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NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

ARTISTS' LIVES

Paul Neagu

Interviewed by Mel Gooding

C466/27

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F4529 Side A

This is an Artists' Lives recording made with Paul Neagu at his home in Jackson Road on October the 4th 1994.

Paul I want to start by asking you about your childhood in Romania, where you were born, and about your family.

Right. I was born in Bucharest, the capital of Romania, two years before the Second World War, in other words in 1938. My family was a very young one, I'm the second out of six children, the second of the third, of three boys, which means before me, two years before me there was my first brother, called Edward, I am the second, Paul, followed by Anthony two years after me, followed by three sisters in the same kind of schedule, with two years in between. So my family constituted a few years later six children. My two parents I realised soon, once I was four and five, were very young. My father came from Moldavia, which is a northern, eastern province of actual Romania, from a small village called...the region was called Vaslui, the village was called Boloshesht[ph]. He came down to Bucharest via Galatz where he was an apprentice learning to make shoes. Apparently in his apprenticeship my father had for a master, he had a Greek chap, so during those years he even learned some Greek. He came down to Bucharest and the only place where he found enough warmth and social relationships happened to be - he was a young man at the time and quite naive, without much education, he only managed four classes of school - he kind of visited quite a lot, I don't know how it happened, how he was invited for the first time, to the Baptist church which at the time was, supposedly was evidently of American import. Spiritually my father therefore found a good house in a good warm society there, and it is in that church that he met my mother. She was even younger apparently, I think she was sixteen when they met, and very soon, by the time my father was eighteen they got married. So out of these very pure kind of simple, two very little education people, but with all their hearts in the right place, I mean the church took care of that, we started arriving in the world. He was by then qualified to run his own workshop, he had enough courage and support from the friends he had to start his own business as a shoemaker, and soon he specialised I believe in making shoes only for ladies. So

this was briefly as much as I knew by the time I was a schoolboy. So my schooling started in Bucharest by the time I was six. Because I was born in February I went to school half a year early, therefore I was altogether one year younger than the rest of my colleagues at the time. By the time I finished my third class the war had started, which of course brought havoc to the whole industry of my father and the situation of my parents. But somehow strangely enough, if we look retrospectively, it looks like the war didn't interrupt the rhythmicity with which we were brought into the world. By that obviously, later on I realised there was something to do with the fact that they were religiously Baptist, meaning things like abortion wasn't envisaged or even allowed within the Baptist folk, so this explains why the war didn't interrupt if you like the periodicity with which we were brought into this strange world. As you could imagine, before the war and during the war and immediately after my childhood, along with the other children, was surrounded by this tense situation, in spite of which my father continued to be a progressive person, he was always a very courageous character, and as I said first of all, he continued to have children, partly because of the religious faith, partly because he was a go-ahead kind of guy. My mother on the other hand was a very tense kind of woman and very much in complementarity with my father. He was, I believe, a Scorpio; I'm saying that with humour because of course no one paid any importance to the zodiac at the time, but in retrospect, we've been kind of having funny discussion in the family, realising that my father was the aggressive character and the courageous one, wanting to go ahead and build this thing, move there, invent things and so on. He was therefore an inventive and a very creative person, while my mother was accommodating all these things, this attitude of his, they the two of them being all the time, as far as I realised, together and kind of working as an incumbent[?]. So the war came around, my father at the time had to shut down his little shop where he had, by the time the war had started in '42 he had a couple of people working for him, therefore soon after that he was considered by the Communists to be an exploiter, simply because he wasn't just alone in his work as a freelance shoemaker, he was considered an exploiter by the simple fact that he had a good enough business to employ some other people. So he was called an exploiter. Of course I am saying this with a bit of cynicism, looking back on what happened, but such things have marked all my childhood, particularly when I started going to school, because my going to school after being moved, the whole family, to the

province of Banat, which is west of Romania, in other words immediately after the war, after two years or so being sent in the country to save us from the bombardment of Bucharest, we, the whole family, because my father's decision was to move to the west of Romania, which was quite a courageous move at the time, therefore he had given up Bucharest where his three boys were born, of course my third brother, the smaller one of the three, was very young at the time, in '42 he must have been two years of age. So with three boys, they moved to Timisoara, giving up house, shop and all the friends they had within the church and outside the church, because my circle, or rather my parents' circle of friends was always constituted around the church, the church was very magnetic to them and their socialising and their relationship with the world went through the church. I remember as a very young boy how important for instance was the Christmas. Christmas-time around this church in Bucharest meant not only a gathering of the warmest hearts they knew, but it also meant the time when, you know, gifts would arrive, chocolates and little toys from the United States, which is just as well I mention it to explain why later my father as a Baptist when they moved to Timisoara, the town in Banat, had spent some days in prison because all the Baptists of Romania were considered illegal as soon as the Communists took over, took power after the election in '47. Once the King of Romania, Michael, was pushed out, was pushed to abdicate, which happened about the same year when we moved to Timisoara, the Baptists became a kind of illegal religion in the sense that the Communists didn't accept something which they knew came as a spread from America. At the time, I'm not quite sure about the time in which Truman was the President of the United States, he was a Baptist, and several other personalities of political ranking in the Western world, particularly on the American side, and as you could imagine, together with the coming of the Allies, such things were immediately marked as being anti-Communist and so on.

Were the Communists tolerant of the predominant religion of Romania which I think is Orthodox?

It's true, they are Greek Orthodox, and they were tolerant because they had not much choice, they couldn't go against it from the very beginning. They were tolerant but without being very friendly, which is what happened for the rest of the Communist

time, meaning forty years to go since then. It came to the point where, say ten years ago, meaning in the early Eighties, there were very important Communist guys in certain towns and villages which were able to be important members of the Communist parties, as well as church builders for instance, they were supporting building new churches, which is to do with the double faced kind of role the church has played during the Communist years in Romania, which to some extent now, after the collapse of Communism has been taken against them, in other words they've been accused of being Jewlass[ph] as it were of the Romanian faith, of the Romanian...

Their accommodation with the Communists has now...

To an extent...

Has rebounded on them.

Exactly. So a lot of the high-ranking churchmen of Romania either have been ousted because of this behaviour during the Communist time, or they were just tolerated and they still are in power in some places, because politically they are also very well related to the people in power right now.

Could I just ask you Paul, does this mean that your father and your mother were originally Orthodox and converted to Baptism, to the Baptist Church?

It does, absolutely. Exactly were. As I was saying earlier, they met, they fell in love I assume, they met in Bucharest when my mother was sixteen, my father eighteen, which coincided with both of them coming into this Church. Before that they both came from families which were absolutely Greek Orthodox, particularly my father, because on my mother's side the background situation is less clear simply because she came from a family where both parents died in her youth. We inherited the mother therefore, which was without...who didn't have grandparents, she was an orphan from an early stage, so my mother came to Bucharest looking for jobs and working for rich people. She helped them as a nanny, as a kind of...

Yes, child-minder and...

A young peasant looking for a job in a town. And my father on the other hand came from this village I mentioned earlier, from Moldavia, and my mother being Transylvanian therefore quite a different part of Romania. My father came from Moldavia, a much poorer, one of the poorest parts of Romania, particularly during the war and just before, he came from a family who were, we know very well, there were sixteen children born to that same mother; my father was one of the eldest among the sixteen. Out of the sixteen, and this will explain quite a lot about the poverty of this part of Romania, of Moldavia, out of the sixteen children only nine survived, in other words the others died either immediately after birth or soon after that, either of starvation or some kind of diseases which were not treated. They were absolutely poor peasants, and my father was one of the three of his sisters and brothers who evolved, even though he didn't do more than four classes as I said, primary classes, through his keenship to educate and elevate himself, he managed...his major university therefore, in spite of his lack of real education, was the Church, and trying to start explaining how he became psychologically if you like, and spiritually, very much supported and educated as a person, morally nevertheless, morally especially, by the Bible, by the priests who he met in his youth, who he very much admired and followed. He used to be in the church every third day. As you might not know in the Baptist Church there are all kinds of services, some of them are analytical on the Bible texts, others are simply educational on moral tastes and moral criteria, not always in a very tight religious dogmatic way. This is why the Baptists are more or less like a family, they call themselves brothers and sisters, and they look to the Orthodox as being completely alienated and kind of hypocritical in the sense in which they run their own social lives.

Well I was going to say, of course the essence of a Baptist congregation is the openness of contact between the people in the congregation, and the equality...

And the intimacy, and the intimacy.

Yes, and the equality between them, whereas of course the Orthodox faith is marked by a great deal of ritual, a greatly hierarchical set-up within the Church, and so on.

Exactly. Well, the Orthodox ritual, because there is a ritual in the Orthodox Church, is definitely there, but it's much more traditional, much more ancient. So the way it penetrated society and still does is by being enforced. So it happens within the Church, not so much outside, as you work and so on. The Baptists became famous, I remember those years when they were prosecuted for a number of years, as I said, the Communists were against them, considering them little spies, little American faithful people, in spite of that they were also considered incredibly honest, so any corrupt Communist or any corrupt citizen, no matter what political colouring he was carrying, if he wanted to be trusted, he was seen as an enemy of the Baptists to the point that when later I was reaching the age of eighteen and I happened to work as a draughtsman in a large workshop in Timisoara, a State firm of engineers and technicians, they discovered, because they had informers, as a young draughtsman that I came from a family of Baptists, and they started a whole trial to oust me from what it was natural to become for me, a membership on the Communist Youth Organisation. So instead of giving me that naturally when the age came to be correct, they decided to...I wasn't the only one in that particular trial, there were three people for different reasons, my very strong...their very reason against me was the fact I came from a Baptist family, and so they investigated and interrogated me in public as it were, a public which was formed of course by the Communist Party members and the appendix of that, which is the Youth Communist Organisation. What does it mean to be a Baptist, why do I go to the Baptist church? Me as a little frightened by this process, I was very young, my parents were not participating there, I didn't tell them everything about it, so I was a bit scared by what was happening to me, were they going to throw me out of this job as well as not allowing me into their organisation, what was happening? And in the end I was lucky, because of their not very tight bureaucracy they forgot to take my organisation member card away, so that simply they allowed me to function as a draughtsman but not as a member of that organisation. But the very meeting which instigated this process was enough for the rest of the people to show that the Communist Party cannot have trust in anybody which has a belief in God or any kind of religious faith. On top of that the Baptists

were, like I said they were not accepted legally. This acceptance of the Baptists legally though, it did happen later, when together with the Jehovah Witnesses and other kind of new religious fervour had been accepted as a small department within the Ministry of Cults, which included all the religions. I'm not sure to what extent these fights of the Baptists to be accepted as a part and parcel of the Romanian social body was impeded by the Orthodox themselves; I wouldn't be surprised though if they would say, we would rather not accept them as a viable religion. But these are, you know, interstitial fights which go beyond my knowledge, and to be very honest, for what you are asking me, my childhood didn't really care too much one way or the other. What I did care for though in these years, because in Timisoara I finished my lyceum, which in Romanian terms it's like in the French system it's called the baccalaureate, normally finished at age eighteen, I did finish it at sixteen, partly because I went to school younger, and also because the system was slightly changed to not push you into twelve years of education but rather ten; that's how it happened that I was with the diploma of grammar school if you like, translation into the English system, aged sixteen, which was much younger than my bigger brother for instance. Another organisation of a Communist type which I couldn't avoid where you are caught, is what they called the Pioneers; the Pioneers are a form of Communist scout organisation, within which there are children from...yes, they are mostly, they were created for young people, boys and girls, from the time you are in school, meaning, I don't remember exactly, I suppose by the time you are twelve you could join this thing. From that Pioneer thing you joined therefore the Youth Communist Organisation, and from that at a certain age of maturity, when you become a professional or a student, you become a Communist Party member, that was the ladder. So, I was desperate to be allowed to do my job, and therefore after that my next ambition, which was very much encouraged by my father and the attitude in our family, was to go to higher education, which wasn't easy, having a father, you know, crossed in the Communist catalogue as being an exploiter before the war, after the war all the children had to go through this hurdle. The problem was to which university, which department and the faculty you could go with such a dossier, because in those days the main posts as students were occupied, each one being by competition, by open competition, at least officially, but usually there were, the top ones were occupied immediately by young students which, young candidates with

good dossiers, which means working-class peasants or working-class... And since I wasn't one of those I had to struggle. As I arrived to be a draughtsman, but before that, meaning between the age of 16 when I finished my grammar school and the age I started being a proper student, 21, there are a good five years. In these five years from being an amateur, first electrician then I was following a course to become better qualified as an electrician, I worked in a power station for about a year. In this post I was once put to look after very important electrical motors in the outskirts of Timisoara, an explosion happened one night when I was supposed to be on guard, and I wasn't very sharp to ring the telephones of the central. An investigation followed, I was sacked, simply because I wasn't awake at the right time, and ringing the right bells.

Sounding the alarm.

Sounding the alarms for what was going to happen. In other words...but they were very hard jobs actually, you had to work twelve hours with only four[??] free, so it's day and night in a very disruptive manner. So I was punished by being sent to work for a while in a different department in the same power station, which was to push large, kind of containers which will take the ashes out of the fire. This was a terrible power station. They were burning coal. At end the coal goes in and the other end the ashes comes out, and these ashes are often still burning, and needless to say there's a lot of fumes and toxic stuff coming up. In these days there was no mask or any protective affair, so this was a real punishment, it was worse than working on a mine. Of course I didn't last there for long, partly because of this medical hazard, partly because I wasn't obliged to stay, that punishment was relative, if I wanted to stay within the same place. This is to go through the adventures of my youth, you know.

Before we go further with...I'm very interested to know about that period of professional work before you went to the Art Academy, but can we go back for a bit to your home again, because you mentioned it was in the nature of your father, and it was consistent with the way he thought, that he would want you to go to university and so on, and this suggests that, as well as having come from a very poor peasant background, both your mother and your father having come from such backgrounds,

he was obviously a man of energy and some vision who had achieved a sort of culture, partly through the Church, the Baptist Church...

To a great extent through the Church, yes.

Yes. But it suggests that there was, by the time you were growing up in your teens, there was a considerable sort of, what you might call a culture in the home. I mean, I'm thinking about here, about books, music, and what have you.

All of that existing culture in the home came, as we were growing up. Imagine my bigger brother was only two years older. Well after me there were all the others, so this culture came with our schooling years, because bringing colleagues, bringing other people in our house, even people who were not Baptists, as well as among the Baptist folks, my father and us were together into this curious world of trying to learn and borrow more from people who know better. For instance I remember, it's a very beautiful story in a sense, beautiful, it might be boring because it's such a standard thing. I would say this. My mother was born with an incredible talent of singing, a beautiful voice and a very clear feeling for, you know, for singing. I suppose this was developed from her very early years in the village. She came therefore into the family with, again it's in the Church that such a voice would be cultured and asked to contribute. So it's from the mother coming to my sisters when they were very young, or even to the brothers, that we had in the house a piano. How it came to be there, I could only imagine it came through this kind of natural way, because it's an instrument to bring more harmony. The church had a harmonium, not a piano. Also the children, which were by now, you know, different ages, but I'm talking about, say, my brother, my bigger brother, Edward, he was six, then eight, then twelve, my father out of his own investigation forced him to take piano lessons, not only piano lessons, violin as well. Once the first brother does that, the second one, which was me, had to try too. So of course, this was partly a discipline which as children growing up in a very much

tense situation, war-like, you know, because we were surrounded all these years by the Russian army, not to mention the years in Bucharest. Are we near the end?

Near the end, so.....

End of F4529 Side A

F4529 Side B

There was a lot of music. Was there reading?

There was the music, which was primarily kind of mother singing without knowing musical notes, but she had a natural talent, a good ear, so as soon as there was a song in the church she would come home and play a solo, which was good enough to incite my sister, particularly one of the sisters, who followed my mother talent-wise and took it up. And one of my brothers, Tony, the smaller one than me, immediately played the piano without any good schooling, simply because he inherited the same kind of ear from the mother. At the church therefore Tony would immediately push the, you know, the clavier, the harmonium; coming home there was the piano. So Paul, me, I was attracted to Italian canzonets, so I was playing 'Santa Lucia' with Tony at the piano. We had this kind of fun, or if you like, non-religious sessions, which were in the first place, you know, our amusement, secondly, if we, you know, exercise sufficiently we could even play it in public, it was that well, or certain areas from certain operas, as soon as I started going to see operas with my father and my mother, and some times one of the bothers. So this was a kind of slow, if you like presence of culture and all forms of art. Less visual, because the visual came into the family practically only when I had grown up, because it came through me. I can't say there was a feeling for paintings, or maybe I'm lying, I should say this, my father used to make expensive shoes and sometimes his clients were painters or people with a lot of paintings. I remember therefore, just as I talk, fortunately, I didn't think about it before, when we were growing up we realised that on our walls there were oil paintings of quite good qualities. Among them was one or two drawings of Jesus on the Gethsemane Garden, others were...

That's Gethsemane.

Gethsemane, yes, that's what I meant. I didn't know how to pronounce it. There were also paintings which were of very good character later I realised, in oil, by an Italian guy called Santacorno[ph] I remember, which must have been some kind of Romanian Annigoni, not sentimental though, well painted, which were kind of the

school of Barbizon. They still are in the family, only now they are distributed in different houses, since my parents don't exist any more. In other words we had grown up with that. My father regarded the painting as something given, it wasn't something that one of his children could try. I'm saying that again thinking of the fact that when it came to me establishing what kind of higher education I would have, I had a very hard time for a number of years, I didn't know exactly which one I would take, even though I was a draughtsman at the time. So again from outside came the solution to my dilemma. Being a draughtsman I used to skid[ph] from the profession, and on the edge of the drawing I would make a portrait of my colleague. Mind you I was seventeen, eighteen. So I was attracted to see if I could do that. At the same time I was copying illustrations from books into one of my secret sketch-books in which I was also writing, if you like little letters to the girls I was in love with, because I was in love, my first love was one of my colleagues to which I couldn't speak for at least a year, so during three years I used to write all kinds of project letters which I could never send. So the life was full of such incidents which were part cultured, part, you know, a natural kind of investigation, spiritual ways.

You played the violin didn't you as a child, but you didn't persevere with the violin.

I played the violin insofar as I was to take lessons, but I didn't play it well enough to be a part of any orchestra, even though the church was craving for that kind of training. Because piano and, you know, the harmonium were the, particularly the harmonium, was a church instrument; there was a little orchestra too but I wasn't persevering with it enough. But what happened later on, some other kids, meaning one of my sisters, went to the conservatoire, so I should restate the fact that my father little by little showed us the great ambition he had that all his six children would go into higher education, and believe it or not they did. So there was this little man, my father was little, he was up to my shoulder only - well, I am five foot nine, imagine he was probably about five foot, and this little man, who, like I said, wasn't pushy but he was kind of bossy, he would boss everyone around. If you don't know what you want to do, he will give you some time, but then every so often he will ask you, 'Have you decided? What about this, what about that? I suggest do this, do that.' But the family was at the same time going through a long struggle, financial struggle, so our food

and our clothing was very poor. I should also mention something which was very strong, which was that being in a kind of ladder of ages, the children, particularly among the boys, a pair of trousers or a pair of shoes would move downwards. If my bigger brother finished with wearing and his foot would be too big, he would give it to me, and me to my brother, and so on; this played a very important role. I remember my first bicycle, which was a dream for many years, came to me something like seven years after the war, because you couldn't afford to buy a bicycle. My first long trousers, because the fashion these days, no matter what season it was, a boy would wear shorts, I mean short pants, so the first long-leg trousers was a golf, what you call in English a golf, the one you bring...

Plus-fours.

Plus-fours, that's right. And that came along with the bicycle. Now this was a great moment, because I was sixteen, I remember the photographs taken at the end of the lyceum, baccalaureate, happened at the same time. And at the same time I was developing a very kind of private life to which no one had access; the only people who had intimate rapport with me then were friends of mine, chosen by me from outside the family, outside the church. I remember being not very rarely beaten up by my father, he used to beat us up when we were lacking in discipline, when we were cheeky, when we were not doing what he gave us to do, meaning orders. Particularly in holiday times, he would go to work and in the morning he would leave for the two boys...at some stage my bigger brother went to a military school so I was left home to be the biggest, look after the others, but from 9 in the morning till the time he will come home, Paul will have to look after the geese. We also had a number of animals, almost a farm; having so many children my father was trying economical way of being sound, so rather than buying everything we needed we had garden, we had pigeons, we had rabbits, pigs, even a cow at some point. So who would look after these things? Because my mother was too busy looking after the whole thing. The children of course. For instance we didn't have drinking water in the house; I'm talking about the house which is the strongest in my memory, is the house of our childhood, which happened to be in the periphery of Timisoara; being periphery had the advantage that we were surrounded by green places, even though on one side we

had the railways. So this was my adventurous background in the backwaters of this town. But the town, it's not a big town, from this place which was the very edge of the town to the centre, it meant 20 minutes on the bike, and at the same time it meant that we could grow in our garden, you know, a flock of geese for instance, there were about 12, and often you would go out with them and take a book with you, or maybe a knife and a piece of wood, and play with this kind of stuff. On the way home you will collect whatever you can, like nuts from the walnut, or quince from the neighbour's quince, which was smiling over the fence, if it was autumn. And coming home, not paying enough attention, one of the geese was missing, because the dogs, you know, followed them around. So if such was the case, your father would be there waiting, and, 'Where is one geese?' And you would get a nice smack. Of course at the time everyone hated these sessions of father punishing, but later I came to appreciate them as being the only way of dealing with the naughtiness of one's behaviour. In other words, in those days I wasn't exactly the best friend of my father. On top of that I became rebellious, not listening and not taking in everything he had to preach me, and that is not a metaphor, my father's personal ambition was to be a Baptist preacher; next to the fact that he was a shoemaker he had a talent for delivering a speech. You hear my voice on this tape, but I promise you that my father's voice would have been a lot better. He had a diction which was the diction of a Minister, a politician. He used to be the president, or the chairman of the parents' committee in the school year after year, where he had the three boys going one after the other, because no teacher in that school could deliver such a speech at the beginning of the year I remember, he was usually asked to do that. He was clear, he took care of his diction for everybody to understand from the bottom of the room to the foreground, and in that sense I suppose he was educated and exercised within the church, even though he never had an authorisation, to be authorised by the Communist regime to be a real Baptist preacher, for which you could make a priest, and this is why he was put in jail, because he was caught preaching in the church without authorisation.

Without a licence.

Without a licence. So being only a four-class education, it would be too difficult for him to obtain that licence, not being sufficiently educated, at least according to the

system. But he would do it nevertheless, because he couldn't stop himself from wanting to speak to others, to share his ideas. And in that you must remember all the time that he was inventive, he had beautiful metaphors ready for the audiences; he had all kinds of solemnity when it came to important pronunciation; he was always asked to say the main prayer in the church, or the final one. The important occasion, my father was always a ceremony man.

Ceremony.

Ceremony, in a sense in which you needed a man to carry the flag, to be conspicuous and to be definitely a very assertive character. Exact opposite of what my mother was, who was the tame lady who had never wanted anything for herself, extremely selfless, and she had to be pushed to accept a new dress or a new hat. Sometimes my father would give her such gifts, great occasions like her birthday and so on.

Did you find...your father sounds absolutely extraordinary, a man of enormous energy and power and gift.

Confidence.

And confidence. Did you find this overpowering, did you relate closely...

Very much.

Did you relate closely to your mother, in the way that sometimes boys do when their fathers are very strong characters?

You guessed it, you guessed it. I not only looked like my mother, I was convinced that it's her who is my friend. In fact there was certain moments when I was suffering from, like I mentioned, my father's punishment, which meant his...

Belt?

His belt was coming out, and I was having to take ten, twenty such strokes. My mother was coming in to save me by saying, 'OK, you've done enough, leave him alone, leave him alone. Don't you see he is a soft-hearted bloke, he doesn't want to talk.' My father was getting very anxious because I wouldn't cry, so my stubbornness was a kind of induced frustration, I wouldn't give him the pleasure to see me crying. In that sense I was my father's enemy. I was of course hating him at the time; if you had asked me, 'How do you feel about your father?' I would say, 'Oh I hate him,' you know, because I felt he was extremely overpowering, and not only that but imposing it. If it would have been just words I would have accepted it probably differently. So when it came to the point of me leaving the house, because that happened when I was, like I said, only 21, all my secret affairs with young girls, with my private life, were the result of me trying to get from this powerful person's influence.

I think this is a very interesting point.

My mother on the other hand was my greatest friend within the family, and, you know, supported, she never pressing or pushing anything.

I mean, I think this is interesting in all sorts of ways, Paul, because I think you have survived in a way as an artist also by a sort of cunning, a kind of, a disguise.

Right.

And also an obstinacy, an obduracy, a refusal to compromise or to follow fashion. And I say this not by way of compliment but by way of description, and it seems to me that a great deal of this must be to do with this inner necessity perhaps to oppose your father, or at least to stand up to this extraordinary powerful presence.

Well you're right, only later I came to realise that my father was in me too, in other words like you just mentioned. Of course I am a tenacious person, and it's probably not because of my inheriting my mother, that tenacity and that obduracy comes from him. But of course when I was under his power I wasn't recognising that, in other words I was entitled to say, this is the person I hate most. But as I started, going on to

tell you about the fact that I left family to become a student in Bucharest again, in fact the town where I was born, I was terribly relieved and very happy to go away from home.

How old were you when you did that?

21.

21.

Kind of late. But at 16 I had to go to work, because the family needed money. At 17 I was doing the same. I had to take a new course to get better qualified to get more money. Meanwhile my bigger brother had to go to military school for the same reasons, it was a necessity for the surviving of the rest of the family. My father of course didn't have any longer that shop of making shoes, he was now working in a factory after the war, because of the Communist takeover, he was certainly not allowed to carry at on in his business.

Ah, this I didn't realise.

Well I didn't say it, simply because I went on talking about the war, I didn't express what happened to my parents' business after we moved to Timosoara. His successful business went down and down, eventually he worked in a rubber factory for a while, even lost a finger in one machine. He hated it all the way of course. Later on he...but, meanwhile he was producing at home, you know, in an illegal way, he was producing top of shoes for women only, because he wouldn't give up, there is another aspect of his obduracy. Resisting the illegality of that fact, but being desperate for...because he wasn't earning enough as a factory worker for his numerous family. At that point my mother had to go to work too, which was a bit of a disaster, she worked in a textile factory for sixteen years. This was the years after the war. And it's in this context that I had to go to work too, starting to work as an electrician like I said, then I moved on to working for the railroads of Timisoara. I became a topographer, I was qualified soon to start making maps, I was a cartographer, therefore within the railway. I was

an accountant for a number of months. And then I moved to draughtsmanship, because in the evenings I was taking a course on draughtsmanship, partly because I was interested in drawing, which I always liked, in a sense in a very uneducated and naive way, so the draughtsmanship took care of my abilities, how I started taking lessons of how to work in ink, black ink, you know, for drawings proper, for architects and so on. Again educating myself in a mathematical direction, which at some point I thought it would be something I would like to do. And every year I would try to get into some university by changing from year to year. My real love those days started to be something more abstract, something closer to philosophy, because my first readings which were done on my own choice rather than school indicated ones, were secret books which had to be translated from Hungarian to Romanian, about yoga for instance, things which were not allowed in a Communist State.

Things about Eastern philosophy, did you say yoga and...?

Yoga came via Hungary, and there were all the[??] books, but I had to have a friend who speaks Hungarian, and together we will translate phrase by phrase and then try to follow yoga, meditation, yoga movement and so on.

What other...that's absolutely fascinating. I mean what other secret books did you read?

Well then there were several books in connection with commentaries on the Bible, which again were all the[??] books, before the war started, and certainly before the Communists took power. These were moved from hand to hand, from older people to younger people. Very often they were Germans or Hungarians, but in this town there were sufficient Hungarians, speaking Hungarians and speaking German people, again speaking Romanian too, so this kind of work with other languages and work with other nations had an advantage, because it brought you in contact with other nations as it were, even though physically we were not allowed to cross borders in any direction after the war anyway. So that was if you like my first contact with the world, in a limited way, but when I started reading where yoga comes from, where the

original gurus and so on, of course my mind was blowing with the imagined world, and the dreams started building, because my earliest dream when it comes to that, comes from that kind of adventure, which was mental to start with, and then becoming a student this thing would grow bigger and bigger.

Can I just clarify something here about the actual chronology of these things. This developing interest in philosophy perhaps, in aspects of Eastern philosophy and so on, this comes in your later teen years, doesn't it? It comes at the same time as you are already working, first of all as an electrician and then as a draughtsman.

It comes between the 16 and 21, we're in that period.

Before you went...

Before I became, by partly an accident, a student in fine art, because, like I said already, my direction was to be something of what used to be called a humanist kind, rather than scientist. So once I knew that, still I had my hesitations, because once I tried to get into philosophy, you know, you had a very tough programme in the sense in what you have to read to become a candidate only, so you took at least a year to study those books, which is Marxist-Leninist. I'm afraid in those days, to become a student of philosophy you had to be very well equipped with everything which is connected to Marxist-Leninist thinking. Of course you are not allowed anything beyond that, like German philosophy, from Hegel. Hegel was probably the first one you were supposed to know about, and from there onwards everything connected to what happened in Russia and the rest of events, therefore history and philosophy went hand in hand. But, as I already said, before doing that I was connecting in my mind what I was reading in the secret books, in the not-allowed books, in the yoga, in the theosophy, which was the next step, Blavatsky and the stuff, theosophy later on.

Rudolph Steiner?

Yes, all that came to me, but later when I was a student, I will come to that, about three years later.

So you were...actually can I just get this straight. You would be reading for example Marxist-Leninist [INAUDIBLE]...

To prepare myself for the faculty.

To prepare yourself for the philosophy faculty, in the evenings after work, and so on. Can I ask you about that, because clearly it played a...Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and what you might call the general philosophical culture of Marxist-Leninism, was a...

Materialist dialectic.

Enormously powerful in Romania in the post-war years, certainly at the official level.

It was powerful in the sense that it was reinforced by the people in power, not because people wanted it.

No no, I understand that. But can I ask you, reading it, did you, I mean did you feel that you learned anything from that in terms of certain sorts of discipline of thinking, certain ways of regarding the historical process?

You do it without you realising. This is the way I was looking at it, because I...my natural inclinations weren't towards a dialectic of Hegelian type, I must say, but in the process in which you feel frustrated, and nevertheless you have to do it, you accept certain notions, particularly the mechanisms, the methods, which later became very handy and very useful, but other times, if I am to be correct to my youth moment, no I didn't love them. I would have loved to see Kirkerwood[??] or to be allowed...or to be asked to read about Kirkerwood[ph] or other German philosophers, which, only later. By means of being critical, you were allowed little incursions, say in Goethe, to what extent was Goethe an artist, to what extent he had something to his philosophy at the time, but not much. Only that they aim to say, but Goethe lost himself by doing this and doing that. So you move on from there, and get on with dialectics, see what

happens with Marx and Engels and so on. This was the ground on which you had to be accepted at philosophy, so I did my best. Of course you start with the Greek philosophers, but again briefly you have to go through everything history-wise, and if something which is not convenient to the, you know, to the Communist perspective, you are supposed to be critical to it and get on with the next chapter. So this was if you like the solid preparation for candidate for philosophy. On top of that, what happened to me was that I realised obtaining a mediocre note, that the people who are kept as students, therefore that the examination board, that competition, didn't accept me, not because I was just mediocre, there would have been places for my 7.5 grade I got, but my dossier interfered. So, because there were others with a better dossier than mine, even smaller notes than mine, smaller grades, they would be accepted and I would be rejected. Of course this wasn't explicit to you at the time, only later came to light. So this happened two years in a row, I tried twice to enter philosophy. If I could get on from here, I would say this happened roughly, therefore, when I was 19 and 20. Every time I didn't succeed to become a student, this happened in the autumn, so, take my, what you call the...

Matriculation, or your...?

No no, I was working as a...

Entrance exams?

No I was going to say, I was doing my exams while I had my summer holiday from my job, which was to be a draughtsman. Being a draughtsman in Timisoara, these examinations always happen in Bucharest, because the faculty of philosophy was in Bucharest; Timisoara didn't have one, Timisoara had a language one, which I also tried, which again I failed there, for the fact that I wasn't prepared well enough. But by then I knew if you like, partly because I had to study the Romanian literature and to a degree universal literature, to what was demanded by the curriculum envisaged, but take from philosophy onwards, every time I failed this autumn examination to become a student there was this big danger above me that I will be joining the army, because you were obliged to join the army at the age of 18. I was lucky they never

caught up with me. When I was 18 I changed jobs, and then later somehow I had been left out. If you become a student, then the army gets postponed until you finish, and if you happen to finish after the age of 26 you are excused from the army. But then it's a new...things have changed all the time, but somehow I was lucky about this army business. First of all you ran away from it because you tried to postpone it by becoming a student; since I didn't succeed that, I would have to come back to my job every time, every autumn. [BREAK IN RECORDING] Then I came back to my job, and at age 20 I realised.....

End of F4529 Side B

F4530 Side A

Paul Neagu, recorded on the 4th of October 1994, at his home in Jackson Road. Tape Two.

Paul, we were talking about the way in which you deferred and deferred your army training, and also about the succession of years in which you failed to find a place at university. Can I just ask you about that. This succession of failures to get into university to study philosophy, which is what you wanted to do, must have been a great disappointment to your father.

It's exactly so, you are right. Partly because all my brothers and sisters, or at least the ones older than me, were more decisive about this, even the ones younger who didn't arrive at that stage, they knew what they wanted to study; there was a strong education in each one's personality that I want to do that, so, even during the school days. But I left school as a mediocre pupil, mediocre I am saying looking back at my grades, I wasn't at all brilliant in any particular field, but I was interested in many, so my father put more and more pressure, particularly when he started noticing how confused I was; I was confused, because if you know the whole range, I even tried to become a sport teacher, which means probably that under the pressure of getting away from the army training I was trying anything just to be a student. So the nearest that appealed to me, I always tried. The only one where I was determined, or sufficiently strong with myself was philosophy, but even that was demolished as soon as I realised that I wouldn't be accepted whatever I do, because there were too many with good dossiers, and it would take too many years to exhaust that to add my point, my line. So what happened, I was making 20, because I was available for higher education from the moment I was 16, but because I couldn't quite concentrate myself in one single thing, part of the confusion came with the fact that I had too many, can I say without false modesty, too many talents. I was attracted to literature, I was attracted to everything visual, from film to painting. Like I said, painting I didn't even know it could be trained, I thought that was something you develop in your own time without any training. It took this tough hand of technical drawing, which is why I became pressed into, pushed by others really, because I was quite easy to be influenced. I had

a very good friend when I was at school who, under his supervision, and with some extra meditation from him, extra lessons, I even tried to become an engineer, I tried the polytechnic, which I studied I must say in the evenings, I became a student in the evening course, which allows you to work during the day, but four months later I gave up, because I didn't like it, when it became complicated trigonometry and complicated mathematics I decided to stop it. So once more that was an indication that it's something of the human kind, not of sciences, that I was available you see. I was too young, too...not quite ready I suppose. So it took me a few more years to kind of add more confidence in myself, and that was illuminated, that was clarified, by my years working for these engineering firms, which was an adventure in some way. From topography I moved to cartography, I moved to draughtsmanship. I progressed there, I became quite well trained to the degree of technician second grade as they call it, my salary had become better, my father was quite happy then. But I wasn't, I wasn't going to be without the university anyway, so I kept trying. And like I said, I found myself aged 20 being a draughtsman for three years now, when suddenly somebody said to me, 'Why don't you prepare yourself to become a painter?' I thought that was too easy to be trained for, it was within me, within my reach anyway. And then I became very curious, you know, I started searching in the very town of Timisoara for who would give me some kind of training into what painting is, how do you draw etcetera, in a more methodical way than the intuitive way I had. Then I soon realised in Timisoara there was one man, who was a very interesting person, who probably was my first solid teacher of how to draw. This man was a very unpublic artist, he was in his forties, kind of old, who was giving evening lessons privately. Now to start with, in a Communist situation that kind of private evening classes is kind of rare, if not unheard, but because it was given by a professional, by...he was in the first place a graphic artist, he did a lot of etchings and charcoal drawings, and the strengthness of this man was that he was not Austro-Hungarian, he was Polish, educated in Hungary, in Budapest. He spoke bad Romanian. He was called Podlipny.

How do you spell that, Paul?

P-O-D-L-Y-P-N-Y - sorry, the first Y it's an I. P-O-D-L-I-P-N-Y. Podlipny.

Podlipny, yes.

A very interesting personality who fascinated his students. He was extremely severe. He had no right arm; during the war or something in his youth, took off his hand. He was working with his left, which made him even more intriguing. This man would be like a whip around your head, you would sit on this special chair called a horse I believe in English, and work on your charcoal drawing or pencil drawing for hours on end, not allowed to talk, by looking at the model, usually, or a still life. That will be his tough discipline, to work out good students, good people, to knowing how to draw. Of course we are talking about the plumb-line, we're talking about Cubism, we're talking about a certain modern approach, but certainly not a sentimental one. His graphic power was very similar to what everybody knows, this German woman is known for, Käthe Kollwitz?

Yes.

That kind of force, black-white, very little semitones. And he was very secretive about his own work; he concentrated on the work with the students, very expensive life classes in the evenings. So I went to this man, I was 20, it was winter, and I knew I had five months to prepare myself for the next examination of fine art. When he heard me, of what I wanted to do, he allowed me to do a test. After the test he said, 'Very bad, very bad, no good, no good Mr Neagu. You want to be a student of fine art in Bucharest? You must be joking. You should have come to me three years ago.' He said, 'No way can I get you ready in four months, or five months.' So he warned me from the beginning with his left hand, with the finger up in the air I remember, 'You're never going to make a student of fine art in Bucharest.' Absolutely negative from the beginning. So, at the same time I think he was testing my audacity, he was testing my tenacity. I insisted, I said, 'Never mind, I just want to be in your class.' Because it was difficult, he had a limited number of places, no more than six. In the end he accepted me and I started working with him, and I did what was required with a fantastic determination to do well, so I was listening very carefully, and I never saw in myself such determination before, so it must have been something inside me which

made me for the first time a hundred per cent, you know, intent to do that, which creates certain hard points within yourself. Anyway, when it came to painting, colour, he was very shaky, and so was I, but there was not much time, so by the time the examination was happening, which was late summer, the following summer, I was becoming 20, actually February I am age 20, four months later was to be the examination. Luckily at the faculty in Bucharest, which was the Institute Nikolai Grigoresco, there was another course of about four weeks before the examination where you could be prepared. All the candidates had access to these, as long as they had the time to be with certain assistants, certain lecturers, to prepare you for the examination. So, there was a little contradiction between what I had learned from Mr Podlipny to what this course was taking me to, because the course in the summer was given by a young painter who just came from Leningrad, with heavy studies and heavy methodology, from a kind of really socialist...

Social Realist.

Social Realist.

In fact Socialist Realist.

Which was going backwards rather than forward from what Podlipny told me. So there was a bit of tension already there, but again...so I have to remember that I dropped everything I kind of knew from Podlipny, all that Cubistic kind of analytical journey[??] of the object, of the face, of the figure, and tried to concentrate on a kind of expressivity which came with the Social Realism, from this man from Leningrad. I was doing whatever necessary to get nearer and nearer to the idea of getting in. And as the examination came, I, to my surprise, to a lot of other people's surprise, I got in. What happened now, I realised that I was much better than I expected at something I didn't study with Podlipny, which was composition; you were supposed to invent a composition out of minimum three figures, this was the calibration of a composition in these days, of course you had to be figurative, but they were talking about minimum three figures. Two wouldn't make a composition, one is a portrait, two is not enough, and three is just sufficient to make a composition. And when it came to

putting them in a page, in a frame, I was very good at juggling this kind of situation, even though my anatomy studies were very poor. And the other thing was, the study of colour, meaning a still life, and a drawing, you start with drawing, at which I was very good. So I just managed to get in. What surprised Mr Podlipny and all my colleagues from Timisoara, from these evening courses, I remember coming back to Timisoara with the victorious, 'Yes, I am in,' and they were flabbergasted when they heard this news. They said, 'What's happened to the college in Bucharest? How could they accept a guy like Paul Neagu?' But I was relaxed, you know, for once. I didn't know what was ahead of me, but I was absolutely happy.

What was the response of Mr Podlipny?

He was...he got a very tense and dark face, because he himself couldn't understand how a student like me, in his eyes I was a mediocre guy, how can I get into the school, particularly since he promised me that I wouldn't get there? So it was a contradiction once more. But this Podlipny nevertheless became to me, to my soul, he became a dearer quantity as I became older, in time.

And, your father and your mother must have been very very pleased that at long last...

At long last I became a happy student, without them quite realising what I was in for, because the idea of fine art was a mystery to them. Paul Neagu by then, the only approchement[ph], the only appropriation I made to fine art were to look to reproductions, which I could find in magazines, and sometimes postcards, that's the only thing they showed me in the house with[ph]. What I was doing outside, I started of course during the Podlipny evenings, to come home and tried to tell my sister to pose for me, or a cat, or I was copying a famous painter, do a painting. So they were slowly and very sceptically looking at my studies, but when I succeeded of course there was a big feast in the family. And I was wrapping up my best clothes, putting them in a...preparing my luggage to go to Bucharest. I was going to be away from home for the first time, you know, for a long period. And so that was like a new born, you know. I was 21 of course and when I got to Bucharest and get myself enroled I realised that most of my colleagues were 19, 18, 19, 20, I was one of the oldest. In

other words I finally succeeded to get out of the drama of my confusion years. And it's true, what followed was a number of years of happy search, not that I was a disciplined student, on the contrary, the Academy ran its courses, I realised there was a lot of pre-imposed methods, there were people who were putting on their students nothing else but the Russian imposed view of what art is. In art history we studied not further than Impressionists, you are not allowed to mention the most modern of the Romanian artists, Brancusi like[?]. So there are a lot of frustrations. But they build up slowly, as you get an older student. The first year is a kind of happy-go-lucky kind of moment, because you are allowed to study different things; only in the second year do you determine, you decide which particular field you want to investigate and become a specialist.

Do you think that the disciplines of working as a draughtsman and topographer during those in-between years, was useful to you when it came to...well first of all I thought perhaps, when it came to doing the composition exam, because draughtsmanship requires constantly being aware of relationships between forms, and elements in a drawing, doesn't it? And I just wondered whether you feel that that...

The only way I could see it, the only point where I see such a helpful hand from my previous learned methods and discipline was the same thing which Brian Robertson[ph] noticed the other day when he wrote this forward for a catalogue of mine, when he said, 'Paul had a chance to understand the topographical, geographical reality around him at an early stage'. Of course I did that, but it was such an intricate process, I couldn't see it related, at least in my first years as a student, because the viewing, the perception of an artist, at least in an academic way in which Romania had it, didn't connect at all to the general view which I was required...which I was already trained at from my topographical years, say, from draughtsmanship. Only later, Mel, only later, by the time I was in the fourth year, fifth year, which is almost final, because the sixth year is left only for the diploma work. So what happened, it will come to make sense only later, as my artistic maturation starts to build up. In other words, it was full of contradictions and full of frustrations, my first, second, third and fourth year. As a student I was a free person, the disciplines in the schools were mostly frustrating when they are asking for things you didn't like, and they were

basically things like art history, disciplines like art anatomy, where you are supposed to know the names of each muscle, not just the way they function, or in [INAUDIBLE], but you are supposed to know as much about anatomy as a doctor does now, in the first years of studies. So I wasn't very happy. I've never been happy with any kind of imposed methods.

But there was a very rigorous academic training you received, wasn't it?

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

The art training was rigorous, but at the same time the best teachers, not every one was as rigorous as the others; some, because all the teaching was done by real artists, there wasn't anything like just didactical approach, it was always exemplifying and always given to you by an artist, who, if we want to see what the difference is, I would say that an artist as a personality, and some of them are less able to say words what they want to say, but they come, take your brush away and they show you on your own canvas, how they feel. In other words, it depended very much who was teaching you. As it happened, in the first two years I had unimportant people teaching me, the only person I started to like was again a man who was imposing a certain discipline, he was the man with three degrees behind him, philosophy, medicine and art, he was the teacher of anatomy, but he was such a complete person, quite a severe character, who reminded me very much of Podlipny, he was like his follower. Now we loved him because he was severe, and you knew as soon as you came up to his seminar you will get out of it better or stronger, and you knew something at the end of it. With the others we used to mock them, we used to, like schoolboys, we used to trick them. We used to pretend we do the work but in fact it was done in five minutes, not in two hours. Because what you were asked for most of the time were to be seen to work, and there were many many hours you were supposed to put in. Every day from 9 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon you were supposed to be in your studio doing painting. It could have been a theme painting, or something free-like, a composition. Then in the afternoon after 4, you will have theoretical things, like what is called in England complementary studies, art history, anatomy, political information, Marxist-Leninism and so on. In the evening, after you

go to have your dinner, you will have two hours to four hours, depending, the last two ones were voluntary, if you want to study so-called 'croquis', these were studios with mixed students from all the years who would come to study models in movement.

What is the name of that again?

Croquis is the French name for quick sketches.

C-R-...

C-R-O-Q-U-E[sic].

Croque[ph].

Croque[ph]. Croque means, like in the famous Rodin studio, you had a number of models moving around, and Rodin wouldn't tell them to stop because he will try to catch them in movement.

If this was going on in the evenings, after your supper...

They were poses given for two minutes, five minutes, or one minute, or even half a minute.

And you had drawing from the model during the day as well.

Yes, but that's study. In the evening it was something else, it was like a quick flash.

Yes, I understand. But that meant that they had to have models, there must have been a lot of models available, I mean, and there must have been a tremendous sort of...

You are right. As a proportion of the students there were something like one model per 20 students. Briefly, if you had something like 600, 800 students, our school at the time had over 100 models, or 120.

Over 100 models, working...

Walking around, being available. Of course they had their own programmes, but each class might have been split; a class means no more than eight students, the ones who study those hours in the morning might have one to three models, because three students might want to concentrate on a different pose. There were models of all kinds of anatomical possibilities, fat, slim, women, children even, or sometimes you are allowed to fix compositional arrangements. So all the students working on their diploma would have personal models, different categories, depending on how complicated their diploma would be. Imagine you are Velásquez, because it was like a school for preparing Velásquez and, you know, a classical type of Realist sculptor, or painter. Mind you there were also a number of departments, there were models for graphics, for painting, for sculpture, again which would be free to be intermingled according to the arrangements, you know. So this was what Romania had as the top institute; mind you there were only two such institutes in the whole of Romania.

Well, I mean, we have to remember, don't we, that this is precisely the period, you went to the Academy in Bucharest...

'59.

In 1959, and you were there until 1965.

That's right.

And this is precisely the period of course when in English art schools, drawing from the model was more or less...

Was fading away.

Was fading away. Only in certain schools did they continue with this particular way of teaching, and in many schools, I mean the notion of drawing from the model was

becoming, regarded as sort of ridiculous really. So, do you think that the people who came out of that training, with this enormous concentration on drawing from a model, seated, standing, movement, in combinations, in ensemble and so on, do you think that that produced a generation of, at least artists in Romania who could at least draw well, or not, what do you think?

Well I think the whole system of that academic training came with one advantage and one disadvantage, that's to say the minimum. The advantage was that it created young artists, who might not be artists, but become teachers themselves, which it happened in the majority of cases in fact, and that is that it's a more versatile kind of sensitive[??] perception; it created a sensitivity on a number of levels, from the psychology of the person who you are studying, to the colouring and to the air, to the compositional arrangements. That's already several. Within which you will find room for abstract disposition, need be. Now, the disadvantage is that by doing that it focuses one's attention and one's method and one's effort in a direction which is traditional. It didn't encourage discovery, rebelliousness, or anything you might call, say, Kandinsky. Kandinsky developed from probably a very powerful courageous mind, because I don't imagine his training encouraged him to do abstract things. In other words, this context of academic training, it took you a long time to discard everything you learned in order to do something like Kupka, Kandinsky, or any kind of abstraction, which is what happened with me actually. So in retrospect I could objectivise slightly and say that the disadvantage is that if you wanted to be a real modern artist, you had disadvantage, because you spent so much time, and it's very difficult to discard that; in other words you get a luggage which is hard to give up. But, on the other hand, you are very available to do many other things. You could even become a dentist, because you are given enough focus on what happens in the muscle of the face, as it were. Or you could study fresca[ph], or you could be an actor. That anatomy, it's common to many things, but not just anatomy, all the other things that you learn with, like art history. So it's up to you, you either...in other words it kills some of the specialisation which some of us wanted to pursue, but it encouraged the versatility and a variety of approach.

What was social life like in Bucharest as a student?

Well, as long as you are a good student, you are supposed to obey some of the rules and regulations; that means you had to put up with certain frustrations. Bucharest had an élite, a cultural élite; in order to reach it you had to be curious enough and discover how, because for instance as a student you are not allowed to participate, you are not allowed to get into certain libraries at the time, which for me were very important, for instance I could see Western magazines. That library, there were one or two in Bucharest, and I knew where they were, but with a student status it's not enough to allow you there, on the contrary. The same goes for films, for theatre, for experimental art. Yet I knew it existed, and it was part private and part secretive, because it was kept club-like to certain institutions. For instance, because I penetrated it, once I knew how and who to contact, and talking intelligently in the end you are allowed in, for instance you see a lot of films which are not even on the public screen, because they come in to a certain club to be looked at by experts, and only after that they decide if they would buy them or not, at least this is what the situation was. And it's in that sense that for instance, during my student years I managed to see a film which was absolutely forbidden for the public viewing, censorship, that was Alain René[ph], 'L'Année Dernière A Marienbad'.

End of F4530 Side A

F4530 Side B

.....Paul, about student life in Bucharest during your years as a student at the Art Academy there, about the possibility of seeing Western films and so on, having some sort of access to a broader artistic culture if you knew the right people, you knew where to go. Could we talk a bit more about that whole aspect of your life as a student over those...you were a student for, I mean for five years, six years.

Six, six years. Yes, I must say that at the time the situation was very much at the...was left to the latitude of the student. If you had the will, if you had the ambition to discover more, it wasn't impossible, that's what I was trying to put across.

Yes.

If you were lazy, or happy with the official feeding what you were given in the school, or the official structure, in the rest of the time you would do ordinary things, rather trivial, then of course you had no chance to improve. So this already was a kind of natural selection implied in this process; in other words, as I was becoming more myself, which happened during those years as a student, because one of the things which was unique for me at the time was to be away from my family, not that the family constituted a heavy impediment, simply because I felt freer. So for the first time I had a certain number of choices. Of course the choices were limited within the restrictive character of those times, because the restrictions were put across you. As a student for a number of years I lived in a commune kind of accommodation, which again had this provision of the officials, so were your eating patterns for instance, you eat in the student canteen. If you didn't want to eat then you could commercialise your little notes.

Your vouchers.

Your vouchers as it were, and with the money you would go to a restaurant, pay for one meal with the vouchers you sold for one week. Now we were a tiny core of friends, a group, more like four or five of us, who were in very intimate terms, and we

would be a kind of, very friendly in an intimate fashion within the school in the first place, which of course constituted already a secretive attitude which the school didn't like, because the school was full of Communist students who liked to inform on such attitudes. So by then you were aware that the Communist Party who had its cell in this Beaux-Arts institute, certain guys who would be very good at theoretical work, particularly when they were studying Marxist-Leninism and the like, they were also practising that kind of thinking in their own arrangements; I am short from saying that they were actually informers. But we kind of sensed out who they were. So if I was part of such a little group, it wasn't really a conspiracy but the outsiders, particularly the ones who were keen to inform the Party what we were thinking about, they might have seen sketches done secretly at home and then brought at school, or a photograph of things which were forbidden officially, those things were quickly arriving on the table of the men who were observing such behaviour, and you were sooner or later marked as being with decadent tendencies, or Western ideas, in other words like a virus. There were such things, and all you had to know, how to avoid them, and how to maintain a secrecy over these kind of conversations even, let alone the fact what you were carrying in your private pockets, or bags, you know. So going to a restaurant to eat, which was usually a luxurious restaurant, very expensive, meant that you had given up your canteen appearances. I am trying to tell you in great detail something which is very difficult to re-create, but you have to see it as part and parcel of the student time. On top of that there was a certain humour which, you were excited about how you could treat these guys to making them believe one thing, in fact you were doing another. For instance I remember I was in the third and fourth year, when I was doing portraits at my own little home I had as a student living in an attic. When I managed to get away from the commune accommodation given to us cheaply, where you were living in bunk-beds, I moved to an attic which in the first place had to be paid separately, and my parents wouldn't send me any money simply because they didn't have any, so I was having to be self-sufficient. It's true I had a grant, and it's that grant you are trying to defend, because if they find out that you are making money or obtain money in some other ways than the official channels, you are again likely to be shaken by the school, particularly by the political side of the school. So there was a kind of hierarchy of power, and not all that hierarchy was visible or obvious; a lot of it was secretive, and particularly because I wasn't allowed as I said

earlier on when I was a draughtsman, I was sent out of the organisation of youth, Communist Youth, this time I was already marked as being with certain type of tendencies, and as I was doing those portraits in my private time they were exactly portraits which were not allowed to happen during the school time or within the school studios. They were either Cubist or of some kind of geometrical, analytical fashion; at the time I started being aware of the existence of people like Paul Klee, Cézanne even, Cézanne particularly was the end of our art history courses but we came to Cézanne only in the fifth year, in other words in the last year when you were taught art history. Up to Cézanne everything was to be studied, but after Cézanne, like there was nothing the school wanted to accept. You were not supposed to be interested in what happened in the West, at least in a contemporary sense, what happened in the actual Paris scene at the time when you were a student in Bucharest, in other words in '62, '64. And because I was ambitious enough and I managed to know the chief librarian for instance of the Union of Artists, where students were not allowed, so you shouldn't have been seen there, but if you know the persons you might borrow one or two magazines at home for a couple of days, where you could see what happens in Paris. So I came across certain strange things which were, because they were forbidden they were terribly exciting. So part of my ambitions were nourished by this secret material.

Can you tell me what sort of material we're talking about?

Well we're talking about kinetic art to start with. In Paris there was a group of so-called visual research, which was a group of artists around Sheffer[ph], and some Latin Americans who were doing kinetic environments, moving works, I was very interested in these things because I couldn't see in art history anything of the kind. The same time I came across, again through Polish magazines, which were called 'Poland', which were much more advanced than our own magazines in Romania, with Constructivist art. And very little we had access, even through the illegal ways, illicit management as it were, to find out a reproduction or any sketch-book, say on Russian Constructivism. Those things were appearing here and there in certain magazines, usually French in the first place, simply because the other language allowed to be used in Romania, after Russian, was to be French, which was the traditional

connection, culture-wise. After that, English was a difficult language, rather less practiced than, certainly not taught, not officially allowed to start with. The choices were, after Russian which was obligatory, and this started with my lyceum times, with the earlier years, so when you came to be a student the only languages you were allowed to pick from was French and German. I remember I did a couple of years of German lessons, not advancing very far, because it's difficult, German to a Romanian. French to a Romanian comes as a very natural prolongation, because it's the same basis, being Latin etcetera. So most of us would be able to read, get inside material of, you know, very fresh publications from France, for instance what was fashionable at the time, and I mentioned I was very keen on film, I remember being able for the first time to see a film which wasn't translated in French, like films by Nouvelle Vague, a French group of film directors, was a great excitement, or the novel, 'Gommes', Alain Robbe-Grillet, Saint-John Perse, poetry. Two years later I remember doing my first illustrations to poetry as a pretext under which I could do abstract pieces of graphic work, and it was the same pretext that it's an illustration to a poem, I could get in an official exhibition and managed to get a couple of my images in a very official exhibition, because my paintings in no way would be accepted there. What happened with my studio work was that I was therefore for a while doing parallel stuff. My teacher knew this because he was a very sympathetic and open-minded older man who, even though he was greatly in love with Delacroix and that kind of painting, that was his perfect field, heavily figurative but a romantic nevertheless, he allowed some of us, the ones who knew how to justify these interests, rather than just being curious about formal things, he allowed some of us to sketch things out, to even talk to him about it, he was keen, up to a point; I remember in the fifth year, and then in the sixth, the year of the diploma, he used to come to me and instead of giving me a creet[ph], a correction to my work, he would say, 'Well I'm not going to talk to you, I know you know too well what you want to do. I could see that I don't have much to tell you, you probably know better how you want to develop it from here'. He was saying that when he saw the sketch or the beginning of a canvas which happened to be semi-abstract. So he kind of indulged on my own directions, or tolerating these, which wasn't the case with my other colleagues. Most of them being, you know, classically figurative, all they were trying was to be, in their interpretation, to be lyrical, to be warm, to be personal; in other words they embraced the discipline

which was the official thing about the Realist Socialist. I remember the biggest fuss created in the sixth years when the diploma came up, there was a whole history case on me because the teacher, who knew me quite well and was a great friend by that time, he took the word and tried to explain to the rest of the commission that Paul Neagu is a special case, you must allow him to speak up, because no one else would be able to advocate for his work, and why is he doing this kind of strange looking thing. In other words, I was the black sheep already in my little group of colleagues, which was no more than 14 painters. But I forgot to say earlier on that in fact my greatest directioning point was that I wanted to be a painter, so in spite of certain advice given to me by several different artists, more professional than myself, to study graphics or sculpture, I stubbornly wanted to continue doing painting. Why I am saying that, because they have noticed that my paintings were suffering from a lack of refinement when it comes to colour; in other words, I was having great doubts about my sense of colour. In Romania this means a lot, and this was something you could form an opinion at the very early stage, like, it's a talent, you're born with it, you cannot educate it. Because I kind of, I suppose intuitively I realised that painters have always enjoyed the priority, the first ranking, when it comes to visual arts, for me sculptors were too, not vulgar but too ordinary, and I suppose it was too easy for me to see things in three-dimensions and working with materials, because in the first year you were given the chance to try ceramics, textiles, sculpture, graphics, anything, anything the school provided. So, the only thing I didn't want to do was to be taken away from paintings, and my markings as they developed over the five years weren't at all the best of paintings, but I had very good markings when it came to composition.

Good marks you mean.

Good marks.

Yes. Can I just go back for a moment to the question of colour?

Please.

You know, you said that there were criticisms of your colour, and you said that in Romania there was a particular feeling about colour, whether you had a gift for it or not. What was specific about that in Romania?

What is specific about it? I suppose it's to do in the first place with the climate and light of Romania. I'm going to say here in a rather assertive way that there is an immediate difference, if you study a little bit what happens in the history of Romanian painting, there is a big difference between a Romanian painter and a Polish painter, there's a big difference between a Russian colour sense and a Romanian colour sense, just as well as it is I am afraid with the Hungarian, which is on the other side of Romania. So geographically being placed the way it is, and taking into account the richness of the Romanian folk, you will find a lot more subtlety, a lot more association, not only with the Latin world and the Greek kind of sense of colour, as you look at the icons for instance, but you wouldn't find anything harsh, anything gaudy, as you do find for instance if you look at the coloured churches of Leningrad and Moscow. In other words the folk art of Romania it's the heavy background, it's the root of the Romanian sensibility. And if you look at that in the first place, and look at the fantastic natural variety of nuancing, when it comes to embroidery or tapestry, the richness of that automatically has bred in time over the years a certain type of Romanian lyricism which makes sense when you see it later on expressed as being romanticist. It is romantic in that sense, because it's definitely lyrical, therefore Romania will have much less example of, I mean in a kind of greater perspective of Romanian culture, you will find much less examples of Hard Edge Constructivist work in Romania. But instead of that you would have a number of Jewish artists, Romanian Jewish who developed Dada form of approach to art, which with humour and with subtlety becomes quite an avant-garde, when such artists move to France. Not only that, but the greatest education when it comes to painting was a Romanian artist going to France, working with the French, Barbizon for instance, I'm talking about the 19th century in particular. You wanted to say...

Well I was going to ask you about that, that's a very interesting thing you've just said about colour in Romania, about colour in Romanian art and how it has its bases in a very distinctive sensibility in Romanian folk art, in embroidery and so on. And I was

going to ask you, given the sort of orthodoxy, the academic orthodoxy that clearly ruled the curriculum and so on within the Art Academy, are you suggesting that even within that orthodoxy there was, and within the orthodoxies of Socialist Realism, there was a distinctive quality that could be called Romanian, and that couldn't in a sense be squeezed out of the art, it actually, it actually still continued to affect the actual nature of Romanian [INAUDIBLE].

With absolute certainty I would say, this is the case. It couldn't be squeezed out, on the contrary it was the saving grounds on which Romanian sensibility couldn't be killed entirely. Even though its major compositional reference had to be Realist Socialist, within that you could always find that Romanian sensibility, because it comes to colour, vibration, lyricism, that's what I am saying.

That's a very interesting thing to say, and...

Because in these years when I was under this kind of restriction and becoming an artist as it were, not only that folk art was all the time there, it was heavily revered, it was respected, and...

Within the Academy?

Within the Academy, even though within the Academy itself this was regarded as the background for decorative artists, for a relationship with architecture and decorative art; it wasn't mixed up, it wasn't meant to be broken that barrier between what we call fine arts and craftsmanship. The crafts belong to decorative art, the other arts were enjoying a superior role of cult arts, highly cultivated. So as we move to a highly cultivated, talking about the figurative work of a painter, for instance in these very years, in order to - I'm switching at this point, in order to make clear something else - I was doing what we used to call the labour work for mature artists who had commissions to do large mosaics, monumental work but particularly mosaics.

Mosaics?

Mosaics, decorative work over large surfaces. Now there were two standards of being paid for these artists. They needed students who had good enough sensibility to carry on the actual physical work, but they were demanding the concepts, so they would devise the cartoons as it were and we were to achieve the actual work. Several students had this luck, and this experience. Their work was paid at the higher rate if it was figurative all the way through. If this commission happened to be decorative, therefore not containing any figure, it was paid a much lower rate. So officially there was this strong barrier between, strong...

Division?

Division between decorative work and figurative work. Also in the way they were paid. As it happened, in one of such commissions which is still existing in one wall somewhere in Bucharest, I've seen it recently, I remember the artist who was doing his so-called decorative work he happened to do a schematised, a kind of schematic number of animals, like there was this legend with a shepherd and the number of sheeps. These sheeps and a shepherd were schematically made out of sticks, if you like, of black lines; those black lines at a point of, at the stage of project, this work was regarded as decorative, therefore he was categorised as receiving a lower payment. As we completed the work and the commissioner came to receive the work, they immediately pointed to the fact that the work was figurative, therefore he was entitled to a higher payment. But the commission couldn't force the hand of the commissioner to pay the right level, so in the end the artist was asked to cover up these figures, to make it more abstract, in order to be accommodated within the paying role.

The lower pay scale.

The lower paid. And I remember being asked after the work was finished to cover up part of these stick figures, the sheeps and the shepherd, so that they don't look any more like a human and animals, but they look like some abstract marking on this wall, which says a lot about a number of things. That's the way it was fashion at the time. Going back to the folk art, again to an extent the painters were encouraged, the

sculptors were encouraged, and particularly the decorative artists, the ones working on the departments like, as I said, ceramics or textiles, to look up...every summer we had two months in which was called the practising time, when you were sent obligatorily, to places like shipyards and factories to pick up subjects and to study human struggle, the socialist fight, the positive new man who was building newer and newer factories, and God knows what; you were supposed to document yourself and get full of material for the next year. Now, sometimes you were even allowed to spend time in the country looking at folk art and the craftsmen of the villages; at other times, later on some students, more mature students, were commissioned by certain museums to go in the country and choose old icons or peasant-made icons on glass, which is another technique developed by 19th century religious country work, you were supposed to buy such work, collecting them for museums as it were, against minimal prices given to you to choose such things, therefore they were relying on your taste and your choice. You would either give money to the peasants or simply offer them reproductions instead of the ones you buy, who were the genuine icons from their own houses. In other words the students as they matured became agents of collecting museums, and by doing that kind of work very often artists or the students themselves would accumulate little treasures for themselves, because of course that was quite flexible, how much money you could pay for these for instance, he managed to buy two for the price of one, and one you keep for yourself. Now this is still going on even now, even though the production in the country is probably much less than it used to be in those years. So big collections were made by using this kind of half expertise presence of the student. So these were practising time in the summers which became more intense as you approached the final year, which meant the diploma year, which meant that before you go into that you talk to your tutor and ask which place would you be sponsored to go, would that particular building site be OK, or shall you go on that other part of the country? You have to explain to him what kind of subject interests you, and they will take care that whatever you take up should be within the line of the official indicated direction, the socialist.

But this indicates to me that there were certain advantages to your education, your art education, in Romania.

Like what?

Well in spite of the fact that you were dominated by an official culture, and by a culture which denied you access to a great deal of what was happening in Western art and especially in Paris, and one might say in the United States, at the same time there were certain sorts of discipline of attention to things that were probably very valuable, and also, not just this what I call disciplines of attention but also a regard for a whole body of folk art of a kind which was in its own way totally inaccessible to Western art students at that time.

Well, regarded in this light I think you're dead right, and I am also thinking that, even without somebody to point to it, as I came to the West and became a teacher myself, I realised that in my years as a student - I realised only later I'm saying, in retrospect, that I was very richly informed by this background to start with, not so much what was given to me in the college but the allowances they were making for us, and encouragement to go in the country, look at architecture in that region. Of course this was the most fulfilling, the most satisfying, and the most nourishing for myself, but there were others who were not taking us into the folk direction, they would go into the so-called civilised city, or simply looking for a building site, or places where you will see the naked worker, therefore to supply the socialist demand with the best, if you like, figurative work.

It had a very profound effect it seems to me upon the development of your own work, and one that lasted right through your own work to today, to now.

End of F4530 Side B

F4531 Side A

Paul Neagu, recorded at Jackson Road on the 5th of October 1994. Tape Three.

Paul, we were talking about your own painting, and your own insistence upon, as it were majoring in painting at the Academy; in spite of the fact that you had much advice to the contrary, in a typically obstinate way you decided to persevere as a painter within the Academy. Part of the objection made to your work at that time, we've discussed, was your lack of subtlety perhaps in...

Exactly. Colour-wise.

Colour, colourism. Nevertheless, as we know you persevered as a painter, and I would like to go back now to that and to what that meant to you at that time.

Yes, well I suppose I was surrounded by...my very very close friends were themselves painters, and we had a lot of extra discussions in private, at the weekends, you know, in the evenings particularly; some of them were film-makers or interested in films, because the three faculties which were kind of separated, the institute of acting, therefore directing, as well as film-making, music and fine arts, tended to be sympathetic to each other therefore friendly and therefore making friends continuously, rather than meeting architecture students or medical students, that was a [INAUDIBLE]. In that context, plus, you know, the history of priorities within the Romanian culture, the ambition was nourished by the fact that, like I said already, that being a painter meant a lot more, or meant the foreground place rather than second or third, which goes entirely with the fact that, maybe because...I'm just imagining now if Brancusi as a notion of great Romanian success abroad would have been pumped up in our consciousness as a student, as a growing up artist, would have been greater, which wasn't, because Brancusi at the time was considered a decadent artist who was just getting very old somewhere in Paris, in fact we were discouraged from knowing more about Brancusi officially, if that would have been the case, maybe I would have been proud enough to study three-dimensional art, meaning sculpture, meaning architecture. But my interest on those fields were very fragmentary, I wasn't at all

focusing on them. As it happened therefore I stayed with the sensibility of painters, and we had a lot of dilemma discussing sessions, in private, looking at nuances, looking at folk art and looking at peasant art, and then after that looking at whatever we had constituting modern fields of painting. I remember in these days, probably in '64, a great exhibition took place in Bucharest which was Op art. It was unbelievable, this was a very modern intrusion in our Realist Socialist. One of the greatest heroes there was, in that show, which came from France I believe, was Vasarely, which was a very innocuous presence, because everything was coolly perfect, with perfection achieved, and that irritated and also excited a lot of people, so it polarised a lot of sympathies; in different ways it played to the students. As I have grown older and I became a student in the fifth year and then in the sixth, I also took up another activity, which was more or less encouraged by my greater teacher of art history, which was a wonderful person, a man called Schileru, Aogen[ph] Schileru.

How do you spell his name?

You spell it S-C-H-I-L-E-R-U. This was a very highly educated man who spoke a few languages; he was an older Jewish man, very sensitive to international issues. Previous to being an art history teacher he used to be a literary man; later on I discovered he did translations before the war and a lot of universal literature came into Romanian because of him. But the art history teacher, he was a laconic person, he was speaking very economically. Meanwhile he was a great drinker, so he, because he was a great drinker and he loved sitting at the same table with younger people, his investigations were very subtle, because he used to know the person not through how well he did in the school but more as an individual personality, as an individual developing young person through all kinds of references, through poetry for instance, if you had any sensibilities towards music. So this Schileru character was another great edifying person to know, and I would rather talk about him when he comes to my memories of those days rather than my very teacher of the studio, who was, as I said earlier, was a mediocre painter in love with Delacroix. At least that other man, the painter who practically was my teacher over four years, when it was supposed to be speciality painting, at least he had the sensibility and the tolerance to let me be; he realised there wasn't much he could force me to do, and he wasn't a great

official artist either, but he was sensitive enough to my own case. And this applied to others of course, among my colleagues there were some which were very intent to become official artists, the sooner the better, so they were studying figurative art with great intention, and between us was a lot of tension.

What was the name of your painting teacher? I want to go back to talk about Schileru actually, because he sounds a very interesting man, but the name of your painting teacher.

The painting teacher was called Angelutza[ph], he was a man with a long beard looking like Michelangelo, who was a very nervous character who.....[INTERRUPTION - BREAK IN RECORDING] Mr Angelutza[ph] was nevertheless a lovely chap, because he was full of humour, and he was trying of course to be very flexible according to each student's needs. Whilst Schileru was much more of an academic in the sense of knowledge, Angelutza[ph] was very much a kind of man good for titillation and extremely good when it came to colour, strangely enough, he was very keen on telling you exactly how to mix, what to mix in order to get that nuance, and he loved the subtlety of that language.

What did you mean by titillation, Paul?

I mean by having a humour plus, you know, doing a job forward; titillation in the sense of laughing a lot, and not being very pompous.

Yes.

Am I making sense?

Yes of course you are, carry on.

While Schileru's humour was the kind of dry humour, and he always gave you the feeling that he was aloof all the local trouble, including the political thing which Schileru was quite ironic about. Of course Schileru never was a Communist member

party, which Angelutza[ph] was; this explains a bit I suppose. So privately Schileru would light up and he would become much more sparkling than he would be in the class; the class would be a laconic deliverance of what was expected officially. So if you happen in the dark when he projected a slide of art history, usually based in the German heavy books called propilan[ph] Kunstgeschichte, that was...

Meaning?

Meaning art history in twelve volumes or whatever, most of them black and white. I remember when you talk about, you know, 17th century German art, Teutonic affairs, Schileru would just project slide after slide, discussing with you the major artists and what is the characteristic of this or that composition, move forward, and if you fall asleep in the darkness of that class, he wouldn't mind. Maybe five minutes later he will produce a sound, as if by accident he will wake you up. So those years were quite happy from my point of view, because I wasn't really part of the Party discipline, from the beginning not being allowed to be part of that organisation, so I felt a bit better in that sense, in other words freer, even though I knew that my back was spied on, or kind of looked, supervised by the guys who were very keen on progressing, you know, socially. Which is what happened really, because three years after we finished some of these guys were kept in the school as assistants, as young lecturers; not me of course. And the issue with Brancusi as I already mentioned, it was a rather thorny issue, because some of the critics who used to visit us from time to time giving us special lectures, would find themselves mentioning Brancusi, then suddenly shutting up; without any explanation they would move away from this subject as being dodgy. This was something I remember. I remember even a student being given a strong warning that if he would continued to bring to the school - he happened to have two postcards, reproductions of Brancusi's work, he was threatened with being thrown out of the school if he continues to show such reproduction. Because, as Brancusi died in '57 I believe, in the Romanian newspaper there was a little announcement that 'The decadent Romanian artist called Constantin Brancusi died in Paris the day before, he will be buried in Montparnasse cemetery,' and that was all.

You must have felt, or feel that it was fortunate, or...in fact, that the great monumental sculptures of Brancusi in Romania were actually not destroyed. I'm thinking of the park.

Well to be very honest, we didn't even know, I mean as students we were not aware that these sculptures were there, we were so naive about Brancusi, we were so lacking in information. I became aware of Brancusi's great work in Romania probably a year or two after I finished.

Really?

Which is very very strange, if I look at it now. Because what happened was, in a strange twist of events, suddenly, round about '67 there was a Bucharest organised big celebration for Brancusi because of American pressure. From Guggenheim a whole team of experts came to re-introduce if you like Brancusi in Romania, and it's from that year onwards that he was accepted as an official, if you like a figure to be proud of, therefore after his death. In retrospect I also have learned that Brancusi was a very sad man in the last ten years of his life, mostly because he wasn't recognised in Romania; in other words he was in his seventies, he died in '57, he was 82. So he was, because of the Western pressure that, after great inspection I suppose by the commissars of cultures at the time, they couldn't pin on him too much anti-Communist attitudes, so in the end he had to be taken up and made into a big hero, as it happened after '67. Therefore, it sounds like about ten years after his death he was still disregarded totally as an underground figure. Now, as you see this happening with me, all we have to do is to see in parallel, in fact Stalin died when I was a young man before I was a student, I was in Timisoara still, and I remember a funny scene. When Stalin died the whole of Romania, when he was buried actually, in the moment of his burial in Moscow, or wherever it was, Romania had all the sirens of the factories hurling at you, sounding very loud throughout the country, for about half an hour. I happened to be with my father on the street in Timisoara at the time, I can't remember the exact year, I think it was '54.

1953.

'53. Well, so I was in Timisoara in my last year of lyceum. And my father instinctively stood; he stopped from walking, I was with him holding his hand I remember or something like that. He took his hat off, because of all the sounding of the sirens. So after we finished this moment of great ceremony, I turned to him and I asked him, 'Why did you do that? After all, you never liked Stalin,' I said to him. And he was a bit embarrassed, and he said, 'Yes, but after all, he was such a great man.' In other words he couldn't resist, you know, the total respect paid by the officialdom, and the sirens and all that, and his son who was questioning his respect, you know. Now I understand better of course, but it was a bizarre moment. So, when I became a student, Ceausescu wasn't yet the big monster that he became later; when I became a student there was another president having charge of Romania, and that was Gheorgiu-Dej, which was the man before Ceausescu. As I finished my years as a student towards '65, I think Ceausescu came in full power round about '67, Ceausescu was a modest kind of leader and he built up towards a nationalist leader only clearly visible when the Russians started putting pressure on the Czechs to quieten down the Dubcek regime. By then it was 1968, so Ceausescu was in power a couple of years before that happened, and as we will see, 1968-69 became my very important years, because a lot of changes happened to my situation, my social inscription. If I am to say more about the colours of those years, the most interesting thing that happened to me, realising again slightly in retrospect the year or two later, was the diploma year. In that diploma year, which was '65, after spending a whole summer in the region where I wanted to investigate, to find more documentation for my diploma, which happened to be a very long-lasting and very significant point of reference in my biography, it was the market in Romania called Tirgu Gaina[ph], Tirgu Telte Munti Legaina[ph], which means the market on the mountain chicken, chicken is 'gaina'[ph]. This strange custom, which is an ancient custom, was that once a year in the first week of June peasants from the four cardinal points of the Romanian geography would meet on top of a hill called Chicken. Now the ancient custom was to bring their young daughters which were ready to be married to meet the potential young men who would be their husbands. The peasants would come to this mountain, not only with their wonderfully decorated girls, the young girls, 17, 18 years of age,

but also with large ammunitions as it were, which means carts full of goodies, from textiles to...what will form the girl's...

Dowry.

Dowry.

Can I just ask you a question. This hill was called the Hill of the Chicken.

Chicken Hill.

As in chicken?

Yes. But there is no connection. It happens to be called that, I don't know why. Probably because around that hill a chicken has a certain significance, not because the hill looks like a chicken.

No no.

It's a very smooth, unforested hill which has easy access from all the directions, and it happens to be in Transylvania because it's more or less the centre of Romania. And I was attracted to this point, I'm not quite sure how it started but I certainly hit on this as being what I would want to try to do as my diploma. Now there you are, imagine a festival, a kind of huge carnival, festival, dancing, drinking, bonfiring, for three nights and three days.

You mean, you wanted to...

This is what it was.

As the subject for a diploma painting?

Right.

Yes.

With thousands and thousands of people, first of all carts with oxes, carts with horses, peasants dressed up for festivities, for holidays, to dance and drink and exchange conversation. This is what it is. The market...of course the affair of the girl meeting the young bloke happens during that time; it's not a very obvious thing, 'Look, I am selling my girl to you,' but that's what the pagan background of this legend if you like, or this myth, says it used to be like. Just like a market where you would sell slaves, say, but this time it's a kind of convivial arrangement by which you show discreetly what you have. You might have two girls, or three, one following the other. Of course you bring the whole family there. So would the man's family, you know, or there were one young man ready to get married and two girls, they would all come there for carnival, you know. But the carnival was of course within the very discipline of Romanian folk behaviour, which in some regions it's more visible than in others. I'm saying not every region of Romania produces the same folk art, therefore the dances, the songs would be different, and so would the drinks. So this is a very interesting, slightly huge conference open for everyone, with the kind of discreet purpose of presenting yourself to the others.

How long did it last?

Three days and three nights.

Three days and three nights.

Basically, and there is a lot of music going on and there's a lot of drinking of course. And within that, you have this, at least I am talking about 1964, June, that's when I went there with a group of four or five colleagues, to test ourselves against this thing. How can we make this into a subject for our diploma? These were the four students, or the five students, who choose to investigate in that region, with a view that the following year would be the diploma year. And here I was, with my little camera, I had my first picture-taking camera, which I remember was doing half frames, and I

was rather unexcited to start drawing there, because there wasn't much you could draw, unless you start drawing horses and carts, you know, which a lot of my colleagues did. What I did do though, I did a couple of sketches which, I ended up next term in school with a couple of sketches, and something like twelve photographs. Most of the photographs were of the crowd, and some portraits. And there was the material I was supposed to transform into a diploma work. So what happened was very strange, because, I didn't go into the subject trying to get a lot of quantity of work, sketching and sketching and different costumes, different regions. The place was such a full and rich in things that instead of going inside it and trying to eat up as much as I could, I rather stood back and took a number of photographs and took everything by my presence there, talking to them, drinking, maybe dancing, I can't remember everything I did, but, all I remember was my kind of detached attitude towards the whole thing, so much so that when I presented what I had at the next commission, because once you go into the diploma year you have a lot of panels to examine your progress, so the first thing is presenting what you have from the summer time.

From the research.

The research, and then you go into the first stage which is producing a kind of sketch kind of canvas, and then you discuss it again, and then you proceed into the next stage which is to do the actual work, for which you have four or five months. The diploma requirement meaning at least one composition, and two other canvases; one had to be a portrait, therefore, not just a face but what they call a three-quarters portrait, like a sitter, the chair and the top part of the body. But the composition was the major piece. And then a number of drawings to supply more documentation with the same theme. These were meant to be all related. So from this kind of detached view I had, the photographs and the sketches, the sketches were full of coloured dots actually; trying to depict the crowd in the top of a mountain wasn't an easy subject for painting. So I ended up producing what you might call now a helicopter view of the whole market, which didn't please anyone whatsoever in the commissions following the examination; I was very much suspected for not being able to develop that into anything. In the end what I did was an invented, a re-invented girl market, which was

as I said more or less influenced by knowing or influenced by subconscious feeling, by Paul Klee. In other words, I enjoyed the colours and the conflict of what was human colour in a context of natural environment. I have one or two examples of this work of mine even now, I carry with me. What I am going to say is very capital to my statement here on tape, which is that this is the moment when as an artist I feel for the first time I had a very clear awareness that I am becoming myself, it's the first kind of work I realised as I went through 1965, it's the first time I am doing something consciously from the moment of documentation to the end result. In spite of what is expected of me, I was becoming a mature perceiver. So what I was putting across was, at least insofar as I was concerned, definitely very personal, and at the same time I didn't care of what the restrictions were. The result was that among four or five of my colleagues who were with me on the same mountain, on the same hill, I was the only one producing that kind of Paul Klee-ish kind of composition, which was mostly invention rather than straight relating to the reality of what happened. So I was putting across my imagination at its full power for the first time, and not allowing the school to interfere with my vision. Because of the other colleagues, who did a very socialist composition of two or three personages dancing or having horses around and things of that kind, I produced something unusual, and it created a scandal in the school.

End of F4531 Side A

F4531 Side B

Paul, it was this painting of the girl market that your teacher suggested that you should defend for yourself at your final examination.

Right. While I was sketching towards my final work, at that stage of course I didn't know for sure what it is going to look like at the end, because I didn't have a pure concept of what the final thing would look like, I used to have conversations with my teacher, and of course looking at my material I brought from the hill, it wasn't very conspicuous at all. So he decided again, once more, like once or twice before, he said, 'I'm going to leave yourself to your own devices.' Not only that but when I finished, he took a great courageous step forward and started defending me against the rest of the commission who were going to fail me, because the result was such an unusual view, like I said looking from above, like I was in the air, like a bird's view looking down on this very crowded hill; in places there were fires, there were animals resting next to...a mélange of things. So for me this work, immediately after finishing with the studentship and getting my mediocre mark, the only reference that mark had was that according to what you get at the end you would be given a job. The institute I was doing therefore was providing jobs, the immediate jobs to take up for young artists was to teach drawing at certain primary schools. After the big jobs in Bucharest were finished, because I had no more than seven in a line of ten points out of ten, with five you just passed, with four you failed. So I had something in between, like 7.3. With 7.3, when it came to me, in order of priorities, I was offered a job half-time teaching in a tuberculosis hospital somewhere in a village on the edge of the Black Sea, and the other half of the job was to teach in a primary school, drawing. None of these smiled to me, so I refused to go. This was part of my weak results.

This was a consequence of your...

A consequence of my mediocre success if you like. On the other hand, within myself I was perfectly satisfied with that work. I was strong enough within myself to not give too much importance to this lack of socialist success. First of all I refused to go to these jobs, because I knew I wanted to develop what I started, working at home.

But the risks were, I was threatened all the time with a complicated trial, because the Ministry of Education who expected me to turn up as a teacher, they threatened me with a court case, because for six years I had a grant which now is not paying back to them. Apparently I could have been forced to pay back the six years grant, or my parents, because I wouldn't go to the jobs I was given. So there was this threatening thing, but I ignored it, and I continued to do what I wanted to do according to my own vision and my own ambition, which was to simply stay free of such commitments, stay in Bucharest, continue to work in the little place I had, with no much financial means. So what happened, I should connect my last year, therefore the diploma year, with the fact that I was very much in love with a young woman who was just finishing her own academy of acting, she was to be an actress, this was Sybilla, her name, later she became my wife, but because of this relationship which developed and flourished into marriage, I couldn't possibly go to that kind of job which would have taken me away something like 200 miles away from Bucharest. And once gone there, it would have been difficult to come back. Not only that, but it's the city which provided me with enough material and excitement to keep going. So, at that point maturation was almost an obligatory thing; not only have you had to be mature, to become quickly aware of yourself and what you are doing, but also to be able to maintain a civilised level of income, which wasn't easy at all.

Can we go back, Paul, to this presentation of your diploma painting, because I feel that that story, in a way that part of the story, hasn't been completed. Before we go on to talk about your life in Bucharest after your graduation, can you just say, you've indicated that this painting and this project, not just the painting but the work around it and the research, was of enormous importance to you, and I wonder if you would just go back to your defence of that work at your final examination, and perhaps trace from that what it was that was so important.

Well the true importance of this work becomes clearer as the years go by, because, in fact I was going to come back to it, this was just the initiation moment, my diploma work. As I finished the studies, the studentship, this subject was far from going away, it stayed with me, and this is when it becomes important.

Ah, fine, carry on then.

Yes. So what happens, rather than being just a student accommodation of subject matter in order to get through, this market of girls became, in the first place it became much richer than it originally seemed to appear. Why? Because it was a cross-section of folk art and modern event; in other words it was an actualisation of a very old tradition. This I realised only through intuition. Of course I had no concept, I had no material to read about it to see the history of such an event, but my contribution to it, therefore participating once in this market, was enough, and those little sketches and photographs. The photographs I had taken I must say I still have the negatives and from time to time I print large prints of these few photographs, which constituted like I said in retrospect a major arrival in my development. Only a year later I had redone the composition, but this time of course it was a lot more advanced, because I used a geometrical device to put across the same system of social meeting on a hill market, but this time it became more and more conceptualised, therefore, almost systematically the subject which was in the first place if you like the induction for my diploma, it became a conscious subject I was proud of, and I developed further, until it became a sketch for a sculpture. It's unbelievable as it develops, because, with patience[??] you will see that over the years the thing comes back to me, but this time it's not any longer a social event, it becomes a cosmic thing. From what it was, a skeletal social event of the peasants of Romania from different cardinal points, I say that to immediately make sense of the geographical and topographical gathering of people from different parts, also climbing this mountain, in space, as it is developing in my work it becomes a sketch for a three-dimensional thing, originally each one of these cells in which I invest with some energy some point, at some point in painting, this means a little cell within which there is a substance which might be red, therefore the idea of vital fire, therefore a human within there, without necessarily having to sketch a figure. The sketching of the figure already happened a year later. Now we step into another stage, which is, as I said, conceptualising and using geometry, therefore I am using another device, which is folk art, Romanian folk art is full of geometry. So what happens in my work, I am selecting, I am filtering, and I am becoming a kind of conceptual artist within one subject matter; this thing therefore from being a mountain of peasants full of gay time and having a great spectacle of

their dances and so on, becomes a more abstract kind of archaeological, at the same time poetical, social, even philosophical thinking. So it's invested with all kinds of things, up to this point where the sculpture becomes a stainless steel development of very systematic and almost mathematical eight branches developing from one centre.

And all this is based in fact, I mean the festivity and this extraordinary sort of...

Gathering of energies.

Yes, spectacle which is a gathering of energies, has behind it a very primitive sexual, social function. It has a purpose that relates to the very basic.

Exactly, I remember in my defence, I used the word 'carousel' a lot. The carousel, the kaleidoscopic gathering of the events, because the peasants would sell things to each other, as well as exchanging free things, from a drink to a salute, from a song to, 'Have a bit of my sandwich' - of course it wasn't called sandwich - 'Have a bit of my bread.' All that invested in me such a strong experience that there was a stage when it became, like I said, almost the parameters of an investigation which had anthropological feeling, first with humans in it, marked and present as humans in a graphic or painterly way, later became as pure energy to create the complexity of this system of mine which I am working with even now, and I am talking about, what is it, 25 years on.

This is the anthropocosmos.

At its very beginning.

The cosmos with notion of a whole cosmology that is based upon a human gathering upon a human intercourse of some kind.

Exactly, because in a symbolic way it constitutes probably the whole development of my work since. And again and again almost like a period of twenty years, or ten years, you see the same compositional base re-appearing in the work, less and less

figurative or sometimes going back to the figuration of that, as in my latest meditation of hermeneutical kind, where all these notions are taken in in another carousel, kaleidoscopic, cosmic investigation. Without having to be myself in the centre of it, I must also point right now to the idea that in 1974, therefore five years after coming to Britain, another big moment in my development was the gradually going to another performance, which was a dynamic carousel, if you like, due to the moment of initiation, which happened to me in '65 on this mountain, not because I was active as a peasant but because I was the witness of this event, and participant to an extent, this time I was doing a performance where I was the centre and the carouseling of energy and elements of ordinary daily data were around my bodies. Not only that but there was a performance, a version of the 'Gradually Going Tornado', where I worked with four assistants. So again symbolically we could see a metamorphosis of the original idea into these events, which preoccupied me for a number of years.

'Gradually Going Tornado'.

Exactly. So there is the spine, and that's the beginning of its surge if you like. So what happened, I could only congratulate myself that I didn't waste my immediate years following the diploma time going to be a teacher of ordinary drawing for small children, but therefore I invested more and more, as I did that I also got and more confidence in myself in my own way of following certain intuitions, because there was nothing very scientific about this, everything was due to a certain sense of smell, but at the same time I realised by doing this exercise diploma-wise and doing a few other paintings after that in the following years that in fact me being stubbornly a painter didn't count for much.

Did you say a sense of smell?

Yes, in a sense of smelling my ways forward, or smelling my ways around, by which I mean intuitively, guessing rather than having a precise, you know, scientific...

Programme.

Programme. So, what happened was, as soon as I got my diploma as a painter and a potential teacher, because we did a few years of studying pedagogy as part of the training, separate training in order to make you fit as a teacher, which was rather superficial, special lessons.

Did these lessons in pedagogy follow after your diploma, or...?

No they were...

Part of your diploma course?

Part of it. But they were like an appendix attached to, because as an artist you were supposed to be unable to earn a living and therefore the teaching was the easiest way to look at it, so they were giving you a few lessons to prepare you for a class of small children or students maybe. Nothing much on that sense, but it was, in their eyes was sufficient to get you ready as it were. In other words I had to disregard that as well, because, what I was going to say was, what happened to me, not only did I get married to a lady involved in theatre, but I got involved with another group of friends, young like myself and full of vitality and energy spent on newer and newer ways of looking into a gestalt, I met film-makers, directors of film-makers, writers, poets, and so on; not only that but I started trying my own ways in that directions, I was contributing to a cartoon film for instance, I wrote a number of scenarios. I made one or two tapestries, I worked on mosaics in Palo[ph]. In other words I was not only prepared but open and interested, in far more than just being a teacher; I wanted to have my hand and some experience in every field where I felt some support, some confidence, and some attraction.

So this is why staying in Bucharest was so important.

Essential. Not only because I had access to certain libraries and films and friends' conversations, but because I couldn't practise such a variety of things in a small provincial town, because I knew what I was rejecting, because for a period, because of my young marriage I did sacrifice a couple of months of my time, I went to the

town where my wife was having her first job in the theatre, in a provincial place, and I became for that period a stage designer. Of course I collaborated with a play-writer, with the actors, with the director of this play, and as it happened it was quite a successful intervention for my part into the stage designing of the theatre, so successful that some of the actors came to me to ask permission if they could wear the costumes I designed for them in their private life, or if they could make another costume to wear that summer in their holidays, the play being something of rather local, happy, holiday time. I mean this by small measure there was a satisfying experience, but I wasn't going to waste myself to become a stage designer; on the contrary, I came back after that period to Bucharest, where I knew I could have a hand in other commissions which were given for tapestries, for larger monumental work and so on. So in a gradual way I moved from earning some living, sufficient living so I could carry on my own experimental multi media work, by doing graphic work, which again was a freelancing, doing illustrations for books, making covers for records, record covers, or posters for films.

Is this how you got out of the problem of not, as it were, paying back by working for the State, your six years' grant?

Well the paying back for the State was just a notion to threaten me with; in fact the business didn't get so far as to be asked to give back the money. They simply postponed their disciplining task towards me, so much so that I lost touch with them and they lost the impetus to punish me; in other words they let me be. Meanwhile I was having to earn my living in some ways, partly because now I was having for the first time, I received some money from my parents which sold their big house in order to help all the children, and as I got married my family gave me a small sum to which I had to put more money in order to buy my first studio. This studio was my living quarters, it was no more than one room, kitchen and bathroom, and it's within there that I was spending my first years of marriage as well as doing my own work. Very squeezed space in a very central part of Bucharest, but I wasn't far from the club or theatre to which I was contributing by looking at the new staging going on with friends of mine; I wasn't far from the cinematheque where I used to go once or twice a week; I wasn't far from a library or from studios of friends.

What was the culture of Bucharest like in those years, what sort of city was it?

Well talking about these years meaning '67 to '68, '69, there was a passage, historically speaking, within the Communist era, where the idea of doing just one type of official work wasn't necessarily enforced; it was becoming a disciplinary thing only if you wanted to become an official member of the Union of Artists, which of course put pressure on me too, because I wanted to become a member of the Union of Artists, and in order to do so you had to have three, minimum three official participation, official exhibitions, which were heavily censored, and it's in that kind of exhibition that I managed to exhibit at the graphic department with my abstract things, pretending they are illustrations to Western poets, which was allowed, therefore they were not occupying their priority places with large compositions of any ambitious type. So in a sense I was diplomatic, because I was trying to have my participations without irritating anybody with big statements, so I was doing my small statements, managing to get in, on a department which was less important, meaning illustration, graphics and so on. Then once or twice I also put in paintings, but of course they were usually rejected. The only time I had success in this sense, in those very years, when there was an open competition towards four tapestries, I put forward my project, which again it was to use a figurative element, but in my own case I used this figurative element to analyse it in a very structuralist way. By doing that I managed to do, like in the Mountain of Chicken case...

The girl market.

A kind of cross-section, the girl market, I did a cross-sectioning of figurative with abstract, to produce this tapestry of five metres by three, which was received this time with congratulations and success, partly because the weavers which worked for me were very good at following my project, my suggestions. And by doing that I managed to understand myself better that I could compromise, I realised, if I have to I could compromise without feeling dirty afterwards. And as the time progressed, as I was saying these restrictions were not imposed on you unless you wanted an official position. I was quite happy to be a marginal, a potential member of the Union of

Artists, which in the end I was approved to be as a studier[ph], as what they call a provisional member, which is given to you as a preparatory stage, I couldn't possibly expect to have a one-man show in Bucharest, because most of my mixed media work at the time was considered illegal, underground. What happened was that politically Romania changed step. As Romania started sympathising with the Dubcek regime, Ceausescu became a stronger leader, trying to fight against the Russians' impositions, culturally it was the second but first politically. More and more Ceausescu was fighting for an independent Romania from the satellite states of Russia, and one of the events which forced those changes was exactly the fact that Dubcek in Czechoslovakia, trying to run a freer system, less subservient to the Russian power, created such a havoc, in 1968 suddenly Czechoslovakia was occupied by Russian tanks and Russian armies, as we know, Ceausescu made public statements in sympathy with Dubcek against the Russian occupation, and a sudden big tension happened in Romania, everybody was asked to be aware that any minute the Russian army could attack Romania across the river, which is the border with Russia. This is what happened in 1968.

Of course this made Ceausescu a darling of Western governments.

Exactly. Unfortunately this had a bad result in the end, because as we know Dubcek was stopped from progressing any further, he was taken down, he was replaced, called to Moscow, so was Ceausescu, and so were the Polish and so were all the leaders of the other socialist countries, and Ceausescu, one of the strongest warnings he had from the Russians was to cool down and to be less vocative[ph], less assertive about Romanian independence. At that point coincided a number of Western visitors to Romania, Romanian culture for a year or so had a happy moment, a bit of a relaxation; a number of exhibitions were privately allowed to take place, they were not any longer of Realist Socialism, they were more of an experimental type of semi-abstract work. The Romanian lyricism wasn't the main thing, it became a visionary, full of surrealism and kind of strange artists, which were old artists, like Tsukulescu[ph], like Bucur[ph], like Derinday[ph], which are all unknown names to Romanian culture up to that point, suddenly they became acknowledged publicly through exhibitions. Not only that but the Western brings to Romania large

exhibitions of mixed type, which in a very encouraging atmosphere of openness present to us people like British artists, like Henry Moore, not only Henry Moore but Abstract artists from the United States. For instance I remember my first contact with Alan Davie's paintings was through the British show taking place in Bucharest some time in '67 or '68, I can't remember exactly. And there was a large British Council show brought to Romania and probably touring a number of Eastern bloc capitals. So we all thought that this is going to be the liberalisation of our cultural restrictions, of the censorship and so on. Unfortunately it wasn't so. My greatest bit of luck though happened in these years, because as I said Romania was visited by dealers from the West, curators from the West, along with Poland, Hungary, and even Russia, and the very dealer which came across my ways was Richard Demarco from Scotland.

End of F4531 Side B

F4532 Side A

Artists' Lives recording made with Paul Neagu at his home in Jackson Road, October the 5th 1994. Tape Four.

Paul, we were talking about your life and work in Bucharest after your graduation from the Academy there. I was interested, I am interested, in the sort of artistic milieu, if I may call it that, in Bucharest during those years, what it was like to be an artist.

Well using a word like 'milieu' is a very suitable one, because of Romanian heavy tradition on relationship and link with French culture to start with, which wants to say that it was conditioned to an extent, or created to be that way by our fathers and even grandfathers; culturally Romania being very close to the French, because of the language, and because of the spirituality altogether. On the other hand the French themselves have shown a lot of sympathy to the events of Romania, and that goes back to the years before the Second World War and even in the 19th century to a great extent, by which our greatest artists, Grigoresco for instance, you might be surprised to know that in the south of France in a small town I discovered in a museum a whole room dedicated to the painting of Nikolai Grigoresco, who was the man dearly loved by Romanian culture at the end of the century, he was a kind of sentimental but very good painter, who painted agricultural scene of Romania and Romania at its most romantic. Now he was an academic painter, and he gave the name to my college, the same college which Brancusi studied at many years later. Beside that there were several big names of Romanian painting who went to France for long periods of time, some of them stayed years, Barbizon for instance, painters like Andreescu[ph], like Balady[ph], a great friend of Matisse, spent many years in France, they developed friends, friendships, and they developed a rapport of colour relationships, cultural understandings, and so did poetry and literature, heavily, heavily related to, almost like a cousin of the French culture.

I meant to say that of course it was to Paris that Brancusi walked when he left Romania, and it was Paris where Tristan Tzara...

Marcelli Ancu[ph], Tristan Tzara, Victor Brauner[ph], all of them came from Romania, who go to Paris during the Dada years, Surrealist years. Some of them were Romanian Romanians, others were Romanian Jewish, feeling internationally aware and internationally keen, can I say. But then before the war, the move to Paris and back again was a very free thing, just like you have it in Britain coming from here and going to New York and coming back without having to ask permission of anybody. So this is the criteria by which I judge the very years when I finished my own studentship, when I said earlier on I think that Romania went through a period of liberalisation in arts at the end of the Sixties, before the Dubcek regime in Czechoslovakia brought everything to an end, that's what happened again, there was I remember very clearly, De Gaulle was visiting Romania, and this was exactly 1968 with the trouble in Paris, when suddenly he was called back to France because of what happened in the boulevards of Paris. I was still in Romania, yet I had the invitation of a gallery in Hamburg in my pocket allowing me to think it shouldn't be too difficult to go and exhibit for the first time my strange objects, which were mixed media, in Hamburg. How this came about, it was that I was related to an older friend of mine called Jon Bitzan[ph], and two other people who were doing kind of unusual avant-garde work in Romania, Peter Jacobi[ph] and Richie Jacobi[ph], both of them, one making sculpture and the other one textile, unusual, rich work, and none of such things were expected to come from Romania which was heavily Communist indoctrinated. Bitzan[ph] came with collages and a lot of spontaneous abstract kind of lyrical work. I was meant to be part of this group of four artists in Hamburg Bauzentrum[ph] 1969, because they discovered being one of the youngest in the group that I was making strange concoctions of different materials. So what happened, as soon as I finished my '65 diploma time I moved into investigating how I could make the painting more real, more tense in the sense of materials, so I had moved away from the simple plain on the wall, and started building shelves to the painting. Then the shelves started having their own colour, reflecting what the painting was saying, I slowly proceeded towards the three-dimensional. Immediately after that I took up matchsticks and box matches, and other odd left-overs materials, to which I was used already from my childhood, because for many years before this, even before I became an art student, I used to play and create strange toys out of

leather, leather being the material very present in my house where my father was making shoes; with leather, with wood, sometimes with thin foil or metal stolen from other industrial places. For instance, when I was 16 and earlier I used to have a chemistry laboratory in the basement of the house; that laboratory functioned with improvised glass objects in which I would concoct different chemicals trying to create little explosives with which I would amuse myself and my mates. While I needed metal I used to climb the telegraph poles to peel away the little note which says, 'Danger to go above this point because of electrocution'. Now that thing happened to be made of a thin aluminium foil which I used to rip off and take to my lab, and being able to cut it by scissors I would invent little objects which would be a book, say, like a box covered in leather, inside would have been an axis made of metal, which would open the box in a very unexpected way, or a little radio made of galena, a mineral which would be able to connect you with the most powerful radio station locally, and you could listen in with a couple of microphones which themselves would come from telephones disturbed. Shall I go on and say that it means that a lot of public telephones were ripped off and little things out of there, or old radios being re-used in my lab, reconditioned and so on. So, there was adventurous, rebellious way of not respecting the regulations or the law, if you like. A couple of times I was in danger of being caught by police, which made my life illustratively quite perilous, and so it was after being a student, and even during the student years when I had probably culminated<sup>[ph]</sup> culturing myself, but soon after that I started producing ways of terrorising the traditional painting, trying to say plastically. What happened, I was putting mirrors like I said in the front of a canvas and then attaching them to the same canvas, see if the viewer would rather look in a mirror at the canvas, in other words reversing the rapport, or looking directly. Things of this kind didn't stop quickly, it went on and on, until I made such complex platforms containing up to fourteen different materials, from pieces of stone to shell, leather, wood, metal, all trying to make sense out of some subject which usually was a social subject can I say, like investigating how many figures I could fit within a pyramid; the pyramid was made of mirrors, therefore there was an interior which was physically built out of matchboxes, each matchbox contained a figure, and they were reflected in the four sides of the pyramid which would open up, kept open by strings. To get at its core you had to open the box itself, which was bigger, like 4 feet by 3 feet. The cutting in order to

open the box wasn't at all an ordinary normal straightforward hinged door, but they were cut in diagonals so that when you cut its doors you could flick them over behind the work, make the work rest on these open doors, so the whole thing will spring up from the floor. The next stage was to open the pyramid by the[ph] mirrors, which would reflect the inside, the core, where you find the matchboxes like an ancient graveyard where you discover that the dead inside it is still mirrored as you open the pyramid, therefore you could send that very message in a visionary way to the very sky.

Can I just say something here? What you're describing is, you are really describing the development of what you might call cellular structures.

Exactly.

And there are two meanings of course of cell; one is a compartment which is part of a configuration of compartments, as a honeycomb for example, has many cells, or a prison has many cells.

Or a monastery has many cells.

Or a house has cells in the form of rooms. The cell also of course refers to an energy centre, a place in which energy is conserved for future use.

Yes.

As in a battery cell. And we shouldn't forget that you had of course begun your professional life as an electrician, working with electrics.

Yes.

It just amuses me that you have these two possible meanings, and they are both entirely apropos when it comes to the work you've just described, which is a work made up of cells, has a cellular structure, and a work which also has a contained

energy which, with a certain action, the opening of the box and so on, this energy is released in the way that energy might be released from an electrical cell.

Oh yes exactly, it's within that, I have several things in my hand at one very time. I wasn't entirely aware though of what potential they were hiding within, so it was up to me to concoct, to mix and still try to make sense, because I wasn't concocting just for the sake of creating a chaos. I remember, as you talk to me I remember that one of the earliest moments of, unusual moments of culture in my youth was as a young child I was taken by my father to what was a strange, a lecture on Egyptology; this happened in Bucharest, so I must have been, I don't know, nine or so. I remember the strange man who came, the Athenaeum of Bucharest was like the Albert Hall in London, where sometimes very unusual professors would come and give a lecture on very unusual subjects. This time there was Egyptology, which I didn't know anything about it. My father was curious enough, and I think he didn't know what to do with me so he took me over. And I myself paid some attention, to a degree I remember just vaguely that in fact the talk was about big slides, photographs taken by these kind of Egyptologists who were studying the pyramids, he was showing us sections through the pyramids and how the chambers within these heavily geometrical monster shapes, to my mind at the time, were hiding small secretive chambers where old kings were buried. Now, take it or leave it, this was in the back of my mind, this was my subconscious mind. Earlier on I just described my mirror in[??] pyramids, and as you pointed to certain cellular obsessions of mine, which were in the process of becoming almost a virus with my production of art, 'production' in inverted brackets, not art, I could see now that what I was after was, I was trying to re-animate, to re-energise probably what you just said, why is a human being shut up in prison, or why in a socialist State it seems that the very tiny apartment is supposed to hold a whole family? And why cells are also part of our biological being, on a physiological level. So these things only slowly occurred to me in my mental understanding, my conceptualisation of work. What I was obsessed with in a very conscious way was though, the observations I could make on an ordinary perceptual level, which were that no savage energy could be progressive or constructive unless it's checked up or controlled by some kind of cellular structure, therefore the discipline is needed to contain the wildness, the savagery of this energy, which is like a flame, that's the way

I used to conceive of it. So then I came to obsessively use this cheap material, which were matchboxes and matchsticks, and there is a metaphor for you, at that point it became the very brick of my foundation, the cornerstone of my immediate metaphysics I was dealing with, which was, I used to give explanation. I remember my first catalogue was in the intimation of a matchbox, only that I managed to get to the factory which made them and I ordered them bigger. In this matchbox-like box where the central drawer came out of this shell, you find a harmonica, a piece of paper which describes in several pages as they open in front of the eyes, the very short CV of this artist. On the first page, which was stuck to the bottom of the box, glued, there was Paul Neagu's face, and several stages after that his face diluted, coming out into steps. Now this is another description of an art object which at the time I made into a catalogue, so it must have been that the matchbox, plus its intricate relationship with the finger, the relationship of a matchbox and the finger, is definitely a tactile relationship and is not indifferent what size it is. So I must say that immediately after that I started observing that the keyboard of a piano and the size of one single clavier note is not wider than the finger, than a medium-sized finger. So I started thinking, of course, look, this human body and its proportions give sense to all the objects which are made for the human body. Of course tools or musical instruments. So I started seeing sense, even in how big was the apartment, and it's there that I started building a lot of, I started gathering a lot of material, documenting my own observations and my own discipline of looking at things, which later gave fruition to my observation in what I saw in Corbusier and his kind of urbanism he was envisaging. In other words the modulum, which related the human body to the size of the box, to the size of the bed, the coffin, the bathroom, the bath-tub, as well as the size of the apartment altogether, from which we expand or extend to the size of the city. Going backwards, then I created for myself a small keyboard, and I used to think in these terms, I remember, because I repeated it several times since. There were three measures I was working with, there was the finger measure, which was the...well, properly, a thing called tactility, like the Bry[ph] language, for blind people.

Braille.

The Braille, not Bry[ph], sorry. The Braille therefore tells us what the finger is capable of doing, and all the nuances on the finger sensibility; then there was the size for the hand, like a pocket, like a lady's...muffin?

Muff.

A muff, which I remember looking at, or the glove itself, the glove which has just one finger, or anything else which is like...a bannister, which is a handrail, meant for the hand not for one finger.

Or the door handle.

Or the door handle. And then it's the next one up which is the size of the bed, or one chair for one person, different from, you know, a sofa for two people and so on. So the constitution of my world was very small, but generating, so they were intricately related to each other. So there was the finger, the hand and the whole body.

May I interrupt you here? Because, again it's by way of clarifying an issue for myself, but, of course from these small scale, from the smaller scale thing, the matchbox, can be generated structures that are enormous. I mean, in other words a cellular structure is capable of re-duplication and multiplication, and your multiplication will give you larger structures which contain within themselves the dynamics of the smaller structures.

Absolutely. So I was building a small metaphor as macro and micro, in order to...

Micro and macro.

Micro and macro.

Yes. I beg your pardon.

And their relationship in the sense of the world of small perception relates to the world of large perceptions. Going back from here to what I did in my diploma years, I realised the disparity between my own work, which you saw as a carousel on the top of a hill, seen as an invention from a mind of a helicopter pilot looking down on this, the difference between these and what my colleagues were doing, was that I was looking at it from a general, above, aloof point of view, while the others were looking at it from close-up, the Socialist Realist point of view, which means to look at a human being as it's there to sit for a portrait. There was no way I could cover the idea of a market which contained a few thousand people by concentrating on one or two people, or one or two figures within the market, so I desperately wanted to have a wider view, a wider angle. So if you ask me again I would say the 'Anthropocosmos' thing, which is an overriding title of my work, which is a heavy metaphor for what I did, starting with that year, '65, it ran on and on with certain branches and definitions, even including the invented group of fictional artists in '72, which was once more a hand with five fingers. The one finger I knew very well was myself, and then I wanted to create if you like a little musical organ where each finger had another song to play, and yet what the whole group were putting forward, like when I had my exhibition in '75 in Oxford, was the common ground of the group, not each finger, but that common ground couldn't happen unless you had each one of these fingers investigating, perceiving the world on its own.

A common ground being as it were the hand.

The palm itself.

The matrix of the fingers.

Yes.

And one might also say here again I think, as a way of clarifying something, which is that, from the beginning, from the work you did for the diploma painting, you were exploring what we might call diagrammatic and schematic ways of...

Exactly.

Of visualising and understanding the world, and its relations.

And this gave rise to my philosophical loop, to my scientific loop, while the other side, which for a while I neglected, was the characteristic specificity of one element.

But I would say that, it's interesting again going back to your work, your life before you went to the Academy, is of course that you spent two or three years as a topographical draughtsman and a technical draughtsman. And of course, a great deal of your work has had to do with what you might call topographies, topographies of the spirit, topographies of human relations.

Right, so it's cartography, making a map. Map-making.

Map-making.

That's what cartography is.

Yes.

In cartography you spend more time and more focusing on the general aspect of the land, put it that way, by being able to formalise on the conventional language of map-making, you work with symbols; for churches, a cross, for a fountain you use a duck, for a river, for a source of river one thing, for a railway another. These are all little symbols.

And topography extends of course into mathematics, doesn't it, and, I mean there's a whole branch of mathematics which has to do with topography.

Absolutely. Now topography is done through photography from aeroplanes, but in my days they were done by topographers being sent out there with certain measuring simple machineries to measure the differences of level of the land, compared to the

zero level of the sea. That's how you build maps, and give height or what you call, quotations.

So you are exploring all these themes in the year, the two or three years after you left the Academy, and you are working in Bucharest. Can you just say something, to go back to the very beginning of this particular tape, something about the milieu that you were working within, and how this sort of work that you were doing in Bucharest, in Romania in the late Sixties, was being received by your friends, your colleagues, by other artists, by the people who were making films or animations.

Yes, it's exactly this very milieu who were the first people to encounter the kind of struggle I had in my own laboratory, and I must say that the argumentation was incessant. Arguments were going up and down. Some people were on my side, others were taking the critical view of telling me that I was crazy trying to combine so many different things, that I shouldn't do that. So in the end someone would come up and say, 'But don't you know about gestalt?' So, if that would be the case, we will say, 'What can I find out more about gestalt?' So someone would say, 'Look, in Germany there was a movement called the Bauhaus centre around which this and that happened.' For instance my mother-in-law at the time gave me heavy heavy lessons for many years, about three years actually, on Rudolph Steiner, only to discover, through her own talks, because there were no books about Rudolph Steiner, she, this poor lady, was in jail once, when the Communists arrived to Romania because of her work with Rudolph Steiner, which was considered definitely anti-Communist. Her own husband was a serious translator of Steiner's work, and in Rudolph Steiner one would discover, I mean through my discussions with this lady; of course I was in a position of her student. I remember her daughter, my wife, would disregard these talks by saying, 'They are nonsense, I've heard them so many times before.' To me they made a lot more sense, so in fact in a funny way I became a better friend of my mother-in-law than my wife ever was, her daughter, because she found in me a very good listening character. So it's without saying that Rudolph Steiner was a Renaissance kind of person who was busy making paintings, creating architecture, having a lot to say about theosophical matters, or discussing religion.

And energies as well.

A lot of his investigations were in changes of fluency, of liquids, materials, as well as spirituality. All those things were nourishing me without being quite at this stage able to make, you know, sense in more than producing a few objects which were of very intriguing type of most artists around me. And what happened, it's within that milieu that, why we the younger ones were struggling against the older ones, because of course, just like in any fight of generations, we were coming up with all kinds of new ideas which were making nonsense of the traditional values. Some of our teachers in the Academy, I was lucky enough not to have them, were painters like Valàquez, they would talk about incessantly the great Spanish painters. Picasso wasn't even allowed to be mentioned, he was a disruptive, savage character who wasn't even visually educated in their eyes. So the method, the idea of 19th century art, not necessarily academic as we know it for its works[??] in the 19th century, but more to do with, say, a kind of persuasion of the Realist reason, say like in Delacroix, or even Frans Hals, if that's any better, these were the.....

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So if we talk about Frans Hals, maybe we can't insist too much on this, simply because he came to me because he is one of the academic painters who is freer when it comes to brush-work. Of course the discussions academically was around people like Rembrandt and then moved onwards historically up to the Impressionists. We were discussing Monet for instance, or even Seurat, and these already were enough avant-garde, like we were in a time warp, we were forbidden to mention what was happening contemporarily, being suffocated by the same criteria that art is not to be discussed unless all the artists are dead, in other words it's the art historical loop, do not try to invest too much, you know, perception power in what happens under your nose, which, as young people we found irritating, but then I talk about it like we were a group. It's in the same milieu that I must say I came across a musicologue who was very interested in modern work, and it's with him that I started being asked to illustrate the work of Mahler for instance, he was putting on lectures about Mahler with auditions for the first time to students of the Conservatoire, these were special evening hours as a kind of luxury information, and the symphony of Mahler, Paul Neagu was putting on a very long specially-made slide, which was a piece of glass which I was passing through the projector at a very slow pace, I was trying to pass it on, the slower pace than the pace of a watch indicator so that it's not noticeable with the free eye as it moves. With the music therefore I was calculating if the first part of the symphony was, say, 45 minutes, I had to pass my slide, which was about 60 centimetres long, slowly enough so that people don't perceive how the image on the screen is being changed. I was running a slow flow with the music itself. What was on the image of course was another kind of illustrative, colourful flow of colours trying to complement Mahler's music. Now that kind of work was, for me, dead avant-garde.

Well you see, that links with Rudolph Steiner, doesn't it.

Exactly.

And all of these experiments in scene-aesthesia[ph], you know, which was also Kandinsky, and goes back I suppose in some ways to Wagner, but I mean certainly this notion that there are correspondences, 'correspondance', between the intervals of music and the intervals in the spectrum, and the structures of a piece of music and the structures of the body, or whatever. So you've got this whole, rather late in the day I may say, in the late Sixties...

Exactly, and it's in the same...

You're actually exploring...

It's in the same late day that we came across, 'we', people like me, a few of us, the first reproductions of Kandinsky, and Wols, and the first Abstracts, because the school wouldn't allow us, or wouldn't provide us with that information. But we gradually managed to discover enough about it, earlier on I mentioned for instance the Groupe de Recherche Visuel in Paris, a group of younger rather than middle life artists, working group, which for me was very exciting because I knew that Sheffeur[ph] for instance, one of the ex-engineer-became-sculptor, doing kinetic structures moving on a stage, controlled by computer, they were just background to ballet work. So imagine how exciting this was when all my ideas and most of my intentions were to push toward a mixed media kind of spectacle performance, total spectacle, this was the word. Antonin Artaud, his ideas were young. In Poland we soon found out, not because he came to perform in Romania but there was enough information circulating in this kind of élite intellectual, being curious, to discover that Grotowski was active doing the Theatre of the Cruel, doing a very important work on an avant-garde theatrical way. Romania itself here and there in provincial places which were less under the strong eyes of the censorship were putting on plays by Ionesco, even Beckett, you know, this was all incredibly exciting. Some of it might have been late, but as they were coming to us we were of course hoping that this atmosphere would keep growing and become even freer, at some stage each one secretly preparing ourselves, we will travel in the West at one point or another. As it happened, as I talked earlier about the political context and the tensions, this was to

be cut short by what happened in 1970, when Ceausescu was asked to stop any form of liberalisation, culturally and otherwise.

Can I interrupt you again Paul, because I can say, of course, young people in the West in the late Sixties were also reading Kafka and Beckett and Ionesco with a certain amount of excitement; they might be in some cases a little bit out of date or seem to belong to a previous era, but nevertheless they were being rediscovered, as they still are, by generation after generation of students in the West. Insofar as you were finding these things exciting, or indeed finding the sort of scene-aesthetic[ph] experiments of Kandinsky and people like that, and also exciting, art students today are continuing to find these things interesting and illuminating. So, there's a sense in which although you may have been in what might have seemed a backwater, with your own friends you were engaging with a great deal of what was in the air, a great deal of what was still exciting and interesting, to young artists anywhere in the world virtually.

I could see what you are saying, creating this parallel with the situation of new generations everywhere in the world, yet we had one extra problem to cope with, which was the frustrating officialdom which we knew they were all against this kind of search and research. So we kept blaming it for not allowing it to go all the way.

Yes. And that I think links very very directly to something else in your early work, and something which has continued to be a feature of your work, and that's the element of secrecy, the element of hiding one thing within another.

Conspiracy.

Conspiracy, a strategy for survival. I thought of this when you talked about the first catalogue, or one of your first catalogues being like a matchbox and your face was hidden at the bottom of a sort of concertina that came out of it.

Exactly, yes.

And I thought this was a very typical strategy to hide yourself in this box, just as the boxes that you've described, the cell structures and so on, are means to hide messages; as well as being cells which contain energy they are also the means to hide messages. I'm thinking of a very early work of yours called 'The Great Metronome', which is...

'The Great Metronome' was the largest work which I managed to...yes, to put together, as, I used the word concoction earlier on, in fact it's a more adequate term to say it was an aggregate of different materials. It became 'The Great Metronome' because it's actually grown into what it was; it was like a wardrobe of nine departments, nine sections, which were aggregated within the same large composition, each door opening somewhat different from the others, some in diagonal cuts, others in ordinary ways with hinges, to put, after you see these nine more or less equal compartments, open...

Configured as a square.

Configured as a total square, but within the square there were nine departments, the central ones had planes of release inclined to you at different angles depending on the position on the square. If they were left-right and up and down, each one had such an orientation as to show you that there was an implied centre somewhere towards the front of this wardrobe, which was outside it, so only when you had the doors open, each door had a moustache, this moustache like a long arm, you could fix to have the door open at the precise angle, like you have the mirror of the car on the side, which you then fix. In my case I used a long stiff wire to fix the door open at this angle. According to that angle you imply the very centre of the whole thing. 'The Great Metronome', because there was a measuring device within it, without beating like in kinetic art, it wasn't physically moving, but once you open the thing, the very fact that you were there centre front of the object, you became the centre, and according to your manipulation of it, you would orientate these doors in such a way that without realising you are actually the centre of this metronome. The metronome, it's a metaphor, it's not really to do with beating time, but it's to do with creating a rhythm of your energies, a rhythm, which will be marked inside by the way that the mosaic is

distributed, each one of these panels having some kind of energy device in an implied way, not in a dead realistic fashion.

If you opened the central sections, or if you opened all the sections, in fact the, one two three four, the five central sections, that's the one in the dead centre, that to its immediate left and right, and those to its immediate top and bottom, would of course configure as a cross.

The cross was evident, you did the right guessing. There was a cross because the two boxes' extreme corners, at top and the two ones at the bottom, were empty; this emptiness wasn't there for nothing, the emptiness was ash, was painted a grey layer of silver and black.

Ash?

Like ash. So if you have the object closed, you would be quite certain that each one of the nine boxes is going to give you the same richness as it comes open. When you open it, you see an emphasis, therefore four are empty, five are full, which is one step inwards, inside that subject matter as it were. So it was of a complex nature visually which was nevertheless having a very powerful centre which was after all communicated through the cross, but the cross of symmetrical kind which had no arm more important than the others, apart from the fact that the gravity had an action which was different, the lower part to the top. So it was a form of metronome suspended in time. It was one of my more naive if you like, probably the first time I have tried to put a tool together, an instrument together, which was to cross-section time with space.

Yes. And, the point I was making about it earlier on though is that being like a wardrobe it was a thing in which things are hidden, it's a thing in which, by which something might be revealed if you acted upon it or opened the door.

If you participated.

If you participated.

Yes.

Now, as I said there's an element there isn't there of a strategy, there's an element of conspiracy almost with the person who participates in the work, an aspect of secrecy or disguise, and this I think is a recurrent feature. Am I right in supposing that this might in a way relate in some ways to that...a sort of situation you found yourself in when you were making...?

In retrospect, I was looking at myself...in so many years ago I would say that you are right, but at the time I wasn't doing that consciously. At the time I imagined that that secrecy, which I was aware of it surely, it arrived in my work, or I arrived at it, simply because it was part of the traditions of mysterious things, religion-like. Don't forget that a lot of altars require that you enter the church, and sometimes that means some effort, you have to find the key of the church, it's not always open; a lot of churches in Romania are shut during the day. And next to that there are rooms in the back of the altar where you are not allowed to enter altogether, so if you enter that's a different stage, so you enter it temple-like. And it's the same with the work, it was making natural sense for me at the time, because I was thinking of an icon which has doors.

An icon?

Yes, an icon with a closing capacity.

And with an image representing energy, in the case of the icon of course  
[INAUDIBLE] Christ...

Was quite a gracious thing to deal with.

Enclosed, as in a cupboard or as in a...

Right, or as in a safe.

As in a safe.

Or as in a power station, where don't forget I worked in. And every places in that power station, had a very strong safety grille in the front of the three phases, the three phases of energy. I mean, electricity, plus, minus and neutral, these were painted in three colours, and there is a relationship which I wouldn't have known between energy and colour, they were coloured in that way with special colours in case the frequency of the engine would go above its normal rate of 42 duration per second, any of these colours going out of sync would change colour. So it's supposed to be not colour blind, no it's supposed to be very aware of the purity of the colour on reading these things, because you can't touch them. So, once, you are not supposed to touch them, because there is the grille which tells you forbid to get any closer. Because of that you had the colour coding, which you had to know when it's going off the pure colour; that means there's something wrong, the temperature goes up and the colour changes, do you see? It's a wonderful relationship between energy, colour, a new perception of it in the way I was supposed to be a dispatcher[ph]. A dispatcher[ph], I don't know if it means the same in English, dispatcher[??] meant a watch-over, a watch-dog. If anything goes wrong you are supposed to be the first one aware, you take recordings of the readings of frequency electricity, engines, not simulators but synchronising powers, duration that is; unless something goes wrong you have to take note every fifteen minutes.

And this is a pure `correspondance', isn't it, of a sort of...

It's a `correspondance' which I had...

Of a Beaudelairian kind.

Being true without any concept of it. But I mean they happen to me that way, like an experience of my life.

It was when you fell asleep that you very nearly lost your job.

And something went dreadfully wrong, yes.

In the power station, yes.

But that was probably a happy accident, I don't know.

So, I can see that there's a whole complex of ideas here, aren't there, coming together in the work.

They are all there in a seed form, yes.

The work you were making in Bucharest, doing those very, what we might call very fruitful or productive years, seminal years in Bucharest before you left Romania.

I think my only, shall we say...the only thing I am to be happy with, thinking of those times, was that I was aware of all those things and I didn't lose track, because I couldn't quite make sense of all these things, they were so many, you know, from reading a Camille[ph] book, 'L'Étrangère', one of the most fashionable books at the time, to what I just said about my experience in the power station. Of course all these things were within me, so it was quite natural me trying a kind of educated democratic solution to this great number of excitements, to create, you know, a not terribly happy work like 'The Great Metronome'. Only later I started taking one by one and making sense of each one and trying to order my ideas, but then I never finished, I am still at it.

Mhm. What about action art at this time? I mean, remember these are the years when Beuys was just beginning to make a name in, certainly in Western Europe, as an action artist.

Well my artistic childhood didn't know anything about Beuys. My first contact with any form of action was, like I already said, through being married to an actress, knowing about Grotowski, and probably seeing a film or two which had to do with

theatre people being experimental. On top of that, I knew, and I was getting by now very excited about what I was finding out about the most exciting Frenchman, who was a mystery nevertheless, called Yves Klein. Yves Klein was not only an elegant action man, he was known for having a judo high level...

A black belt.

Black belt education. And then he was enough to see his action with the cullen[ph]. At the same time I remember seeing - it's funny that you mention it because you're making me think and remembering things which I thought I had forgotten - at the very same time I remember seeing this amazing film called 'Mondo [INAUDIBLE]'. It's in that film that I saw several artists, some of them rather silly I thought, some much more intriguing and much more elegantly putting across the idea of action; one of them was the section on Yves Klein with a number of naked ladies swimming in a pool of blue colour, and in the music what he called I believe 'One Line Symphony', or 'One Note Symphony', which was played by some formal orchestra, the women went in the blue ink, or rather thick blue pigment, and they were coming out to deposit their body traces, the front, backs etcetera, on a large canvas ready for them. Now that thing absolutely fascinated me, so quickly enough I started doing my own experimental art of that kind, but of course I was thrown back to my lack of material, space etcetera, so I used small canvas and a lot of pigment, almost like I built up a kind of mortar out of cement, coloured cement, and I articulated my hands so I could develop a lot of speed, and several other techniques of this kind. I remember I was working with, for instance, I developed my own two techniques, ones for engraving, coloured pulp, which I used to put under pressure, under one of my mosaic reliefs to create a rather uncontrollable structure; the structure was controllable but not the colour of it. Then there was a point when I wanted to put one of these prints in the Biennale in Vienna, we were invited, as I was a young member of the Union of Artists, I remember the commissioner of this Romanian participation said to me that you can't put your work there because you can't prove that it's a technique of etching. I said, 'But it's nothing to do with etching, I could repeat this with slight variation in colours.' He said, 'That's not good enough,' and he didn't allow me to participate. That was one of my moments when I was trying to break away from the Romanian, if

you like regulatory type of background and put something out in the West. Well there was this chap who cut it down. Next, with my very keen order, trying to put some motors to work in my mirrored surfaces. I couldn't find the right motors, I had to start...

Right, I'm sorry, I didn't catch...

Motors.

Motors, yes.

Motors. To turn slowly a certain surface I was building out of wood and mirrored glass. But I had to drop my plans. I still have the sketches for that, it could never work because I couldn't find the right power to animate my kinetic work. So then I resorted to static work, and I started producing what then later became palpable and tactile...I don't know if to call them sculptures even, palpable and tactile work, which later gave rise, after I became an artist living in Edinburgh, to 'Palpable Art Manifesto', which starts my exodus from Romania. I am saying that because once I was in Edinburgh I wasn't sure I'm not going to go back; in fact I did go back to Romania to make sure that I am not going to regret it, because I was having to give up not only marriage, therefore wife, I was still in love with my wife. Unfortunately she decided that her career was more important than being with me, because she herself was young and interested in avant-garde theatre, so she decided not to join me. But by then I already developed my own action work, because the first film I made of my tactile objects was made in '68 in Bucharest, part of which my wife contributed to, as being an animator of some of the objects, we together did what I could call my first performance, street performance in Bucharest, with my tactile iconic secretive objects. I used to place them in awkward corners in the street, sometimes in a very public street, see if the cars will smash it, or will it avoid it. And I have these on film. Actually it was a very exciting time; at the same time I knew I am preparing myself to get out of Romania to exhibit in Hamburg, and then in Edinburgh.

You made some street actions, didn't you, in Bucharest?

At that time, yes, in '68.

Can you describe them?

They were like I said, tactile objects, created in rapport with the human measurement, in other words to manipulate for whole body, for one arm, or for just fingers, so there were three, these three characters were quite present in them, and because it was present my performance was made just by placing them in such a way as the people who would happen to pass by would imagine that I just found something, and secretly I was watching over and even filmed them, photographed some of this behaviour to see what people would do if they find an object which they don't know what it is but it looks awkward or interesting or attractive. So they couldn't...knowing that the Romanians on the streets of Bucharest are basically curious people, I couldn't imagine that anyone would pass by, seeing them, and ignoring them. And it's true, these performances, most of them were with offering unusual intriguing objects to see what happens. So there I was collecting a lot of psychological data, people finding something and then looking left, looking right to see if anybody sees them before they touch it. And then they very curiously open the door of that to see if it's anything they might be interested further. When they discover just empty boxes inside or maybe a certain material which looked like a glutinous gold, then they might start smelling it. All that was part of the performance. Or re-arranging or kicking it with a foot to see if it is moving, or something strange hidden behind.

You watched these and filmed these actions.

Yes, filmed and photographed.

Did you not...did it not occur to you that this was something very similar to surveillance and to spying?

(laughs) No. No, I wasn't. I suppose it was too natural for us to do similar things to the ones who are used to. Now that you say, you are right. I remember as a child we

used to play a game allowing a coin to be on the street in the evening, and seeing people bending over to catch it and then we would pull it, because the coin will be linked with the string, a very fine string and they couldn't see it. For me it was that connection. So it was a childhood-like game. But what you said, it makes sense too, because, in fact one of the most conspicuous behaviour happened when I put this tall object on two legs with closed doors in the main artery of Bucharest. What happened to come along, not only trams and cars, ordinary cars, but there were a couple of heavy military kind of lorries which were carrying, you know, the tanks full of water with a special gun to shoot water at the demonstrators.

Water cannon.

Water cannons, right. I happened to have caught on film the water cannon police of Bucharest - I wasn't aware of this, this happened; they were watching me placing this object, I ran away from it, and they were coming closer, there were three or four such big cars, and you could see in the film the head of the man in the cabin, watching this object, they were probably thinking it's going to explode or what. And they came closer and avoided crashing it, just passing by. All that is filmed. You could see the head of this man watching, intrigued, what's going on in the middle of the road. But they didn't stop, unfortunately, because I would have been probably arrested or something.

Well that for me is full of the most extraordinary implications. I seem to recall seeing a picture of you on some sort of stilts at some point. Was that in Bucharest or was that...?

Stilts, but that was later, that was just a few months later in Edinburgh.

Ah, then we must talk about that when we come to your work in Edinburgh in 1969 and 1970.

End of F4532 Side B

F4533 Side A

Recording with Paul Neagu, February the 22nd 1995.

Paul, we talked on the last tape about your work in Bucharest in the late Sixties prior to your move to Edinburgh and then London. Perhaps I could ask you tell us something about what were the conditions in Romania that led to your decision finally to leave and to come to the West.

Well at the time, previous to that very year in 1968 there was a lot of political pressure of the Russian sort which meant the Romanian culture had to toe the line of whatever happened in Russia in arts, in particular in the visual arts; I am talking about what I was educated on, the idea that the Unions of Artists and professional artists must produce Realist Socialist work in order to please the working class. Unless you do that, that kind of thing, you wouldn't be allowed in public exhibitions, you might starve, you won't be encouraged or you might even be put in blacklists by the Securitat there because of your interest in abstract art, things which are supposedly corrupt institutions of[??] the West, decadent, etcetera. Given that context, when the situation changed politically, as it happened early that year in '68 when the Russians, because of the trouble in Prague, Czechoslovakia, the famous Spring of '68 took everybody by surprise, the Romanians took sides with the Czechs, so for a little while suddenly there was a move towards liberalisation of what was going on in the State galleries; in other words freer art was possible, even to be shown, and for a few months these `threatened', inverted brackets, to become the rule of the day, in other words we were envisaging freer and freer possibilities. As it happened, therefore, the tensions I mentioned earlier are a lot to do with the Romanians taking sides with the Czechs, immediately castigating Russians into their immediate enemy, and among the young people, particularly the ones keen on modern art as such and its experimental calibration, which I was one, thought that we were happy to see it happening while we were still in Romania. So within that context, several dealers from the West started visiting countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia. I was myself given a passport with a group of young artists to visit Prague, I remember arriving in Prague exactly when the Russian army was everywhere there. The Czechs

in secret were very brotherly and very happy that the Romanians came to visit them, and I am referring to people concerning, people within the visual arts of Prague. The whole thing was a kind of fraternity of our little luck if you like. So I went back into Romania hoping that the things would improve, starting with that moment. In fact it looked very wobbly a few months later. Yet within the same atmosphere, strange dealers from the West like I said visited those countries, one of them was some kind of curator from Hamburg happened to be visiting Romania, and they were looking for unusual kind of art, avant-garde, young or old, whatever, something which they knew wasn't exhibitable before that date. And they discovered in Romania a few such artists, some of them were older some of them were about 30, like myself. So we instantly created a group of four artists who were meant to exhibit in Hamburg, which we did later on, but as the group was preparing itself with all the work to be, well, once more had to be stamped and checked by the State commission, if it wasn't too dodgy or too dangerous ideologically. The work was novel definitely for that context. I was doing mixed media objects, like I described earlier on, palpable things, even though I had a painting background. The other members of the group, one was making tapestry with very strong allusions of abstract picture; the third person was doing collages which were influenced by French Abstractionism; the fourth one was a sculptor, again doing pseudo-Constructivistic maquettes. So the four of us were going to go to Hamburg, and as we were getting ready for that we happened to come across another dealer, this time from Scotland, which happened to be Richard Demarco, who was coming down from Poland on the way back to Britain. As Mr Demarco was visiting some of the senior artists together with the official team of translators and people from the Union, I happened to be by accident in one of these studios and Demarco insisted that he wanted to know what this young man is doing. What attracted him with me was the way I was dressed in the first place. So at his insistence in a more or less unofficial way, I said to him, 'If you could get out of the hotel early tomorrow morning before the team of translators and interpreter come to check you out and take you to other visits, come quickly and see my studio.' He did just that, to discover that under my bed and everywhere I had secret places, I was hiding my strange mixed media objects. There was a bit of an explosion in his eyes and his voice, he was speaking some broken French, and so did I, so we understood each other, without official translators, simply through French; I couldn't speak any

English. Soon after that he has learned about the idea of the four people going to Hamburg, and he immediately said, 'I would like the same show to come to Edinburgh, because it has the potential to be a great explosive surprise for my clients, for my visitors.' Which is briefly how it happened to originate, the visit to the U.K.

Can we just sort out the dates of this, Paul? We're talking about the late spring of 1968, are we?

No, I said the events were in the spring, the Richard Demarco visit was over the summer of '68.

Ah, the summer of '68.

And actually the going to Hamburg took place in February '69. By March the 1st I was crossing the Channel from Germany, Hamburg, into London, King's Cross, where again I felt very much a foreign alien, not knowing the language, this London was very strange, I had to change trains to go straight to Scotland. I was the only one on the train, the others going by plane. In other words our exhibition from Hamburg took place in Hamburg in, these four people, in a large showing room of furniture, of a factory of furniture called Bautzentrum[ph]; the same exhibition went to Edinburgh by March '69. We re-gathered as it were in Scotland therefore early that spring.

You re-gathered in Scotland?

Re-gathered, the four of us.

In the spring of '69?

Exactly, March. The exhibition therefore started in Edinburgh, from Edinburgh it went on a tour of Scotland, I remember vaguely a big show of the same show in Aberdeen at the local museum, then, I can't recall exactly the places where it went because I didn't go with every one of them. The subjective feeling that I had was that we were treated very much like creatures from outer space almost; none of us spoke

good English, wherever we went we were treated with limousines and mayors taking us around because we were such unusual guests. On top of that our show was a very unusual type, even for the art of the West, particularly in Scotland, so it's at that point that I started meeting people who later became very strong, very good friends, particularly in Scotland, people like Fred Steel[ph], Ainsley Ewell[ph], and Sandy Frazer[ph]. From Dundee to Aberdeen, to Edinburgh, to Glasgow. After the show, which was quite a powerful success in that time of the year, which wasn't the Festival mind you, I decided to stay on in Scotland because I was offered several ways of continuing to work there, and also learn the language, because to a degree I was in love with that strange idea of staying away from my home rather than quickly going back as our visas were. The others had to go back to different employment. Bitzan[ph] for instance, Jon Bitzan[ph] who was the senior of the group, he was teaching at the Academy; Peter Jacobi[ph] and Richie Jacobi[ph], they were a couple, they were having all kinds of contracts for their tapestries work back in Romania. But I had no such call apart from the fact that I was married in Romania, so I decided to stay in Scotland to get a bit deeper into what the Scottish culture is like, to meet more people and to work there. So between March...

And what date...?

March and the next Festival, which was August, middle of August, I produced a lot of new work which were basically around the same subjects, tactile and palpable materials, I produced a lot of dark boxes, by that I mean mysterious ones which were later installed during the Festival, '69, therefore, at the Richard Demarco Gallery, at the time he had this, the gallery was located in Molver[ph] Crescent, soon after that he moved from there, but I had my first installation, which was called 'Art in a Dark Room', the emphasis being on tactility, so people were coming and have to feel their way around rather than seeing everything very clearly, it was a kind of semi-obscurity room in which there were a few hundreds of pieces of mysterious kinds. Some boxes you open, within the box you find other boxes; you start pushing them with your finger to discover they might drop on the floor and so on and so forth.

So there was a sort of, well there was a participatory, almost performance element to that...

Exactly, particularly because I was there myself.

Could I...that's very interesting, I want to come back to that, but can we just go back to the show that you put on in March in Edinburgh and then took to Aberdeen with Bitzan[ph] and the Jacobi[ph] brothers?

Right. Jacobi[ph], husband and wife.

I beg your pardon, the husband and wife. Can you just describe that show for us?

Well, it's not that easy, it was quite a complex show, and we, as far as I remember we weren't split in separate rooms. I had a lot of small objects but they were made of Romanian material and therefore a bit more decrepit. In spite of that there was a fascination about it; again they were tactile and palpable boxes with mysterious clap-trap arranged to amuse and bemuse. There were some people who came from London to look at it, and particularly to review it; one of such rather high ranking art critic at the time was writing for 'Studio International', was called Mr Kennedy, I remember he was a librarian in the Victoria and Albert, he even wrote a wonderfully complex article in 'Studio International'.

I think that was...that was R.C. Kennedy, wasn't it.

R.C. Kennedy, right, a poet as well as a writer. And from their reactions and from historical photographs if you like, I remember my room was nicknamed Dr. Caligari's Room, given the mysterious aspect of these boxes. R.C. Kennedy called it several times 'full of dangerous potential', by that he was meaning in one hand a political background which was subdued in these boxes, each box might have a silhouette of a man, therefore he read in them political messages, ideological, sociological messages and so on. Next to my Caligari space, which was rather complex, intricate and full of, not usual kind of exhibition work, there was nothing clean or cool, everything was hot

and rather intricate, there was suddenly a much more warm space which was Peter Jacobi and Richie Jacobi[ph], at the time they were collaborating doing rich tapestries with titles like 'Transylvania', or 'Moldavia', they were having strong reliefs, and within the weave of the tapestry I could also remember that they were heavily made of goat hair, which was an easy material in Romania, which was unusual again to show a tapestry to start with and then being made of goat, part goat part wool, made a lot of people rise their brows and be more curious than usual. While Bitzan[ph], the senior, who had his own very elegant art work, basically collages of very fine shaded colours of paper, usually associated but being at the same time a rejuvenated form of Bissière; I am talking about the French Abstract painter who I think was just about alive at the time. Bissière we knew was for some time influencing Bitzan[ph], therefore the set of sensibilities he was putting across in his exhibition constituted, for Scotland at least, something unusual to come from a country like Romania. Most of the knowledge of Romania was minute, meaning that very few people knew where the country lied; a lot of them imagined it was a Slavonic country, a part of the Soviet Union, not to mention the even sillier ideas that Romania might come from somewhere in mid-Asia or something. So there was, all these points were making us rather unique and a bit of a circus going around, as we were, the four artists, going with the exhibition, particularly in Aberdeen I remember. During the openings I was always asked to show how to open my Caligari cabinets which had some, not frightening but kind of clap-trap little springs and things at the door of my boxes. Because my emphasis was on the tactile and the participatory aspect, they wanted to film me or photograph me as I opened them, as I manipulated them, as I demonstrated, so I instantly had to become a bit of a teacher, if not a demonstrator. I think I quite enjoyed that, but later on I've come to resent that, because I wanted very much for people to do it themselves. So this was the very very start, this was the very rumour-making show. Demarco was incredibly happy.

Demarco?

Yes, Richard Demarco himself. That's exactly the kind of thing he wanted, and when I made up my mind to stay on in Edinburgh and do a bit more work, working towards the Festival time, he was once more delighted. He wouldn't let me look for a space to

live somewhere in town, he wanted me to stay in his spare room, which I did actually, it was after all for free. So every day I would go to this workshop, which was the maintenance of a big store in Edinburgh called Goldbergs[ph], where I had free access to all the material available. Most of this material was new to me, like Formica, the material, maybe, therefore I tended towards things I knew, like wood. But there was something else new which was the kind of tools available there, which I wasn't used to. In Romania I was doing what I did with very rudimentary kind of tools, and no machines of course. So there were several leaps if you like which happened concomitantly, all at the same time. First me staying there, then having a different language to communicate with, then having different materials, different tools, different environment. It was quite a shock, more than just cultural shock, I could say it was social, cultural and political all at once. Now I am talking about the experience of being on my own in a town where very few people would speak French, let alone, there was no Romanian around whatsoever, so for months on end, because of that I could concentrate at my work. Meanwhile, like a child I would sneak into my memory all kinds of words I would relate to daily in the workshop from the working class I was surrounded by if you like. So these people, making me feel free and easy, comfortable enough, but ordinary, allowed me to have my second childhood in a sense. Of course it was a delightful childhood because I could build my toys as it were. A lot of what I am saying of course is tongue-in-cheek type of retrospective observation, but I must say that I was probably at one of the happiest moments in my life. The only thing which was creating a bit of unhappiness was that in the back of my mind of course Romania was still lurking there; having news from Romania wasn't at all pleasing because most of them were unpleasant and unhappy, talking about my wife, my family, my friends, and on a larger scale I kind of learned politically Romania was becoming once more, slowly this time, heavily under the Russian control, first politically and then culturally. So as time went by, about eight months went by, at the time of the Festival, at the time Romania had this law that if you have some kind of delegation, some of job abroad, after six months your wife could follow you, even for a short visit. I was still astonished, because my wife came to the Festival to accompany me, even though we didn't have children in Romania to be left behind as guarantee, as the cases were in most situations. So when my wife arrived, I took her immediately to Edinburgh. The Festival started. Because she was

a young actress, it was very exciting for her to be in Edinburgh in Festival time. She had a wide range of spectacles to choose from. I happened to become more of a side one. The side effect of your husband you haven't seen for so many months wasn't terribly positive, and there it starts my first tense moments when I had to explain to my wife that my intentions and my plans were to stay abroad and not to go back to Romania, given the latest events of Communist...

Consolidation, shall we say?

The re-consolidation. I couldn't see any future for me going back to Romania, so I was trying desperately to convince her to stay with me and collaborate; I was even envisaging quite clearly that I would move into performance art. So I was thinking that my wife would participate very gladly in that kind of visual display, if not using language immediately, at least physically through gesture, through movement. But she wasn't to be convinced that easily, so it took me two or three months only to realise that in the end she wanted to go back to Romania, which is what happened. After we left the Festival we moved on to France, for the first time I saw Paris, I was still a tourist, but seeing Paris after Edinburgh and then London, for me it was a bit of a disappointment because Paris appeared to me that it was a very civilised Bucharest, very close to home, given the Latin spirit and the language. I was very attracted to England, particularly to London, because it occurred to be so strange, so bizarre. To me that was attraction, so I was interested in that mystery, I wanted to know more about it. Yet I went through the motion which every Romanian would accommodate, the idea of seeing the city of light, which was Paris. It is in Paris that she left me and went back to Romania a bit earlier than myself. So by October, November, I was still in Paris, she left to go back because she was starting her first acting contract in the provincial theatre back in Romania. I was waiting and hanging on because I was invited by the Germans to visit Germany as an official professor, I was given a paid tour before I went back to Romania as it were, which was to happen in the first part of December. So by Christmas '69 I was back in Romania, to everybody's amazement. What happened within myself was trying to check once more if I am doing the right thing; I wanted to see what exactly happened back there in Romania over my absence, and what exactly was left of my marriage, if I could save any of it. The truth was

bitter than my imagination; the truth was that there wasn't much to save from my marriage, my wife was fairly well alienated by the idea of me wanting to be in the West, or having been in the West and being in love with it, I wouldn't be happy to stay back in Romania. And she was developing a good relationship with the theatre where she was working. So I paid a short visit to my family back in Timisoara, to discreetly warn my parents about my intentions to leave for good. I knew I didn't have much time, because officially I was trusted when I was near my wife. My friends were surprised that I was back; after being abroad with my wife, the usual thing was to stay out there with your wife. So she came back by herself and then I did, but in fact for me this was a reinforcement of certain impressions, certain checkings I had to do before I knew for sure where I want to put my foot next. So what happened, I had another invitation to show, in Paris this time, for the March 1970, which I used in order to re-obtain my passport, this time on my own, and pack up a whole exhibition to go to France with it. By the time they gave me the passport the situation in Romania changed slightly, as I said already, towards the Russian control, censorship, art not so free, etcetera, so once more I was in a bit of anxiety to get out before I could be stopped. This time the pretext wasn't very powerful, it wasn't a Festival, it wasn't Scotland, but it was just an ordinary one-man show in Paris. So the passport came to me only six months later, but rather than saying my show wasn't up any longer, I kept silent, I took the passport, I made my luggage and I left for Paris, being totally aware that this is goodbye. So when I left Romania you see, it happened in a very uneasy way, it happened in 1970 for sure. From Paris I immediately asked the Home Office to allow me to come back to Britain where I had my friends, Scotland and then London. So by 1970, August, I was back in Scotland with the help of Demarco and a few other British citizens who had to guarantee my coming over, in other words politically I was a correct person, but culturally I needed freedom, these were the reasons, these were the planks on which I was putting my case. I came to Britain only to be asked by Demarco to participate again in the Festival in 1970. Not only that but he asked me to, not to ask for asylum, because 1971 looks like it's going to be the official big exhibition of Romanian art, which is a wider selection of Romanian artists who come to the Festival, and if I would have asked for asylum I would have been struck off the list. So I stayed as a Romanian visiting with visa, legally as it were, until about '71. Most of that time was making a

kind of journey between Edinburgh and London, but in fact I was living in Edinburgh. Only by the time the Festival in '71 finished, and the Romanian big show took place, which was a bit of a misnomer, because it being so heavily censored only myself had actual physical work present in that Festival, all the others were kept by different checking points without the work at the opening, so once more I had the chance to congratulate myself for my decision, therefore I could be in my way, by September '71 I went to the Home Office and declared myself ready for asylum.

End of F4533 Side A

F4533 Side B

Paul I want to go back to the 1970 Edinburgh show. You had stayed in Edinburgh and worked towards that show on your own in what you called a sort of, a sort of idyll really of childhood almost, working, creating, and then on your own making a show for the Edinburgh Festival of 1970. I wonder if you could describe what you showed in 1970 and then we could begin to talk perhaps about the work you began to develop as an artist in the West.

Well it was a moment of happiness and infinite freedom - well because of the infinite freedom I felt so good, and so produced a lot of good work I think, because for the first time in my life there was no impediment between my ideas, my thoughts, my concepts, and the possibility of achieving it. So I had several developments of my early ideas which this time took flesh, bone and flesh; one of them for instance was to build for the first time a man-size real sculpture, three-dimensional, different materials which I wanted to be seen also as a piece of architecture with each floor movable. This was in my studio a kind of climax of many years of doing tactile, different materials, but out of that Byzantine mixture of materials I wanted to simplify things, and this time also make it life-size and figurative. So this was made in that studio in Edinburgh towards, in the Festival it was shown, together with a number of small objects and simple objects which if you like put the point on the idea of Palpability. It's because of this, I was saying earlier about my happy processes between mind and hand, I also put together the Manifesto of Palpable Art, which contained in seven articles everything I wanted to do, stressing and emphasising the elements of texture, materials, tactility, rather than just seeing. In fact to a degree I was going against the visual things. These were essential things for me, planning also at some later stage to take up the idea of eating, the consumption of the art object, which, soon after that, by that I mean '70, '71, I started making gingerbread objects in order to cover that area as well, which is the completion of that group of ideas. So one of the things was this 'cake men', so called, which was thirteen layers of palpable and tactile life-size men; later in London in '71 I managed to exhibit it in parallel with my first life-size Waffle Event, which was a laying down waffle man which was consumed by several participants in Sigi Krauss's gallery. To arrive in London and

Sigi Krauss, it happened via Richard Demarco again, because Sigi Krauss himself was a kind of rebellious, spontaneous art dealer, I mean he wasn't educated to be one...

He was...

At the time he was the framer of Marlborough Fine Art. But this Sigi Krauss was a very crafty character; he was very good at woodwork but also very lazy mentally. He just wanted to take advantage of all the avant-garde movements at the time, he was having one-off shows of people who had unusual ideas, like Stuart Brisley doing performance with spaghetti, eating, like Marc Chaimowicz's environments with shoes, like John Daga[ph], David Medalla, Paul Neagu; this is a small group of artists which, if you like was the cream, or shall I say the core, of what Sigi Krauss was willing to do. Every time he was doing a thing like that he was doing it partly for the purpose of annoying the great establishment which Marlborough was, and it's funny that it's in the same workshop where he was making his gilded frames which were very expensive and beautifully made, I was making my little objects. This was already the time I moved to London, you know, from Edinburgh. But to go slightly back to what happened in Edinburgh, like I said, '70, '71 saw me doing another final stroke of tactile objects which was wrapping up a lot of domestic objects, like a shoe, a bottle, an apple, a glove. This wrapping was done very carefully, even influenced by the wrapping I've seen on Egyptian mummies. My first contact with real Egyptian art was in Berlin, and then I saw the huge department of Egyptian antiquities at the British Museum. So there you are, the encouragement of London came to me not just through the modern art scene but also through the fantastic range of museums one could look at indefinitely, because it was like, they were huge places for me to search, to look, to study, to speculate, to, you know, to co-operate with, which is exactly what happened. So even though Edinburgh were the grounds where I felt free to perform or free to show myself, like during the Romanian Festival, I was of course, I became easily the star of the show, because not only that the work wasn't censored by the Romanians, which was not a gimmick but an advantage, the others felt uneasy because most of the painters who came from Romania, or sculptors, were doing conventional work, and here it was, this young man, I was 31, doing such scandalous

things. Of course it was still full of debate around it, and some of the older members of the Union who came with that Festival were looking at me with a double type of eye, you know, in one hand they seemed to be saying, 'Is this guy serious or is he...he appears to be more of a clown trying to call attention by being shockingly strange'. On the other hand when intimately talking they would say, 'No, in fact it looks quite convincing what you have done in that room with this gingerbread, or with these tactility things.' I could see that it takes time, and I could also see that they were still suffering from effects of, you know, being pre-processed, or pre-brainwashed if you like, you know, in a Romanian context.

And at this time they thought of course that you were going back to Romania.

Most of them didn't know I had decided to stay, but as soon as the Festival finished and most of them started going back, I had to say to each one of them, 'I'm staying a bit longer'. Eventually to the one who represented the Communist Party, because there was the so-called Commissar within this show, to watch over, I went straight to him and I confronted him, and I told him, 'This is it, Paul Neagu is not going back to Romania. I wanted to say goodbye to you and I hope to see you some other time.' At which point he even shook my hand and said, 'Well, I wish you the best.' But that wasn't an official discussion. (laughs) So it ended up in that note. They were hoping I suppose some of them that I will still go back with them because of my family, my house, my wife, my friends, but they didn't expect me to be so ruthless with myself in the first place, and then when I turned out to be that they left and I haven't heard from them since.

This was an enormous step to take in some ways, and I know that you are anxious to talk about the work you began to make in Edinburgh and London. But I just wonder if you might not say something...it was a period you felt very free, but there must have been another side to it, a side of, a sense of loss, especially in relation to your family, especially in relation to...

Not at that point, not that immediate moment. I was too excited and too, what's the word? I was full of beans as it were. You know, it took a bit longer. I'll tell you, I'll

come to that, that will happen probably a year later, I become rather aware of my situation as a single man, adventurous. In fact the next few years I did have a depression of that kind. It was not so much missing the country but feeling a form of regret which I couldn't blame on anyone. It was the fatality, and I soon became aware that I couldn't do anything about it. But there were sufficient signals from Romania, for instance two years later I was called for a trial in Romania because when I left originally my best friend guaranteed for my departure, simply because I had a debt to the Union and in case I wouldn't come back this guarantor will have to take care of that debt. [BREAK IN RECORDING] So, as I left two years later they wanted the money back for this debt. My guarantor was called to pay, but at the same time he had a lot of psychological trouble within his own world. What happened, he committed suicide. After that his widow confiscated the house which I had on his name, because I wasn't allowed to have a house in my name in Bucharest even though I was born there. The situation is very complicated when it comes to notions of social inscription in Romania, whether you belong by job, whether you belong by birth; it's not to do with that, it's to do with, were you are allowed to stay. Because I wasn't a full member of the Union I needed someone who had the right to buy in Bucharest, therefore I used this friend of mine. He committed suicide as I left, or soon after I left, and because of that happening there wasn't anyone to pay the debt. But by law his, like I said his widow had to pay up even though, because she took up my house, my real wife lost the whole thing because meanwhile she was in a different town, playing the actress, so the widow of my friend took over everything, she had to pay the debt, and the rest of the money she pocketed. I couldn't possibly go to be part of the trial, I even sent letters to the lawyers at the time reminding them that I am in asylum constrictions, I can't possibly come back, I don't want to get stuck there. So this is part of the trauma. During those years and those months, of course I left very lonely.

By trial here you mean a law suit?

A law suit.

Involved in the house and so on.

But they had a real trial which I was supposed to be the main defender.

Ah.

It was on this very case. So by letter I refused to do so, at which point my wife, ex-wife if you like, started asking for divorce; the divorce was given to her more or less automatically because I was accused to leaving the domicile. So all these things being there in Romania, on top of that my parents from a different town were writing to me very worried letters about, what's happening to me, how do I manage, do I make any money, do I have what to eat, etcetera. But all these spirits had to be quiet one by one, so indirectly I benefited from that myself, not having time to feel too much pity for myself. It was sheer survival. I remember as soon as I came to London I stayed for a few months in an attic where Howard Hodgkin used to live, somewhere in a big house in, not Highgate, it was...

Hampstead?

Notting Hill Gate. Then when he couldn't keep us there any longer I came to meet Sigi Krauss, and Sigi Krauss, the man who was running this small gallery in Covent Garden, put me up in Highbury, because there was a large basement which was empty. So I moved on and on with no money, just by simply having friends giving me a hand. By 1972, when I was again moved out of London into Purley, because a rich man offered a studio there, for the simple exchange of advice of how to paint, and I happened to have an exhibition at the Serpentine he liked, at the same time I was asked to do my first visit as a teacher, which in the first place I kind of refused, I was reluctant, I said I don't know how to teach. 'No no no, we don't need to have you teaching, all we need, we've seen your show, we know what you could do, come and talk to our students, just talk about your work.' They were very tolerant people who assumed that as long as I talk about my work and because my work was so strange and so unusual, which several people told me over the months, particularly with that show in mind, the one in the Serpentine, which again centred again on articulated, palpable, eatable art, with drawings and other concepts, of men and figures, humanity,

seen as a multi-cellular network, I was called to teach, therefore I could see for the first time in practical terms how I could make a living out of my Academy, out of my experience. And gradually that improved; as that happened my language improved, my speaking capabilities became more fluent, I started reading, because at the time I was mixing, I mean originally in London I was still mixing mostly with foreigners who had more than one language to use, either French or German or Italian, very few Romanians I contacted in fact, I didn't know of many. So by '72/'73 I was well doing one day a week, maybe two days later, which was my first employment in Britain, and this took place at Alexandra Palace, Middlesex Polytechnic today, at the time it was called Hornsey School of Art.

Yes. Right, let's go back, again, because I want to pick up now the thread of your art and your thinking as it began in 1971 and then developed through '72, '73. You mentioned the Palpable Art Manifesto.

Right.

Can you tell us about the Manifesto? You said seven articles, did you mean seven statements, seven...?

Seven paragraphs I meant. Seven or eight, I am not sure, I think eight. The Palpable Art Manifesto was meant to be a clarification of my intentions, and also of my, already what was my accumulated experience. Those articles were emphasising, and they were stressing, the need for a unified art and for a regenerated visual art, by going to other senses other than the visual. That was the main article. And how to do that was by calling in in a rather direct way, look at your mucosis[ph], look at your ten fingers, your skin, all that could tell you more about the world around you than just looking. The eyes themselves would distance you from the object of your contemplation, but the hands would make you appropriate them. Of course I wasn't talking like I am talking now, those articles were very bland and very direct, but if you like the developed text of that Manifesto would have sounded like something I am saying now. So the stress was there, put like this, you have more tentacles to approach the world if you use your tactility and palpability than just the eyesight,

which is already being degenerated by over-use, television, photography, film. This is how more or less those Manifesto articles would sound.

Can I...I mean, it's an interesting thing that you should choose at that stage, to make a manifesto. I mean in a way that's a very un-English thing to do, we don't...

So I realised, but only later.

There's a whole tradition, is what I am saying, of making manifestos, it goes back to Malevich and to the Russians, you know, the revolutionary Russians and the Putrists[ph] and so on, that whole tradition in radical European art about, the tradition of producing a programme of some kind, of making of what one is doing, an ideological if you like statement. So in a way that must have marked you. It's not the English way of doing things.

Well it took me some time to realise this; of course now I know this very clearly because I have been long enough here to know how strange I might have sounded by doing such a thing. Yet 'Studio International' published the Manifesto, of course with some comments, which were not exactly sympathetic but they were slightly condescending, pointing to the idea that, again like you said, that that kind of behaviour is typical Vienna 1925, or such-and-such a school like Bauhaus will come out with a manifesto. But my ideas were that, never mind the traditions in Britain, what about political manifestos, why can't art do a similar thing, even though it might...this is a...we used to call this in my backwaters in Romania 'a statement of intent'. This was the manifesto I wanted to do. It wasn't just for the people, it was for myself, like a programme which you might stray away from but, it doesn't mean that you have to perform exactly that and nothing else; it was a kind of guide-line which you then could go against, or you could go with, flexibly.

Yes. But the whole notion of making a programme of this kind, of making a statement of intent, implies a philosophical attitude towards art which is entirely consistent, I would say, with the notion that art is more than the visual, art has to do with more than what one can see. Art has to do with what one can feel, what one can

touch, what one eats, and therefore art is to do with the whole being, the whole being of the person.

That is very strange that you should so strongly emphasise this point, because even today I would, if I will have the chance I will re-do a manifesto. Yes, I agree with you, it is a constitution of a clear thought, part philosophical part poetical I would say, and it's to do with the type of behaviour which is not British once more, and I could see why you are saying that, and yet today I would still produce that, which simply says that I am very stubborn and I don't mind continuing to suffer from all the castigation I had to suffer in Britain, being seen as an alien character. Yes, this is part of my indicative teaching. Maybe patronising, some people might call it, attitude of, how does he dare to tell in advance what is he going to do? I remember not long ago a student from the Royal College told me he had a talk to Anthony Caro who was visiting the Royal College, and one of his discreet advice was, to never tell the people what your final depth intentions are. Just go along with things and when it comes to a statement, you make it, but never too strongly, never too radical, never too philosophical. Well I am different. And of course I paid the price of this difference; now in retrospect I could see it, and I could even cry over that point. I paid that price. I've been many times marginalised because I've been seen as an alien, even provocative, kind of artist. And yet this attitude, if you like, which made me stand out of most of my colleagues of the same generation, and to a great degree it's similar[??] concerns, but no one of them would be so conspicuous about it. Mind you, how many lectures I started doing which were nothing else but the development of this kind of manifesto. In 1972 I was asked to go to Belfast, mind you Belfast was very tense, 1972, at Queen's University, to give a lecture about generative art. This was the start, after my Palpable Art Manifesto I developed these ideas into what I called, on a more personal basis, a grammar, and full of symbols, particularly geometrical, which constituted if you like the basis of generative art. In order to stress this I was asked to give a talk. Strangely my Queen's University, Belfast talk didn't have more than twelve people in the hall because of the political tension at the time. And that lecture became a demonstration [INAUDIBLE] performance; it wasn't a radical manifestation, it was more like a flexible entertainment. If I would have done that consistently in Britain, I would probably have reached better, but I never wanted to

move into comedy, even though now I use with great reluctance the word 'entertainment', because I never believed that what I want to do artistically could be called entertainment. Only in Britain I have been told many times over that that's what art is expected to do, entertain one, rather than educate. Well as you've noticed many times before, and you mention even now, it is probably a much more European type of tradition to be categorical about this, to even see its implication politically and socially, because I think now in retrospect with a slight critical note I would say, that in Britain art has been always seen as something which is not a strict necessity to one's life, spiritual or otherwise, therefore it's entertainment. I remember being interviewed by a policeman in some casual story when he said, 'Mr such-and-such, how do you entertain yourself?' When I heard this question for the first time, I didn't know what he meant. I simply said, 'What do you mean? I don't entertain myself.' He meant by that, where do I spend the weekend? Like what kind of hobby you have. Now I know of course that those things were new to me, just as I realised a lot of things I had to say they were new to all these people who heard me saying them. So there you are having a tough dialogue with the British public as it were. These, I mean anecdotal stories of these meetings with people who didn't know exactly who I was, and we had these kind of clashes, are hundreds; I could...describing hundreds of such little stories, clashes and so on, because you see, once, I said, I started teaching, the teaching process itself is full of meetings of people you don't know, meetings of students from different regions, different accents and different mentalities. Among my students very often there were foreign students. It's one thing to talk to an American student, or a German student, surrounded by English ones; it's another one to talk to an Italian while you are in Rome, and so on and so forth. So the variety and illustration I could bring into this, it's infinite almost, things keep going on. What I want to go back and explain a bit further is what happened when I said that I had to pay the price for being different. There were moments of rather unpleasant remarks I've heard by artists when they were saying, 'Of course Paul Neagu has not a problem; because he is a foreigner everybody will employ him to teach.' They were talking about their hardship of getting employed as teachers, and why should the bloody foreigner, which I was, should have such an easy time simply because he is from another country? Well this wasn't fair, I would say now, this was simply an exaggeration, or rather misinterpretation of the facts. Yes of course I was from

another land, but that's not why I was a successful teacher. I would say no, I was just...justification that, because I was brought up somewhere else, and educated in a different academy, my coverage of fine art issues, fine art history, were much more wider and I had a much deeper field and much richer field to draw from. I also have been blessed with a talent of explaining myself, which I believe I inherit from my father, who was the man who was a shoemaker and a preacher. So this man sang, simply by being a foreigner you get better teaching jobs, it wasn't quite the right approach.

In any case you would bring to teaching, in British art schools which are famously non-didactic in a way, you would bring a different sort of dimension, wouldn't you? You would bring a philosophical dimension, a didactic element, that would probably be quite unusual, and therefore very very useful I would have thought, in such schools.

Exactly what made my teaching life a success.

End of F4533 Side B

F4534 Side A

Paul, your first show in London was in 1972 with Sigi Krauss.

No, actually it was '71.

'71.

As I shifted from Edinburgh.

I beg your pardon. And this was with Sigi Krauss. We've talked a bit about Sigi Krauss but could you tell us just something about his gallery, where was it and how he organised it.

Sigi Krauss, as I said, used to have a framing workshop in Neil Street in Covent Garden, he was basically running this business of framing for Marlborough. Apparently Marlborough Gallery set him up by giving him enough money to start doing the framing, but after a while of working as a framer he was inclined by making friends to open up a little gallery for unusual artists and unusual art, which included performance and works which were rather ignored by big museums or other galleries. In the relationship of that time context, I would say he was closer to Arts Lab, if I remember Jimmy Haines[ph]...

The Arts Lab in Covent Garden.

Yes, which wasn't far from there, used to be a man who would come as a normal visitor at the gallery, Sigi developed this political attitude towards any form of art or artists who would be anarchist, because these will suit his thinking. He didn't have any programme, any political programme, but he was greatly sympathetic to people like Rudi Dutchke[ph], another German anarchist of the time. Later on I remember he even expressing sympathies for Baader-Meinhof type of revolutionary people in Europe, he was full of agitation of that type, and without having much education in art historical terms he just opened a gallery accommodating that kind of work.

Everything was very flexible and open, open to discussion I mean. He also had in one side of him, which is what I liked very much about him, the ability to make things, to improvise things out of very little money. In one word, he was a good catalyst, very much needed at that time, early Seventies, in a very good part of London. Mind you Covent Garden at the time was also a very thriving vegetable market. I remember going at night with him to collect for his largeish family, he had three children, you know, vegetables which would be thrown out by the big dealers and he will pick it up for peanuts money, he will take it home for a whole week in one night. That's what I mean by being able to cope with not being rich, even though he was working for Marlborough; every often his orders for frames would be very late, and because he was getting more and more interested in the fine art of his job, I mean gallery running, he would ignore part of the business, in other words making money. But in spite of all that his wife and all his friends were on his artistic side. It was exciting, it was boiling with something interesting, much more unusual than being a conventional, you know, craftsman. So on that friendly basis he liked my palpable art, my eatable art, and I was able to have more than one show with him, '70, '71, I think one of the shows was in double bind[ph] with Horia Berner[ph], who wasn't in Britain at the time but I had a lot of his work here, as two Romanians; Horia Berner[ph] being a very good friend of mine, was benefiting from having me in London. At the same time I was using Sigi's workshop for his tools and easy materials to make small tactile platforms, objects, even bigger sculptures if I required. Later on, he was a very generous person, he offered me to stay in his basement which became my studio, which was in Highbury. So we had a very tight intimate relationship, me and his family, to start with, not because he regarded me as an emigré but he knew that I had very very little money. But what happened, a year or so later he went bankrupt because his framing business had to pack up, he has kind of given up being a good craftsman, his ideas started getting higher and higher in his skull. Sooner or later he went into drugs. Even though he was doing a lot of demonstrations at the Tate Gallery, for instance Picasso had a big show at the time I remember, Sigi was gathering people to make a demonstration with white doves on the steps of the Tate Gallery, this was the early Seventies. It's that kind of manifestation he was attracted to, like I said, because of some relationship with the political situation in Germany, he started telling us and showing that he disliked and hated even the capitalists of this

world. After his bankruptcy, which, I think it took place about '73, he was, because of his courage basically and his experience, he was asked to run what is today the Goethe Institute, at the time it was called Gallery House[ph]. It was for a bit less than a year where he had shows with Stuart Bisley, John Latham, Gustav Medsker[ph] and people like that, all that branch of plucky British artists or, if you like revolutionary. People who used to teach at about the same colleges like I was, you know, Middlesex Polytechnic, like the Hornsey School of Art, known for his rebellious left-wing history shall I say, Sigi was on that side, even though he wasn't very clear. He was the most non-German German I ever met, he was German actually, but totally the opposite of what we know as a standard German chap; totally disorganised, chaotic, therefore anarchic. His life story could make a good on its own, but I will refrain now from that, I will just say that by '74, I remember that was the year when I did my first spectacular performance of `Gradually Going Tornado', in Edinburgh and I was the whole summer...

Sorry, `Gradually Going Tornado'...

`Gradually Going Tornado' for the Edinburgh Festival.

At Edinburgh.

At that time Sigi wasn't any longer living with his family because he had a lover, he wanted to separate from his wife, and eventually he went to Germany, from where he moved on to Switzerland, and from where he left later to go to California, making coffins for rich people, but not more than he needed for living money. In other words he carries on somewhere in California on the same style. At the same time, '72-'73 is the time when I moved to Highbury, and as you could see I am still in this area, using whatever available without ever making a lot of money; we had of course occasional instances where somebody would walk even into Sigi Krauss's gallery and wanting to buy things which were not looked after by anybody. I remember Conran and Associates, which opened a restaurant opposite the gallery, they were looking for some decorations for their bar, it was quite a smart bar. So one of the architects which was partner with Conran, decided to buy about twelve multiples of my

gingerbread man, which were small pieces of gingerbread fixed onto a box. Six or seven years later they were still there, before they started crumbling. So much for the tactile and eatable art. Others were made to last, depending on the recipe, how much sugar you put in that mix. I am saying that his collaboration with Sigi Krauss developed into many ways. For instance his wife used to bake, cook the waffles for my big performances, because my first exhibitions, '70-'71 with Krauss were not only tactile objects and palpable objects which could also be seen, but they were ending up on a performance which was what I later called the chapter called 'Blinds Bite'[ph], they were representations of the same tactility and consummation of art by producing fresh waffles where the smell was spread through the gallery while the making was going on; Sigi's wife was busy making the waffles and spreading such a smell, I was organising the setting-up of the waffles layer by layer, so that by the time the public arrived, which was three hours later, everything was ready to be offered. I was making a chocolate syrup to put on top of the last layer. We spread around a programme of that performance where there was a map of the portions within the sculptures so the potential viewer, clients, could purchase one of these portions. I remember during one of these performances a newspaper phoned up asking who is the person who purchased the genitalia piece of waffle? Question by which I had been very put off, because performance wasn't about that; in fact I remember my reply was, 'It's not a male or female, it's just the silhouette of a human being.' The journalist was rather disappointed. I can't remember what newspaper it was, but it must have been 'The Sun' or something of that kind.

More or less a sort of par for the course when it comes to British journalistic interest in art.

If you like. (laughs) The thing is that these performances went on to our amusement, some of them were filmed. They never pulled huge crowds but they pulled twenty, thirty people per evening, and they were perfectly happy to be just that, which is partly the attitude of people at the time.

May I just ask you, Paul, about this, the waffle men and the waffle art. Was part of the performance that people actually ate the sculpture?

Well they had a free choice, they either ate it on the premises, which some did as we see in the films, others took it home, you could preserve them. Particularly the first layers were tougher, because they must have been older, and I think we took care to put a bit more sugar in them so the preservation was easier. The ones on top were fresher therefore more for eating. But the number...because each portion had an attachment, a label, with describing the event in brief terms; it could have been an art item for a while. Mind you I was aware at the same time, there were other artists dealing with such things, for instance there was a German bloke who was doing suitcases full of cheese, he would leave them in the galleries and it would smell. So smell, foodstuff, and similar stuff were used by Fluchster's[ph] people. I am saying this so that everybody knows that I wasn't a perfect naive, or innocent Eastern European; I was very well informed what was going on.

And there's also the question, isn't there, of an art which in a sense is dismantled as it's bought by the people who, or acquired by the people who come to it.

It is dismantled to show that it's not about possessing something, but it's rather being part of something.

And that links with the notion of performance, doesn't it?

Absolutely.

The notion of performance whereby the actual work is something that exists in time for a moment and is then gone, and it's the documentation and the memory and so on which is important in relation to that work.

The ritualistic act of being part of a big feast for instance, like a wedding.

Yes.

Goes back down to history, into immemorial times. I wanted to bring these notions into a modern world, a modern context. But I never dropped the metaphysical concerns of my human shape, that's why I wasn't if you like indulging and illustrating a particular person. It wasn't myself, it wasn't Sigi or his wife. What I did on the table was the idea of humanity. Again the metaphysical approach was to say that I used a machine which would produce this brick which was the standard waffle to provoke the idea of mechanical reproduction into a human shadow, so you see, I am playing with words here but at the same time you see I am trying to express what Arthur Koestler called 'the ghost in the machine'. By combining such technological tools with which I make foodstuff, what the foodstuff looks like, it's a combination of architecture because the waffle machine has cells, and the idea of a bite, of one purchaser who would [INAUDIBLE] this product, for me it was sufficient to construct a ritual which could be made daily or once a week or maybe the first weekend in April, if you want to translate it into a social ritual. Different cultures always had such things in different times according to this particular context. For instance in Romania when a young man is ready to court a young girl for marriage, the young girl, usually the family of the young girl produces gingerbread in the shape of, say, a heart; within that gingerbread heart you might find little fragments of mirror. If the girl is courted and she happens to like the man, she would break that heart as a symbolic gesture that she is interested. The heart then broken of gingerbread, it's taken away by the man, he might mend it and keep it until the marriage or whatever, he might eat it on the way home. Now that's a very ancient custom in Romania, most people don't even remember why these things do happen. Just like you do have, a gingerbread man for children I suppose to sweeten the idea of biscuit. Just like later we saw manufacturing spaghetti and other pastry, have employed letters for the young children to play with it in a soup.

Yes.

So there is a ludic element which is playfulness but at the same time my playfulness had a deeper level. It's on that level that less and less people were equipped to enter; most of them stopped at the illustrative element up to the point that they were people totally oblivious to the meanings in depth, and they were simply saying, 'Oh you and

Romania, you would think like a cannibal, you want to cut people into pieces'. Which is obnoxious, this kind of thing used to not only put me off but made me think twice about doing the next event. So, in spite of all that these kind of eatable performances I produced not only in London a couple of times but in Edinburgh, and even in Paris where I was invited in a youth biennale. Then I moved on to my next performance, which I believe was, which more or less started at the same time, walking on stilts with a special suit which again contained many pockets. You could understand that it relates to the same figure which is compartmentalised in such a way as to express the idea of networks going through one's body, and if you think of many bodies all having networks you could start understanding the fluency of liquids and other volatile elements, substances, moving from one body to the next. And here we are, I'm talking about a virus or some kind of fluency which is not just language or abstracted thought, it could be a physical fact, just like we could put the finger on many such things. But then, I was also worried that performance behaviour, happening behaviour, had such things before me, and so it did after me. [BREAK IN RECORDING] In fact I ought to have mentioned that all the things I'm talking about when I talk about networks of cells and human figures, it came under the generic title, 'Anthropocosmos', which is a combination of anthropoid and cosmos, therefore it's the cosmos of man. That kind of concern, it was my first if you like, my first serious metaphor which I think it's still full of potential for me, I've been working with it for a long time intensely until about '82, but now recently in the last couple of years I have started taking it up again, because since then of course I developed other things, but now it has even a renewed relevance if you like. So I could never drop it back and say, this is something in the past for me, I shelf it and finish it, it's not like that, the thing seems to be infinity, as human behaviour is.

It's the notion, isn't it, essentially, that the human being, the living human being, is...

Living tissue.

A living tissue. It's a universe.

Exactly, exactly.

And that the universe could be understood, in a sense as a set of interconnected tissues and cells...

It's exactly what you call a universe. I call it, I choose to call the universe, I mean in my words, I use it as a cosmic relationship, or cosmic awareness. Sometimes I say that this anthropocosmos is nothing else but a spiritualised man, a man of awareness, a man of thinking. If you want to make the portrait of 20th century man, and I mean humanity by that, you are bound to show that it's a thinking animal. That thinking element which is characteristically human has to be expressed in some way, not just by showing what the man looks like but by showing what distinguishes him from other animals which are not thinking. Therefore I wanted to bring in a network like geometry; this is what I call crucification of 20th century man.

The crucification.

It's a shallow crucification, the interference with anatomy, with the net of geometrical, cellular, a cross, constitutes a crucification, because it's basically a vectorial cutting. These vectors are the straight lines which make the nitty-gritty of the cellular grid.

This is a crucial idea I know, and I'm going to...

Just like you said, crucial.

Well, OK, it's a crucial idea I know and I want to pursue it for a moment or two because I'm not sure that we've got it absolutely clear. Can I start by suggesting that, we're back again in a way to the business of, it is not the visual as such, or the visual alone that matters; in this way what we're talking about relates both to your notion of palpable art, what is felt, the whole processes of living become part of the art, or become part of the subject of the art, or whatever, as opposed to the notion that what is interesting about art is what is actually seen. It's as if, it's the opposite in a sense, we're talking here, aren't we, to portraiture.

Exactly. Portraiture in the old sense, yes.

Yes.

What one is looking at, and looking at particular pictures of this period, and particular drawings of this period, what we have is heads and figures made up of structures in a sense, grid structures, or inter-connected cell structures, and that these drawings look almost as if one had cut a section through in order to see from one side of the structure to the other, and what you see is a set, as it were, what I would call cells or boxes. I've brought this in because the notion of things in boxes, the notion of things in cells, is crucial to a great deal of your art over this period, isn't it?

Exactly. No it's very valuable to talk a bit more on this, because like I said it constitutes one of my most important metaphors I worked with for so long, and it's becoming even more relevant as time goes by, as time goes on, with me still being around. Because I must say I have always failed, or feel to have failed, to convince people of the many layers of this expression. Because in Britain most people are used to portraiture in the old sense, in other words realistic portraits, which is something I have never done or never been interested sufficiently to be involved with, but which I find myself capable of doing, I wanted to go a bit deeper, therefore I stumbled on metaphysical truths. I wanted to portraiture somebody to show you the way that person thinks, to be very evident and clear. Therefore I would cross-section, say, the person with a kind of allusive cityscape or kind of allusive reference to some grid structure which will give me, if you like, the notion that that person thinks in quantities, in qualities, in depth, with several dimensions as it were, not just that he is palpable, soft-skinned or hard-skinned or good looks, or what age. What is important is to try to go beyond the visual, like you've noticed yourself, I've done that in several ways, and this is one of the more lasting such metaphor, which I am trying again and again to revitalise. In the end this gave rise to what I call later 'generative art'. Being generating and generating all the time is like dealing with a genetic code, so for me as an individual artist the start of my speech as it were, the moment of expressing myself as an individual artist, had to coincide with a setting-up of certain, it's almost like mapping, a terrain which I would like to put across.

Can I ask you about this. You've just talked about the discovery in the early Seventies in a sense of a visual language which was your own language, what you called your speech. But we are talking here in visual terms, aren't we?

Right.

It's a very distinctive language, as I've said, it has to do with, not so much with division but with building. The grids in your work are not grids which divide cells from one another but are structures composed of cells placed together and structures, so you are always in your works, in these drawings of this period and in the paintings of this period, one has a sense of an image being built up, not of something being reduced to a grid but of something being created of, a structure created of cells put together and cells which, being put together have a dynamic relationship with each other.

Well I could only be glad to see you looking at it that way. In a lot of cases I've seen the very opposite; people used to think of them as being people in prison, in that they were reflecting my background, saying, 'Oh you must have felt like that because you come from an ex-Communist country,' which I thought, my goodness, that's very wrong. Maybe I am wrong doing this. Of course I am dealing with a cluster of cells.

Yes.

I am not dealing with unique cells. I've never been happy with what I studied and observed of minimal artists for instance. Take Donald Judd, who is a box-maker just like me, but Donald Judd took great care of the individual box; for him one box was a stage, it's within that box he was staging certain existential drama to do with shadows, to do with cuts, to do with simple, very simple equation of geometrical kinds. Space contains space cast out from the total space. In my case, in a sense I feel I am much more romantic. I don't want to be so sterile to deal with one case empty with no bottom; you go through to have this abstract feeling that you have been eaten from the rest of the space because you are in a form of geometrical stern space. I wanted you

to be an outsider and look at this city which is crystalising around the shadow of a figure, and make you think metaphorically there is something poetical about this which I couldn't possibly have found in a minimal artist. So by having a parallel with something which is so oppositional of my intentions like Donald Judd, and yet there is a great common element there, which is the usage of a geometrical symbol which is a rectangle or a square, makes a lot more...clarifies a lot more the differences, and my introduction in this time of art history.

End of F4534 Side A

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So, Paul, we have...at the beginning of the Seventies, fairly soon after your arrival here, you began to discover a visual language which enabled you to pursue your concept of the Anthropocosmos, the human cosmos, the body conceived as a sort of universe, and also society itself as being itself composed of inter-connecting cells in a sort of dynamic, energetic relation to each other. So the city could be seen as an image of this, the human body could be seen as an image of this, and the universe could be seen as an image of this. It's a way, isn't it, of, it's a symbolic language.

Absolutely. Symbolic with a meaning. I mean like any symbols I think it has more than one meaning; in fact I started doing these by an innocent observation when I, immediately after the fourth year as a student, if you look at my diploma time you could see that I was very impressed and very taken by the very subject I was looking at, it was a gathering of peasants from different parts of, the cardinal points of the country, they were gathering on one hill. There is a custom, a very old, probably pagan custom, once a year for three or four days, peasants come from the four wings to meet on this hill and have a market.

Of course we have discussed this...

Right earlier on.

At length.

That is not multi...it's a multi gathering, because not only humans, animals, carts, as well as children and grown-ups do come together, they make a great feast, but at the same time it's an open market. So I was always attracted to a multitude of events rather than one single thing. In other words I am trying to explain that I've never been too attracted to the lyrical typical approach of an artist as we know it from the 19th century, I've never been attracted to still lifes or to portraistics for that matter, probably for the same reason. So from the very early stages when I got my first consciousness as an artist, by that I mean at the time of my diploma I was 22 or so

years of age, 22, 24, I can't remember exactly, I was attracted to a gorgeous carousel - sorry, a roundabout of events, I was attracted by a circus, by a mandalic social explosion of things. So if I could substract[ph] or go inside that thing, I was very happy. This is how I could explain my diploma work and all the studies which followed. It's from there onwards that I started looking around an ordinary city and seeing building upon buildings, of flats on top of flats, in each flat there was an event. I never looked at them as individual events, like in theatre; I had the chance but I avoided it. As you know I was married to an actress, yet the stage as one unique event didn't interest me, it was too lyrical, too private. I wanted a degree of generalisation, so obviously I was attracted to the whole building, if possible to the whole urbanist event of one city. For instance when a city has a demonstration and you have thousands of people on the street, I combine the people with the houses then you get an anthropocosmic event. That's exactly what was the first impetus to be closer to that, to understand more about it, and this is how I arrived at these complex clusters today which are still interesting for me from a more formal and less philosophical point of view, in other words visually and otherwise, but the meanings is one layer. You said symbols, of course I had to simplify and symbolise in order to be able to signalise further. Therefore what appeared to be very suitable for my undertaking was what I said earlier, generative art. Generative art wasn't entirely my invention, I borrowed this idea from generative grammars which I happened to read some time in the early Seventies. I'm talking about Chomsky, who looks at the language. I could make several references, for instance looking back again into an anthropocosmic structure, you could see that I wanted to produce, not a romantic necessarily image, but an image of totality and yet full of details, like you would read a book simultaneously, all the pages at once.

Can we go back then to the word, 'generative', because it's a key to a lot of the work you did in the Seventies I think, isn't it.

It is.

Generative here, by analogy with generative grammar or whatever, has to do with the way in which complex complexes, complex structures, can be built up from simple

cells, simple givens, that if you have a programme, that programme can generate any number of possibilities, each of them being consistent with what is implicit in the original cell, or in the original group of cells.

We are into genetics, aren't we.

Well we are, yes, and it's...I think there's a whole set here of quite difficult ideas. One of the things that your work seems to be about is to find if you like images, structures, in sculpture or images in drawing, that in a way simplify and summarise this.

Right. That was my job, yes, it still is.

That is the job I suppose of an artist in a way, but it's an interesting point here, I mean, close to the heart of what you're at.

Exactly.

That it is not so much that you are interested in the individual physiognomy say, the face that might be; all of our faces are generated from what is basically the same set of given instructions. A portraitist might be interested in the individuality of a given face, whereas your work continually looks in a sense for something that links, cuts across all those individual physiognomies.

Because I wasn't interested ever, not enough, in an aspect which a portraitist would call the psychology of the model, or of the person to be portraitised. I am much more attracted to the, if you like generalised aspect, as you said, which I would call the philosophical one, and if any lyricism is to come into that, I would call it the poetical aspect.

Or the metaphysical.

Poetry too, poetry is the constituting, relevant phrases, simplified or cooled, from the totality of the language. Poets even could go overlapping with grammar; poetry

doesn't have to take into account written any longer, or notions which constituted poetry, say two centuries ago. One could make modern poetry, ignoring rhythmical languages, or rhythmical words, or the arrangements of rhyme. So I am like a poet in the sense in which I observe and I reconstitute, re-articulating my own aggregates, those aggregates are a combination of different cells. There are such paintings these days I have done, just completed, which combine two different sets of symbols; they might be rectangles like in cells, next to circular forms like in spheres, so my anthropocosmos relates very directly and very clearly to anybody, into cosmos, by simply using a circle rather than a square. The universe of human, I would say symbolic shapes for humans, and a human establishment, rather than using a nest of some kind of erratic lining, I would use an urbanist type of map, therefore you will find lots of rectangles, right-angles, or sharp angles in my structures. As soon as I use a sphere I am relating that to the stars of the sky, moon, sun, even the shape of the world, so in one hand it's human, in the other hand it's cosmic. Earlier on I said that such anthropos are related to a cosmos, or they want to show an awareness of a cosmos within which they are inscribed. In that sense I am just manipulating very well-known symbols like sphere or squares. Many cultures before have acknowledged for instance that the perfect symbol for male establishment is a square; the idea of perfection it's a circle, like in the Japanese flag, or symbol; the idea of dynamic entity, it's a formulation like a triangle which has three points, in other words a dynamic. Establishment is square; dynamic is three; perfection, therefore fulfilment, or submission to nirvana or final happiness, or call it ecstatic death if you like, it's definitely a sphere.

Can I ask you what you mean by `establishment'? You've used that word in relation to correct angles[??].

By `establishment' I mean something solid, something humanly established rather than naturally established. Human in the sense of civilised aware consciousness. In that sense, Malevich is the king, he established a square as the idea of men, or humanity. We could go on from there to see sub-levels, as it were sub-divinities, but the main divinities I came to observe, and also Cruel Art[??] of all the geometrical

available symbols, three major things. And now we could see how we move on from here.

The three major things being the rectangle...

The three major things being, like in Cézanne, like in the Oriental graphic, any master in China will tell you that the world is based on rectangle, triangle and sphere, or circle rather. Now...

Can I just interrupt you there?

Please.

Well I was actually going to bring us back in a sense to your history as an artist, and what you were actually doing in the Seventies in relation to this, because I think, we could continue with this and I think we will come back to it in a way, but I would quite like to go back to the Serpentine and ask, because I think it will help in terms of your exposition of your ideas if we keep it fairly closely tied into a specific history. And so, your first major show really in this country, in London, was the Serpentine show in 1973.

'73, right.

And I wonder if, I don't want us not to go back at all to discuss these issues about the poetics as it were of what you do, and the symbolic language that you employ, and the metaphysical implications of all that, because I'm sure we'll have to come back to these things.

It will come back.

But in a way I would like to bring us down to earth again and say, what actually did you do at the Serpentine, what did you show?

Right. Well my well-remembered show in '73, I am saying that because several people have reminded me of how unusual and curious that show was, that was 20 years later, it was a constitution of hundreds of drawings which were a referral to these anthropocosmic obsessions of mine, which were parts of bodies and full bodies, sometimes an animal or a plant, like a rose or a horse. But for most cases they were a relationship between hands, heads, the full body, or part of the face, like a nose, an eye, lips, ear, referential being to senses. All these fragments of human beings were one way, another way of dividing the human figure, and then to come again and again to the idea of totality, totality in this case meaning the organic human being which means re-organising the human shadow, what I call the shallow figures I've been using, and their crucification, to show that, in a very naive way a fractal[ph] geometry is at work. If you look deeply into the hand, or at the surface of the hand, you wouldn't see more than you normally see, but if you look through the eye of the anthropocosmic man, which I was, you would see that the level in which the hand itself is split into cells is differently done than the way the fingernails are. Because the fingernails are of a different material, much harder than the rest of the skin, I devised a drawing as an example where the fingernails were divided in cells much smaller, like a microcosm of what the rest of the hand was. To look at the eye with the same understanding you will see that what normally you observe as being a sphere, or being liquid-like, which is a substance of the inside of the eye, was again divided differently than the outside of the socket in which the eye was set. In this way I was trying to go a bit deeper into the metaphor to explain, into a new form of anatomy, I used to call these, not anatomy but 'an atomy', in other words using the word atom for anatomy, to show that the world of a human body is an anatomical, full of atoms, which inter-change each other as you are in touch with another person, or with the air around you, through which you live, through which you breathe and so on and so on. Just like the air getting into your lungs and out again, the same happens with my cells from one picture to the next, or sometimes within the same pictures. So I was trying to show the flexibility of this. Next to this set of two-dimensional hundreds[??] of things at the Serpentine...

These drawings.

Drawings mostly, were also a lot of objects which were a re-constitution of events, like the one with gingerbread men, cake men, some of them were kept in jars, others under glass or perspex, tactile objects set all around the gallery on platforms. It was a laboratory of perfect complex kind which would give you many different approaches to the same subject, which is, as we have said already, heavily metaphysical, but at the same time in a strange way related, not very easy to understand, not at the first glimpse, to the human lively being.

Yes, to the very nature of existence, of being involved.

But not in an illustrative way, more like in a pseudo-philosophical lesson. It was a strange journey altogether.

So there was an element in this show of demonstration you might say, of laying things out in order...

Museography almost, like in museums, like museography. Trying to arrange things to make sense, at the same time leaving things open for the viewer, to participate, to touch, to discover, and to relate.

Who invited you to do this show?

Well, it was...I can't remember exactly how it happened, all I remember was the chief co-ordinator was Sue Grayson, who was the lady having an eye for novel things, for new things which the Serpentine was said to do. In fact this was quite early, because the Serpentine started functioning only two years before that. And that was one of the most pertinent shows I had in London; after that I have shown twice more at the Serpentine, each time different things. But, I mean next time it was a complex performance, related to what I already said. I found it very very difficult to say that most people have seen quite clearly what I was doing. No, my reaction, my feedback, was always that I was complex, heavily complex, and puzzling. Very few people have seen me as an integrated artist.

Tell...

Sorry, I was talking about the three Serpentine shows.

I know, well I'm trying to pull you back to the first of those shows, because, you've anticipated my question, which was, what sort of response did you get to the '73 Serpentine show? Did you spend a lot of time in the gallery?

No, no, I wasn't like in Edinburgh, most times within the environment. I wanted to leave it for others, I felt that being there it might have a bad reaction in the sense that I was intimidating certain young people. But looking at the photographs taken by several people, I have noticed, it was the summer time and there were a lot of relaxed people. We were in the years when a lot of hippy-like behaviour was around. Some of them were intrusive enough to look under these objects, because they were labelled, 'This is Palpable, it comes from that performance', and they were presented on a kind of messy thing, a bit like Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford; imagine you have access to put your hand under the glass and dig for new things. Some were looking for drugs, others were trying to steal bits and pieces so I had to have a guard in there most of the time. The reaction was very very sympathetic, but it sounded like a lot of people wanted to have access to this room for the rest of their lives. Well it wasn't to be like that, unfortunately the gallery had a schedule, you know, a few weeks later, in fact I think it lasted five weeks. But it was a very lovely response in the sense of annoying and irritating a lot of curiosities, and it's because of that show that I was seriously asked to teach, not because of my other credentials like documentations but because of what that show had shown. It had shown an open platform with many possibilities, none of them being concluded in a kind of dead-end way.

This of course is another interesting thing. I said there was an element of demonstration, but there was also an element, as you have just put it, of open-endedness, there was an aspect to it whereby you are presenting the materials without necessarily presenting a completed thing. And if we go back to the notion of generative art, there's a sense in which you are asking the spectator, asking the visitor to that show to put some of these things, some of these elements together, to generate

from these elements some sort of vision that wasn't necessarily actually there, visible.  
Am I making sense?

Yes, yes, yes. Well that element was there, the thing wasn't...we couldn't...one thing, one could go back and blaming oneself for not offering the public an actual material, substance, displayed in such a way so that he could actually play with it and see results immediately. That we couldn't do, simply because I wanted to activate the minds rather than the physical participation, which I did otherwise in many other events.

Did that exhibition have a title?

Well, it was the west room of the Serpentine, it wasn't the whole Serpentine, which was very compact, full of hundreds of little things, and that itself had a title, yes, it was called 'Tactile and Palpable Objects'.

'Tactile and Palpable Objects'. Did you share that...

Two different degrees here, can I stress?

Yes.

Tactility meant finger, Palpability means the whole hand, which gives you a clue to two degrees in my entry into my world. Now, to the sense, tactile sense, like keyboard, which is typical tactile, to the idea of a glove where you put the whole hand, which is palpable, to that extent you had access to things. Further than that it was visual, so in fact I wasn't denying the visual, the visual was available, but the stress was on the tactile and palpable. That's why it was a reconstitution of events, I didn't do any event as such there.

So in a sense what you were giving people in that exhibition were evidences of...

Evidences and possible development, alignments.

Yes. Who else was showing at the same time? You said you had the west room.

Next by was Ainsley Ewell[ph]; another room was taken up by a neon artist whose name I don't remember, he's the one who did the tower which is still on the top of the Hayward.

Oh yes.

Then there was...I remember, it was this American lady who is showing now in Gimpel Fils, Susan Hillier[ph], had an environment which I think was a bit on that side of so-called conceptual art. It was a concoction, there wasn't any relationship between us.

No.

Each one of us was single, kind of.

I just wondered, because I thought maybe it was part of an event which attempted to fit you in to some sort of...

Well it did, there was a title for the whole show, but it wasn't doing anything to unite us. It was called 'Sculpture Serpentine '73', I still have the catalogue, but there's nothing to that, because it's a very vague thing to call us all sculptors.

Yes, yes. And you had things on tables.

Plenty. I had a huge table specially made for the whole gallery, like 'The last Supper', that was surrounded by a shelf, table-like, all around the walls, so in fact once you entered these it was like, you must go around the big table and see left and right, objects all around. Above, on the walls, was four levels, four layers, of small drawings.

And, I'm sorry I may have missed this, or I may not have quite grasped the point earlier. The things that were on the table and on the big shelf around the gallery, these were things that people could handle?

Yes, yes.

Pick up, handle, put their hands in.

Because we had a gallery continuous supervisor, people were invited to touch, but we had to be very careful because there is a limit; if you have a nasty couple of kids who wanted not only to touch but they started playing violently, to the extent of allowing them to fall off the table or put them in their pockets, it became too much. So in that show I lost a few details, a few fragments of this world because of this attitude, you know, but at the same time we didn't say, 'Don't touch anything', on the contrary, it was, 'Please touch'.

Itself of course that's a denial in a sense, or an opposition to, the notion of sculpture as something you can look at but not touch.

Well it had to be, yes.

So it was entirely coherent with the ideas behind it, that notion that people could touch, handle and so on. You've said quite a lot about the way people behaved, the way they went into this. Did you film or observe at any time this process? Were you interested in it?

Well I was very keen to get as many personal opinions as possible, but I couldn't help noticing that those opinions varied with the age; the younger you are the more curious and the more adventurous you tend to be. I remember, because I paid visits once or twice a week, once or twice I went into heavy discussions with people who appeared to be very well-equipped in visual art terms, they started having philosophical arguments with me, debates as it were. I don't remember the details but there were people who, you know, with one elbow on the table and me on the opposite side,

would dispute a lot of these divisions. Why aren't they consistent from one end of the room to the other? Why aren't there more animals? Questions of that kind. Or what do I think by Cartesian philosophy? Because the partitions of figures which were understood, appealed to people as being an old-fashioned Cartesian thinking. So we had to go into Greek philosophy, if I could manage to, to what extent I can't remember, but I remember the word Cartesian coming up very often. My world wasn't rigid, but it was definitely organic, so I had to explain several times, what do I mean by organic, because I happen to think of organic not necessarily as an organism but as an organisation. So in that sense I had to put things right from time to time. And very often I had to listen to others telling me about what their impression is and how it relates to other things in their lives, for instance it's in that instance that I remember somebody told me a whole story, he read a piece by Beckett, who has this story of a man which had several pockets and depending on the mood he took a stone out of the pocket, he would suck it, he would put it in his mouth, and then put it back in the pocket according to what happened. You could see I remember that story because it made a lot of sense to me, I didn't know anything about it until then. So it's an opportunity like that which made me, you know, meet a lot of interesting ideas, and people, you know.

I spoke of that exhibition as a sort of demonstration of a set of ideas. I wonder how far it was a demonstration and how far it was an exploration.

Well the exploration I'm afraid was less than 50 per cent, I would say in retrospect. I think it was a demonstration because it contained so much of already achieved things. But they were open even with their wrong angles to the public. The exploration should have increased a bit more by me being more aware of impressions or inventing some kind of record book of opinions, feedback and so on. I must say that wasn't done well enough, I mean, it's one of my regrets.

End of F4534 Side B

F4535 Side A

Paul Neagu, tape seven, February the 22nd.

Paul, the reason I asked you about the difference between demonstration and exploration, and I think you immediately grasped what I was getting at, but it struck me that the question of setting up a situation and then observing people respond to that situation, had something in common with those experiments in Bucharest when you set things up in the street, and then secretly observed people.

Right.

I wondered whether, watching how people responded and reacted, had played any part in the scenario for that exhibition for you, or whether that was simply incidental.

Well, like I said it wasn't enough. Mind you the difference was that in Bucharest I was shooting a film while I was doing that, which I have recorded, all these reactions, and I was looking forward to get them, to catch them. In London I wasn't doing that, in fact I could excuse myself by saying, this was an exhibition, and if it had to have an effect I was hoping the long-term effect would be more interesting than the immediate effect of being there, which I think, now I could say but at the time I didn't think that way of course, no. Yet I am still saying that I would have liked to see more of the immediate effect maybe on a recorded video. It's a regret I have to live with, but sooner or later I regarded myself, and did something else where this happened a lot more intensely actually, in the Seventies. For instance, my next show at the Serpentine was an event with people sitting down etcetera, and this was very much recorded, this was in '76; and in '79 at the ICA, where again there was a whole, there was a set of people set by the Arts Council to do a gathering of opinion of a very complex type. So the feedback has been recorded in other instances, not in that one. In a sense I was unaware of, you know, what I could do. So I was learning, I am saying.

Can I ask you now to talk a bit about the Generative Art Group?

Oh right, well, the Generative Art Group came very much from '72, therefore in '73 when I had this show at the Serpentine, Generative Art had just started. It was a very unusual ruse, again, because I have to confess it was a secret thing at first. Originally I wanted to do a real group with real artists, and for some time I was talking to several individuals. In the end I realised it's going to be terribly difficult with people, real people, because not easily an artist gives up the idea of total self control in what they are doing to the extent to which they are participating into a group work. I needed bit more of a flexible kind of manipulation, if I could put it that way; what I am understanding by that, the ideas were pre-set quite strongly, and what the Generative Art Group wanted to do. In other words I could not meet suddenly to be confronted by an artist who wants to talk to me a different language than the one which was meant to be generative. So it became difficult to choose artists to do the real one, so at that juncture I decided to invent the group, which meant that I was to invent twice, first the art works to stand for the artist, second the artist to stand for the art work. The two layers had to be fictional, which I managed to do. So for two years this thing was kept secret to the point that, I mean these worked well to the point that I managed to go to the Arts Council trying to get a grant to publish the first catalogue; the Arts Council immediately said, 'We would like you all to come here and meet us,' to which I said, 'That's not possible because those artists live in different countries I'm afraid, one is in Corsica, one is in France, one is in Scotland, one is in Spain. Would you please consider the art work rather than the artists?' To which they agreed, and that was my strong point, because in fact the art work existed, I was working at it for almost two years. So by the time...

Can we just interrupt you there, because... Did you, at the outset, publish a manifesto, or declare a programme? In other words when you went to the Arts Council to raise money for the Generative Arts Group, what was, as it were, the programme or the platform upon which you made that presentation?

An interesting question, because at this time I didn't produce a manifesto. What I did produce though, it was a simple phrase related to an illustration. The illustration had a strange...I could see it because I have it with me, had a strange, like a strange space

shaft, a space machine, like a gyroscope, moving in space, having five exits; in each exit was the name of one of the fictional artists, including mine. And around this gyroscope there were a lot of arrows, like comets, moving in space; it was very much a kind of illustration you find in books about cosmos. And the text simply said, the Generative Art Group, it's a group behaviour, each individual participating through the game[??], and being able to exchange information as we go. And the way the work is constituted is by the continuous collaboration and exchange of information from one to the other, bouncing on and off. So something very simple of that kind. And then I gave the names of the artists and that was the end of it.

Can we just go through those names?

It was rather enigmatic I suppose. But they closed their eyes. I don't know how much suspicion there was that it was fictional, nobody questioned it. The names were Philip Honeysuckle to start with, he was the true painter to be concerned with hand behaviour in the sense of physically painting a picture, therefore in Honeysuckle work you always see a hand drawing or a hand painting, very often this hand was drawing another hand, the other hand, left was drawing the right and so on, but only hands. So it was done almost mimetically in the most realistic fashion possible. No one knew that I could do that kind of thing, so I wanted to express myself almost by contriving myself to do so on something I wasn't known to be able to. Edward Larsochi[ph], the second person, whose name came from a combination of, oci[ph] is Latin for eye, larsochi[ph] came from a conversation with a Corsican friend I had, and I understood that, like in Romanian, oci[ph] means eye, therefore Edward Larsochi[ph], which is, Edward comes from a brother of mine called Edward. Just like Anton is the other brother I have. Paydollar[ph], Anton Paydollar[ph] is the third character in the group, he came from an old colleague I had when I was a draughtsman, Anton is the name of my brother. Husni Belmud[ph], again, it's an old colleague I had when I was a young Romanian draughtsman.

Husni[ph]...

Husni[ph], it's a French name, and Belmud[ph] as you could see from, it's a nice mood.

Yes.

If you want a loose translation. So Mr Larsochi[ph] used to be, as it was in nature[ph] Corsican, he was obsessed with the idea of irises. The iris is a cosmic object, either seen at an angle, like the flying saucers, the amazing colourful events in the centre.

The iris of one's eye you are talking about, aren't you.

Just the iris of one's eye. Or segments of the iris, and if you have a segment then it's almost like a magic mountain, almost like Fuji with snow on top.

Yes, yes.

While Husni Belmud[ph], even stranger than that, he used to take very simple domestic objects, including one's tongue, out of the mouth; taking the tongue out of the context it was just the tongue suspended in mid air. This tongue could do a lot of things, like a cartilage which could express different attitudes according to the shape and the twist. Now, strangely I am thinking now, this tongue business of Mr Belmud[ph] has a lot to do with certain dances I have learned later, in certain Fuji islands I believe they have a dance where the tongue comes out of the mouth and the dancer expresses a libido of some sort. I remember the Queen seeing such dance in television shows, documentary, and she, I mean the journalist who was watching her saying, 'Probably she is quite embarrassed to be offered this dance'. Belmud[ph] had therefore this tongue, but also the tongue relates to the best part of the human organ which I used to illustrate the idea of the hyphen, because it relates the inside with the outside.

Yes.

On the other hand, Belmud[ph], I said, used domestic objects, like a spoon, or like a tree, but instead of looking at the tree in a normal way any person would see it in a park, he looks at the tree like he was a bird, from above, therefore it's quite difficult to see it as a tree, and yet it's as naturalistic as possible. The spoon itself was seen from a shortened angle, so when you look at the spoon drawn by Husni[ph], and if I say spoon, you recognise it immediately, but if I don't say spoon, you could look at it for a long long time and not realise what it is. So it's a very mysterious way of lateral approach, this was characteristic of Belmud[ph]. Paydollar[ph] was the most abstract poet in the group, he often presented a white blank, un-worked-on sheet of paper or canvas, or, often he would present you with a text which was difficult to read, because you have to take the piece of paper and put it at that angle to understand the poem, otherwise front-wise it looks like a series of lines and only that.

And it's like those...there are certain optical illusions which is, if you hold the paper or the page...

Exactly.

At eye level, then elongated letters, rather like letters on a road, which have been elongated become...

Which is called anamorphosis, yes.

That's right.

So, altogether the Group...

This is Paydollar[ph].

The Group had...

So one, two, three, four, Philip Honeysuckle...

And the fifth was myself.

Edward Larsochi[ph], Husni Belmud[ph], and Anton Paydollar[ph]. Is there any special...Paydollar[ph] just was a given name.

Paydollar[ph] comes from Dali, which is, it's an anagram from Salvador Dali apparently, Paydollar[ph], pay dollar[ph].

Yes.

So you have anagrams, you have anamorphosis, you have realism and you have poetical approach, sometimes very minimal or conceptual, to combine to create this strange group, to combine with my own metaphysical human figures. And then you understand how the work was presented again as a set of drawings which you could arrange the way you like, like cards in a game. You could exchange their places, you could put them in order by subject, or you could put them upside down, or you could put the poet first, Neagu second, Larsochi[ph] third. Or you could alter the arrangement in one line or in four lines. Now the only time I had a full expression of the whole group, like an orchestration, because this was always in the background, in the back of my mind, to produce a jazz band where each soloist could play the music of the other musician, even though they are playing different instruments. Now that's a very old idea of mine, very often expressed differently, like I said earlier on about the market of the peasants in Romania, I was interested in a collective arrangement, in a group, in a multitude of individuals. In this case I wanted to bring life to the idea of four very typical individuals in a visual expression of them, they would come together as a group, so, you shouldn't be amused, or you shouldn't be surprised, if Anton Paydollar[ph] suddenly wants to do a thing like Philip Honeysuckle, or Paul Neagu. The truth was that I produced different works according to these characters I just described. The Arts Council saw that work and they were convinced that it was a group of five people; they could only recognise my own behaviour according to my habitual way of cutting people into boxes. And in this case it was a polyvalent or a rather pluralist approach, visually. Together they created a chorus of strange things [INAUDIBLE], half recognisable and half unrecognisable. So there was once more a

new open platform of, not anagramic but I should say part symbolic and part imetic[ph] expressions, which, beside being entertaining it also hides a lot of other psychological and philosophical meanings.

I can see this. Generative Art Group is a cunning title isn't it, because you have actually set up as it were a machine for generating art works.

Not only that, but the short of Generative Art Group is GAG, G-A-G.

Gag. Yes. (laughs)

So everything...

A joke.

Yes.

Now, I mean I think Generative Art Group is a wonderful conception, a conceptual art group making a whole lot of different works, and actually deepening the game by saying that any one of them might make works like any of the others, of course is to take the joke to a higher level still. I have always wondered to what extent this conceit[??] yours, this notion, had...it could have had a number of purposes, one of them being of course that, to invent such a thing actually gives you the impetus to create a range of work, doesn't it, it generates work, and are you.

That was one of the very strong impulses.

So that's one thing. The other thing of course is, by the aid of the Arts Council you were hoping to generate money, weren't you.

Yes, but that's...(laughs)...that wasn't meant to be part of the title[??]. It wasn't generating money, no, in fact I was begging for a minimum sum which in fact was

£500, to produce a minimum of a catalogue. I needed a bit of publicity and that's why. The idea of generating money, no, it was more...

Generating funds. I mean...

Fun, yes, loads.

Funds...

Fun, fun. Not funds.

Funs, not funds.

Funds was by the way, a necessity, but not a purpose.

Had you...did you get money from the Arts Council?

£500.

You did. And did you eventually reveal to the Arts Council that...?

Not then, later.

Later on.

Two years later.

Two years. (laughing) Can I ask you the third question that comes to mind, allowing that...I have no doubt at all that you were acting in good faith, and when I talked about generating funds there was a sort of joke there, but it is true that you did...

That's perfectly, yes, quite. Well I had to generate money, not because I was planning to.

No.

Because I was trying to publish something, you know. If somebody would have said, 'You don't need money because I will pay for these,' I would have been perfectly happy.

I mean, so there was an element of ploy about it.

Yes.

Because you were more likely to get money for what sounded like an interesting group...

Well the real ploy if there was to...if we want to call it that, it was the following. I want to go against the grain of an established art scene where every artist is known in its pigeon-hole for doing that particular thing; I wanted to show, eventually, that an artist could do many different things, did doesn't have to be all the time the same thing.

This is the deep [INAUDIBLE].

That was the one strong lucid purpose I started with, you know.

That links, as I said, to the third question I wanted to ask in relation to the sort of purposes of the Generative Art Group, and that was, did you ever have any...did you ever sense or did you ever have any satiric purpose in creating the Generative Art Group?

Satiric?

Satiric. I mean was it part of your intention to show...?

To the extent to which you call...I call this ludic, ludic meaning the gamefulness.

Ludic, yes.

If you want to call it satiric, then it has to have a critical nuance...

Yes.

In a social way, and that's the one I've just said, the idea of, I wanted to satirise, if I could say that, to show ludicrous the expectancy that an artist, once and forever, sets a style and sits with that. In other words I wanted to destroy the idea of single-mindedness, because for me the opposite was more valid, which is pluralist, pluralistic approach.

No, but can I just take... I see, I understand that point and I think it's a very good one, and as I said I have absolutely no doubt about your good faith in setting up GAG.

I wanted to show I was single-minded about being pluralist.

Yes, quite. But some people would think it a joke of another kind to actually get money from the Arts Council for a non-existent group.

That's by the way. Yes of course they can, but I don't mind.

You don't mind?

No. As long as...

[INAUDIBLE] was part of it, I mean that's [INAUDIBLE].

It's like today accusing an ex-spy that he was doing it for money or for ideological reasons. If the spy took a lot of money then you could say he has done it just for

money, but in my case I did it for a little money, tiny money, particularly necessary, and mostly for ideological reasons. That's the clearest way I could say it, you know.

But you understand why I wanted to ask that question.

Yes of course.

Because I think...

It's not a financial trick.

No no, because I think a lot of [INAUDIBLE].

It might work well with tax people, yes. (laughs)

I think a lot of people find looking back at Generative Art, the Generative Arts Group, they find it a very very funny idea.

Well it could be done, if you do it properly then you carry it on for years, then you get a lot of money per five names. I must confess to you, as we are talking now, years later, in between, many times it crossed my mind that I could obtain, say, social benefits or any form of money by employing different pseudonyms, because I had this behind me. And I also come across writers who wrote different works under different names. It appears that in literature, in writing, that's also like in plays, like, imagine the five actors in search of an author, isn't that Irandello[ph]?

Yes.

Well it was a game of that kind, if you like, five confused artists in search of a common denominator.

Yes.

So that was the ideological side. But the saddest factor which came up later was that in the British art scene these elements weren't considered properly. Most people are ready to call me split personality and therefore schizophrenic; rather than seeing this as a game element, they took it as a psychological disturbance.

Was this part of the response to that?

Yes. Particularly one in between the beginning and the end of these group activities, I had a one-man show for Philip Honeysuckle. I did a poster, in Edinburgh this was, and the poster said, 'Philip Honeysuckle'. A couple of Americans came to me later when they knew who I was and they said, 'Paul, when we saw this Philip Honeysuckle we thought it was something phoney, from Philip Honey, something phoney about it,' because I suppose the dealer of the gallery told them they had never met Philip Honeysuckle, they met Paul Neagu and that's it. (laughing) It had all kinds of symbolics.

P. Honey.

Yes, P. Honey, yes.

Yes, quite. Did you make a show with the Generative Arts Group?

Yes, in Oxford.

Whereabouts in Oxford?

The Museum of Modern Art.

At the museum. And can you describe that show for me?

That show was a wonderful time, because in fact the show was called 'Paul Neagu and his Generative Art Group'. Now that show contained all the amalgamated work, which is what I used to call it, there were about six amalgamations, meaning six...

Collaborations between different parts...

Collaboration pieces.

Different members of the group.

But within that, you see this was the first thing that happened, I felt the necessity of having some kind of tool, some kind of point of concentration of all of them. Because the show was about Paul Neagu, this person, yes? Mind you in the catalogue of that show which I still have, it's a little beautiful document, at the beginning of it, with small letters, I am saying, 'Ipso facto, the five members are all Paul Neagu'. Now very few people have read that. The opening went on, I remember it was quite busy, the opening night, and one lady at the end of the opening came to me and very discreetly and very seriously asked me how could she meet the poet, because she would love to know more about the poet. And I didn't know what to say at that point, I said, 'I will let you know later on; right now I can't tell you because he is not here. All I could say to you, that he might come later.' And she actually wouldn't let me go. Later on I had to explain to her what happened, so I opened the catalogue and said, 'If you read here, it says that all these people is one person, Paul Neagu'. I couldn't believe what face she made. I mean, she is almost, from a very big open mouth, she almost went into tears, she didn't know what to say. It was a real shock for her to discover that she was conned, that all the time of the evening she imagined what she saw on the walls as being the poet, Anton Paydollar[ph], in fact it was the same man as Paul Neagu, and all the others the same. Simply because she hasn't read the catalogue, and nobody in the opening night would speak up about this. It was assumed that everybody looked at the catalogue.

Who organised the show?

Nicolai Serota.

(laughing)

And Sandy Nairne.

And Nick Serota was in on the...?

Nick Serota was director of that museum at that time.

Yes I know, but was he in on the joke? He knew that it was all you?

Oh yes, everybody knew, of the gallery. The thing is that in the centre of the gallery I devised two other things, first, it was my first sculpture on the round, that's what the tool was, in order to be able to have things together. But that sculpture which was called at the time 'A Generator', Generative Art Group, 'A Generator', it was like a machine made of wood, very simple, like a table with three legs, which had two halves because the third leg split this rectangle in two, one was for a man, one for a female, and each part on the table there were five tools, each tool stood for one member of the Group. As it were, the same members were, on the left side they were female, on the right they were male. Imagine this kind of generation, generating artists, male and female. And within the same show twice during the six weeks, five weeks, I did two performances which are called, again the relationship with the idea of generating, the performances were versions of 'Horizontal Rain', but in fact they were called 'Horizontal Seed', in other words from that table the seed went around upwards, distributing, dissipating, information about the five members of the Group, and the way they play their jazz, can I say. So it's in that sense, it was again fully poetical. I was performing dressed up with, I was going to say a Superman suit, with an anthropocosmos man suit. I had a bag, a white/wide[??] bag tied up to my hand full of walnuts, and each time I took my hand out of the bag, on roller-skates, dashing towards the big wall, I would throw a nut on the wall. If the nut will split open, then I will obtain a point called 'yes'; if the nut wouldn't break I would call it 'no'. This wall had a grid drawn in charcoal by me.

A grid?

A grid. Within this grid therefore I had like a constellation of yes-no-yes-no-yes-no. All that done in a dynamic way with roller-skates on parquet floor within the museum, surrounded by the exhibition of the Generative Art Group. So instead of having five members playing the jazz, which I said jokingly, it was still Paul Neagu taking nuts out of a bag. You could see every nut as a sphere having to tell me, have I got a seed inside or have I not? Am I going to make a splash on the wall or not? And so on and so forth. So this was the end of the group activities, and the beginning of my first serious concern with sculpture on the round. The hyphen being the link between every one of us. What I call 'Early Generator', it was called the 'Subject Generator', and just a year later I changed the title from 'Subject Generator' to 'Hyphen'.

Because you have in that, that particular show, for that particular central piece, discovered the central sort of motive of the hyphen, because the split table in fact is the shape of your...is the basic shape of your hyphen sculptures.

Yes. Containing the two halves.

Yes.

Well, thank you for that. I think we will end the tape here.

End of F4535 Side A

F4535 Side B

Paul, how long did the Generative Arts Group continue to operate, how long did you keep up this rather wonderful fiction?

Well this wonderful, insidious fiction came to a close as a fictional thing in that year, in '75, because of the Oxford show. But one time later, in '76, during my final performance of 'Gradually Going Tornado' in Arnolfini, Bristol, I had to make the five members become alive. Because the performance there was constituted in three parts, like a symphony in three parts, my second part was by definition called 'Horizontal Rain'. It is within the 'Horizontal Rain', within the dissipation of material, within the distribution, that the GAG works, the Generative Art Group. So I had four assistants, four students of mine, who each one, there were two women and two men, became those members of the group.

Can you explain to me what you mean by 'Horizontal Rain' and how that was...?

Well every time I impersonate this general creature which is called anthropocosmos, as I did it in my performance work, 'Horizontal Rain' is anthropocosmos as performance. It's because in a 'Horizontal Rain' performance, the things are[??] dynamical, not any longer static, like a painting or an object; 'Horizontal Rain' means communication at the horizontal level, at the social level. The fact I am talking to you, or to this machine now, it's a horizontal rain behaviour; if I send a letter from here to Romania it's a horizontal rain.

How do you spell rain here, as in falling rain?

Like in rain, but instead of being vertical it's horizontal.

Horizontal, yes.

It's a rain of communication. When I described earlier on the illustration to convey the idea of the group, Generative Art Group, I said to you like a jarring machine in

cosmos with a lot of little light spots around it, that was a horizontal rain jarring machine. Imagine a merry-go-round on the horizontal is the jarring machine, people coming in, people going out, this is the rain drops.

Yes.

The seeds of walnuts being thrown against the wall in Oxford were the drops of my rain there, just like the little drawings I was showing at the Serpentine and so forth and so on. Everywhere you go, like Post Office, if you like, is the jarring thing. You send letters in, letters get out, and so on.

The concept being, I mean, the concept is that the rain itself is a refreshing, regenerating force, and that you imagine this...

Exactly.

Operating not [INAUDIBLE].

It's a new flux.

Not simply vertically, from heaven to earth as it were, but parallel to the surface of the earth.

Exactly.

And spreading from one...

It's like the murray[ph], like the, what do you call it? When the sea comes in and goes out.

The tide.

The tide, sorry. It's that sense, but it's also human. You cannot have natural horizontal rain like the tide. When I say horizontal rain I am relating it by definition to communication, that's why I said Post Office, or books, written for people, by people for people.

I'm sorry to be so literal, but it's because it's such an extraordinary and idiosyncratic, poetic idea of yours.

Well you must see it related to the cycle performances, the first being `Blind Bite'.

Being...?

`Blind Bite'.

`Blind Bite', yes, we've heard of that.

Which is triangle. `Blind Bite' means aggression, it means the person who doesn't see is desperate to eat, it means the touching and the eating, and the engulfing.

`Blind Bite'.

In other words, a blind person, like an animal, in order to survive has to eat, he doesn't see he doesn't choose. Whatever, if he's very hungry he has to bite on something. Again, metaphorical. Next level, it's this, the city within man, the brain within the head, it's the need to talk, language, speech, writing and so on. The third one is `Going Tornado'. `Going Tornado' means the final degree. So these are the three parts of my performance in Bristol. Are you with me?

Yes. I want to talk about `Gradually Going Tornado', but...

Yes, well that's a chapter in itself.

Yes I know, quite.

But 'Going Tornado' is the one performance by itself, so 'Gradually Going Tornado', you have the three parts.

Yes.

There is the whole system of what I have been doing.

Good. Now describe it.

The first system, like I said, it's represented by 'Blind Bite' performance, or by 'Triangle' in geometry. That gives base, foundation, to the second, which is 'Rectangle', which is civilisation, human education, our speech, our languages.

The establishment of communications.

Exactly, the civilised exchanging information. The idea of communication altogether.

The built thing between men.

The built things between men, and for men, by men for men. The third one, it's again an individual third because it regards you ready to die. You might reach satori, the so-called state of final ecstasy; you might reach it through suicide, death, normal death, or simply through drug, or through some kind of...I mean it could be done artificially, it could be done naturally.

Sexuality?

Sexuality too, that's an instance which doesn't kill you, put it that way. But it's ecstasy, OK. So 'Tornado' relates to that ecstatic thing which is very individual, hard to communicate. If you communicate it you could only refer to it but you could never make another person feel the same way, unless you have a, like you said, love-making or an ecstatic type of communication, which is difficult to see how. I am saying it's a

personal affair, just like the birth is. We are born alone, we die alone; in between we have this big, thick crust layer of communicating, exchange, shaking hands, getting dressed, fashion or not fashion, you know, cars, the whole network of transport for instance.

All this is part of...

All is horizontal rain.

Horizontal rain, yes.

Everything underneath that, from here downwards, sex, violence, aggression, or to do with the stomach, therefore teeth as well, eating, it's 'Triangle'. I am repeating now, I am going backwards.

Yes.

Well those two, 'Triangle' and 'Rectangle', are demanding the third, which is the ecstatic final level which is 'Tornado', which is 'Tornado'. The link with God, the link with other worlds.

Transcendence?

Transcendence, absolutely. It's absolutely in the centre of it. So these three things I did perform, these three things I use as a basis of metaphysic, when I paint, when I sculpt, when I make group work go together, and so on and so forth. But I have to account for these three things. And mind you, once more I would say this, these three things are nothing else but the cooling from the whole vocabulary available within geometry, because, I would say this much, take a point for a walk, you have a line; take a line for a shift, you have an angle; take an angle, close it up, you have a triangle. There's your first figure. Double a triangle you have the rectangle, or a square; put another line there, you have a pentagon, octagon, any-agon, circle.

Sphere.

Once you are in the sphere you are a point again. So there is your whole geometrical simplicity, simple tones within which I picked up three.

May I...

Please.

Again take up this point, because it seems to me that what you are saying has a lot of points of contact, not necessarily with classical geometry and all that that might mean, but much more with tantric, with the whole tantric art, the whole of tantric art, and the whole of the tantric picturing of the cosmos.

I have consulted books, I have made observations of different cultures. In the end I came up with the most...with the most gorgeous kind of solution - not solution, understanding, based on this thing. Like you said, it comes from tantric arts, it comes from China as it comes from India, it comes from Japan as it comes from Greek Orthodox.

I quite agree with all that, but it seems to me that the actual imagery that we are talking about, and in fact your anthropocosmic imagery, the only place...I was going to ask you earlier, what did you draw upon visually for that imagery, and, I don't know whether we actually got this on tape or not, but you more or less indicated that, you in a sense had to invent it because there are only Mannerist antecedents for it, certain antecedents of different kinds.

They were too illustrative and...

Yes, I mean, Arcimboldo is an example of a particular way of building up a picture from cells of another kind, from particular objects, to create a total effect.

My simplest...

But the only other source that I can think of, visual source, for some of your anthropometric...anthropocosmic drawings, is tantric drawing, tantric charts.

It does relate there, but you will be amazed, I will give you two more.

Go on.

One is much more ancient, and it's the Temple of Luxor, which is supposed to be built on the proportions of the human body, and there are special books on that, one of them I studied, I mean very very specialised books by Walter de Lubic[ph]. The other thing, even simpler, which is all part of very known iconography, which is Jesus Christ on the Cross. Jesus Christ on the Cross, take it as humanity being crucified by two factors, horizontal and vertical. Once you understand that metaphorically you are right inside my work. And just multiply that.

OK. That's by way of a digression, because, your description...

But giving way to a symbol.

Your description in a sense of your symbolic system, this refinement in a sense of all geometry down to the three major points if you like of the line, the triangle, the square, or the rectangle, and the circle or the sphere, just made me think, and I wondered how far you had been aware, in the evolving of this particular system of your own, of the tantric cosmology really or the tantric geometry which is concerned very much with a symbolism of this kind. Now, let's put that [INAUDIBLE].

To an extent. I am not of great knowledge in these areas, but I have a small knowledge, I mean a small awareness, of the usage of these symbols in tantric, I have a couple of books on that.

Fine. Let's put that aside, as I said it's a sort of digression. Can we come back now to Bristol?

Right. I was meaning to make the end of that. The Bristol, as I said earlier, was the performance which wanted to encapsulate the three performances in one symphony. So it started with me performing, again with the help of four assistants which were blindfolded, the first part of the performance called 'Blind Bite', that consisted of, ritually the four assistants were sitting down like an Indian yogi, displayed in the shape of a triangle. I was the only one holding a scythe in my hand, blindfolded too, on the third side of the triangle, so there were two, two and one. In that group of five, I was handed a long tube full of ashes, symbolising death, and being blindfolded I had to cut this with one gesture. Once I cut...this happened - sorry, this happened after we all eaten from one waffle made on stage, which we did eat blindfolded. We felt, but we couldn't see it; we touched, but we couldn't see it. It followed by the cutting of that long tube full of ash, which produced a lot of dust. Once that happened, the blindfold came off, the awareness increased, inverted brackets, and the five members become mature. First part finished. A little pause, we entered the second part. There are four tables, on each table there is a chair, a lamp, a magnifying glass, each one of the assistants is doing it fast, very detailed. One is cutting an apple, another one is taking a photograph, one is looking in the mirror doing a drawing, and so on. I was the man on a suit, anthropocosmic suit, moving around on roller-skates coordinating the four tables. As this very detailed activity goes on, the tables are pushed together little by little, the four tables are making one big rectangle, and the four members starting going around. That lasts for about half an hour, because what happens is, the table is very detailed, I'm not describing everything now, it's just a brief thing. So coordinating means that I move from member to member, sometimes carrying one element from one table to the other. Going on roller-skates made the whole thing quite funny, but I was the bonding agent if you like, being also the manager of the group, it was my task. So the second part, which is 'Horizontal Rain', communicating via the manager from table to table, make them come closer. Once they come closer they all are one. The five-group is one. At that point the members become less significant. Second part finishes, 'Horizontal Rain' over. Third part, the four assistants, almost like stage props, help me link to my body every piece of cloth I strip off my body, jackets, roller-skates, suit, hat, metronomes which I had on top of my head, gloves, and God knows what else, a pair of scissors, part of the floorboard, all

go strapped to my body with elastic straps, I get naked and start spinning. As I spin, the elastic straps start flying in the air, and the assistants fly round and round these flying objects trying to be one with them, like I was Jupiter, and around me in a ring there are the four moons, trying to stay on the level with the flying object. The faster I twist, the higher they go, these objects, and the faster the whole thing goes. Then I stop, the whole thing goes around my body, hitting me all over like that, and then I go on the other side to a degree of exhaustion and ecstasy, I became invisible. I could show you a photograph, I became like dust, you can't see the body any more it's so fast, it goes in these [INAUDIBLE]. And then the whole thing finishes as the second gyrating changes sense, I collapse on the floor and that's the end of it.

That is the final ecstatic...

That's the 'Tornado Gone Away', yes.

Yes. And of course, I suppose...

But another by itself, I've done a performance, I have the whole video of it, in a studio in Aberdeen.

The notion of going round and round and round until in a sense you enter a state of ecstasy, out of the body, out of status, out of...

I become invisible, which for me is beautiful.

Yes. Is...that of course relates to the whirling dervish notion, doesn't it, that sort of dance...

It does, it does.

A dance which leads me in to transcendence and to invisibility.

I had those things. Yes, exactly.

Now that you said was the final, that was as it were, you said, in that, the four other performers were for you, as it were, the re...

Well in the second part they took a real role.

And they were as it were re-enacting the Generative Arts Group for you, in symbolic terms.

Exactly. In the first part and the third part they were like props; in the centre they were themselves.

And they became as it were re-enacting, they re-enacted within that performance.

And that was the only performance where I put the three together, which I am saying, in another sense they mirror triangle, rectangle and sphere.

And the...that was called 'Gradually Going Tornado'.

That's 'Gradually Going Tornado', when you had the...

And 'Going Tornado'...?

Well 'Going Tornado' is just me...

Spinning.

Yes, but that's just the final part. To get spinning it's a very long process. The performances I did were an hour, an hour and a half. The one I did for television was half an hour, I think, yes, which you could see. In fact, if you fancy you could play it, I have a copy. Because it was so long ago, it had to go through two systems in order to transfer it to a contemporary symbol, a contemporary tape.

VHS.

But you would see me very young, and doing very strange things. Have a look, and then you see what happens with the apple, how it changes to higher up, things up, how the whole floor becomes my ceiling, how my...black hole above my head. There is a lot of cosmic, poetical, lyrical-less[??] epic type of transfiguration.

Yes.

I am very glad whenever I think about these things. The only thing that really makes me sad - oh, we're recording - it's that there is no serious record, nobody has ever asked me for this or that archive, or for this or that book, can we have a photograph of that, can we have a film of that? It's only me who kept them alive here, and then whatever I have archive material, and I have plenty. Because I believe that what I have done, one day will make more sense than it has done when I did it, strangely. You see, now you know a bit more, all these relationships between geometry, metaphysics, philosophy, cosmos, anthropocosmos, humanity, for a lot of people, appear to be incredibly heavy. They are not having a good time. They think art is not for that. It's like talking to, not to an entertaining character but talking to a philosopher who wants to be a painter, who wants to be serious, wants to be comic, wants to be, you know, gimmicky and so on. It's very...too many. Intensity and density annoys people.

I think that's a very good way of putting it. A great deal of what you do, intensity and density. I think it's also...

It's one of my big defects.

Well yes I think this is true, but I mean I think that's partly because you work out of, if I could put it that way, out of certain traditions and certain traditions of thought and feeling, certain traditions of metaphysics, with which people are simply not familiar in our culture.

Well this is why most such critics of mine, I mean in colleges, lectures and so on, ends up by me being accused of being subjective. Why do I have to press to the public that those things, triangle, rectangle, are...that's what I think. They have different symbols, why don't I listen to that? I say, listen, this is not my invention, it's what I have learned, read this, look at that. I give them long lists of people to read, books to look at. People are not interested or willing. Sorry, we've finished this I think.

Yes. Well, I mean, after the performances, and there's very dense and interesting works of the Seventies, as you have described...

Yes, well sculpture becomes...

You have described the evolution in a sense of your own sculptural forms, which are very distinctive and which we really ought to discuss on the next tape, I mean as we move towards perhaps a discussion of your major sculptural work, which is the 'Nine Catholic[??] Stations'. Because clearly that picks up in many ways on some of these ideas, but with that these ideas find sculptural, three-dimensional form.

That's how I move, yes.

End of F4535 Side B

F4536 Side A

Paul Neagu, recorded on the 21st of March 1995. This is Tape Eight.

Paul, I want to take us back now to the show at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1975, which was the exhibition with the Generative Arts Group, and we have discussed that at some length. But I want to go back to that because, while we were talking about that it became clear that the centre-piece, the divided table sculpture, of that exhibition, in a way was the beginnings of your move towards an expression of your ideas in terms of 3-dimensional static sculpture.

It's true, yes; even though before that I used to do mixed media platforms and tactile objects, I never considered sculpture as such in a sense of free-standing, what we call rombos[ph], a piece of concrete statement to which you could go around, you could inspect it by embracing it or you could consider it as a free-standing entity. So, going to '75, it was a strange event for me to have to conceive a tool, a tool which was to be the magnet of the group, and my disseminated work which was tending to be too much disseminated, too much going to many directions, I kind of, I remember even the psychological anxieties I had at that time, needing an anchor. Strangely enough this table, divided as you call it, was like an anchor, having hooks into the ground. And in retrospect it's very clear that it was re-named from an original title which was 'Subject Generator', about two years later it was re-named 'The Hyphen', which then clearly became evident it was the first time I did a three-dimensional piece of sculpture, even though it was skeletal and structural rather than having a lot of muscle and fat on it, as it were. Looking back, it becomes not only a hook or an anchor but it becomes the central spine of my concerns. Slowly I dropped all the other concerns, like performance which, the last one was done in '77 in Venice; I also left behind everything to do with so much interest I had in graphic, or even film, which used to be connected to performance as a documentary, as a documenting movement. So I left movement, and I left everything which was behaving according to time, in order to concentrate to something now which would be a more stern, a more, if you like compact form of statement. So very soon after '75, by '76/77, what I was doing, different variations on the same thing, which was the hyphen, by that I meant

originally was more small material, small sizes, hyphens made of gesso, canvas, wood. Including therefore all the tactile years of experimenting, this time I wanted to consider its general skeletal being, therefore its core, like I was interested in establishing a structure for it before I could think about its outer aspects. I remember by '79 when I had the show in Glasgow a student from the Glasgow School of Art used to look at my constructions in wood, because that's what they were, constructions made of beams of wood bolted together with metal, or hooked together with strings connected, articulated, they looked like strange animals to most people, those students were saying that they were not very well made, in other words technically I wasn't convincing to them, because they expected me to be as good as a carpenter, minimum, or, like a sculptor, they were coming down on me with their criteria, which was carving, modelling, you know, for casting. Yet my sculptures looked more like the gymnastics of someone who wasn't well-equipped to build such things, therefore I was for some time labelled to be a conceptual kind of sculptor.

Can I interrupt you there, because I would like to ask you whether or not at that stage it mattered to you, and in that sense what you were making was an experimental series of works that might finally be realised in technical terms, in more complete technical terms, or whether you were quite happy with the roughness. I am asking this because those early sculptures, those early 'Hyphen' sculptures, I like for their roughness, and...

No, I was very happy with their state. I was happy with their skeletal aspect, I was happy that also I could show the process they were made. If a bolt was going through and in the process was creating a crack on the wood I didn't mind that, on the contrary I was evidencing this crack to look even more, you know, sincere. In other words of course at the back of my head there were things I was reading, or heard here and there, like Henry Moore said, 'honesty to material', such a sculptural slogan everybody knew, even if you were not a sculptor. I was aware of it, but my sincerity was very much in the way I was building things, I wanted them to be visible, so I wasn't hiding the joints at all. And if people liked them for what they were, like you just said, probably it doesn't mean that the majority of my viewers, my clients, were of that opinion. like those students I mentioned in Glasgow, and several other type of

remarks. But, me, I was very concerned with my ideas in the first place, so the technology of my work wasn't at all one of my priority...important concern of mine. This later, maybe much later, became more important.

In those early works, one can't help sometimes seeing something of the sort of peasant sculpture perhaps of Romania. I don't know if, again whether you will accept this as true of the work, but one of the things about the 'Hyphen' as an image, as an object and image, is that also it looks like an anchor, as you have said, but it also looks a bit like a plough, doesn't it, or a ploughshare.

Well you are right again, I mean it does look like a plough, people have mentioned that; other people call them catapults, others said that they are weird animals inviting you to caress them. I remember Sarah Kent making such remarks in private and sometimes in writing.

I find that a little bit far-fetched, although I could see how some of them might look like a sort of skull of a beast, you know, a skull of a sheep or something like that.

Right.

But certainly the notion of the plough or the notion of the anchor, these are all entirely relevant considerations, aren't they.

They are.

In relation to the theme of the work.

Well I was very happy to be in the midst of so many different interpretations, so every time some such weird interpretation came to my ear I was enjoying its weirdness if you like.

Yes.

I was saying, I could see through that better who is the person who attaches that interpretation to my objects. Because if I immediately inspected myself, I could see that there was no such inspiration from an animal, or even from a plough, even though, as I have heard people saying, it looks like a plough or it looks like a ramp for lions getting their meat at Longleat zoo garden, which happened to be true, because I remember a photograph of such a ramp, you see those hyphens had a major irritating agent, and that was the long shaft which came from the middle of the table going askew; this element, I remember some sculptors, some artists were very irritated. There was a lecture where someone said, 'Why can't you understand, Mr Neagu, that your sculptors are too long?' Which made me laugh of course, but at the same time I could see the conventions picking against this rebellious kind of behaviour of mine, trying to put me right. Of course they were too long for his understanding. Of course it will be very interesting to say who that was but I can't remember exactly his name, all I remember was that he was a figurative sculptor, and he didn't like it. Other people associated this long ramp, this disturbing element, with the phallus, and yet it didn't have an aggressive behaviour because basically it went into the ground, it was more like a primitive society which wants to have some kind of implementation into the ground, phallus or not phallus, spermatic if you like. So this connects. I could tell you that I discovered in a Canadian anthropological museum a strange three-legged chair which, instead of...the place where you are supposed to sit ends up with a head, so it's very anthropomorphic, it has three legs, and I was explained it was a special stool for midwives. This I have photographed and it looks incredibly close to my 'Hyphens', but technically was made a lot better, and in the end it's a very figurative, half-animal half-human three-legged stool, but it's also a full grown sculpture, part of some, you know, provincial culture, some tribal culture. This is how far it could go this kind of interpretation. And of course it's to be re-found again within the idea of a plough, it has its basic structure, because we are talking about a knife, a triangular imposition into the ground, therefore the idea of fecundity comes back. My own thinking, my own inquiring at the time, was to making these weird things, which were often surprising to myself, but I was very much pushing on, with my, if you like crafty imagination, which of course I couldn't help, I was too much in a hurry to put these ideas in many many variations, which I just did. Sometimes they were

convincing, sometimes they were not, depending on who was the opposite side, you know.

Some of them I think are quite sort of complex and rough in execution and so on, bolted bits of wood, and you know, that sort of feeling to them, but others...I mean I think the whole thing about the concept, and I take it that one of the reasons why you found the concept so rich to explore is that it is so elegant in a sense, isn't it. I mean it does actually so many things in such a very neat and elegant equation if you like. I'm thinking of elegant in a way that mathematicians use the word elegant.

I understand. It might imply flexibility as well, the equation.

Of course, but if you have three points and you put those three points also on a circle, then you have a reference back really to the anthropocosmic man, don't you, and you have a reference back to the truvian[ph] man and a reference back to the notion that one way of looking at the world and measuring the world is by the dimensions of man himself. Is that far-fetched?

Not at all, no, on the contrary I was going to say myself that for me it's the philosophical approach, and it's the connecting impetus I had within my doings, I wanted to put in this sculpture not only a structure of geometrical time, but I wanted to, if possible, to evoke all the performances I used to do before, therefore the anthropocosmos was normally something which had to be implied or something to be inclusive of this strange object. But the only way I could pursue it at the time, as it was an intimate rapport between materials, myself and what I was imagining I could do with it, was to try and try, was trial and error, and yet the objects stood firm in my, if you like in my studio; even now twenty years later I am still fascinated by its richness, as you said. Yet I could also understand that for a lot of people, some of my students who were writing an art history thesis on my work, were for instance trying to be critical and they said it's a very dogmatic kind of philosophical referent. But I'm afraid I have to go back and say that those students were very short-sighted, because they couldn't see that in fact it was an elegant equation, very flexible, which allowed me to enrich, to cut off, in other words to trim it like growing a concept. The beauty

of the whole thing, and I think this is what kept me so long involved in this object and its concept, was that it was an open-ended kind of process.

That characterisation of the work as dogmatic of course, again to some extent is a manifestation, isn't it, of the sort of Anglo-Saxon or English response to your work generally, that is to say that it's seen as in some way demonstrative of something, it's seen to have philosophical...

And too didactical I suppose.

Yes, and didactic possibilities or functions. And there's a tendency in British art and British criticism to distrust that sort of philosophical underpinning, to be uneasy about it.

I agree.

And to prefer the empirical, and to prefer the lyrical, the suggestive and so on. One can see how, I can't help feeling that the response, that the things looked like a number of things, could look like almost anything, is like an attempt to domesticate it.

Exactly.

Whereas in fact I feel that it's geometric, and it's its power as a sign is what gives those early 'Hyphen' sculptures their particular power and [INAUDIBLE].

Well, it looks like, yes, everything you said seems to be demonstrable and true, from my own experience, not only that I accept it, it's been that kind of process all around me which I saw as a kind of critical thing which in a way helped me, if you like. Maybe that's why I didn't drop it immediately. I imagine if this concept of mine would have been approved and accepted and everybody would have applauded, I probably would have stopped from doing it, but because there was...I am saying there was an incentive for me in the fact that not everybody accepted the thing too easily. Yes, some were dogmatic, because of their attention given to the empirical aspect,

that's why all this criticism about the technique of my inabilities was coming across. I remember going to Japan round about '81 and having to give a lecture about the 'Hyphen', because the whole subject of my visit there was my own 'Hyphens' within a big exhibition. I improvised a 'Hyphen' from very much what you might call a local material, or site-specific, the museum curators in Fukuoka gave me pieces of bamboo. I said, that's fine I will make a 'Hyphen' out of that. Half an hour later I had a little 'Hyphen' made specially to go into the lecture with, and demonstrated on the blackboard how a 'Hyphen' could draw spiralled rather than just like a compass to draw circles. And they were fascinated by the object I made. You see Japanese themselves are very empirically drawn. Philosophy is something rather difficult, in an art museum anyway. So I was trying to combine those things by telling them that I am interested in the archetypal mood of thinking, and if I could make my 'Hyphen' show itself as an archetype of human becoming, or human behaviour, then I will be happiest, you know, well-achieved artist.

Can I again interrupt you Paul, because you said something that's very...seems to be very...have all sorts of possibilities. And that's, you said you showed them how the 'Hyphen' could be used to draw...

Spirals.

Spirals. And, I am very anxious to bring out in our conversation the way in which your latest sculpture is in a sense a concentration of many of the key ideas that existed in the performances and so on.

Right.

And if we think of the spiral then we are thinking of spinning, and we are therefore back in a way, aren't we, to 'Gradually Going Tornado'.

Dead right.

And we are back to that process of starting static and ending dynamic.

It's to do with the equation of three rather than two, I mean the basis of this 'Hyphen'. And then from three, the idea of a rectangle which is not a dead square but it's a rectangle therefore dynamic therefore golden proportions are coming in to that. Thirdly, it's to do with the results, or what are you to do with this machine, or with this equation, and I am having to demonstrate with it in a dance, or moving with it, that it could perform. But this does happen I am saying in my graphic explanations, that it does happen in life, it happens with every individual, as I did try to show with my performances. Now the 'Hyphen' itself, it's a central tool to do just that, and therefore in Japan when I had to demonstrate it's not what you imagine when you just look at it, just take it for a move, for a dance, like Klee would say, take it for a walk, but if you take it for the most elegant jarring walk, having three legs, you have to change the step as it were, and that is where you discover that it's a spiral, not a circle. What is more beautiful than, in Japan where the circle, the straight, flat dot, the disk, it's on the very symbol of Japan, Japanese flag, and the circle is the symbol of perfection, you go and provoke everybody by trying to tell them about spirals. Of course they are not alien to that, but in the traditional symbolic of Japanese graphic art or spontaneous art, the circle has a very definite and very powerfully achieved place, while the spiral is not so present. So there I was again breaking somebody's traditional eyes as it were.

It seems to me, and this is something I would like to hear you talk a bit about, that, Brancusi keeps coming into my mind whenever I look at your work and whenever we talk, one way or the other.

Couldn't help it.

But the other artist who comes to mind often is, again not from the way the work looks, but having to do with the, if you like the notion of a sort of metaphysic and a certain amount of didactic element in the work, the other artist who comes to mind is Malevich.

Right.

When you say the disk, or the circle, of course the truth of the matter is that the circle is the design in two dimensions, isn't it...

Of a sphere.

Of a sphere, or...

Or of a point.

Or of a spiral.

Yes.

In the way that the black square is a proposition about three-dimensionality, not to mention four-dimensionality.

Right.

But the black square is certainly a proposition about what is possible behind that square in terms of space and in terms of volume.

Well I would say the spiral is more like a special form of a disk, because it's...you can't equate one with the other actually. But like you said, I take from just what you used, meaning if you take the fourth dimension, I mean time, and apply it to the three, then any sphere or any circle from the three-dimensional world put against time, it will give you a spinning body in space, like the earth itself. So the spiral, it's as natural as you could see when you look at the cosmos. Malevich doesn't use spirals as such, does he, because he was going for more established, more static kind of forms, even though with those static forms he was trying to build a composition which are often very dynamic. I think, you are right to look at Malevich, but behind him somehow it seems to, I would say, it seems to give rise to a whole world where probably Kandinsky is more at home; in other words, what do you do with the

stability of Malevich's world, which, if you ask me I would say it's kind of, establishment of compact and very dense elements, but they are not dynamic enough as they are in Kandinsky say, or even in Paul Klee. So in order to construct something viable, something graspable and touchable, you have to move from Malevich I would say and go via Gabo for instance, where you see the movement itself, or you go back into, say, Brancusi, or forward, and start building a whole world out of it, just like Cézanne, going back, would say, 'Give me the three major elements in space, a cone, a sphere and a cylinder, and I could build a whole composition'. We know very clearly Cézanne never gave you a composition which was Malevichian in the sense of arresting strong forms, but he all the time juggled with these things in his Cubist period by showing you how reality is seen through a prismatic world of different geometrical types.

Mhm. Gabo is very very relevant here, isn't he really, coming back to the [INAUDIBLE].

Well exactly, Gabo dynamises and he uses transparency.

And coming back also to the 'Hyphen', because, you know, leaving aside Gabo's own kinetic work, the static work of Gabo always as it were, is a figury[ph] in static terms of kinetic, of dynamics.

Of movement, yes.

Of movement, of those possibilities. And that's what gives it its extraordinary...

Yes, I find that Gabo, certain limitations, exactly there, where he is building sculptural objects, in stone particularly, and they become too determined by the very elements which creates them; in other words they do not take a life of their own sculpturally to become organically convincing. But that's just on the sides. The major work of, I think the most transparent and the most successful work by Gabo are the works where the kinetic aspect is still very evident as being a process in

development, rather than those stones which are carved, almost like carved by robots or by some kind of mathematical engineer.

Gabo, Kandinsky, Malevich...

Klee.

Klee. Well Klee is Swiss.

Right.

But the rest are Russian. Brancusi is Romanian. We are talking here about a tradition, if you can call it a tradition, we are certainly talking here about a critical and creative dialectic, which seems to be Eastern European, if I can put it that way, and that this does link to some extent, doesn't it, with our reflections on the way in which your work has had a difficult time in a sense, critically speaking, here, because of there being not a sort of discourse to support it.

Yes, this is the most unfortunate aspect of all my movement from East to West, because it's with me I brought over all these traditional things, as you said. I am trying to re-apply them into the Western art, which I only discover late that it's not an art ready to embrace these kind of cognitive notions, not easily anyway. Even though there is a lot of respect in retrospect when I think of what the British art world thinks of, say, every one of the artists you have mentioned, it always happens after the event. But if we look at a small section of what was the life of Gabo in this country, it's another sad saga, because for a while he felt well kept and well encouraged. He was doing his best, but it wasn't a very long while before he realised that he had to move on, and we went, where? To the New World, to the United States. Which, altogether I suppose I would say in my own[??] words, it puts Britain on a kind of insularity, insulated from the winds of the Eastern thinking. And if we look even further back, you could see that it's in the East that there is a very [INAUDIBLE] 2,000 years ago and before, that very geometrical, strong notions are developed in connection with the life of the humans, societies, political elements and so on, and I am talking about the

Middle East even, where we have different cultures like Egyptians, Babylonians, before we get into the Oriental proper. And then going further north towards Russia and what we have, the Balkans, you could see that these things are evident in the pagan folk art of these countries, it's part of the, and heart, of those grounds.

Yes. And this can't be said of what remains, or what had remained into the 20th century of British folk culture, or Western European folk culture.

Exactly. So it's a process of being conditioned by your own background I suppose to a great extent.

End of F4536 Side A

F4536 Side B

Paul, I would like to ask you now about the way in which your sculpture evolved from what was in a sense a sort of discovery of the hyphen image, and also through that discovery of an image, of an objectified, if you like, expression of a set of ideas, quite a complex set of ideas but a very economical and elegant image in a sense was found for them, and this clearly meant that you wanted to go on then making three-dimensional sculptures. And as you have said, performance and other sorts of interactive procedures fell away to some extent, and you came to concentrate on the making of sculpture in forms that were more, not conventional but certainly more in the nature of what we think of as sculpture, object sculpture in other words. And so what I would like you to do is to talk a bit about the development of your own, particularly your own special, what I would call family of forms.

Oh, right. Right, I think there were at least two very clear directions in which I was hammering at my progress; one of them was the exteriors, the outward-going teacher, which I was. Beside being a teacher, a lecturer in different places, different appointments, I was exhibiting, so very much a present participant when I have an exhibition, I wanted always to be a part of a dialogue, I wanted to encounter the very reaction of my viewers, the visitors of my shows, the students I had. Sooner or later every class I was teaching, or looking after, they had to know what kind of work I do, so we developed that kind of dialogue which probably was a kind of dialectic, because even though I might not give the impression that I listen very well, things people do say do affect me; even though sometimes it's very delayed, a reaction, they always stay with me, remarks and observations people make. So in that sense I was having a dialogue, a continuous dialogue, with my own public, or with very unexpected visitors to my ideas. On the other hand there was my inner process of developing which was my studio work, things like when you don't have much time to put into words or analyse behaviour or reactions, when you just push on with this or that media, like in parallel drawings and sculpture always were constituting for me the two major fronts in which the work progressed, by trying out new variations, new definitions, new elements of movement from my statical experiences of sculpture. So in this way I was either affected by what some critics said in a newspaper, say in the

late Seventies, during my exhibitions which were in Newcastle, in Durham, London, Glasgow, or later in the early Eighties moving to Canada. I had a period of teaching at the Concordia University in Montreal, that gave me an opportunity to do a number of lectures. These were a new public for me, new mentalities, being in American territory if you like, and I had the chance to test out if you like everything I knew. At the same time there was a feedback to all these exchange processes, and that was very efficient in the sense that within my own doings, my drawings and my newly-made sculptures, some of them made in Montreal some of them in the United States across the border, I was working on a farm, I was making new 'Hyphens', some of them having parts which were movable, for a show in Toronto, and also meeting a lot of new people, some of them were of mixed nationalities, others were Americans a hundred per cent. That improved if you like the variety and the nuancing of people which I could embrace as opinion-creator, as a kind of dynamic process of learning through, you know, playing the same discussions and discourses. My work, my self, my presence, as well as the work's presence, meeting new people, have had an influence on making the 'Hyphen' become a richer kind of concept. It soon appeared, gradually at first, because I was preparing a show for New York in the first place, '78/79, I had my first and only one-man show in the United States, which was Elise Meyer Gallery in New York. I remember at that time some of my work was shown to Leo Castelli[ph] and other big dealers in New York, and of course some of their reactions was relevant to me, because it helped me push things ahead, some of it encouraging, some others were telling me that it's not convincing enough as sculpture, because it is too dense the world of conceptual thinking and not sufficiently demonstrated as empirical sculpture for instance. So this thing, it's a very zigzag thing. The fruition though was, by '81/82, I realised that my sketch-books and my drawings were accumulating a number of associated forms which all appeared to be relatives, related forms, to the original 'Hyphen', to what itself used to be called 'A Generator of Subjects'. Now it turns up to be true in the sense that I soon had a double hyphen, I had an open monolith which was a kind of cross-over of two different forms which was a flat original form called 'Fusion', which were made of steel bands and metal, of other types, as well as wood. For instance 1980 in Dublin I had a show just with 'Fusions', which were angular forms, displayed as open stars, therefore suggesting spirals, which was just the fragment of all my things in the

studio, the same kind of exposé of stars and fusions and what I called later 'Head Stars', were the subject, a very strong subject on my show at the ICA in London, and then the Third Eye in Glasgow, I'm talking about '79, and then '80. The show in Dublin by the way was called 'Constellations', which is a romantic title for a show which was based on, if you like the ambition of a sculptor to build philosophical, simple shapes. It didn't need to be called 'Constellation', but because I had this, I suppose degree of romantic metaphoric poetical thinking within me, I allowed that to be taken as a poetical title if you like.

Is it also that, if you like, constellations are things that are generated, there is an infinite number of possible constellations once you are given the sky full of stars.

From our perception point of view, yes.

Exactly.

At the same time, constellation, it wasn't more than an aggregation of different permutations of angles.

Yes.

Taking it simply, arithmetically.

Yes, at the most prosaic level that's [INAUDIBLE].

I could have done that, yes, but I allowed constellation to slip in, which was kind of, later had become quite relevant, because my relationship with the idea of cosmicity or cosmicity or cosmos, like earlier on in Anthropocosmos, was coming through again, when I talk about constellations. So those groups of forms which evolved from 'Hyphen' were cross-sections of such experiments which were graphic elements most things with three-dimensionality, like 'Constellations', like the 'Hyphen' which became 'Double Hyphen', or the 'Fish', or 'Edge Runner', which was another version of the 'Hyphen'.

`Edge Runner'?

`Edge Runner'.

Yes, E-D-G-E.

Right. Which meant that it was sitting on edge rather than on points, therefore it had a movement and a circle this time, physically built into it, and new articulations. So I worked through a number of variations of these kind of articulated forms, all of them though being based on three major, three symbolic elements, and three basic brick-blocks I should say, which were triangles, rectangles, and the idea of a circle; I say the idea because it wasn't always physically there. `Edge Runner' though had a physical semi-circle, or at least one, which then again and again came back into the work. During this time, during these six or seven years, some of the sculptures I was working towards, like definition, there was a form which started with a cross, built up physically out of balance of three different materials, have been dropped out, or rather discarded, simply because it, after a long time of dealing with it through drawings and physical experimentation, I realised it was better expressed in a much more taut kind of work, which was later called `A Cross'.

`A Cross'?

`A Cross', like a cross, without a pause, which meant that instead of dealing with a perishable, precarious kind of balance, I was building more of an archaic type of work, articulated in such a way as to be a solid block, or a solid statement in one piece, with less precariousness, which later on became, by '75 - by '85, '87, became one of the so-called `Catholic[??] Stations'.

At the time you were making these various, what you might call the sculptures which consisted of various sorts of permutation almost upon the basic `Hyphen' shape, this plough-like shape, like `Edge Runner', which always makes me think of a skate and which, as a skate operates on the ice rather as a plough does onto the earth, I mean it

cuts a groove, but it also allows a spin, doesn't it, and all sorts of other things like that, but they are basically all related to this fundamental sign that you had arrived at. At the time, were you concerned with making individual free-standing sculptures, or had you already begun to think of them as an ensemble of pieces which would actually have inter-relations and become...?

No I wasn't, I wasn't thinking of an ensemble, I couldn't see so far ahead. In fact I was thinking, like you said earlier, as individual pieces.

Yes.

So far so, and I was quite happy within that process, simply because from the 'Hyphen', you said permutations of 'Hyphens', well when you look at the 'Starheads' or the 'Wake', there is nothing graspable to be related...

A 'Starhead' or the...?

Or the 'Wake'. The 'Wake' is the lower form of star, which evolves from fusion. They are not related physically or structurally to the idea of the 'Hyphen'.

No.

But they take the thing one step further, or if I am to be correct really, is to say three steps further, by which, the 'Starhead' doesn't have the combination in a hierarchical structure of triangle or rectangle or circle, but it's a circle to start with, which is made up by angles, either obtuse or acute, which happen to, naturally seem to rest on two legs, those two legs crossing each other form a triangle.

Yes.

So in no way is there any evident rectangle or square. In other words from 'Hyphen' I went far ahead in order to build independent pieces, free-standing pieces, as far as the 'Starhead' which, it's almost at the other end, I could say, of the range, and yet if you

look again at it you will see this time I am playing a repetition of elements, therefore triangles, therefore angles, therefore angels if you allow me a metaphor, in order to end up with a form which is like a flower, a very symmetrical or, almost symmetrical flower, yet this flower is open-ended therefore there is another intricate aspect to it, because it's the beginning of a spiral. And this 'Starhead' idea, it has a beauty of its own because it's probably the first time I built a sculpture which is truly giving you a surprise as you go around inspecting it from 360 degree, 380 degrees, or how many there are in a circle. In other words, if you look from the front, the two legs are crossing each other almost like saying, this is a closed path, a closed gate, crossing your arms. If you look from the profile they open up, like a gate, welcoming you to pass through. In other words it has a truly three-dimensional inscription which the 'Hyphen' doesn't. In a simplistic way of regarding it, or looking at it, the 'Hyphen' at the first sight shows itself entirely through, it's a transparent work. In this sense, I remember the time when I sent four photographs of the same 'Starhead' but from different angles, to a friend far away, and he asked me, which one of these four sculptures is the 'Starhead'? In other words, to a common denominator, looking at it from one angle, wouldn't realise it's the same sculpture, photographed from different angles.

Can I just say that it seems to me that, I said permutations of the basic thing, and in a way I think I meant also permutations of a basic concept, not necessarily of a basic image, and the concept is an anti-monolithic, that's what's interesting; the concept is not one that...

Beautiful.

It's not one that's based upon a single point of contact with the ground.

You are much better now, much more right when you say this, particularly when you employ the word 'monolithic', because one of the sculptures, one of the stations of this, what became later the 'Nine Catholic[??] Stations' is actually an open monolith. Now this open monolith, to dwell a bit on that world of openness, it's twice open, first because the form itself affirms not a closed form but an open one, in other words the

star itself which forms the skirt of the upper part of the open monolith, is pointing to a spiral, to a continuation, which is suggested. Secondly because you could look at the sculpture and see through it, it's not a solid block as a monolith is. You see this openness which wants to, the symbolic of all the stations and all the sculptures, are showing themselves to their greatest flexibility; like you said, it's variations on a concept, or variations on a same code, almost like a DNA thing expressing a family of individuals. So little by little as we talk, you could see the idea of an aggregation of such forms became, not only valid but necessary, which is exactly what happened. First of all through my drawings you could see a very interesting process of elimination of, clarification of, crystallisation of these stations. At the early stages even the form of anthropocosmos, or the light meal[??], which were early structures made by me as projects for monuments or simply for two-dimensional reliefs, were part of these drawings, together with 'Hyphens', with 'Edge Runners' and 'Starheads'. As we pushed through, during about three or four years, there was a hesitation, there was a process of denying this and affirming that. Eventually the 'Nine Catholic[??] Stations', only after doing several wooden pieces made by myself before I could go to other technicians and have them made in stainless steel, or bronze even, which took many more years, so it took a long time, a long process, and the equation was up and on[??], or rather trial and error all the time, that by elimination and by induction I managed to keep within this aggregation, nine pieces, finding them relevant enough as players within one field.

Again, players in one field is a dynamic metaphor of course, isn't it.

It has to be.

The sculpture as a player within a game. I remember you talked about the ludic nature of a lot of the work you did earlier on, the notion that a thing might move, a thing might be dynamic. I think that a very important thing has come out of this as well though, which has to do again with the anti-monolithic thrust if you like of your sculpture, which is that it is in the nature of most traditional sculpture to be governed by gravity.

Right.

It's in the nature of it to rest on the ground and to be expressive of its own weight, if I can put it that way. You know, it is the weightiness of it, it is the earth-bound nature of a great deal of traditional sculpture, and certainly a great deal of 20th century sculpture. It seems to me that what you were concerned with was an opposite dynamic, that is to say almost...

Opposite in the sense that I was playing against this sense of gravity.

Yes, you were always...

Yes, I wanted to show an aspiration, an aspiration towards flying, towards an elevation, towards imponderability. But that was all visible.

I mean I'm just thinking back to the video of a performance you did at the Serpentine in 1973 I think, was it '73?

Which performance?

No.

'Run[??] Python'?

Yes.

No that was '76.

'76, yes. In which an important part of the performance was you running up to, attempting as it were to run up a wall and then falling back.

Right.

And then moving round, and then running and trying to get up the wall again, so I mean you actually...and I know that you did several performances of this kind where...

I did a whole week.

Yes. But the purpose of this was like a repeated, almost ritualistically repeated effort to defeat gravity.

That's right.

Completely...

How interesting, yes, you bring that back into the sculpture.

Yes.

And you rightly do that, you are justified in connecting the two things actually, because they are beautifully representing both ambitions, I mean, sculpture and performance, or performance and sculpture, in the sense that of course most of my efforts were to show how we depend on gravity, but it doesn't mean that we are stopping there, depending only and simply being dependent of the gravity. I wanted to show an effort which is required, a twist as sometimes I call it. There was a catalogue I did for Newcastle, Laing Gallery, which was called 'The Writhing Space', writhing, rather than simply staying within a circle, like in vicious circles, very much like the idea of building a circle in order to show a break on it which is the exit towards spiral. The same here.

What was the word you used?

Writhing.

'Writhing in Space'.

`Writhing Space'.

W-R-I-T-H-I-N-G.

`Writhing Space'.

`Writhing Space'. I'm sorry. Writhing of course is a [INAUDIBLE]...

Right.

Of movement in a spiral, isn't it.

Exactly. But it's that fickle twist which gave me if you like the symbolic necessity to show a ramp, meaning a movement, in the context of an installation of sculpture and drawings, at the Serpentine, together with my collaborator which was one of my students at the time, to show how could one go up the wall, not in a crazy way, but that came into it if you like, in a kind of ritualistic way. You get exhausted by that, so it might even look, not casual but rather unsuccessful, like a feline is trying to climb up the impossible, which is running along the horizontal, truly conventional running, against this dead wall, and once you face the wall then you try to run up the wall, two or three steps were successful. In that sense I was doing nothing else but symbolising the very desire to play with the gravity, almost like in a dance, even though that dance might show itself to be limited, or with...

It's also in the nature, Paul, isn't it, of any ritual that actions are repeated again and again, and it's in the nature also of forms of meditation, that actions are repeated again and again, and that this simple repetition, and it might be the repetition of word or whatever, or an action, this repetition itself finally leads to a shift of consciousness, some sort of ecstatic...

Exactly, yes.

Transcendence. And so, one of the things, I mean I don't want to go on to it too long, but one of the things, there's an interesting aspect of this to me, and that is what again comes back to the playful, which is that you have again and again adopted certain sorts of ritual actions, or certain sorts of ritual notions, that might be taken from, for example a communion.

Right. The sharing of things.

The 'Blind Bite' is a form of communion which, that the waffle-cum-bread, salt, sugar and flour as you call it, is passed hand to hand, and each take a piece of the bread and it's all...

In the main contributing emotion, it's feeling it rather than...

Feeling it, and passing it on.

Right.

And this, passing it on of course in what amounts to a circle.

Again, yes.

Yes. So, you have this endless passing on and partaking of the shared bread, and so there's a ritual, almost Eucharistic element to that.

Mm.

I mean it's borrowed. I don't think it's intended...

It's a litany, it's a litany.

A sort of, yes, quite. So you continually take these ritualistic and ceremonial forms and adapt them, but at the same time what interests me is that you often introduce an

element of what I would call the ludicrous, which also comes from the notion of play, that is an element if you like of...ludicrous really means an action which is sort of fundamentally foolish, it's bound...it's bound...we say, it's ludicrous, because it's bound to fail.

Yes, it's putting in an unpredictable grain.

Yes.

The strictly necessary thing in order to play the game of art, if you like, otherwise I would have been a physician or some sort of scientist.

Well I was thinking of Generative Arts you see, that was also a joke in a way, you know.

Absolutely.

And had a comic element to it. And I think that...that leavening, that's all I want to say, that leavening of what is a very serious set of notions, of the spiritual, of the possibilities of transcendence and so on, there's a leavening to it that you get again and again throughout your work from the beginning.

Well it's in a very very very domestic almost, but in a very banal way, a helicopter when he is about to take off, it can't lift itself unless the propeller reaches a certain required speed. Now, you said earlier in my repetitious rituals there was always either a ludic element implied or inserted in there; I say it's the same element which makes the successful scientific, technological inventions uplifting, is because it's that moment of, Oh! Elation! For me, beside being an emotional thing, it's like in the 'Tornado' thing, you know, everything was domestically put in order, disciplinally performed, up to the point where the things suddenly takes off. That's the whole thing, and it's worth doing any effort, any repetitions, days sometimes, in such rituals, when you know that at some point things would, might, take off. But it's that which

makes it unpredictable on the one hand, on the other hand it's pretty risky therefore it could be dangerous.

End of F4536 Side B

F4537 Side A

Paul Neagu, recorded on the 21st of March 1995 at Jackson Road. Tape Nine.

Paul, what do you understand by the word, 'hyphen'? Why did that become the term you used again and again as the title for that series, very long series of sculptures, sculptures upon which you have worked for something like - well, you began really working on them in 1975 I suppose, and you are still making them, one way or the other. There's twenty years of work gone into this form, and a whole family of variations upon it, generated in a sense by it in the way that we have described.

Right.

Why hyphen?

Well hyphen has become in time, it wasn't meant to, it wasn't consciously determined to be, it has grown into this kind of entity which took over most of my, if you like philosophical order, and not just philosophical, I mean my conceptual, my thinking, my reading if you like. Only the other day I discovered something very very powerful within the Islamic traditions about hyphen, that there is a special word for this kind of thing in the Islam which I can't even remember just now, it's a very recent text I have read in a special book. In other words I am continuously reaffirming it or re-finding encouragement for it, and it has continuously been refurbished if you like with new and new ammunition. Sculpturally, the sculpture has more or less reached a very fulfilling momentum, it has become quite an organic thing; I say organic with some pride because originally it has been a skeletal geometrical thing. For[??] most people, my sculptures in the earl Eighties, all these Catholicic[??] sculptures, 'Hyphen' being the centre of it, was to be cast to the way as being some kind of, you know, gymnasium-type sculpture. I remember Alastair Wolmer[ph] at the Serpentine called it a gymnasium of the mind; some other critics called it things like a modern - I am talking about the 'Nine Catholicic[??] Stations' which became a strong group by '87 in stainless steel, it was called by a critic like Donald Cuspit[ph] 'a modern

Stonehenge'; in fact I was invited to be part of a show which was celebrating Stonehenge with my `Nine Catholic[??] Stations'.

What do you mean by gymnasium type of sculpture? I'm sorry.

He meant by that that the sculptures themselves as they appear on the lawn at the Serpentine Gallery appeared like a group of people moving their limbs in different ways, like making some kind of therapeutical...

Therapeutic.

Therapeutic expression, gymnastic-like. So it's a gymnasium in a sense.

Yes.

A gymnasium of the mind.

He has a point.

Yes, he does, in a rather literary way he says something there.

Can I just...I want to talk about the `Catholic[??] Stations', and you keep referring forward as it were to them, but I want still to bring you back to the word `hyphen'.

Right.

One of the interesting things about you is that, English isn't your native tongue; you speak marvellous English, I have to say this, actually, but at the same time there is a certain sort of gravity and a certain sort of measure to the way in which you speak English which marks you as not being English if you see what I mean, and one of the interesting things about your titles and some of your ideas is that you find, you use an English which is very strange in some respects. Now you have picked upon `hyphen'; we take `hyphen' to mean the `trait d'union', the little mark between two words that

are linked, it's a linking mark in orthography, but you've invested that with an enormous sort of significance, and I want to press you on that.

Because like a curious foreigner I am, being in England I discovered in English dictionaries that 'hyphen' comes from Greek, and in fact in its original genealogy it means, if you look at the philosophy of that as it's used by linguists and philosophers, hyphenekinon[ph] in Greek means a place where we will meet, which place exists before we even get to it, therefore it serves me once more with a fantastic, as I said, impetus, with an encouragement, that my hyphen, it's in the first place not a parody of an abstract place but it's an archetype of sorts. I seem to be the one who has given birth to an object, to a place, and to a meaning, which usually didn't had a body. The meaning existed but there was no body to it. I for the first time bring a concrete body to a meaning. Now that fills me with fantastic satisfaction in the first place, and like I said earlier, I discovered a text about the Islamic significance of this thing, and if I say what it means you will say that I am a grandiloque-man[ph] suffering some kind of megalomania, so I would rather not go into that.

Well I would rather you did.

Well I don't know if I could remember, it's easier to read in the book itself. It has a very strange word in Islamic language and in Arabic, but it seems to me the place which inhabits a paradox, which is the place which separates and yet it unites at the same time by separating, therefore it gives again meat to the very concept of the hyphen as it was in my mind. Because like you know from literature, it's a stroke, a simple dash which separates and yet unites. More translation, in Romanian I translated it as a bridge, but this bridge has a very peculiar character, because this bridge becomes hyphen proper; in Romanian it's like in French, 'traget d'union'[ph], which means a little trace of union. To separate, we know it separates, but the meaning in the dictionary doesn't explain separation as much as it explains, that it keeps the distance between two words. By doing that it's very much like in many other technological fields, it's something which, like two coaches on a train are united by a link without which the train can't function, but that link doesn't make the two coaches be one, there are still two coaches, just like in language itself. So to go back

to the Islamic meaning of it, it's a space of paradoxical nature which is abstract by implosion, and by explosion it's everywhere.

Yes.

In other words they say it's like the very spirit of Allah.

Yes, perfect. We could come back then in a way, I don't want entirely to come back down to earth, but there's a sense in which the sculpture becomes a conceptual sight.

It's an interlocking...

Yes, in which my mind can meet other people's minds, my spirit can meet other people's spirits.

Right.

And that the, and this of course is a very ancient [INAUDIBLE] isn't it, that art provides precisely, and iconic art especially in a sense, provides precisely a sight which makes possible wherein differences act[??], and not only merge but differences meet.

That's exactly the meaning of the hyphen.

Yes.

Throughout my years of trying to explain this, to myself and to others, I came upon the same kind of definition.

In an earlier part of our conversation, Paul, you said that if one were to think about the cross as an image and as a conjunction of contradictory dynamics, dynamics that are right-angular in a sense...

Right.

A meeting of forces at right-angles, a meeting of forces at absolute angle to each other, that a great deal of your work could be understood in relation to that, and I know that you weren't at that point of course meaning that you wanted any sort of theological, and certainly Christian theological, reading to be attached to the work, but that...

No, that was included.

Yes.

Of course, a great deal of Christian art has turned upon the notion of the cross, especially if you like a sort of abstract Christian art, has turned upon the notion of the cross as precisely that meeting, because it actually constitutes, doesn't it, a meeting of the vertical with the horizontal, that's the first thing, I mean it's an image of meeting.

Right.

But it also strikes me that the hyphen of course is predicated, isn't it, in plan form upon the cross, upon a cruciform thing.

Yes, but, can I intervene?

Yes.

To say that a cross is more or less sufficient as a graphic symbol, therefore two-dimensional. A cross is not usually conceived as a three-dimensional thing, at least when you call it through the word, a cross[?]. So from the cross onwards, which is part of the hyphen, I wanted to make it sculptural. Speaking the language of sculpture I have to say that, probably speculating, that a hyphen is nothing else but it's a cross with a body crucified on it. Now, beside saying, 'How do you like that?' say, 'It's as complex as that'. Unless you have a cross with a human body inscribed on it,

therefore forced to take its mould, or suffering, you wouldn't have a hyphen. Just as I said some time ago - this is the first time I am talking about the cross in this way in relationship to the hyphen - but I said before, a bridge is not a hyphen unless the water suffers from a flooding rise, and it takes over the bridge; if the water which is under the bridge normally goes over the bridge, then you have a hyphen. So there is the interference, or the inference, of the third body, then you have a hyphen. Therefore sculpture, it's a much more unique kind of thing, that when the bridge...otherwise a bridge is a bridge, it's a catalyst between the two sides of the river, or if you like, it's a way of avoiding getting wet, in a simplistic way. But how complex this paradox becomes when you have the water taking over the bridge, or the beast in a jungle walking across the motorway which normally crosses the jungle, then you have a hyphen. Therefore Allah appears from time to time; he's not always there. But the meeting of the minds have to be sufficiently deep, just like the water in my river taking over the bridge, you have to have a flood, just like in my metaphoric ritual you have to have a tornado, which is not a very daily affair, in order to have an elation to the sublime degree of 'Going Tornado' was meant to be.

So, you are saying in a sense that you are not interested in an iconology.

No, I'm interested in establishing a new dynamic of the ancient symbols, like the cross, like the body, but how do you articulate them? So Malevich is not enough for me, Mondrian is not enough for me, I wanted to do something novel, and I suppose, this was my ambition, that I became so convinced that the hyphen does the job, that's my good luck I suppose, or that's my effort. And now I say it in great conviction, because it cannot be but that; in other words it's a special event in the life of the cross to become a hyphen.

(laughs) This is very profound and indeed very ambitious isn't it, as a set of ideas about what your work does[??].

This is as far as I see my task going.

It's a sort of ambition of course, again I have to come back to it, it's a sort of ambition that one recognises as belonging within a tradition of artistic effort that seems beyond, if I may put it this way, beyond what most English, or Western European artists would want or attempt to do.

Well I am convinced, I think it's beyond most artists, never mind where they come from. It's something I've grown into really, it's nothing I've been born with, or maybe I was born with it but it wasn't developed until I was old enough to realise what's at stake. But things are happening in spite of me, I must say that, and I could exemplify it in many ways, you know. It's like when I was building the station called 'The Fish'.

'The Fish Over Gate'?

No, just 'The Fish' by itself, because there is one 'Fish', and there is another one, 'The Fish Over Gate'. 'The Fish Over Gate' is a combination of 'Hyphen' and 'Fish'. But to stay with 'The Fish' itself, then I realised that symbolically and allegorically the fish is a very very heavy symbol of many many connotations. I built my sculpture, which was an evolution in space of a very simplistic rectangle, which rectangle you could find in many artists before me or after me. The thing is that I articulated it in such a way, it had to become a three-dimensional body, and once I had a three-dimensional thing built by my assistants, I wasn't even present at this process, when it was ready, looking from its profile I realised that the bottom of it, they had no other way of articulating the higher loop with the basic circle, but building the end of a fish. It's the...

The tail.

The tail of a fish actually welded into this sculpture. It's like a strict necessity way of articulating the two forms, because we were talking about the twist again.

Mhm.

It's difficult to explain to words. The thing is that I was surprised, and I remember the first time I saw that, I was absolutely trembling with emotion, because it shocked me in the first place. Things like this do happen all the time.

We are talking here about a notion of the artistic effort as almost mediumistic aren't we?

Exactly. No I'm trying to point to a spiritual life of events, to a spiritual life of symbols, which is independent of me; I just happen to be a follower, and also very attentive, and when one becomes very attentive to that, you can't help but become a specialist in this kind of thing. And once you prepare, you are tuned to this kind of music, then it's going to happen to you. You could call it mediumistic if you like. I find the mediumistic label a bit diminishing, a bit...

I'm sorry, I didn't mean it in quite that sense.

Oh no, I'm not taking it personally.

I meant the artist as a...yes quite, but I meant the artist as being a sort of medium through which certain sorts of truth or certain sorts of perception, of possibilities or whatever, are actually mediated. Of course, I mean there's a sense in which of course the mystic is another model if you like.

Mystic evolves as part of this, yes. Yes I agree. But it's a mysticism which is very available to everyone, provided you have sufficient grace to listen carefully, to watch carefully, to be silent when it needs to be silent, then things start coming towards you, which happens in any field, I am convinced. It doesn't have to be art only, far from it. We know how inventions do occur to scientists sometimes simply because somebody is sensitised to this particular, or that particular way of looking at things.

Another way of talking about it, another way of discussing it, would be to say that your sculpture is metaphysical, and that would be...that's a sort of, is to court another deliberate sort of paradox, or another, if not paradox a sort of dialectic; that is to say

that, whereas your sculpture is necessarily earth bound, it sits on the ground, and yet it aspires to another condition, that is to say to the condition of flying as you put it earlier, of rising or whatever...

Yes.

It seeks to defy gravity in the way that the performances sought to defy gravity and so on. So, if we talk about the sculpture's metaphysical, we are talking also about the paradox of this metaphysic being expressed in purely physical terms, wood, gesso, polished steel, bronze and so on, these are...

Well, yes.

Solid objects, not solid, these are objects that one can see in your garden at the minute. I mean, there they are, sitting there on the ground, solid objects, and yet they are a way towards the expression of metaphysical content - a metaphysic.

I think, I want to say that metaphysical facts in my work are becoming a result, not something I started off with, not something I determined, I want to get at. It is true that if I look at my very early works of painting for instance when I was a student even, there was something which displeased me when it came to the world of simply imitating what you see or are trying to be, mimic reality; this wasn't ever satisfying for me. So there was this desire within me always to see an angle which wasn't visible to everybody. So I think that tiny desire which somehow, I think I inherited from my birth and from my education if you like, it's grown into a resulting metaphysics, but meanwhile of course I have been watering it. I helped that growth by nourishing it with my readings, because I've been interested in poetry and philosophy all my life, psychology at the same time. So it is a metaphysic which is somewhat detached from religious thinking that is related to philosophy, which pure metaphysic is anyway.

Well, yes, and that's really what I was meaning, because we think of, the metaphysical is by definition that which is beyond as it were the physical, and yet art has this paradoxical function.

Right. I suppose we're talking about a spiritual level of realised art work.

There's no programme, then, to this? I mean it wasn't a matter of demonstrating. I mean we've talked earlier about how there's a sense in which a lot of your work is didactic, interactive, deliberately philosophical, and yet what you are saying here is that it's not...the work doesn't develop, hasn't developed from a programme.

It hasn't developed from a programme but it has developed due to my intellectual discipline, that is there. I was trying to say earlier on, the way I think I inherited some of that, through my upbringing and my education. It is an intellectual approach, analytical, that might be sometimes towards synthesising. This is why sometimes, even though it's not programmatic, I feel the need of systematising or classifying concepts and elements of my work; entities are somewhat sometimes colliding with each other, and I don't like paradoxes which don't tend to solve themselves.

I was thinking really of this because earlier we were looking at a text by Malevich in which he said that everything that the artist does, the artist does consciously, and you wanted to take issue with that, and in a sense when I raised the question of programme I was wanting to provoke you into some thought, or, to say something about that, you know, that although you are a didactic artist this doesn't mean that you have a set of notions or a programme which you want to preach or that you want to demonstrate; in fact your own work has proceeded by means of intuition, intuitive...

Yes, I think the flow of processes are themselves open to chaotic disarrangements, and continuous...Brownian movements, Brownian movements meaning...

B-R-A-U-N...

Unpredictable movements, chaotic.

Why do you call them Braunean[ph]?

Brownian, there is a scientist discovered, Brownian Movement being...

Yes, I beg your pardon, yes. Go on.

Which meant an erratic type of, aleatoric events.

I said, B-R-A-U-N, is that...?

It's not Braun[ph].

Braun[ph].

Brownian. It's B-R-O-W.

Brownian, oh yes.

Brownian.

Ah, yes, carry on.

Meaning like in music, aleatoric means not pre-ordained.

Yes.

It's in this sense that I see the flow of, and the evolution and the processes of my sculptures. I do tend though to try to move them in groups, in family processes which often appear to be like systematic arrangements, articulations and so on, but they, those systems, those installations of mine, like 'Nine Catholicic[??] Stations', are within them containing a dimension which is simply aleatoric again, chaotic, which is to say that there is an oracular aspect, I like that word, oracular, which means it takes

the shape and the size of the environment in which they are put, even the reflection of the environment physically appears. If you deal with stainless for instance...

Stainless steel.

Stainless steel, mirroring as it were, there is a certain way in which these sets of works, like in systematic, are flexible, in other words they will take in, they will...you could punch into them a different personality. It's like, again intruding with a ludic aspect, like you yourself said earlier on, that it has to be some kind of intrusion of something, almost crazy, almost foolish. It's this foolishness which is built within the system, like my last installation which took place only a couple of years ago, '93, called `Epagogue'[ph], contained that in a sense in which the arrangements were free, they could be changed around. It's almost like you throw dices, you know, and you don't know for sure what could come up, but it certainly wouldn't come up with an impossible number, it has to be something already on the dices.

Yes, and within a set of, perhaps even, a nearly infinite set, but a huge number of possible sets.

Exactly. So the sets I build are unpredictable, how they are going to turn up. All I could predict is certain limitations to the set. In other words I am dealing, say, with nine stones; in the way I throw them in the air it's up to the moment, up to the situation, up to the environment, how they are going to fall.

But they are going to fall according to the rules of the physical universe for a start, they can't fall in any way outside that.

To at least 50 per cent, to at least 50 per cent of what one could predict. The thing is that I would like to follow the thinking of the scientific community now, and say that aleatoric behaviour, in other words chaotic things have to be part of the system. So therefore, even if you don't want to, the flexibility has to be part of it, otherwise it denies itself. The self-regulatory part of the system would see it that it will die off, and that's one thing which will create that form of art. So I am far from building on a,

you know, a kind of dogma, religious or metaphysical, which would have a stiff set of rules. It's more like...but probably even that doesn't say enough; I was thinking of the I Ching which has 64 hexagrams, which again is such a flexible system through these 64 hexagrams, which are depending very much on the way you read them and how they fall in order to read one of the 64 according to the mood you are in and the situation, the profile, psychological pressure which is over the hexagrams. You can not predict the way they're going to fall, but once they do fall, like an oracle, like an ancient oracle, I think there is a modern oracle. This is what happens, the economic markets, say, or the situation of the share in the market and so and so forth; things are predictable only to a degree, the rest is chance. So, strangely enough, when I say the word 'chance', it came to my mind another British artist who plays this kind of ludic game, brilliantly but a bit more in an illustrative manner. He was a Constructivist.

Who are we thinking of, Kenneth Martin?

Kenneth Martin, who did exhibitions called 'Chance and...'

Yes, 'Order and Chance'?

'Order and Chance' I think. At the same time comes to my mind a great book which influenced me by a microbiologist called 'Chance and Necessity'.

By Jacques Monod.

By Jacques Monod, which in my youth was a great great influence, when I was... I remember the end of this book.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] Monod talks about, again the degree to which one could predict one's equation of life, DNA, biology, after which he says there is a large area as you could see which is entirely mysterious to us, we simply don't have a grasp of what is beyond this. In other words he affirms very clearly our limitations, which is exactly what I am trying to say in my work. Even though my ambitions are quite high, I'm talking about elevations and talking about uplift, there is a point which is open, open to the future, open to chance.

End of F4537 Side A

F4537 Side B

In your studio, Paul, I know that you've had for some time, I think going back many years now, a set, in fact a number of sets that you've had fabricated specially, of steel balls, which you use I know in experimental ways, and you have actually made, you've exhibited work using these balls in various configurations and so on. Can you tell us something about that part of your project?

Yes. After doing my, what I call a cardinal show called 'The Nine Catholicic[??] Stations' in '87 at the Serpentine Gallery...

You called it 'your cardinal show'?

Well I said it, of cardinal importance, to my own evolution. It doesn't appear like that to people outside there, but it was very important for me to gather these nine stations together and make a show of them, and also because the sculptures and stainless steel were the most expensive, I spent a number of years doing them, their public appeal wasn't very successful. But there you are. Experimentally for me that was the end of a road. By then I was already playing around without knowing exactly where it's going to lead me, with a set of balls. This set of balls originally were over 2,000 small ball-bearings which I bought in Canada in '83, and since then I have been playing with them outside, indoors, outdoors, making multitudes display, kind of groups, sometimes allowing them to be themselves, almost like a child would play, other times arranged very neatly in sets of nine by nine, rows of balls. As the number of years, by about '88 I decided to make them bigger; because I wanted them to be inscribed in one's palm as related to the idea of palpability, it was essential that they were the size to fit well in one's palm, therefore they had to be the size of an orange. Again the idea of tactility, the idea of playfulness, and the idea of being able to put it in your pocket as a piece of sculpture. So I ordered a set of stainless steel balls in a factory in France, and since then I have this other extra set. They were originally named water, as liquid, because the inspiration of the first realisation of what happened was a very pretty story. I happened to be lying on the grass one morning when I discovered next to my head there was a web, a spider web, in which little

droplets of row[ph] were floating on this web, suspended as it were, very very tiny ones. So I...

Little drops of...?

Of dew, sorry. The dew. So I photographed this arrangement, which was no more than three inches square, and enlarging the photograph, only then I realised how beautiful they were suspended in a kind of erratic way on this, and yet very cosmic-like, it was like an opportunity to look into the microcosm, which gave me an incentive to try to translate this emotion into a sculpture. So instead of dealing with forms which were devised by me after many years of searching for geometry, for codified meanings etcetera, I felt it will be liberating to have some kind of experience of absolutely free arrangements, almost like I wasn't there. So I ordered something industrial, meaning almost perfect, fabricated spheres the size of an orange, and then I've been starting to play with it; like I did with the small ones, so I did with the larger ones. Up to '93 when I also made a new set of sculptures in stainless, like my 'Catholic[?][?] Stations', these were upgraded, their bodies were fuller and they weren't so much skeletal and geometrical, but they were nevertheless stainless steel, fabricated with few curves, most of them were made up of hard edge and well welded together, so there was no question this time of bad craftsmanship. But they were looking to me a bit rigid, and I wanted to make them a bit more flexible, almost like I said earlier, like a system which has to be evidently a bit more playful. And because, just the year before I was in Rome enjoying a one-year stay at the British School in Rome, I was having this set of balls with me, I did what I could with them, by making another set of clay balls, so I had the jollity[?] going at the same time, a dialogue between clay and stainless. It wasn't sufficiently, if you like, complex, as I do like things which have a certain complexity, at least within the structure, within the interstitial spaces of my installations. As it happened I came to London in '93, I put on a show at Angela Flowers, I had decided to combine my small 'Catholic[?][?] Stations', the set I just made, with rows of spheres. So they suddenly gave rise to a new idea which was again illuminating itself as I was doing it, almost like a game of chess which is for one person rather than a competition with another player. So this is a game nevertheless in its form of competing with yourself, because the arrangements

you might make, it's almost like, see what kind of a war front you go by, see what kind of soldiers you have; if you like, those set of balls were like inter-spaces, and I was very keen on explicitly putting in the installation the idea of 'in betweenness'; this 'in betweenness' meant between what, between the 'Catholitic[??] Stations'. So what happens in between? I needed a fluent element; this fluency was very well represented in a solid state by a row of spheres, therefore an industrial repetition of dead spheres interspaced with 'Catholitic[??] Stations'. So the 'in betweenness' came across very well; not only that but every time I would put up with piece again, like I did it once in my yard, second time in the gallery to be photographed, the third time in the exhibition itself, every time the 'Catholitic[??] Station' took a slightly different position.

Can we just pause there so that we can actually describe what you are talking about.

Please.

The 'Catholitic[??] Stations', the 'Nine Catholitic[??] Stations' consist of the nine sculptures in a sense generated by the 'Hyphen'.

Exactly.

Including the 'Starhead', including 'The Fish', including 'Fish Over Gate'...

'Open Monolith'.

'Open Monolith'.

'Edge Runner'.

The 'Hyphen', the 'Double Hyphen', and the 'Edge Runner'. These all, after the show at the Serpentine, in which they came together for the first time...

Right.

These constitute a sort of concert if you like of forms, don't they, which are usually arranged by you in a sort of circle, and it seems to me that they go back... Much earlier in our conversation you talked about the five members of the Generative Arts Group being like members of a jazz band.

Right.

And I sometimes think of the 'Catholitic[??] Stations' as a sort of wonderful, complex jazz band, each playing the same tune but playing it in a different way, different sorts of instruments.

Different instruments, yes.

Yes. And I have myself in writing about them, described them as a sort of orchestra in which each is playing a different part if you like of a complex tune, but that if you abstracted any one of them from the ensemble you would still have the rudiments as it were, you would still have a basic theme being pursued and followed by the individual piece. So you've got these nine pieces in a sort of semi-circle.

Right.

Henge-like, and in between each of them now you have, as it were, placed...

Well hang on, these were not the same stations, they were reduced in scale, they were re-done, upped-up as I said, or kind of, updated.

Yes. But...yes, and in between each of them is a row on a sort of rail.

Bases of wood, yes.

On a wood base, a row of these stainless steel spheres.

Right. The row might be from nine to twelve, depending on what basis I use. So this creates, directs the impression of chaos, a kind of semi-arranged situation which certainly invites people, because it was displayed on the floor itself rather than on a plinth, even though it covers an area of about four metres by four square, of a height approximate to the highest of the stations, even though those stations could have different positions. One more comment about the ambition of the 'Catholic[??] Stations' is that whatever way you display a sculpture it's still a round event; in other words they don't have a dead side to them like most sculptures are. Traditionally they have a down, as you said earlier about gravity, by having a down side, a sculpture affirms gravity. In my case I wanted to make the sculptures to be valid whatever side you turn them on. So this gives each station three to four possibilities of being viewed; in other words the permutation is increased, the permutation number is increased according to the number of arrangements you could make. So if two of my stations being taller than the others didn't look very good in this installation of so-called 'Epagogue'[ph], which is the title borrowed from Aristotle, which means a process of induction, they were too tall, I didn't like them, I simply put them down on the side, which, they didn't cry much about it, they were simply looking more like the rest. So, they were about three times as tall as the others if they were standing upwards, so I didn't want them totemic, I wanted them to be one with the rest, in a democratic way arranged, so the steel balls would make more sense. Again if a steel ball row wouldn't work very well in this angle, I will change the angle, or change the station, or the station could be in the centre of this set or on the edge of it. All that is free, like in an oracular idea. This is what is called now 'Epagogue'[ph]. Since then I made another version in bronze which is, with the whole of that concern in mind, has become even more neat. The bronze though took a smaller size, therefore each one is almost like a figure on a chess board, and they are much more pliable. They could all be set up on top of a table, the set of rows this time are not perfect industrial but handmade. So the set on small bronze 'Epagogue'[ph] very much looks like a very very early type of ancient sculpture where the craft was approximate, where nothing was very precise. Playfulness enters this 'Epagogue'[ph], this small version, even in that sense, by the fact that everything seems to be made for hand, to touch, and inviting you to change things around. So there is a very 'childish' aspect to this which, I put in inverted brackets, because for me that means innocent, at play, and

that satisfied me when it came to the ambition of orchestrating a set of things rather than just one-off as an individual unique piece. Almost like the same station that happened in the case where I made a monument out of the 'Starhead', I multiplied one of them into three, and I shifted the three of them as against each other, in the sense they became a movement, almost like showing the shifts physically, one two and three, almost like the three steps of one movement, which is a process which is known philosophically if you like, because it could create an uplift which is contained, because, or which appears because of the repetition, it's the effect of...which you have for instance in my neighbourhood here, there is a group of three men which are identical, because they happen to be twins, three twins.

Triplets.

Triplets. When I see these people I always have an emotion. I've seen them for years and they always go together. They have a little dog which is not triplets, strangely enough. They even have their mother. There is...I feel like saying, talking about one man. They are about 48 years of age, so it's a mature person, always dressed the same. So I am fascinated by this repetition, because I can not longer grasp them as three different people, neither could I grasp them as one person. So what happens in this repetition, it's almost like someone who was been cloned.

Cloned.

Cloned. I feel that it's something very bizarre taking place, I'm not quite sure what, but psychologically we are not used to this kind of thing, so it makes me think again and again about rituals, about prayers, about, you know, the Oriental person, the Islamic person who have a necklace with beads and the prayer is repeated so many times.

Prayers, yes.

And the prayers, it's like a board of prayers, and as I said that, I automatically think of my set of balls, because they could only do what I feel as a spiritual satisfaction when

I see them as sets. One of them is very poor, it's technically astute, it's industrially perfect; because of that it's pretty boring. But once you have a multitude it's a totally different thing. So the sculpture becomes liquid.

One ball in itself is neither here nor there.

Exactly.

But once you have a lot of them they become...they then suggested all sorts of possibilities[??].

They become a fluent. So, of course metaphysically I connect this set of balls with the idea of cosmos, with distances, we are talking about sight instead of view, as a set, and I have tried and I have worked, drawings of this kind of thing, by which I could draw a square which is seen askew, because I am using balls to draw a square, and by doing that I create an automatic metaphysic artistic expression. So by combining such a set of tactile bronze, or perfectly made ones in stainless, with the 'Catholic[??] Station', I am already overlapping or kind of interfering two systems at once. The aggregation which comes out, it's a very intriguing...

Intriguing.

Intriguing process of induction. I say induction because there is always something in it pulling you back to turn around and move something. The principle of uncertainty it's absolutely expressed there, and that is a great satisfaction.

So that, Paul, is...that's the latest work in effect, is it? The work that has developed from the [INAUDIBLE].

Sculpturally, yes, but in parallel I have been also doing similar experimentation in painting. As a painter we talk much less, but partly because my paintings haven't been shown publicly much, only rarely I have had the chance to show paintings, because I've never been considered a painter proper.

But do you consider yourself a painter proper?

Well in the first place I was a student in painting, where I did my university in Romania. Because I have accumulated over thirty or forty paintings now, I almost think of myself as a painter as well. But you see this makes me come close to the idea of poetry; through sculpture and through painting I also fancied the idea that my vision has something poetical about it. People might agree or might disagree with that. By the same token I could confess that I have also written verse, I have written verse in Romanian, I have written verse in English. I even published some time poems, years ago in a provincial magazine. Sometimes I even receive compliments from people saying that it's much more explicit what I want to say in verse than in my pseudo-philosophical, didactical way. So I took pride of saying sometimes privately that, look, I could even be a poet, but in fact I think I am a poet, I just don't make myself known publicly as a poet. In a sense I like it this way, I want to be a sculptor first. I have other things behind that, in other words I am simply trying to state that I have a number of different attitudes to different milieus, and I think I could feel at home with any of them. The fact is that I cannot concentrate just on one, so when I get tired or burdened too much with one thing, like sculpture or painting or graphic or literature, I move to the next one. That way I am myself flexible. And my studio therefore has a number of multi expressive ways, rather than being just one craft, one milieu.

You've always been creatively diverse, haven't you, Paul, from the very beginning. I mean you've tended to want to do different things in different media, write, make films and videos, performance, almost finding your way to sculpture but not by accident by any means but finding your way to sculpture by a process of eliminating certain things and discovering others, a sort of intuitive process, and this has gone on, hasn't it, this shifting from one thing to another. Do you think that's a function of your personality, or is it...?

Yes I think...

Or is it a sort of creative modus?

No I think it's something I was born with, because if I am thinking of my very childhood, I was very much like that all the time. To start with, I didn't know what university I wanted to make. My parents had a number of years of having to listen to all kinds of stories. I was doing all kinds of jobs before I could decide to do art, and once I entered an artistic faculty in Bucharest, then I became very happy, because within there I found several ways, multiple ways of being, or possible to be, even though the teaching itself was restrictive to this or that material, this or that media. But that didn't worry me at the time, you know, just, when I became free again, free to manifest myself, I knew I could pick up any of these things. My first years in Romania were, again I remember a heavy struggle to try to create a theatre of multitudes, a form of gestalt, between me and my friends who were film-bound people and actors and musicians and composers, and poets and graphic artists. My only future was expressed in terms of, mind you I was 23 and 24, via a theatre of the total, so it was characteristic from the time I started doing things.

A theatre of the total?

Yes.

I mean as if everything was towards a total work of some kind?

Exactly, a synthetic kind of thing.

Yes.

And yet, well at that time my degree of analytical inquiry wasn't very developed I must say, and the analytical side of myself, because I am a man in a hurry, I suppose it developed later, or slowly, it wasn't so strong as it was the necessity, the desire to be synthetic, to combine things.

In that of course your art in its diversity of forms and diversity of media, is in some ways quite critically and crucially different from Brancusi, say...

Oh right.

Who was so much, so single-minded in a sense. I'm not suggesting that you haven't been single-minded, because I think you have, but single-minded in a different way.

Well it's a paradox I think, because, even though I am feeling very close to Brancusi, I feel close to Brancusi because after all I think of myself as being born in the same...I was going to say zoological area, in the same zodiac, having a similar kind of attitude and sensibility towards intuition, towards, you know, mythology and so on, I find myself being much more diverse, yes, it's true, and in the first place I think I have a lot more interest in the analytical inquiry than Brancusi did. I think his information was quite kind of restricted, by himself.

The ceremonial aspect of your work has parallels, doesn't it. I mean the great table of silence, and the ensemble in the park in Romania, what's the name of that...?

Tirgu Jui.

Yes.

Right. You call it ceremonial?

There's a ceremonial element surely to that, both in terms of...

Yes, yes, yes.

And a procession, I mean, of movement from one piece to the next, and in a sense climaxing with the endless column with its absolutely wonderful sort of symbol of aspiration to the heaven and so on.

Yes, I think Brancusi's work has an increased degree of solemnity; when you say ceremonial I was thinking of solemnity, which I would like to have too, but somehow, I do have that dimension but I often play against it, I do the exact opposite, which probably comes from my other angle of the eye, the Dadaist approach of the, the foolishness of the Balkanic person. Maybe because altogether I had an education which was incredibly more diverse and I could never concentrate for too long in one thing. Brancusi was different in the sense that his childhood and his education was much more, like you said, single-mindedness, and unless he could turn to give birth to sculpture through his finger he wouldn't do much. For instance he is very poor on drawing, if you ask me. Painting-wise I don't think he has done more than two gouaches. Well I am very rich in those fields; not only that but I was a teacher for so long, I liked talking, and because I like language, to a degree I shouldn't, my great desires are to be a silent artist. Unfortunately there is something in me which doesn't allow me to, you know, it keeps breaking the silence by words, like just now.

And breaking the solemnity with this ludic...

Exactly, exactly. In other words I could laugh at myself to a degree which not every Brancusian sculptor is available, or capable.

Capable of doing.

Yes.

You said earlier, just a minute ago you said, Balkanic; did you mean Balkan?

Balkan I meant, yes. I pronounced it Balkanic, like...

Yes, like volcanic. I didn't know whether you said volcanic or Balkanic.

Balkanic.

You think this is, what can we say, the sort of mercurial side of your...

Yes, it's the Byzantine side. Which thing is extremely in our veins, I would say. I've met Yugoslavs, I've met Turkish people, I've met Czechs, but Czechs don't have so much Balkan side into them. When I said Balkan, it's because it's, politically it's known as an idea of Byzantine, labyrinthian way of dealing with things.

Yes, yes.

At the moment we have the Yugoslav mess, if not chaos; that is very symbolic of the Byzantine mind. Before that, I mean Romania it's a very neo-Byzantine country, neo in the sense that Byzantine times are over, but Romania still possesses a lot of that, because it's a meeting point between East and West.

You mean, I mean politically and culturally there's...

Spiritually as well.

And spiritually, there's a lot of convolutions, a lot of...?

Yes. To tell you one of the strongest dilemma the Romanian people enjoy, or rather suffer from, it's the fact that religiously they are very inclined to the Greek Orthodox, which is a very strong, dogmatic set of rules, while culturally we are Latins. Those two things are hitting each other, not always in harmony. If we are Latin, as some of our critics have said, of our own intellectuals, that we enjoy this dilemma, which is unsolved, we should have been Latin to the end, therefore Catholics. Well we are not, we are Orthodox in that sense. So there is a big disparity between the spiritual life and intellectual life, or shall I...yes, spiritual and intellectual, I think that says it.

And at the heart of it a sort of temperamental conflict.

And that creates Romanian Dadaism, you know...

Tristan Tzara.

Like them. That creates Brancusi. Brancusi comes from a much earlier type of root, which is the pagan, before the Romanians were Christianised if you like, so that he is a true Asian[??], less of a Latin. But if you look at the latest philosophers we have, the greatest of them is in Paris called Seuran[ph], he is a very Latin thinker, very rational, existentialist he might be. If you think of the work of Ionesco, the great playwright, he is also full of Dadaist concepts, if you think of 'The Rhinoceros' and so on and so forth. So, our struggle is this dilemma, which is a paradox which is not always solvable.

End of F4537 Side B

F4538 Side A

Paul Neagu, recorded on the 21st of March 1995. Tape Ten.

Paul we've talked a lot about your art and about the development, or evolution I would prefer to say, of your work over the last twenty years. What we haven't said very much about, what we haven't talked a great deal about is your life in England, and how you have felt about being here, in a sense in exile although I think now you feel very much at home here, I don't know.

With one foot. (laughs)

One foot here.

I, especially in the last four years since the Communism has fallen to pieces back home and over to the East, my situation has been slightly different I suppose, not at all in a better way. Before that it was a bit clearer to the English mind, to the English friends; everybody who came across me for the first time, that, OK this man is here because Romania is in a bad way, it's a communist country etcetera, which was a thing, which was the reason for which, through my long interview with the Home Office, I got allowed to stay here in the first place. Once this reason disappeared and I was free to go back as it were to a freer Romania, the whole focus was blurred, because the reasons for me still being here weren't clear any more. I remember, even though I have been to Romania two or three times every year since that so-called revolution, since the year '89, every time I came back I happened to meet somebody who hasn't seen me for some time, and they get into a little explosion and say, 'Oh, are you still here? I thought you left for, going back to Romania.' Which makes me laugh, because they assume that the only reason I left Romania was simply because Romania was communist. Well, it turns up it wasn't just that, it's to do with many other things, but the most important thing is that I developed and I've grown up in England over twenty or so years, there isn't much point for me to go back there. There is a lot of demand, of my teaching, of my art to be shown, to be talked about etcetera, and yet I cannot do that. There are several reasons, one of them is

metaphysical, there is a great attraction to it; the other one is medical, because, well I've been through, I had to have a transplant operation which happened four years ago, in other words I am having to be close to the hospital which operated on me for checks in case of infections. My life is a bit more physically sensitive to these issues, so I can't afford to run wild as I could have done, say ten or fifteen years ago.

Another experience I've been through before that was when I spent a year in Canada as a professor at Concordia University, after a successful year of teaching there a high level of postgraduate students, I was asked to stay, I was asked to stay, they made an offer of large, good salary, much better than I would have had in England, yet I didn't stay in America because I couldn't possibly see myself in the context of a country which everything is translated into profits and money. To me I felt I was too far from Europe which was my country. I remember thinking, Europe is my patria[ph] really. At the time of course it wasn't Romania as much as England. And now I could say simply that half of my life, almost half of it physically, at least my mature life, has taken place and been developed here in England.

When you said everything was translated into money and profit and loss and so on, is that...I mean, did you not find that the years of the Eighties in this country there was something of a development of that sort of idea, or did you feel that there is something, some resistance to it here, in spite of the triumphs of Thatcherism?

Well there is some resistance, which is not the strata of society which helps me too much. The resistance comes from the, what one could call the left-wing, the people with sensitive minds, they are not the people in power, they are not the people even with cultural power. The opposite, which is the negative side, a lot of the English Establishment are still paying attention to what happens in America and almost every fashion that takes place and manifests itself over there, it becomes absorbed in England and translated in English terms which, one could see from what happened to the BBC television programmes, to the film industry, to the writers' fight for money in this country. Everybody who has developed a profession, which now is thought, like in rugby, like in football, who is now installed[??], now that things have changed we have to have money, we have to have managers, we have to have the business side, even though otherwise we are creative, we are artists, we are sportsmen. They started

copying what happens in America and so on and so forth. Of course that I call negative, and that has a great bad reflection in art terms, and I, like many other British artists, do suffer from that. But like some critics have noticed in the mid-Eighties, after great long years of being given a cold shoulder by the British Establishment, because in spite of my...

Cold shoulder by the British Establishment?

Right. I mean by that, museums, I mean curators and so on. The moment I returned from Canada a new generation of young people took over as it were the limelight, they were the so-called post-Modernists, strangely enough a lot of these successful young artists were my young students, my ex-students. So, in one hand I was supposed to feel proud about having to do with their education and their upbringing, in the other hand I could see that the processes of what was happening here was simply marginalising my own art, my own existence, and that became at some point quite a crisis, a crisis of financial type, a crisis of lack of attention. So I have realised that I was just barely tolerated, there was no question of being respected or being loved for that matter. Respect might have been left, because I was asked at several points in these last fifteen years to do a lecture there or to be present at that seminar, but that's neither here nor there. As a teacher, as a lecturer, I always had appeal to a lot of schools in this country; after I stopped teaching I became an assessor, I was an external assessor for many years. At the moment I am a consultant here and there, which is far from taking care of my necessities, my needs, my financial needs. In other words my life has become quite a struggle in that sense.

We've talked quite a lot, Paul, about the way in which your work in a sense is, if I could put it this way...

Alien.

Alien in a sense, I mean, and you accept that?

I accept it, I am aware of it, yes.

Because you come from these traditions of thinking and feeling, and of creative practice, which are in some ways very different from... In spite of the fact that you have actually, from those here, in spite of the fact that you have actually taught here I think some...

I think it's because I am so alien to this culture that my work was considered useful in teaching.

Yes I was going to say that would have made you a very interesting and effective teacher, because you would actually bring a sort of assault of some kind into the situation, a sort of...

Novelty.

A difference, and a critique of what actually sort of obtains here. I'm just thinking that, in some ways, although this has provided you with a home, and in some ways looked after you, this society, in the way that it does, it's also been in many ways an unwelcoming society for you, it's an un... I mean for example, you are recognised as a considerable artist, as a sculptor of importance. Are you in many public collections in this country?

Two or three.

Yes. Are you represented in the Tate?

I am represented in the Tate with a very scarce two or three prints, and one sculpture which I donated, never bought by any serious collection. The only time I had one or two things giving me satisfaction, because they were wanted to be collected by a public collection, was once in the Arts Council Collection which happened to be purchased by an American lady who was working there at the time, I'm talking about the late Seventies, and Edinburgh Museum of Modern Art, because of my many years

of activities in Scotland, but that again was in the Seventies. The rest of it, it's incredibly thin.

Yes.

A drawing here, a print there.

Yes, this is not really significant is it? It is no way what one might think of as a proper recognition of the project.

It's a poor one, it's a poor one.

What about public commissions, I mean what about, for example the Charing Cross Commission?

Oh that's a long saga.

Could we...I mean could you just tell us something about what actually happened there? You entered a competition.

Well I suppose it's kind of symbolic of...it's an experience which is characteristic. I've been told several times that it's not just me who suffered from this. What happened was, in '87 with a variation on my 'Starhead', one of the 'Catholic[??] Stations', which I developed into a monument to be perfectly inscribed in that particular situation in the front of Charing Cross Station, for the Strand, it was part of an international competition in which 140 sculptors came. It took the first prize after a short-listing of about 7 sculptors. There was a lot of support originally, a lot of enthusiasm, but as soon as I started making the work, physically building it, I realised the money wasn't sufficient, and I went back to the Westminster City Council who are the major commissioner, and I put the question to them, who is going to pay for the rest of the money required to finish the work? They started looking around and saying, 'We thought that the prize money was enough for you to achieve it,' which was ludicrous, because the prize money was something like 15,000 while the

sculpture finally had to cost in the region of 75,000. One of the major backers was ICI, who half-way through pulled out because they said they don't produce the perspex any longer which was required in the first place for that sculpture. So I spent the prize money plus my pocket money to complete the stainless steel part. I proposed to do it without the perspex. Westminster City Council eventually didn't want to give planning permission. We are talking about four years of such struggle. The politicians have changed; the original commission which decided I was the first prize wasn't there any longer to sustain this project; everything didn't reach the stage of a proper contract. So finally they buried the whole thing by saying, 'Maybe you could find an alternative site. So you go home, Mr Neagu, your sculpture is your sculpture. When we find a site we'll let you know.' That happened seven years ago. Eventually the sculpture was completed with the help of another private foundation, and now the sculpture exists in its stainless steel form, it is a form which everybody loves, it is apparently ecstatic as some critics have called it, and it's in a private foundation waiting to be sold, probably located for a permanent siting, whenever that will happen nobody knows.

This is not the 'Starhead' that's in the Goodwood Park?

Yes.

It is? That's where it is?

Yes.

And it's waiting there in fact for its final home, is it?

It's waiting there because, it's located there only provisionally.

Mm. Do you know who was on the committee that...

The panel?

The panel that awarded you the prize?

Yes of course I do. They were great luminaries, they were people like Roger de Grey, Hugh Casson, Dame Elizabeth Frink, John Maine[ph], as well as a famous sculptor in perspex who came from Germany. Well as it happened, strangely enough, three of the people in the jury have died in these seven years; I think the last one, who died only recently, was Roger de Grey.

Yes.

So, at the moment I am left probably with one councillor, who was called Roger Bramble[??], who is not even a councillor any more. The whole structure has been changed. For me it's a dead end thing. But looking at the press, and the nasty press, 'Private Eye' like, I could see that from the inception there were a few people very enthusiastic about this, including the jury people, who lost impetus as the critics appeared, and the critics were obnoxious by saying that this might be a Mussolinian symbol, why should it be in the central part of London? Why don't to have more statues of Prince Charles on a horse?

Well you mention 'Private Eye', I mean...

Well 'Private Eye' itself and the pseudonym, they wrote twice about it by naming it a Mussolinian symbol, a Thatcherite symbol of the Eighties, therefore Westminster City should spend their public money somewhere else rather than on such enterprises. It was a man who signed as Polity[ph].

Oh yes.

Who appears to be a Conservative...

Architectural critic.

Architectural critic of some sort. And it was clear that there wasn't much sympathy, simply because the sculpture took that victorious look of a star dropping from the sky walking on two legs and appearing too positive I suppose. It didn't fit with the English weather, or English temperament I suppose. At the same time it's characteristic and it's very illustrative, a big sculpture costing a lot of money took place in Piccadilly or near Leicester Square, a number of horses playing with water. Now those two things happening in parallel, one being downgraded and eventually demolished, which was mine, the other one taking place for about a quarter of a million pounds, illustrates very clearly my point.

Well that's absolutely grotesque, the sculpture, the piece you are talking about.

We are talking about the same area of London.

It's also ridiculous, completely ridiculous. But I take it that that wasn't actually attacked by Pylotti[ph] and other...?

No, it was prized, it was prized.

Of course you're not the...and as you have said, you're not the only person to have suffered from that sort of philistinism and that sort of viciousness, but it does raise a point for me that I think is perhaps interesting for you to pursue, and that is this. That 'Starhead' piece, that adaptation of your 'Starhead' sculpture, which is a superb piece and has been much admired I know since it was erected at Goodwood...

It's one of their star pieces. (laughs)

It's one of their star...yes. Part of the problem is that it was removed from a context of pieces, a context of, and a historical context, that's to say the context of your own work.

I see.

And that, I wonder if this bothers you, that maybe people have a problem with individual pieces of your own sculpture, they find it difficult, because it comes out of this, if you like it, illogical or critical, creative, metaphysical context of the project, and it's very very difficult for your average sort of Anglo-Saxon critic to read or understand.

Dear Mel, no, I don't think it has anything to do with that, on the contrary, and I will explain it to you. Because it was a developed star, and therefore it's much more convincing as it is in three pieces shifting away from each other therefore it looks like a little group, very tight, people who applauded and who liked it didn't know my group, the rest of the sculptures; very few of them liked the sculpture [INAUDIBLE]. The other side of this argument is the fact that two of the sculpture stars I made for the group, both of them are sold. One of them is a public sculpture, the only one I have in this country, which is in Middlesborough, bought as a model; at the time it was a model for a much bigger one, which is part of the set of 'Nine Catholic[??]' sculptures. The second one, which was an identical replica, has been bought two years ago by a private landowner in a private garden, it's just been located this spring. He planted it in an empty lawn and then he made a pond around it. So you see these are two instances where the same work, but even simpler, is taken away from the group of nine and even made special place for it. In other words there are people, I don't know, in the north of this country or maybe...because again, the story of the star, and it's a very long one, it started in Durham, Newcastle, where I found Northern Arts and several people supporting it and fighting for it with great emphasis on the beauty of the piece itself. In no way any of these people had been affected by the group of the nine pieces which came together much later, because the first events happened in 1980. Well the group of sculpture became in '87. So, on the contrary, my experiences from the south of England, for instance I've shown these sculptures in two other locations, once was at Swansea in an art gallery, and the second time was in Colchester, at Minories, every time I had viewers who were puzzled by the work, they couldn't understand the group, but every time there was somebody who wanted to be photographed with this sculpture they took to the star. So it was one of the most loved, because it looked like a flower.

Yes.

Victorious or not victorious, people related to it much more than to the other stations. So it's the most popular and easy thing to like. Even now, I mean, just now I am waiting, Henley Festival, the festival of music this summer, they want to borrow one sculpture, and which one is that? The 'Starhead' which is out here, the little one. They always go for that because it's the easiest thing to relate to.

Yes, I see that.

But on the other hand I could tell you jokingly, yesterday on the radio there was a news item which was about vandals in some place, I can't remember exactly where, 'King and Queen' by Henry Moore, which were located outdoors, had been decapitated by some vandal which cut their heads, which obviously wanted to be a joke, because what happens now with the royal family, or what happened in the history of Britain, of England, with kings and queens, the decapitation it's a very nice joke to put on a sculpture which is too figurative or too reminiscent of that kind of history. So, this is the same country.

Yes. Well, we know that there is great great reservoirs of philistinism here, and that any artist has to live with them, and that those that tend to be successful here I think it's true to say are often those whose work is least offensive to that philistinism and most easy to read and falls within what we've said before, the sorts of empirical lyrical modes that middle-class opinion here tends to go for, and of course, and working-class opinion for that matter. I mean public sculpture here is very problematic, as we know.

True, well...

And I know that...but I raise the point about sculpture because I thought, I wondered, so grotesque was the reading, you know, of that particular critic and who we needn't bother about, but I mean so grotesque was the misreading of it...

It wasn't even criticism, it was just a nasty remark. People do.

But as I said it was a grotesque misreading of the piece.

Yes, yes of course.

And I wondered if you saw that as a problem that had to do with, in a sense with the images that you create, and I think you have answered that question very well. How do you live now, Paul? You're not teaching.

No, I'm not having an easy time, because, as I already said, one of the most unhappy things about my situation just as an ordinary citizen at the moment is that most of the events out there in the galleries and museums seem to ignore entirely the fact that I have been doing what I've been doing, they don't seem to take me as an integral part of the British art scene, even though in accidental moments people do recognise that, like you would do it, like some others have done it, but when it comes to institutional behaviour I seem to be entirely ignored, which makes me unhappy because at least I thought I should have an easier older life as it were. At the moment in fact I am still behaving as a very generous man, I just made two gifts, again donations, to different museums in this country. Even those are sometimes hard to be accepted. It's like, the importance of what I have done is put under question all the time, simply because there wasn't sufficient critical approach to my work, or if there was it's been forgotten, or ignored, and this is unfortunate. I think it applies to many others, but to me particularly, because this is where I am, it's a sore point in a sense, and I don't want to talk too much about it because it's full of unhappiness. So I feel almost ashamed, having to discuss that. Every time I was asked in Romania, how is my situation in Britain, people were really dismayed at the fact that I am having a hard time to survive. My very own agent, which I had several of in the last few years, had a hard time in trying to show my work, trying to sell it, because my work is not wanted; it's seen as difficult, complex, they want commercial work. The whole thing seems to be affected by mercantilism, by...

Mercantilism, yes.

By quick commercial exchanges and so on. There were people for instance a few years back when I was being in hospital a lot of time trying to help me from Christie's, taking my work, putting it into auctions, paintings strangely enough, and some of those works have found clients, buyers, but since then, I mean in the last two years since I came back from Italy, I mean '93/94, have been abysmal, simply abysmal.

You were in Italy as...

I was in Italy as a senior fellow at the British School in Rome.

And how did you find that?

Well there was a happy circumstance by which I [INAUDIBLE] for an interview, seeing that such a fellowship was advertised. They were looking for a mature artist who could look after a set of young ex-students, in other words people with no experience, they were looking for somebody who had some experience, who had work behind him, a great deal of work. And I went to this interview, in the front of me short-listed were another four people who were a lot younger than me, but it appeared after the whole thing was over that none of them were as rich in projects as I was. I had three times as many projects as required, so that they took me immediately, and I had a very very happy time in Rome, even though, you know, I spent - what I mean by happy time is that I had sufficient room to be critical enough, to be constructive, and to be helpful to the young around me. At the same time I enjoyed greatly that context of course because it's Rome, because it's Italy, because it's full of art, but the school itself, that is another issue.

End of F4538 Side A

F4538 Side B

.....discussing, Paul, the situation at the school in Rome as you found it.

Yes, I was saying that the people who were managing art there were just ordinary local people with little awareness of the scene at large, in other words they didn't have enough courage when it comes to European affairs. I knew a lot more than they did, and yet I was just an artist. When I came through with a lot of suggestions, a lot of lectures on very special subjects, like visual hermeneutics, and the producing of a book and then making an exhibition of this or that kind, they weren't very happy because I was ignoring the young and famous who they wanted to exhibit. In other words their main concern, this was the main problem between me and them, the contradictions were that they wanted to make the school better known in Italy, by which they were exporting artists who already were very well known in the whole of Europe more or less, like Gilbert and George, Howard Hodgkin, and Paolozzi, because they were attracting people to their presentations. My points were, what's the...what's so new about inviting Paolozzi to give a lecture to the Italian public? If you want to make the school a solid, exciting place, then you start bringing things which are not known about the British art scene, which were plenty back here. So, we ended up by me having to leave simply because it came to an end, my advice was remarked and registered in the proper paper way, and that was the end of it. Since then I've been asked once or twice to contribute art work for auctions because they want to improve the school, but it's nothing changing that form of management, in fact the director has been changed and just this year I had two ex-students of mine who went through there, partly because I supported them. So I continue to be part of the, if you like the English scene, and yet I have a place which is very peripheral to the central events. For instance, to give you a very sore point, I wouldn't mind if you could take it, I will talk about a very personal relationship. In 1975 when I had my first very strong exhibition at Oxford, the director of that museum happened to be a gentleman called Nick Serota. We were very good friends almost, very much on the same tune, supporting each other, and since then, of course my base was London and Nick Serota became director of the Whitechapel, soon after, a few years at the Whitechapel he moved to the Tate Gallery. These days if we happen to meet

accidentally, Nick Serota doesn't even say hello to me, and there is no reason for this behaviour apart from the fact that he thinks that saying hello to me will show too much friendliness towards somebody he doesn't want to see any longer. Why is that so, is because of the events in between, I would say; my own explanation is that Nick Serota wants to be seen with European characters, like big people in Maastricht or in Venice or in Düsseldorf, and not to be seen as befriending someone from a Romanian strange culture. There was a time when I was good enough to put on a show, and now if I want to show at Oxford again it will be impossible because the new director is not paying attention to anything that comes from the East. I am still, as you could see, understood as someone who comes with Eastern notions, like you yourself said, which is kind of evident. But I think those notions of mine, if you ask me, my opinion is that they are still very necessary to what happens in a central Western country like England. If it's central or not I don't know, but England likes to think of it as being central within Europe, and because I've been here for 25 or so years I find being ignored the way I am, I find it very upsetting.

But I mean I think you would agree, wouldn't you.....

End of F4538 Side B

End of Interview