I drew on all my experience.

DE: So did you think, 'I can go forward with this, I can be a good teacher'? You have intellectual curiosity.

RRS: I've got that. And that's a thing in itself.

DE: That's a most important thing.

RRS: I didn't think of that as a tool for another thing. That was the thing.

DE: You've also got a certain level of chutzpah, which probably, would you say, came from your mother?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And you've got a certain level of self-confidence, which perhaps came from Dadswell, his sympathetic form of teaching.

RRS: He did have a sympathetic form of teaching. You respected teachers like that. He was called Mr Dadswell for a long time. That was the whole school in lots of respects.

DE: Were those sorts of hierarchies in place at St Martins?

RRS: To a lesser extent. They were being dismantled. Tony was always Tony.

DE: Tell me about East Ham.

RRS: I never had proper art historical training. I was just talking to people about the nature of art.

DE: But you were a bit of an autodidact too, weren't you?

RRS: Yes. I think a lot of the people in the class had to do some sort of liberal studies and, if I think about it now, I used to sweat to come up with themes and have some historical background to the things I was saying, and I think I was probably just entertaining them. The real teaching came about at East Ham.

DE: Where is East Ham?

RRS: I don't know, somewhere in London.

DE: You're down [in the biography] as teaching art history in the department of art and design at East Ham Technical College in 1965. Did you apply for that?

RRS: I think someone offered me a job. I think it was through a friend. The English art system had foundation schools, and it was more complicated because they were funded by the municipality. Here we have federal, state and the third tier of government, but England only has federal and municipal, so the municipalities funded education.

DE: Did you think [by now] that your life was in England, and that you could have a teaching career in order to work as a painter and sculptor? That you would be there indefinitely?

RRS: It's very easy to get homesick if you were brought up not far from Redleaf Pool, at Bondi Beach, and everything was so tough in England. Rations only stopped a couple of years before I arrived. It is grey. And I can be prone to depression, so things like that were really unenjoyable.

DE: And you might not have had money to travel extensively?

RRS: Hardly ever. We were always broke. And all of the wonderful things London could do for you, you had to be quite well off to take advantage of.

DE: You weren't getting off to Paris every second weekend.

RRS: When I first arrived from [London's] Kings Cross station, I got up in the morning and there was a dull orange ball in the sky that I could look at. It took me a minute to realise it was the sun. No. It was very hard. It was cold. The one thing that really wore me down was in the winter, if you were working, you got up in the dark and came home in the dark. I have never experienced that in Australia. Here, often you could go for a swim before you went to work or after you go home, and that [darkness] seemed to me to be a really oppressive sensation. There must have been an idea in the back of my mind that I would return but, because I thought I was an intellectual, I pushed it back but I realised later on that there was a feeling of that. I felt much happier and more at home in Rome and Paris and Greece.

DE: But they wouldn't have been feasible to live in.

RRS: No. Well, we did live in Greece for a year. When we first arrived in London I found it so horrendous. We lived in a suburb [of Athens] below the Acropolis, in Anafiotika. I learnt to carve marble in the third cemetery of Athens. Then I moved out to Amarousi, where all the potters were gathered.

DE: So East Ham. Did you teach full-time?

RRS: I think I started off part-time and then they made me head of studies.

DE: Yes, in 1966. Were you presenting yourself at this time as both an art history teacher and a practical teacher?

RRS: Mostly a practical teacher. The art history was really minimal.

DE: But it probably was across the board then?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And by 1967 you went to Goldsmiths. Tell me a bit about East Ham. Was it an interesting school?

RRS: It was a terrific group of people. A foundation school. You did one or two years there and produced a portfolio and then you applied to the art schools of your choice.

DE: So it was like a preparatory school?

RRS: Yes.

DE: So it wasn't just teaching people how to become art teachers, which is what I thought it might have been, which is what a lot of those local schools were.

RRS: No. They were enormously competitive, unlike art schools where you could carry on and misbehave and be a drunk. In foundation schools, if your students didn't get in to the art school of their choice that was a serious litmus test. And we were very, very successful, and that's when they made me a head of studies.

DE: But you only did that for one year. Why?

RRS: One of the lecturers there had a boyfriend who taught at London University, Goldsmiths College. Goldsmiths was teacher training, and there was a major educationalist there called Anton Ehrenzweig, and he had quite a reputation, and he died, and I replaced a part of his role. He was probably a professor. It was one of the teaching institutions. In art education there has always been a conflict about whether you do it end-on: whether you go and do a teaching degree and do a little bit of your subject, or whether you do your subject and do the teaching degree afterwards; and this was very much end-on. You got your degree in art, and then did your Dip Ed [Diploma of Education]. So the whole ethos of that institution at that time was that we were really trained artists because that was the source, in my view, of them being good teachers, not because of some educational theory, and that was successful.

DE: And you only did that for a year. Why was that?

RRS: I started to think about coming home again.

DE: But you were on a good trajectory there. A lot of people went overseas for a two-to-three-year period and if they were not established by then they would come back. But you were gone for quite a while, and were becoming established, so it is an interesting move back. And I think when you returned you didn't like it. You were quoted in *The Bulletin* as saying it was an uncomfortable move back.

RRS: Well, because I thought I was coming home but after nearly ten years all your friends are ... It's so important to grow your relationships over those years but when they're just arbitrarily cut off then it's very difficult when you come back. Peter Powditch was probably the person I kept closest touch with [while I was away] and then I came back to a lot of people who were angry with me! I didn't even know who they were! [Laughter]

DE: Tell me what the final practical catalyst was for you to come back.

RRS: Kashell was out the back of my studio in London wanting to play outside, where it was so cold. It was just miserable and cold and he was wearing so many clothes he looked like a space man. It was no way to bring up a kid. I wanted him to swim at Bondi. It was a bit of a torture, though, because Greenberg had just been to Australia and he came to the studio, which was at 34 Stoneleigh Street, close to Notting Hill. Hammersmith maybe? Greenberg had been to Australia and he said, 'Don't go home. There are a lot of philistines and not enough millionaires'.

Kashell Robertson-Swann (KRS): Just jumping in. We lived in the houses that still had the stables attached. We lived in the stables that had the split level.

RRS: Upstairs was where the hay and things were kept and we lived there and downstairs was the studio, which had these great wooden doors. There were three or four other studios in that same alleyway. Ken Armitage or someone like that had one.

DE: Who were your associates at that time?

RRS: There were the teaching people of East Ham.

DE: Were you right in the scene, working out whose work you admired? Heading off to art exhibitions? Between 1965 and 68. Keeping in touch with Caro?

RRS: When Kashell was born it was Caro who paid for a telephone, because there were only public phones and in a neighbourhood they were all bugged, and if you needed to call

an ambulance or something ... We were living very poorly, hand to mouth. Everyone lived very poorly.

KRS: Mum used to say that we should have gone to America after London but it had been ten years, so it was not only bringing me home. Dad had been away and it was during this time of having to travel by boat and having limited communication with your family.

RRS: And you start to fantasise about home, about enjoying the long, hot summer school holidays and things like that.

DE: And if you'd gone to America you probably would have been a storeman packing boxes or something and you had been a head of department.

RRS: Yes. As a single person I would have had a go at that but not with a wife and kid. Although I was offered a job at Bennington [College, Vermont] as perhaps Jules Olitski's assistant but that fell through. So that would have been a leg in and I would have done that.

DE: Did you line up a teaching job before you came back to Australia?

RRS: No, I just wanted to come home. There is a naivety running through a lot of this as a thread.

DE: I don't think of you as naive so that's an issue we have to sort ...

RRS: But I have a real issue about prophecy or the future. I rarely, if ever, consider judgements about where I should go, where my career is at. I have a very negative reaction to that way of thinking.

DE: Before you left London, you said you'd met Clem Meadmore. Was that with Hutchinson? Did you meet as sculptors? Were you interested in each other's work? Did you know anything about his work at that time?

RRS: I knew him as a sculptor. I'd seen his work. I can't remember at this point if he'd started to do the ...

DE: Well, 1965, no, not completely. He was probably still doing those rusted, linear rod works.

RRS: I thought he was a bit East Sydney art school and I didn't really regard that.

DE: But was he introduced to you as an important Australian player?

RRS: He would have been but I wouldn't have taken that very seriously. I'd already met Henry Moore, George Rickey, [Isamu] Noguchi.

DE: Did you have anything to do with Paolozzi?

RRS: I knew of him but I just thought his work was kind of a mad woman's breakfast at that time, that it lacked clarity. I know there were aspects of Paolozzi that I liked. He was a nice man. We were going in another direction. When you're young and have a passion and a bit of an idea about something, you're a bit stupid [about everything else], you have blinkers. If something doesn't fit where you're going ... It takes a bit of maturity to have it open out, to appreciate other things, and I wasn't that mature.

DE: So Meadmore was a fleeting acquaintance.

RRS: I then saw him later, a few times in New York, and then he'd made more mature sculptures and he had established himself in New York and he was passionately into jazz and he was a generous, nice man. In fact, in my office at the National Art School, there's a beautiful drawing of him when he'd last visited Australia.

DE: By?

RRS: Carol ... She is a wonderful drawer. It [her surname] will come to me. She used to teach drawing. He had Parkinson's at the time and it was difficult to talk to him but then when he got up to give his lecture he was great.

So Max Hutchinson and Rudy Komon came to see me in London, and Daniel Thomas, but they were the two dealers who came. I think, not directly, but through somebody else, [I had heard] that Clement Meadmore was having real troubles with Max Hutchinson, over money, and I was warned through Meadmore to not trust him.

DE: Did you get to know Fred Williams too in the 1960s? Was that after you got back?

RRS: After I got back. That's because I was a founding member of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council. Fred, Len French, they also showed at Rudy's. But I really liked Fred. He was genuinely interested in art – in his art and in other people's art. When everyone was up in arms about Greenberg in Australia, he was the only one who actually listened to him and they became friends and there was a mutual respect there. When everyone was up in arms about masking tape and formalism ... I miss Fred.

At one stage John Olsen and I were very close. He came to visit me in London. He brought a whole lot of paintings over and no one would give him a show. I don't know what happened to those paintings. And then on a trip to Corsica he had a massive accident with the whole family, and Anne and I rang every day. We helped out in the limited way we could, and I think we were the ones who told the Lanceleys what was happening. And when we came back, he was initially quite friendly, out at Watsons Bay.

DE: Tell me about some of your early works. *First innocence* 1962, *Big red* is 1965. How many did you bring back with you?

RRS: Very few. That's why we came back by boat. It was all we could afford. Not many works, but books, furniture. We had so much weight. It was our whole life after a decade.

DE: How many works had you been producing?

RRS: I don't know. I don't think like that. But you couldn't bring back many sculptures unless you were rich. Paintings, at least, you can roll up, so I brought back paintings. One sculpture was in a travelling show in England and they sent that back for me.

DE: Which one?

RRS: *Spring green*, I think.

DE: *First innocence* you gave to Anne.

RRS: Yes, but Caro's got one version of that. I just took all the templates and made it back here. So with *Big red*, there's the wheels that are special, the cast iron feet are special, and then the rest I made, I refabricated it, because I couldn't have brought the whole thing back. They took [a copy of James Joyce's novel] *Ulysses* off me at Customs.

DE: Why?

RRS: They went through all of our things. Apparently it was banned but actually it had been banned years ago and then the ban had come off but they still took it from me. That's when I knew I was home. Don't forget the Catholics had a book list [of publications banned by the church authorities]. There was a series of photographs. A really good photographer, Christopher Killip, who is now head of photography at Princeton, was one of our good friends, and Anne had collected some Indian jewellery, and there was some jewellery that I had made, and he had taken some photographs of Anne nude in the jewellery, and they were taken [by Customs].

DE: Can you tell me about the first two or three years back in Australia? [Quoting from *The Bulletin*, 1968] 'I found my homecoming uncomfortable. I'd forgotten the paranoia and the jealousies. There's no professional criticism here, everyone involved in the arts is in journalism and they can't do justice to the arts. Good things don't happen because there's not an external concern. Australians just don't see enough sculpture. Painting can be identified as long as there's a piece of stretched canvas on the wall. They may hate it but they identify it as a painting but truly modern sculpture is not so easily identifiable. Sculpture has come off its pedestal.'

RRS: No wonder people hated me.

DE: [Reads] 'While it's on a pedestal no matter how abstract it appeared there was an implied core. It had the feeling of being an altar. Now this is gone. Like the syntax of a sentence you must read it and very few people can. I only know of one man in Sydney who can and he's got nothing to do with the world of art.'

RRS: Harry Nicolson.

DE: Did you join the Society of Sculptors when you got back?

RRS: I was invited to, and they were a reasonably professional group. Any serious sculptor in at one stage or another in those days. Now it's just amateurs.

He [Nicolson] had a major influence on my life.

KRS: When David Handley was starting Sculpture by the Sea, he wanted one of the first judges to be the head of sculpture at COFA [College of Fine Arts, Sydney] and Dad and Michael Le Grand put their foot down and said, 'No way'.

RRS: Would it have been Ken Reinhard? The head of the school. I can't remember.

DE: 'Paranoia and jealousies'. What did you mean specifically? What happened in those first couple of years?

RRS: I came back late 1968 and went home to my parents. That was a bit of a disaster. Then I think I won the Transfield Prize and then the Comalco award and on account of that we bought a house, for \$8500, in Darlinghurst.

DE: That's pretty remarkable. So Comalco, that was in aluminium. So what happened exactly? A bit of part-time teaching, then the prizes? Can you remember?

RRS: No.

DE: Anyway, you got back in the scene, started teaching part-time at the University of New South Wales in the architecture department. What did you teach?

RRS: Who was that guy that taught? Lloyd Rees. He taught [the students] rendering, the 'artist's impression' of the building sort of thing. I was more conceptual. There was somebody called Nicholson, an English guy, who had done a major commission in a shopping centre somewhere, who was a bit of a character on the scene, verging toward the conceptual, who put together a program and we taught from that program. He selected a number to teach and I taught with Michael Johnson.

[Break in interview]

DE: So you know your way around an art crowd, you land back [in Australia], you're savvy, I think you are starting to form ideas about what you want to do, you very quickly produce work. Take us through the Comalco work. I think it was an invitation prize?

RRS: Yes [the Comalco Invitation Award for Aluminium].

DE: So you were invited. There were clearly ripples when you came back. Did you have a show straight away? You were in *The field* straight away.

RRS: *The field* was actually being hung when my boat was coming into Melbourne and I went in to the gallery because we had so many hours before it went to Sydney so I went in to see my paintings being hung, by Royston Harpur, I think.

DE: Had Brian Finemore and John Stringer got a hold of you in London and asked you to be involved?

RRS: Yes. Royston Harpur was in London for quite a while too and I knew him – ish. Most of my colleagues in London were people that I'd gone to school with. But I knew there was a cohort of Australians – Lanceley, Klippel, Royston Harpur and a half-dozen others who've never seen the light of day again – and they all seemed to live very close to each other in a rabbit warren of a place and some of them were nice people but for me they had missed what was really going on in London.

DE: And what was really going on in London?

RRS: Well, certainly St Martins School was making a significant change in things.

DE: Heading towards minimalism?

RRS: I never saw it as minimalism.

DE: It's a much berated and misrepresented term, isn't it?

RRS: Yes, and for me there were certain Americans who were minimalists and there was a major show in America with some St Martins people and minimalists, and I think they were seriously threatened by the St Martins School and they put all the English sculptors in the bushes, as it were, and they were the ones who were minimalists and they had an agenda, but not just an agenda, a manifesto.

DE: So you were invited to the Comalco. Why was the win controversial? You won with a work called *Beethoven* [1963, remade 1968]?

RRS: No, that was in Mildura [at the fourth Mildura Sculpture Triennial], and that was another remade work [from London]. I did that work as a post-graduate student in London, but couldn't afford to ship it out so I did all the engineering measurements and made it again Australia.

Tony Tuckson was the one who selected my work to win [the Comalco in 1969] against a lot of competition because I think they wanted the Margo Lewers [to win]. Owen Broughton, Jock Clutterbuck, Bert Flugelman, Margel Hinder and Stephen Walker were also in it. I'm the only winner of the Comalco prize to never have had their work realised. They gave it to Margo. But he [Tuckson] was fabulous and was absolutely confident that mine was the important work. [The judging panel for 1969 was Tuckson, deputy director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales; Eric Westbrook, director of the National Gallery of Victoria; and RM Simpson, partner of Yuncken Freeman Architects.]

DE: Can you remember who the competition was?

RRS: No, and he was pretty discreet about that but he was fabulous. I think that's one of the first times I met him and he was very nice and explained to me what had happened.

DE: And were you stunned?

RRS: I was stunned to win the prize but it took a while to filter through that mine wasn't going to be made, because I'd had engineering drawings made.

DE: But it hit the press fairly soon, I think. I have press clippings.

RRS: I don't remember that.

DE: OK. Was there prize money?

RRS: Comalco was \$2500 and the Transfield Prize was about \$5000.

DE: That was substantial. And there were significant players in the field at that time entering the prize.

RRS: Yes, and you can see how different mine was, so no wonder they didn't know what to do with it.

DE: So Transfield? Was that invitational?

RRS: No, that was the Transfield Prize for painting.

DE: Until the notion of avant-garde, which seemed to change every year or every 18 months in the 60s and 70s, suddenly became defunct, and after that it's just like tossed fruit salad and no one knows what's going on. Ultimately isn't it about the market hitting the art world in a large way post World War II? Aren't we looking at the increasing commodification of art? Where conceptualism presents a conflict because it becomes the avant-garde position and yet it's not very commercial, but then, of course, it is finally commercial.

RRS: That's when my deepest cynicism sets in because they all decided to make works that would be uncollectable so they would be uncontaminated by the influence of the commercial world and capitalism – most of them also had jobs in institutions of one sort or another [laughs] – and then they start finding a way to commercialise them.

DE: A lot of people actually did it in good faith. The one always cited is Ian Milliss, who became part of that conceptualist pack – Terry Smith, Marr Grounds – and was probably the only one who took it to its final degree, actually left the art world and was doing graphics for union magazines. OK. The Transfield Prize of 1969. Who judged that?

RRS: That's the reason we talked about Daniel Thomas. He had declared, from *The field* show, that Michael Johnson was the painter of his generation and that I was the sculptor of my generation. Though I only had paintings in *The field*, he'd seen works of mine in London and probably elsewhere. And I thought, 'Well, these are the trendsetters. Why would I bother [entering the Transfield Prize] if it was going to be judged by Daniel Thomas or James Gleeson or Donald Brook? No one is going to get my painting.' Then I found out at the last minute that it was going to be [judged by] an American and I thought, 'That leaves the field open', and I picked out a painting I'd just stretched [*Sydney summer*] and I sent it in. And it turned out to be James Fitzsimmons, the publisher and editor of *Art International* [who was judging]. I don't follow up things like that with great detail but I may well have been the first Australian painter to get a painting reproduced on the cover of *Art International*. [Note: Fitzsimmons would, in 1970, publish an article in *Art International* by Harry Nicolson on Robertson-Swann's work and illustrate *Sydney summer* on the cover of the issue.]

DE: So did all the Central Street [Gallery] artists cluster around you?

RRS: Oh no, they hated me. Winning that prize seriously ruined friendships [laughs].

DE: Do you think there was also a sense of: 'What the bloody hell are you? Are you going to be a sculptor or a painter?'

RRS: Picasso and Matisse! The two great figures of the 20th century ...

DE: But we're back in Sydney now and that ambidextrous drive ... I'm not sure there are others doing that, are there?

RRS: Michael Johnson tried, but only because I was doing it.

DE: OK, so Transfield caused some ripples.

RRS: Yes. I don't know who was meant to [win], probably Michael Johnson. I thanked James Fitzsimmons very much, naturally, at a dinner and he took me aside and he thanked me, because he said if he'd had to select the next ones down he'd be in deep trouble. I think he meant that. You don't have to say that unless it's true. I took it as truth because it felt good! [Laughs]

DE: I hope you didn't tell anyone else because that might be where the controversy came from.

RRS: Of course I did [laughs].

DE: You don't mind having an intellectual stoush, and in fact you like to.

RRS: I find it stimulating.

DE: By 1969–70 there would have been strong factions forming in Sydney. Mike Parr is starting to set up Inhibodress with Peter Kennedy, and a dozen others want to go down the performance route. There's Central Street Gallery artists, who find themselves stranded after the tide's gone out by 1970–71. It's all starting to fracture, or is it just a mythology to think that prior to this there was more homogeneity? I think there was a change, a politicisation

which went on which had not been part of the agenda for a lot of artists. Did the artists have a sense of what was going on?

RRS: They're probably in their own silos, making noises about how they should be seen. My feeling is that, under Edmund Capon, there was a failure at the Art Gallery of New South Wales to collect some important works that should have been seen. I think he was in competition with the Museum of Contemporary Art rather than finding another role for the Gallery. Then there was his focus on Asian art, but the Gallery had Michael Johnson and one or two others in there, but that whole period is really poorly represented.

DE: Did you find it more ruthless, less collegiate [in Sydney] than you'd been expecting?

RRS: Yes. I couldn't decide if that was [just] Australia or that's where art was going. When there's so little at stake, things get extra nasty. Every tiny morsel of attention was jealously guarded.

DE: Were you seen as a bit of a know-it-all who'd been away for a decade and then triumphed over the scene?

RRS: No, I never felt that because no one ever gave me that sort of a go. I would have thought I was a bit of a prick.

DE: But you were creating good work, were happy with what you were doing, and did you know where you wanted to go?

RRS: Yes, reasonably.

DE: The Mildura purchase prize?

RRS: That was with *Beethoven*, I think. One of the important things about Central Street that I found difficult – and this was an alienating experience for me ... There were serious divisions in the art world in England too but all the sculptors and a small handful of painters and a small handful of American painters would all visit your studio, you'd visit theirs, you would talk about art, there would be great criticisms; it was really a massively collegiate thing that was highly critical but enormously incisive and informative, and you did feel like a part of a serious community.

DE: Which you didn't feel here?

RRS: When I went to Central Street, where I thought my natural home might be, they'd already turned all those things into an academy. A lot of those things they saw as reproductions in magazines. They were so hard-edge. They painted so well, but they really misread a lot of stuff that they were influenced by. All of the things they said were important, I knew were not important.

DE: Was James Doolin around?

RRS: Yes. He was a little bit better and some of those archway pictures were really quite good. The New York painters, the Washington school and other New York painters – Morris Louis, Ken Noland, Jules Olitski and David Smith – they were some of the major influences. Johnson was influenced by Al Held and Ellsworth Kelly.

DE: Had Johnson been overseas?

RRS: He was in London on our second meeting. He was being influenced by minor American artists. I knew Greenberg, Noland, Olitski. I'd been in their studios, they'd been in mine. I'd actually helped Noland paint some of his paintings so there was a real contact there, and when I went to Central Street they had all these rules and regulations and ideas of what these people were doing and I just knew that it wasn't what they were doing or what they were thinking. They were so evangelistic about their position, and I was thinking, 'It's not quite like that'. The direction of it maybe but they were missing the really important thing. So the people I thought I could really identify with, it didn't turn out that way.

DE: Were they interested in the debate?

RRS: Not really. That may have been a jealousy factor. If it was me, I would have sucked their brains out. They were a bit high-handed with me.

DE: And what about the Terry Smith–Donald Brook faction? Did you have anything to do with them?

RRS: They weren't unsympathetic to Central Street, but they just moved on to the next [thing]. A bit like most people move on to the next and the next. Art develops over a whole lifetime. Nobody stays there that long to keep looking. Partly through my disposition and partly through Harry Nicolson, I had begun to listen to and try to understand something about philosophy because the great influence on a whole generation who were just a bit older than me – Clive James, Robert Hughes and the like – was John Anderson, and I was [influenced by Anderson] via Harry Nicolson.

DE: When did you meet Harry Nicolson?

RRS: He spent most of his life at Cranbrook [School] except for a period when he went to East Sydney Tech and was head of studies. He was interested in art, and was a friend of the librarian John Kaplan.

DE: Kaplan was seriously smart, wasn't he? A European intellectual.

RRS: Yes. This was the 1950s, before I left. They ran a discussion group about philosophy. The first one was 'Kant to Cassirer', and that got me in as a 17-year-old. So why do I have the disposition that I have? That's part of it.

DE: East Sydney Technical College has become quite easy to criticise. People say they didn't really learn anything there, so that's a good counterpoint.

RRS: Orest Keywan would be a good one to talk about Kaplan. He knew Kaplan's ex-wife. We just had three fellows inducted last night as fellows of the National Art School [previously East Sydney Technical College] – Ann Thomson, Ken Unsworth and the woman who makes videos [Susan Norrie] – and in those circumstances they were talking warmly about those things. The institution has given them a bonnet and a robe and they were all seen, at that age, to be touched by the recognition, and I think it's very important to build the school, to make it a more serious place. But generally when you speak to artists they always downplay their art schools or their influences. They were all geniuses.

DE: It's a convention, but there are nuances. It's probably a partial truth. East Sydney Technical College probably had a contingent of fairly lacklustre teachers, like a lot of art schools, so it's the excellent ones that stand out.

RRS: There was a lot of stodginess in the school and there was a cubist 'blue' period where everything looked blue, and that was a way of doing things and everyone was on automatic

in their teaching, and Peter Laverty as a young man was a breath of fresh air and an inspired teacher.

DE: I didn't ask you what your reaction was when you got off the boat in Melbourne and went to see *The field*. Did you think, 'This is interesting', or did you think, 'This moment's gone'?

RRS: I don't remember being deeply impressed. I was disappointed in the sculpture, which was all minor. The paintings were better. What might be blurring my memory is all the shit that hit the fan because all these upstarts were getting such attention at the major opening of the gallery. All the Melbourne establishment certainly felt that they deserved that moment in the sun and because I was at Rudy's gallery as well ... But I was just green. I knew nothing about the art world [in Australia] so for me the storm was ... I just sat there stunned. Also because that work didn't seem as outrageous to me as it was seen in Australia.

DE: Those have been the retrospective critiques: that by the time that Finemore and Stringer were putting the works on the wall, they were a form of well-established art themselves. Hence the notion of a 'radical' show to open the gallery wasn't necessarily accurate.

RRS: But the reaction to it was.

DE: Yes. Were you involved in that other exhibition where they reprised *The field*? [*The field now*, Heide Park Art Gallery, 4 September - 21 October 1984]

RRS: Yes.

DE: I think it [the later show] made the point that the original *The field* was not particularly well visited, even though it was a press controversy and an art-world controversy.

It's interesting that you became interested in philosophy from the Kaplan course in the 50s. Certainly by the 1960s the zeitgeist seems to place responsibility on artists to become philosophically more knowledgeable. I don't know exactly why, except that perhaps it goes hand in hand with the politicisation of art, the fact that boundaries across the board were being broken down.

RRS: I've seen a lot of Donald Brook's early sculpture. The sensibility involved in that and then the things he went on to encourage, there's a big gap.

DE: Of course there is.

RRS: You've got to wonder about the gap. Then the other thing is there was a sculpture triennial in Canberra a few years ago and it was meant to be serious sculptors. It was set up by people who made things, and then it got taken over by all the others, flashing lights and burying sculptures. Donald was invited to be the guest speaker at one of the forums they had and he just got up and said that all the things that he had encouraged – the experimental art centre in Adelaide, teaching in Adelaide – didn't really bear much fruit, and he said, 'All I can say to the people who make things, get on with it'. Then they turned on him. They said he's losing it, he's just getting old. So at that point Donald seemed to me to no longer be the king.

DE: But where's the line between absorbing change around you and having that affect you and growing with that? Where's the boundary between that which is absolutely legitimate and probably necessary, and jumping on the bandwagon of fashion? Where do we judge? You are talking about someone who moved from being a practitioner to a theorist, and when you say there's a gap, well the gap is: he stopped producing. You don't end up where you

began. I thought he was, like Elwyn Lynn, smart and a good critic and honest about precisely what his interests were. There was no voice of objectivity, no connoisseurial standing on the high ground and declaring that this is what anyone with any taste would think. He declared his hand very early on.

RRS: Oh, yes. He was far more thorough going than Jack [Lynn].

DE: I think he was a pretty excellent critic.

RRS: Jack?

DE: Yes.

RRS: I think Jack was a better critic. The only thing was that he was less honest and honourable than Donald, because if you got up his snooter you'd be punished. You would read it.

DE: Did that happen to you?

RRS: He was one of [John] Anderson's brightest students. He also had a really good grasp of art history and what he did, in a way that nobody else particularly did in Australia, he knew what a source of their art was. He took it all the way back to where it came from, and in Australia people think, 'Oh, somebody just did this today', and no one appears to see the influences [but] he was very thorough-going about that.

DE: What kind of philosopher was Anderson?

RRS: He was a realist. He started off on the Left until the revelations of Stalin, and he became what's called a realist, but that sounds like a pragmatist but it's a different proposition.

Someone else I think not to be overlooked is a student of his, John Passmore. He [Anderson] was a little like Wittgenstein in the sense that he didn't write an opus magnum, so a lot of things are collected essays, things that other people have written who took notes in his class etc. But his influence on intellectuals in Sydney was enormous, and people don't even know. I feel a little like Jack because I can trace, when I hear someone talk sometimes, I can trace Anderson's thoughts. There is one book on aesthetics ... It is interesting that we have to talk about popular figures overseas, but Anderson wrote something on serious art [*Art and reality: John Anderson on literature and aesthetics*, edited by Janet Anderson et al]. It is terrific [but] I have never heard anyone refer to it. He was desperately hated by the establishment because everything was up for grabs, as far as he was concerned – war memorials glorifying war, religion, the power of the church, freedom of speech. I think the Sydney Anglican diocese would have burned him at the stake if they could have. With Passmore, there [is a] fascinating distinction in his writing on art. He sees art as having three categories: entertainment; telic art, which is socially conscious art, as is all art these days; and serious art. Yes, of course! So much art is entertainment. It's really theatre.

DE: Michael Fried and the theory of the spectacle. The 20th century is the beginning of spectacle culture. I suppose that fits into it.

RRS: And telos – an ultimate object or aim. In Greek, it's literally 'end'. And it's towards an end. The environment, if you like.

DE: What do you mean by 'the environment, if you like'?

RRS: Well, that's a popular subject. Almost everything ... You know those little boxes you're meant to tick? The environment is the new religion. Passmore actually talked about that, I think, a long time ago, saying it's the least damaging of religions.

On the subject of Michael Fried, there's an email with a comment by Fried that I find deeply moving. The university brought him out here in 2013, but I didn't get to see him once. He was in Australia for three months.

DE: Give me the high points.

RRS: He visited Tony Caro's studio on his way back to America, and they sat down to talk about his trip to Australia and how he had travelled around the whole country for three months, and Tony asked him what he thought of Australian sculpture, and he said he thought Ron Robertson-Swann's work was the best modern sculpture he saw in Australia. Tony's PA [personal assistant], Jackie Honsig-Erlenburg, an Australian, let me know.

DE: You are deeply moved by that.

RRS: Of course. You may put that down as being a bit self-interested [laughs].

DE: That's interesting. It's a bit like Greenberg. It's become a bit of a hobby to criticise Michael Fried in the last ten or 15 years.

RRS: He was influenced by Clem [Greenberg].

DE: Oh yes, like Rosalind Krauss, but they both turned against him. So, what starts to happen in the 1970s? What happens to your work? That's the third big prize you've won since you returned – the Mildura Art Prize. You won in 1970. Did you have much to do with Tom McCullough?

RRS: Yes.

DE: And did you have much to do with him after 1970?

RRS: No, we fell out. He was a schoolteacher in Mildura. They picked him up and ran with him. They sent him around the world to all the sculpture parks. They gave him that job and he then shat all over them, the people of Mildura. He put on works that flew in their face. This was a community-based operation. This was a relatively small town. The history and tradition of the Mildura Triennial was the way you would have to trace the development of sculpture in Australia over a certain period. It was so important. It was a neutral place where everybody went. We all helped each other with our works, putting them up, [there were] campfires and dinners and dealers all turned up for the openings from all over Australia, and it was really good.

DE: Until when?

RRS: Until all that stuff about performance.

DE: 1976?

RRS: Yes, and then he totally alienated ... And he seemed to enjoy shocking the people of Mildura, and I just thought that was naive and stupid. He was encouraging the most way-out artists, [who were] blowing up things and having shop fronts and nudity.

DE: But that's what was happening. If you wanted to view Mildura as a kind of litmus test of what was going on in contemporary Australia in terms of three-dimensional work, he plotted those changes. He was a conduit. He had a set of knowledgeable artists behind him, certainly John Davis in Melbourne was a core one.

RRS: He was a bit of a cult figure.

DE: He was. I think Tom McCullough made a large impact, and then he went with the general trends, so started to get the German performance artists in.

RRS: I agreed with what he did at the beginning and it always was important. When the Dutchman [Ernst van Hattum] was running it, it was important. You can still trace the development of Australian sculpture through those triennials.

He [McCullough] just went overboard. You could say he really did bring it to life, he made it important, but then by going overboard – which you could argue was just responding to what was going on out there – he was encouraging them. It was a mixture of driving and encouraging them.

DE: He certainly became personally very interested in performance and pushed a strong performance line, and in Melbourne he later managed a performance duo, DDart, but I think Mildura was a very conservative town. My impression was that there were some appalling councillors and they made it their business to try and destroy him, and they burnt the catalogue! It's hard to feel any sympathy for the people of Mildura ...

RRS: Possibly, but there was as much dissent amongst the sculptors as there was with the town. Tom just kept pushing it in one direction and it was no longer a survey of what we thought serious sculpture was.

DE: What is serious sculpture? What is Bert Flugelman's 'tea ceremony performance' sculpture from Mildura? [This is likely to be Flugelman's *Australian cottage*, also known as *Pioneer cottage* and *Colonial cottage*, with Julie Ewington in 1973.]

RRS: Obscene? It created serious divisions in the art world as well as with the public.

DE: But such divisions wouldn't trouble you, would they?

RRS: It was because it had a particular tradition. He [McCullough] was fabricating a lot of the more confrontational stuff. He swayed dramatically in one direction. But you don't have to exclude other serious endeavours.

DE: He didn't strike me as the kind to do that.

RRS: We used to have meetings in Sydney and meetings in Melbourne, of all of the artists. We'd all come together and argue about these things. He was certainly in full flight. Also, along with Sir Roy Grounds, I was part of a committee to try and establish that new area down to the river as a sculpture park. So I was playing a major role in ensuring that that continued, and that it was a properly organised and designed thing that was part of the community's assets, because it was just sandy scrub. He went too far, too quickly, and a great deal of artists felt that, as well as the community, and when it's a community-based project, you've got to be a little bit ... You can sneak in a hell of a lot without ... He rubbed it in their faces. He got so caught up with wild avant-garde, challenging the world.

DE: Maybe he did, but he didn't get what he deserved. He got rather less than he deserved, I think.

RRS: I thought he did a lot of that to himself. They are my views on that. I agree partly with what you are saying, but then he published something in the school magazine criticising *Vault*, which was really quite nasty.

DE: Why did he hold you partly accountable [for his career troubles]? Were you sitting on a committee, or had you been quite vocal about the directions in which he was going?

RRS: Yes, but I was also on the committee trying to make that into a real sculpture park and make it really work. I didn't like what he was doing, but I was also the leading bloody light in [protesting] the French issue of the nuclear [testing in the Pacific].

DE: Saying 'No, we won't do it'?

RRS: Yes. While I have feelings and ideas about politics, I don't think they necessarily relate very well to art. I don't think art is a very good medium to express those kinds of things. But to make a protest is a separate question. I was infuriated.

There were two aspects to it. The French government were really inserting a group of artists into the show without all the other things we had to go through to be selected. I'm not so sensitive about those sorts of things but at that time I was in England during the Havana crisis [Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962] and I thought, 'This is not a country I want to die in', and I was really pissed off at the French. Do it in your own backyard. And that's all it was about, fairly simple. And a lot of other artists were fairly unhappy about them coming in as a group, so I led that.

DE: Was he unhappy about that?

RRS: No, he loved all that sort of stuff. He didn't object to us doing that.

DE: Mildura might be a good place to stop today. I think by 1980 it had very little to do with things being too radical, it was perhaps more that it was unwieldy, no longer a model that was necessarily going to work. Most artists I have spoken to have said that these triennials were fabulous.

RRS: It was! I got Franco Belgiorno-Nettis to give me a handful of money and I had my students and they all lined up and I just peeled off the money and gave it to them, and said, 'See you in Mildura'. They all got together and shared cars, and I took them all there as part of their art education. The whole sculpture department went there, and through this small amount of money that Franco gave us we made sure they weren't too out of pocket. We went down before it opened, so they went there and helped all the artists put work up. They were the working bee, the site crew, and that's how you meet artists. You can meet an artist at the opening and say, 'Oh, I like your work', and they say, 'Thanks', or 'Piss off'. You get to know them and see what's really going on when you're helping them put up their work. So I supported all that, and I was the first one to bring all the students down there.

DE: By the way, did you go and see Christo's *Wrapped Coast* [at Little Bay, Sydney, in 1968–69]? What was your take on that?

RRS: Again, I was central to that project being realised. Once again, students from the National Art School sculpture department put the thing together with people from Sydney University architecture department. I've got letters from Christo thanking me for all the work and all the labour.

DE: Did that really galvanise artists and the Sydney art world? Is it as important an event as Kaldor Art Projects have maintained?

RRS: It was major and it had a spectacular effect. But it was entertainment, and where do you go from there? Very few people's work developed as an influence from that. I had a very nice experience once in London. It was a very cold winter, it might have been 1963, and I was working at a restaurant and I came out at midnight and it had snowed and everything that I knew had changed. There were no sidewalks, the gutters were full, and the spaces were different, and there was a quietness that happens with snow, and it was stunning, and wrapping Little Bay was a very similar thing. It looked like snow had fallen all over the place and it changed everything, it changed the space.

DE: Which is an excellent point to make with sculpture.

RRS: Except ... People are struggling with a new thing called phenomenalism and I saw that in the realms of the phenomenal. It's a little bit like Immanuel Kant's distinction between beauty and the sublime. Art is beautiful, nature is sublime, and if you sit in front of a sunset you are deeply moved by the beauty of the thing which is encompassing you. But in fact there's not a lot of cognition, it's like a wave of something, and that was like that. But for me great art is both beautiful and involves cognition. But now there's an enormous amount of art being produced around the world on a massive scale that's all about that ... Now, it seems, to be a serious sculptor you need to spend two million dollars building a ... And there are things that are like 'wow' but not a lot that lasts and not a lot that I can feed off.

[End]