

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

Interview with Herbert Flugelman

4 March and 27 April 2010

This is an edited transcript of interviews with Herbert Flugelman on 4 March and 27 April 2010 in Bowral, NSW, by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

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

About Herbert Flugelman

Herbert 'Bert' Flugelman (1923–2013) is best known for his large-scale works of simplified geometric forms in stainless steel. Lesser known are the series of site-specific installations, performances and happenings he produced during the 1960s and 70s. He was involved in running the Tin Sheds workshop at the University of Sydney and was an influential teacher of sculpture for three decades.

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

Interview on 4 March 2010

Deborah Edwards (DE): It makes sense to start from the beginning. You were born in Vienna [in Austria] in 1923 and out here by...?

Herbert Flugelman (HF): 1938.

DE: Aged 15. Not having any idea that you wanted to become an artist?

HF: No, at that age, not long before that, I wanted to be an explorer of course.

DE: Do you have siblings or are you an only child?

HF: An only child. My parents divorced when I was nine. I actually came out [to Australia] with my father's new wife, my stepmother, who died about 18 months ago, aged 102.

DE: If you had stayed in Vienna you would have gone on to tertiary schooling? At 15 had you finished what we know as secondary schooling?

HF: I think partly because of my parents' divorce and all the rest of it ... I lived with my mother. I very much enjoyed primary school, but then, in secondary school, my troubles began. I didn't do well at all.

DE: That seems surprising.

HF: Well, I don't know. Looking back on it, I was an inquisitive child and I would have learnt very readily but I needed someone to actually tell me. I remember we were beginning to do algebra and I put my hand up and said, 'Look, could you explain to me why, when we have abstract symbols with numbers, we have to extend this to letters?' The maths professor turned around and said, 'Shut up. Don't ask questions. Just do as you are told'. And I said, 'No, I am entitled to know'. And he said, 'You are not entitled'. And I said, 'Yes, I am'. The principal told me to apologise and I said I wouldn't and I ended up sitting in the same seat in the same class for three years. They refused to teach me and I refused to learn. After three years, my mother took me out of the school and sent me to another school. Its core was textiles and textile design. You know the social experiments of the 1920s in Vienna and Austria. The factory stood in about five acres of land and employed about 1000 people, with tennis courts, a swimming pool, staff recreational areas. It was an enormously enlightened situation.

DE: Did your father come out [to Australia] because of Germany's role in Austria?

HF: He was Jewish. My parents divorced. They went in different directions. My father had all his friends working in that company and the woman he married worked in that company, and they went out at nights and on weekends. He had that kind of social milieu. The Germans marched in, in March, and the following morning all of his friends who he liked and trusted were sporting swastikas and cut him dead, and he saw the implications. The company was owned by a Jew as well and it was confiscated immediately. And so he [my father] went to the new management and said – I think he was sales manager – 'Look, I have to go to Australia urgently' – they bought all their wool in Australia – and so they said, 'If you have to go, go', and within a fortnight he had gone.

DE: And grabbed you as he went?

HF: No, he couldn't, he went on business travel, then once he got to Australia he had to apply for residency and then he had to apply for permits for his wife and me. It took six months. He didn't go back, just sent for us. If my mother had found anywhere to go and take me with her, I would have gone with my mother, but this was a kind of last resort, you know, we had to get out at all costs, before ...

DE: Did anyone else in your milieu come out or just the three of you?

HF: No. I had no friends, I didn't speak English and we had no money. The refugee organisation tried to get me jobs. I would start and the other boys would tease me and I had no defence against any of this. When I heard them calling me a German or a Nazi or something, I did the only thing I knew how to do, I flew at them, and then they sacked me, so after three episodes like that they sent me to the bush. And in the bush [near the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales], they sorted me out [laughs].

While I was still looking for a job in Sydney I dressed myself up so I would look presentable but all I had was plus-fours tweeds and argyle socks and I remember running down George Street from Central with the newspaper boys chasing me yelling, 'Poofta!'

DE: It sounds like a pretty hideous introduction to Australia.

HF: It wasn't the best.

DE: So you went out there ... Meantime, were you mulling over what you want to do with your life?

HF: And I had had nine months of the Nazis before I came out, because I was thrown out of school immediately and so I just roamed around and I saw a lot of things which made it very urgent for me to do something about it. I wanted to fight the Germans. I tried to join up but couldn't. I tried to join up at 18 but they refused me because my status [in Australia] was still 'enemy alien'. Then in the mail we got letters saying we had been reclassified, as 'alien' and then as 'friendly alien', and at that stage I could join up. My mother was in England. She had managed to get out through an employment agency and she took a job as a domestic. She was a maid in the harbourmaster of Liverpool's household but then they got bombed out so she moved to Leeds and got bombed out, and then she moved to London where she got bombed out.

DE: Had your father and stepmother prospered or was life hard?

HF: My father found a job as a porter in the Mansion House Private Hotel on the corner Elizabeth and Goulburn streets [in Sydney]. He lugged suitcases, but within two and a half years he was manager of the hotel and that was alright. But he didn't go on to do anything else. He stayed in that same job until he retired. All he wanted was to ... well ... They bought a block of land at Caringbah. It was the first or second house in the street, it was bush, so he built a house and all he wanted was to be able to go home at night and be done with it. He didn't bounce back as he could have. We got out [of Austria] at least.

DE: When you went into the army you were there for a couple of years?

HF: Yes, then my status changed and I could apply to the air force and I did that but that wasn't successful. Initially they said, 'No, we can't get you into air crew because you are an alien, you are foreign'. And I said, 'By an act of Parliament last week I am no longer foreign, you have to take me', and they went away, came back and said, 'You are right, you will have to sit for exams in maths in order to get in'. I had no maths at all so they gave me three weeks. I went back to my unit, at Bogan Gate on the Condobolin line [in regional New South

Wales]. I was in a German-speaking hut because they separated us out. There were Italians, Germans, Greeks – all the people they wouldn't let into the fighting force, so they used us for labour. My intention was to get overseas.

DE: To England?

HF: Yes, that's where the air fields were. My ambition was to fly Lancaster bombers and do my bit. So they gave me three weeks to get up to matriculation maths level. I went back to my unit and an insurance mathematician and an engineer and somebody else took turns in coaching me and I went back and triumphantly passed the exam, and then they failed me on eyesight. I didn't believe them. I went into town and had my eyes tested and they were 20/20 and so I went back to my unit and wrote my first letter of resignation. I got laughed out of the place, of course [laughs].

DE: What was the final denouement of that?

HF: Well, I stayed in the army, the last few months in a transport company in [the Sydney suburb of] Ryde.

DE: Did you make friendships there for life? Or was it more transient than that? You were 23–25. By the time you came out [of the army] did you have an idea that you wanted to go to an art school? Had you started to paint in the army?

HF: No, I hadn't. I had a couple of chaps in my unit, architects, who did a fair bit of drawing. I liked what they did. It seemed to me a good idea.

DE: To think of architecture?

HF: No. I knew I liked their drawing. I enrolled at East Sydney Technical College, where the National Art School was. Initially I thought I might do graphic design but six weeks into the common course it became clear to me that painting was my destination. I enrolled in fine art – painting.

DE: So, first design ...

HF: I had to wait a year as there were too many ex-servicemen coming out at the same time.

DE: They had already filled up the places for 1947 so for a year you worked and then went to New York?

HF: No. I had £50 and I bought a ticket on a Liberty ship from Sydney to San Francisco and from there the Greyhound bus to New York. My mother was there. I hadn't seen her for nine years.

DE: She had got herself to New York?

HF: Because she had two brothers there.

DE: You stayed with her?

HF: I stayed with my Uncle George, a bachelor, in New York and worked at various things and then I needed to come back to Australia and I needed my fare. I met some friends from New York University and I said I needed to get some money in a short period of time and they said to come up to the Catskills: 'That's what we do in the summer. You go as a waiter and save your tips and make a lot of money'. So I went to an agency and said I was an

experienced head waiter and so they got me a job. No pay, you rely totally on tips, and you had to have black trousers and shirt and jacket. I arrived there, they picked me up at the station, showed me the place and my room and then said you better get down to lunch. They gave me a busboy, an offsider. The manager said, 'We do expect you to carry the tray above your head', and I said, 'Of course, of course'. They gave me half a dozen tables. They stacked the plates in three tiers and I thought, 'Well, if I drop it, I drop it', and up it went and it all worked, and I saved my fare easily in a couple of months.

DE: You didn't contemplate staying over there?

HF: No, I wanted to come back.

DE: And go to the school? Did you look at a lot of art over there?

HF: No, I didn't. In retrospect I was in a fairly confused state. I managed to book a fare from New York to Sydney on a freighter going through the Panama Canal, and that was wonderful.

DE: You got back in time to get in to ESTC [East Sydney Technical College] in 1948?

HF: Yes.

DE: In 1948 was Frank Medworth still there?

HF: Medworth, yes, and [Lyndon] Dadswell and Frank Hinder and [CH] Vacchini.

DE: And Frank Lumb in the plaster studio?

HF: Lumb, yes.

DE: You began the course and were you there for two or three full years? You did the introductory course?

HF: Three years. I did the introductory course at Strathfield and did the second year at Strathfield and the third year at East Sydney.

DE: And so what are your recollections of the time there? I know you have said Guy Warren was there, and John Coburn.

HF: And Jon Molvig, he was in my class. Guy wasn't, he was a year ahead of me. John Coburn was.

DE: And the main painting teacher?

HF: Wallace Thornton.

DE: A good teacher?

HF: Absolutely first rate. He would brutally goad you hour after hour and wouldn't let you catch your breath.

DE: An intellectual?

HF: Yes and no. He was an honestly stimulating teacher and made you work very hard. He knew about the impressionists and it petered out after that.

DE: So you were still drawing from plaster moulds?

HF: Plaster antique drawings.

DE: Michelangelo's eye ...

HF: And foot. And then there was life drawing and an old bloke, close to 70, an Englishman with a bow tie who used to say, 'More glut, more glut' – gluteus maximus.

DE: Not Godfrey Miller.

HF: No, it wasn't Godfrey Miller. We had Godfrey in third year.

DE: How did you find Miller? There is a mystique about him for many. Others have said he was just like another student in the class.

HF: Yes, yes.

DE: That he was using the life-drawing classes for himself.

HF: Yes, which didn't leave a bad impression at all. The man was obviously serious. He took a few of us home to his studio and talked about the work.

DE: Was [John] Passmore there?

HF: I didn't see Passmore. I knew of him but he didn't teach us.

DE: He seems to have been a very divisive teacher. Miller would perhaps have given an impression of an artist's life that might have been quite exciting.

HF: One didn't, in retrospect, know anything and ESTC didn't take us very far. There was no intellectual growth, no understanding of anything past the impressionists.

DE: People have mentioned an intellectual librarian, a refugee.

HF: [John] Kaplan.

DE: Did Dadswell give you any sense or any feeling that you might like to be a sculptor? I know he was, at this stage, still doing Henry Mooreish work.

HF: I did an evening class with Dadswell. He was a good man, and Frank Hinder was also. He taught me. None of them were that much older. Tom Bass had a little suitcase saying 'Tom Bass Artist' [laughter].

DE: Oliffe Richmond?

HF: He was there but he was a year ahead of me. I have no recollections of him, none.

DE: So you came out, you went back to New York in 1951, but I believe you went to London first.

HF: What happened was, in 1951, we got married because they wouldn't let us into one cabin unless we were, on a ship going to Italy.

DE: Were you a bit of a bohemian? A part of the [Sydney] Push?

HF: I was very peripheral to all that. I stuck to my notion of wanting to be a painter and I worked enormously long hours.

DE: There was a group of brilliant intellectual refugees, Viennese, who found their way to [the Sydney suburb of] Kings Cross after the war. Many of them psychiatrists. I'm interested to know when you started to get around with philosophers and academics.

HF: I didn't, not then. I think it all had to do with the fact that I stopped school so early. I had no academic background at all. I had to gradually acquire a vocabulary and a way of thinking and I think, really, that Donald Brook was the first one. To my astonishment I found that I fitted in very well then.

DE: It seems to me that you have worked in academic schools but associated and discussed theory to a much greater extent perhaps than many of your colleagues.

HF: Well, my introduction to thinking was really Donald Brook and it's an interesting anecdote in that sense in that I had a commission to do a set of large panels for the Kurnell oil refinery building and I was engaged in making these high reliefs, up to 12 inches thick, abstract, and cast in concrete. A white concrete surface with sand and the reinforcing at the back.

The way you make these things, you have a bed of sand within a box and the sand is wet and smoothed out perfectly, and then you can put planks across the box and start scooping out and making negatives in the sand with a spoon, and then smoothing it out, which become positives in the casting. So you have to think in reverse. You have to get it right. The big panel was about eight foot by 12 foot and cast in four separate panels. By putting a plank across it you could reach across wherever you wanted to, and you had made a model, to refer to and to square off.

DE: Made your model in clay? And cast in plaster?

HF: Yes, that's right. Anyway I was engaged in that thing, and each section weighed about a ton and a half, and so six ton in the whole thing, and Les Blakebrough brought Donald and Phyllis [Brook] and I remember them walking down towards the workshop and then we were introduced and Donald looked in and I said, 'These are decorative panels for the oil refinery at Kurnell'. And he said, 'These are load-bearing members, aren't they?' And I said, 'Of course', quick as a flash, but of course they weren't load-bearing members, they were decorative panels. And he went on to say, 'Because if they weren't load bearing, you would of course make them out of fibreglass'.

DE: Would anyone have known much about fibreglass then? Except Donald, who had been in England and Nigeria.

HF: It made me laugh. It was so wonderful to have someone actually tell you the truth but I was well into the process and it was too late to change to fibreglass and also my vanity kicked in. I started to question my whole motivation.

DE: But had they specified concrete or had you?

HF: No, I did, I wanted it to weigh tons and tons and be heroic! [Laughs]

DE: How did the commission come about? Your first?

HF: An architect, who saw some small panels I had been playing with, asked if I was prepared to do large scale, and of course I said yes to everything.

DE: If you are a sculptor, there is quite a lot of learning on the job.

HF: You've got to take chances or you get nothing at all.

DE: So how did you find your time in London, from 1951? London was still very much a focus for students from both Melbourne and Sydney at that time. How did you find it?

HF: I was distracted in a way, because we went to ...

DE: May I ask, was your [first] wife Elizabeth a student too? An artist?

HF: No. [Betty, as she was also known, was a hairdresser.] It was an illustration of how life happens. I went to see my father and his wife in Caringbah on Saturday and come 9pm after dinner they said, 'Well, we are going to bed'. So I wondered what to do with myself, and I ran down to Cronulla and had a beer at the pub and then I went to what appeared to be a dance at the surf club and there was this lovely looking girl, and that finishes up being Kay's mother! [Kay is Bert and Betty Flugelman's daughter.]

DE: That's a very Australian story.

HF: Anyway, we set off in May 1951. It was a slow boat to Venice, to Italy, a light steamer on its last trip back before being scrapped, its top speed was eight knots.

DE: Can I just ask here, had you done well at EST and were you happy with your graduation?

HF: I was pleased with myself.

DE: You had done major painting works?

HF: A large painting in those days was something that size [indicates approximately 1.8 by 1.4 metres].

DE: You received your diploma?

HF: No, I did three out of the five-year course and then quit. I did a very large painting for a nightclub in Pitt Street, a whole wall. They wanted a Toulouse-Lautrec, and so I painted them a Toulouse-Lautrec.

DE: Did you try for the travelling art scholarship?

HF: No, we didn't have anything like that.

DE: So you got off the boat at Venice?

HF: Got off at Venice and we [Bert and Betty Flugelman] made good friends on board ship. I have to keep on elaborating in order for it to make sense. On board ship there was a young man, John Phelan, and his wife Alma. They were English. They came from New Zealand, but they got to New Zealand because he had joined the paratroopers during the war and he jumped into occupied Greece, and lived there for a couple of years, but he was one of those Englishmen, and he and his wife decided to emigrate to NZ but he couldn't find any work at all so he held up a bank.

DE: Goodness!

HF: Well, he had been living like that, and they caught him but because of his war service they just deported him back to England. John was a charismatic sort of chap and he said he had a roulette system and he also happened to have a roulette wheel on board as well and so we played and just kept score, no money. The system was interesting and one of our number, Ken West, who joined the ship in Adelaide, was an accountant and a statistician, and he became interested and we decided to form a syndicate and when we would get to Venice we would play the system.

We arrived in Venice, booked in to the first pensione we could find, took the vaporetto to the Lido to the casino. We had, I think, £40 between us and we lost it, I think, within half an hour and we couldn't stand it. We thought our way through how the game went and we discovered that we had become so excited that we hadn't played the system. So we decided to try once more, and put in £10 each and the next day John Phelan, whose system it was, and Ken West and I went to the Lido at 2pm when it opened and we played and we won and we won and we won, and within a week we had moved to the Lido and we lived in a villa with gilt furniture, and we won and won. We used to go to the opera. This lasted for nearly six weeks. We had reserved seats and everyone knew us. It was literally like a movie – and then we started to quarrel somehow. Some of the ladies began to quarrel. Things became difficult and we decided to break up. We'd had six weeks, so we split the money and three of them went to San Marino to a casino down there, and Eric Dunbar and Kate and Betty and I went to Cortina d'Ampezzo and had a week off, camping and painting, and then we came back to play the system again in Venice and we lasted a week but then we lost our money because we got off the system, so we cut our losses. I bought a Lambretta motor-scooter and we set off, went around Italy and then up over the Brenna to Vienna – the first time I had gone back. We stayed in Vienna for a couple of weeks.

DE: How was that? Strange?

HF: It was interesting. I was a foreigner, with a secret knowledge of the language and everything else. It was complex and interesting.

The Kunsthistorisches Museum was one of my haunts when I was a boy. I remember on the first floor there was a small room with five paintings of the Infanta by [Diego] Velázquez.

DE: Yes.

HF: I've gone back to look at it. Anyway, we were in Vienna for a couple of weeks and then we set off for Paris. We drove the length of Austria and through Switzerland to Paris and when we arrived in Paris I became very ill. I knew it was serious, and I said we better head for the channel, to get to London, and so we drove to Calais and we missed the ferry by about five minutes and so had to stay overnight at Calais. By the time we got the ferry the next day I could no longer drive the scooter. So we got across ...

DE: Oh, this was when you had polio?

HF: I had polio. I caught it in Vienna. So I got away from the bastards in 1938 and they bloody caught me in 1951.

DE: Isn't that unusual at your age?

HF: I was 28. You are not supposed to get infantile paralysis at that stage. I got it. I was very ill indeed. I was in Uxbridge Fever Hospital for three months.

DE: Were you having to pay for all of this?

HF: No, as an Australian citizen. That's why I said to Betty in Paris, 'Let's head for London, we can't afford anything else'. Three months in Uxbridge, and then I had myself discharged because they were going to put me in leg irons and a wheelchair and I said, 'No, I won't have it', and he [the doctor] said, 'Well, I've been an orthopaedic surgeon for 28 years and you will never walk again if you don't', and I said, 'I've been Bert Flugelman for 28 years and I'll not have it'. So I had to sign a release that they didn't have any responsibility, and I called a taxi and joined my wife in West Hampstead.

DE: Were they saying the leg irons were permanent?

HF: They said, unless I rested them like that [indicates] for six months, my disability could become permanent. I was of the opposite opinion. I thought that I needed exercise.

DE: And you were vindicated?

HF: Well, I was vindicated later on by Sister [Elizabeth] Kenny, who wrote a book about polio, and what she recommended, which was what I craved. I wanted hot baths. They splinted my arm like this [indicates] for three months, and I kept wanting to go and sit in a hot bath and move and they wouldn't let me do any of that, but when it came to the leg I had recovered enough to put up a fight.

DE: I apologise. I am not even exactly sure what polio is precisely. It is a virus, isn't it?

HF: It's a virus with an incubation period for three weeks. The nerves that go to the muscles and tell them how to be muscles stop firing and the muscle is bereft of information, and in fact I lost 40 pounds of weight in three days because the water just drains off. You've got a bone with a bit of skin around it. It's fairly disturbing.

DE: How did you recover? What happened when you tried to pick up your life?

HF: Well, I started to walk, and kept on falling down the stairs and falling all over London, but after six weeks in a hopping sort of way I played my first game of tennis.

DE: It was a lost four to five months then but not too much more than that?

HF: It was much more than that, but I got lucky. When I came out of hospital, an Australian painter in London at the time, Cedric Flower, came to see me and said he had heard about the Royal Academy Benevolent Association which would give grants to artists in difficulties. So he, off his own bat, went to the RA and made an appointment. He took me there, I brought a dozen paintings, they examined me, decided I was professional, and wrote to me to say they would give me a grant for 12 months.

DE: That was a wonderful thing to happen.

HF: Wonderful! Wonderful!

DE: Flower hadn't known you beforehand? How did he hear of you?

HF: No, maybe through Australia House, I don't know.

DE: And was this how you managed to go to Ibiza [in Spain] to paint?

HF: The Balearic Islands.

DE: So part of that was to recuperate?

HF: Well, I didn't go like that. I had my grant for 12 months and during that time I did a lot of work. Eric and Kate Dunbar used to pick me up in the morning with my paint box and a canvas and they would take me somewhere in the city, up on the rooftop, and set me up and leave me for a few hours.

DE: Because it was still hard for you to walk.

HF: Yes, I was learning to walk and I had lost [the use of] one arm so I couldn't carry everything. They'd leave me and I painted cityscapes. I was really taken by [Oskar] Kokoschka's paintings of London

DE: Have you kept those?

HF: No, there might be reproductions of some of them left.

DE: Had you gone to London thinking you would go to an art school?

HF: It was some kind of insane romantic notion that it would happen. I was totally confident without any reason for it to be. I did a hell of a lot of painting but had no idea about painting at all, no notion at all really.

DE: Why say that?

HF: Because I was ignorant. I hadn't deeply thought about the theory of the whole thing.

DE: Did you study colour? Any particular philosophies?

HF: Mine was very simple and brutal. I met a very good friend, John Copnall, who was a final-year student at the RA schools and I had access to the schools because of the grant. We hit it off very well indeed. But to illustrate my attitudes – more like a bludgeon than a rapier – John and I exhibited at the Royal Academy summer show, or we tried to. I stayed with him at that time at Notting Hill Gate. We rented a cart for two bob on Portobello Road and put our paintings on that and then we walked down to Piccadilly and the Royal Society show.

DE: So you got into the summer show, 1952?

HF: Yes, I don't truly know whether I got into the summer show, but then there was the spring show for the Royal Society show. I remember John and I delivered about a dozen paintings each and there were thousands of paintings stacked against the walls – all about that size [indicates approximately 1.4 x 0.8 metres], all of them in good taste; safe, beautiful paintings. John and I had a couple of beers and started to wonder what had happened to the giants. Where had the Delacroixs, the Rubens gone etc. Why do we piddle along with little things? So we made a pact that we would paint a giant easel painting – 12 feet by 8 feet [4 x 2.6 metres] because that's two sheets of Masonite – and we would paint it jointly. We made a frame, primed the Masonite and decided to do a shipwreck, a classical thing like *The raft of Medusa*.

DE: Cooking up an expressionist storm?

HF: No, no, it was all very straight, unbelievably. A car ferry plying between Scotland and Ireland had gone down. A car ferry. The loading doors had been bashed in during a heavy storm and it just went down, losing all lives, with the exception of ten of the crew who were on deck and got into a lifeboat. So John and I went down to Maritime Museum Greenwich and started looking at equipment, and then started working on the composition, and then we did life drawing of figures in various poses, and then one day when he was away I blocked it in, and from that day onwards we would paint each other out and painted each other in again, and it was marvellous! We worked each day from eight in the morning till two in the morning, and slept in our clothes, the whole romantic thing. We got it done, and we wanted it framed. We gave it to a Polish framemaker who had run away from his wife and stayed with us. So in exchange for a suit and putting him up, he built us an elaborate frame, but then we had the problem of getting it out of the basement, we had to unscrew it. The Royal Academy had given us a studio for the weekend so we could put it back together again, so we submitted it, had it accepted, and then the Academy communicated with us and said they couldn't hang the painting after all. It seemed that a sufficient number of members objected to a painting that size by students, with a contemporary subject matter. It would cause too much of a furore so we had to take it away again.

DE: Did you manage to exhibit it anywhere else?

HF: I wrote and offered it to the National Gallery in Ireland and they refused. I tried the Royal Society, the only other place big enough to take it, and they refused on the grounds that it was too big and would attract too much attention. So then I wrote to the manager of Green Park and asked if we could make a stand and exhibit it in Green Park so people could see it, and they wrote back and said no, it would set a precedent and other people would want to exhibit 12 by eight foot seascapes, so then we had to store it. John Copnall's father was a sculptor with a big studio in Kensington and we just put it in there under the overhang. It was there for a few months, then John's uncle needed a piece of Masonite and that ...

DE: Was the end of it.

HF: Yes, I have a photograph of it somewhere, I think. We put all our friends in it.

DE: Did you go to Copnall's father's studio? Where were the catalysts to start three-dimensional work?

HF: I started fiddling with it, I suppose, in London at first, and then in New York, little relief sand panels. All you need is a box, fill it with sand, do what you do and then pour plaster of Paris.

DE: So you came to sculpture that way, not by doing any kind of life modelling?

HF: No, it was the fact that I started experimenting with heavier and heavier pigment.

DE: Using sand in your paintings?

HF: Yes, yes, it was an extension of that.

DE: This is the mid 50s. People would have been using wax then too. Are you starting to become more abstract in your painting?

HF: They were figurative abstractions really, veering to the abstract.

DE: Were there any particular contemporary British or other painters who interested you?

HF: No, intellectually I kept right away from it. I don't know this as a fact but I fancy I was still of the opinion that painting had nothing to do with the intellect, that it was to do with the eye, the good eye, but part of my changing over was not only that I felt at home with three-dimensional things but that the integrity of the picture plane – Clement Greenberg – didn't sit well with me at all. The notion that painting nowadays should be flat and an affirmation of the two-dimensionality of the plane without an illusion entering into this thing. At that time I did a painting where a sculptural thing entered the canvas and an illusion of it was painted coming around, exiting the canvas, so I did all sorts of thinking about it.

DE: So were you reading *Studio International* and *Artforum* and magazines like that. Were you up to date with current theory or reacting against it?

HF: Yes, yes, but I reacted against it.

DE: Greenberg came out here in ...?

HF: Yes, in about 1969 or 70 he came out, and gave the Power lecture ['Avant-garde attitudes: new art in the sixties', the first Power Institute lecture, in 1968] and afterwards Donald [Brook] had him for dinner and spent the evening trying to get Greenberg to open up and talk about this stuff. He clammed up, wouldn't engage.

DE: Janet Dawson must have been at that same lecture. She felt what he said was wrong, unconvincing.

HF: Mind you, he was an insightful person to stand in front of the canvas and talk about it. He was not a fool, was sensitive to painting.

DE: After those couple of years were you fully recovered in London?

HF: I was as recovered as I ever got.

DE: So then you decided to go from London to New York?

HF: John Copnall and I decided to go to Ibiza. He had heard about it from somebody. We had 10 pound each, so we took the Underground and from then on started hitching to the coast.

DE: Is this with your wife?

HF: No, she stayed in London. I said I'd be back in a month. We hitchhiked to Barcelona and from there took the ferry, and then immediately found a room on top of a house and that's where we stayed. It was absurdly cheap, and we both painted every day and all day, and I still have some of the Masonite pieces.

DE: Were you painting in oils or synthetics on Masonite?

HF: Both.

DE: Had the polio knocked the stuffing out of your ambitions?

HF: No, I was still under the delusion that I could do anything.

DE: Did you go back to London in a month?

HF: Yes, I did, John decided to stay. I had to hitchhike back, which took me four days. I didn't have anything to eat really. I had grapes I could pick in vineyards and then I was picked up by a truck full of chestnuts and they said they would take me to Lyon if I emptied the truck, so I did that and filled my pockets with chestnuts, and from there, to cut a long story short, I got back and then had a show at the Piccadilly Gallery.

DE: You were hitching back with your canvases?

HF: Six big paintings. That's why it was hard to get picked up.

DE: How did the show go?

HF: It was wonderful. I sold nearly half.

DE: Your first solo show?

HF: Yes, it was wonderful, and then the gallery insisted that I go back and paint another show. [The playwright] Christopher Fry bought one and then he wanted me to give him painting lessons for a while, which I did, and he would give me tickets for dress rehearsals, so it was really wonderful. I could do anything! That's what it felt like. I went back and then had another show which wasn't anywhere near as good. But anyhow for the first time in three years we had enough money to leave England ...

[Ends]

Due to a recording error, a further ten minutes of interview were lost. The following was transcribed later by Eli Flugelman, Bert's son.

HF: We arrived in New York and in very short order found a cold-water apartment in 72nd Street, near Broadway. We furnished it by going to the East Side, round about 40th Street, where once a week they put out furniture, refrigerators or anything they wanted to get rid of. So within two weeks we were fully furnished, refrigerator and all. I spent a lot of time going to the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. I also found a gallery, the Barone Gallery on the East Side, about 50th Street. I had a couple of shows there and sold moderately well. I also participated in group shows at other galleries. I did a lot of paintings of skyscrapers and New York cityscapes. We spent nearly two years like this. Betty became pregnant with our daughter Kay and when she was just three months old we decided we had to go home so that Betty could be near her mother etc. This was in 1955.

I responded to an advertisement in the *New York Times* asking for drivers to ferry cars to the West Coast. It was a simple matter. People who had bought a car and lived in Los Angeles could buy it for several hundred dollars cheaper and we had the advantage of free transport to LA. From there we joined our ship in San Francisco and returned home to Australia. For the first year we lived with my parents in rather cramped conditions. During that time I bought five acres of land which was in the 'green belt' at Sylvania [a southern suburb of Sydney].

I finished up building a temporary dwelling out of Rolls Royce packing cases and after Betty's stay with her mother at Springwood [in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney], we lived there for four years. When the area was rezoned residential, we couldn't afford the rates and sold up and moved to Oyster Bay [another southern Sydney suburb].

Friends of mine who took graphic design at East Sydney [Technical College] persuaded me to try my luck in graphics for advertising. They had realised I had a talent for layout and

invention and encouraged me, so I got a folio together and got a job in an advertising agency.

Interview on 27 April 2010

HF: I have, of course, forgotten what we did.

DE: We had an excellent talk about your early life.

[This is followed by an unrecorded interval where HF shows DE an article about his house and work in the village of Jamberoo in New South Wales which appeared in *High Life*, October/November 2000, vol 5, no 1, as well as a catalogue of 'furniture-sculptures' exhibited at Macquarie Galleries, Sydney in 1984 under the title *Herbert Flugelman: stainless steel with mixed media sculpture 1983–84*. HF explained that a number of 'furniture-sculptures' are in private collections, and some in his shed, and mentions that Tony Bond bought one, titled *Tableau*, from the gallery of Mildura Arts Centre for Wollongong Art Gallery where he was director and that 'an American lady' bought his *Footstool* sculpture from the show.]

HF: ... She [the American] was brought up to Jamberoo because her husband was doing business at BHP. She saw it and she wanted it immediately. She said, 'I've got the other one' [laughs] – [Alberto] Giacometti – so I am in good company.

DE: Well, I thought a good place to start might be the late 1960s. I thought we might start with your installation work *Black box* at Oyster Bay. There was a review by Ken Scarlett, which was very appreciative.

HF: And one by Donald Brook and another by Daniel Thomas.

DE: Yes. Can you talk about the genesis of that work and who was involved in it? I think Brook described it as an informal gathering of some of your students from the Tin Sheds [at the University of Sydney]?

HF: No, the students came from Kogarah Tech.

DE: You went to the Tin Sheds in 1969?

HF: Yes, a half a day or a day a week basis in 1969, which worked itself up to a peak of two and a half days a week.

DE: So you were doing extremely experimental things with the Kogarah students?

HF: Well, yes, I was pushing them as hard as I could and they liked it a great deal. There was a lot of work after hours and they just came and did it. But I had to be transferred to ESTC, to the National Art School, because the head of Kogarah Tech sacked me for doing these outrageous things.

DE: So under sculpture instruction at Kogarah you started to do these experimental things. I assume you were a permanent teacher, hence they had to transfer you?

HF: No, I was part-time but ESTC was embarrassed about it so they said, 'You can have the hours here'.

DE: Who was in charge of that decision?

HF: The head of the art school in Kogarah, Harold Huntley. He was a grand nephew of the man after whom Huntleys Point is named [laughs].

DE: That's a claim to fame.

HF: Exactly.

DE: So how did the *Black box* come about? In 1966 you showed *Equestrian 1* at Mildura [the Mildura Sculpture Prize] and an immediate success with that. By 1969 you had put what was described as an 'organic cube' into the Comalco Art Prize, and by 1969 you are doing the Oyster Bay work. Things seem to have clearly shifted for you between 1966 and 1969. So are you starting to push against the definitions of sculpture that people had dealt with up until the 1960s?

HF: I was very much offended by Greenberg. I went to the Power lecture and Donald invited him to dinner and Donald tried to make him speak and he backed right off. He wasn't a fool. He knew what Donald was doing. I found him quite genuine as a person but couldn't come to terms with the theory of it. But friends of mine, their son went to New York and there was obviously some connection, and Greenberg offered him his apartment, facing Central Park, and the art was literally stacked in the corridors.

DE: So the *Black box* was part of your reaction against the Greenbergian position?

HF: Ah, this is very much reasoning in retrospect. At the time I could not have said this to you. So it's like things that I make. I find out what I've made after I've made it. Then I name it because it fits. It doesn't go the other way. The 60s were very disturbing for me. A variety of reasons, some of them personal. A complete change. I think it was the time I bought a television set for the first time, and I suddenly saw three million people starving in Ethiopia, that sort of thing, and I started to look at all of this and saw myself, standing there with a palette, beret, being 'an artist' in inverted commas, and I found it reprehensible. I didn't want to be that, and I started to flirt with the idea of making things that were outside the boundaries, and that's how I finished up starting on the geometric series, by making a cube and then an equilateral tetrahedron and so on, and worked my way into the geometry of things simply because I didn't want to make some things that said 'Flugelman'. In that sense, I tried to make things that had to make their own way in the world and then discovered, of course, that if I put three cubes together then people [say], 'Yes, that's Flugelman' [laughs].

DE: So your position changes like many artists who were also persuaded by a politic. To make art completely removed from the sale market was part of the platform too, wasn't it? And I am assuming with Oyster Bay that you are also interested in environmental art? Was it something for the students?

HF: Oh, very much so [for the students]. The group of students who were engaged in this were the same students who worked with me in the sculpture class at Kogarah and did all sorts of unspeakable things that had to be discontinued because they were not sculpture. So out of all of this came the notion of making something that we didn't know what it was about, but we would make it and find out. And, well, it came out through discussion. I was leading the thing, I was obviously the teacher, but on my block at Oyster Bay, I had started to build a new studio, which was built out of 12 by 12 ironbark hardwood from barges that were demolished and sold at Glebe. So I bought a trailer load of them and so had these massive uprights going 15 feet up for the height of the studio and then great beams across and a concrete floor, and I hadn't got any further than that, so that was the site. I don't remember in detail how the thing precisely came about but we very quickly agreed we would make this into a box. We would put black plastic around it, inside and outside, and roof, and we would

put a ten-ton truckload of sand for the floor. So we had that. Then adjacent was a four-car carport, and so from then we theorised that we should have the entrance to the black box there. And what to do with the carport space? There was a council tip not far away and we went down there and we found things like an old pram, junk, and we very quickly developed an aesthetic about what was good junk and what was bad junk. Interestingly enough, not only did we do that but the attendants at the tip, who asked us what we were doing taking junk away and we explained what we were trying to do, they entered into the spirit of the thing and started to put stuff aside because it was 'good junk'. And from somewhere else I got a huge amount of cadmium yellow paint and so everything was painted in cadmium yellow and put together like that. So we stacked this stuff in the carport area right up to the ceiling and had a tortuous path leading through it to the entrance into the black box. And I had installed another six or seven thousand watts of light in order to make it as bright and blinding as possible. And that path that led through this junk to a depth of about 15 inches, we had chopped up remnants of polythene, off-cuts as they had come from the factory, so you had to walk through that 15-inch deep path of polythene to arrive at a door. The door had been taken off and on the door-sized aperture there was black plastic leading in to an opening about three feet by two feet, which had a black curtain, and you had to duck and climb through that to get into the black box, and there was a car headlight shining into your eyes as you entered this tunnel and you were totally disoriented as you came into the black box.

DE: Did you have people panicking?

HF: Well, giddy and carrying on and some of them worrying. And the black box was filled with inflated polythene tubes, from three inch diameter to three foot diameter and anything up to 30 foot long, and they were attached to the ceiling and loose on the floor and the place was almost filled with these 'balloons' or inflatables. And the lighting was dim. And amongst all the things we had found at the tip was the brush of a street-sweeping machine that councils had, so we took that and we attached one end of it to a beam in the ceiling and we installed a motor with a reduction gear and attached the brush to that, which then hung down, and then we cut it so that, when it turned, it kept on. It was in the sand and it kept winding itself up and then suddenly releasing and winding up and suddenly releasing again. So that was doing that. Then we had an endless tape. We got a percussion group to come in and we turned this machine on and they started to improvise a percussion accompaniment to the broom and we turned this into an endless tape. Now, on the opening night ... By the way, at the tip we found several crosses from a cemetery so that was pulled out.

DE: Did you have lengthy discussions with the students about all of this?

HF: Oh yes, yes, constant discussions.

DE: And did you have final veto?

HF: I didn't exercise it, no.

DE: So how were the crosses incorporated?

HF: They were put into the ground before you entered the big black box. We'll go up to the shed later and I'll show you the thing we had hanging outside – the 'Big Black Box Money Machine' [laughs], encouraging people to put a donation in. And then on the opening night, three or four of the students buried themselves along the polythene path, just their heads stuck out, so as people walked in, they walked along this brightly lit path, they would suddenly come across a head that started to speak to them. So then when they went through the path and down the tunnel into the box, there was this slow music, percussion, going on, and it was ghostly. And if you have an inflated tube, 30 inch diameter and 30 foot

long, you can't just pick it up and move it, the air resistance is too great. You can only move it in slow motion, so people trying to lift these things up and interact with them would find themselves in a slow ghostly dance. So as an additional inducement, one of the girls volunteered to take her gear off and hide amongst the balloons so that one wasn't sure that one had seen her or not, and people would try to get to her but you could only move in slow motion and she could flit away with great ease, and to everybody's total astonishment, because of this hypnotic movement and the hypnotic noise of the percussion group, people were forced into this slow dance and as they danced they started to take their clothes off. Yes, it was extraordinary.

DE: So having spotted her and saw that there was a performative aspect to it ...

HF: They became part of it, and we became – remember this is 1969 – and we were alarmed by this. It was out of control, you know, so we stopped the music, stopped the tape so that this hypnotic continuity would go away.

DE: Damn, I thought Daniel Thomas might have taken his clothes off.

HF: No but ...

DE: That kind of thing in the 60s would have the vice squad over.

HF: Yes, that's exactly what would have happened. As it was, building the *Black box* in suburbia!

DE: How long did it take to build and how long was it up for?

HF: It was up for a week and, I don't know, it took us three or four weeks to build the thing.

DE: How many people came through? Was it one of those word-of-mouth things that had people come flooding in? Did they come at night? During the day?

HF: At night times. I doubt whether we had ... We probably had close to about 500 people come through in the week.

DE: Did you document it?

HF: I have some black-and-white film and slides.

DE: Did anyone film it?

HF: No, not that I know of. Idris Murphy was one of the students and Frank Littler, they might remember things. I can't remember the names of the others. Ten students, a hard core of ten that constantly came, and others when they could.

DE: Did you have a post-mortem on the work and what was the view?

HF: We had discussions and we were always terribly excited. We had done something which we didn't quite understand but which obviously had an impact. The first night it was open to the public people came through and some of them walked through as quickly as possible to the other end, and some took part in it, enjoyed it and afterwards said to whoever was there, 'That was wonderful!' But I do remember one little lady who came to me and said, 'It is filthy. I know what is going on in there. It's downright filth!' She was fuming, because there were all these phalluses hanging from the ceiling – and we'd cut out the nude girl and we'd cut out the tape [laughs].

DE: Those two things for opening night only?

HF: Yes, girl gone, and we stopped the percussion every few minutes to break the continuity.

DE: With that project you were crossing a number of lines into new territory. It's highly experimental, collaborative, non-saleable, performative, interactive.

HF: It's all of that except that we didn't think of it in those terms. We lacked the analytical equipment, any theory that would come to terms with it. We were encouraged to do it by American magazines really, more than anything else. One suddenly saw people shifting mountains of tyres from one end to the other and doing all sorts of things, and it made sense to us to do things.

DE: The view of art as process? Did Kogarah staff come out?

HF: Harold Huntley didn't come. I was still at Kogarah. The sequence of events has become blurred.

DE: It sounds like it was grist to the mill to have you transferred to ESTC.

HF: I was part-time at the National Art School and I continued to go there for two or four hours, whatever they wanted. I'd just drive up from the Tin Sheds, do my four hours and then sign out, and they'd pay me, because the Tin Sheds didn't pay me enough. I was never more than a part-time tutor and Guy Warren took over for me [at the Tin Sheds] when I quit and went to Adelaide and *then* they appointed Guy Warren as a senior lecturer at the Sheds and gave him a budget – a small-enough and mean-enough budget – and he had to jot down attendance and look after money and it started to be what it was not when I was there. It became part of the establishment.

DE: Donald Brook had set it up and I remember last time you said you met him around 1964 when you were doing the Kurnell work. He set the Tin Sheds up with Marr Grounds. I got the impression that Brook had a very innovative idea about how it would work in relation to art history students and got it in under the radar. So was he the one who approached you?

HF: Yes.

DE: Did Bernard Smith have jurisdiction over you then?

HF: Well, he did because I worked for the Power Institute [of Fine Arts, University of Sydney] and he was the overall head [of department]. One of the things which happened was the federal police came to confiscate a pair of bolt cutters and I said, 'You can't have them. Talk to Professor Smith'. This is another story. There was a fugitive from the federal police who had been on the run for 18 months, a conscript thing, he didn't want to go, and they caught him outside the main building outside the quad[rangle] at the university and they handcuffed him, and suddenly around him there came a group of about 100 students so they couldn't move, and one of the students ran down to the Sheds and said, 'Have you got a pair of bolt cutters?', so I gave him a pair. He ran up, cut the cuffs, smuggled the guy out, stood there for a minute and then dispersed and let the police go. Well, they were furious [laughs].

DE: So they managed to track the bolt cutters to the Tin Sheds. What were the strengths and weaknesses of your job at the Tin Sheds? What were your responsibilities?

HF: They weren't stipulated except at the beginning and that was to demonstrate any technique the students wanted to have demonstrated to them so they could write more meaningful essays, by understanding the processes, the context of the historical setting. What it turned out to be was that people streamed to the Sheds wanting to print posters for this or posters for that. The philosophy department used it as its headquarters for their street theatre, all over George Street. It was a kind of headquarters for radicals and they were radical to the point that every night they would take my office door off its hinges and leave it standing against the wall because property is theft, and I put it [back] on every morning.

DE: But I am assuming that it was not adversarial, that you were part of it.

HF: I was part of the whole lot. You see the way I got teaching done was the first one I got was Vicky King who had done printmaking at tech and she got a commission to do hangings outside the buildings in George Street, and she needed long tables so she came to see if I could help her and I said, 'Yes, I'll let you set up your tables and do your printing but in return you do six hours a week teaching silkscreen printmaking so we can make posters'. And the Earthworks Poster Co-op [formally known as the Earthworks Poster Collective] came out of that. Things just galloped along. It all happened so quickly over two or three years. I very quickly opened it to the entire university, students and staff.

DE: That was fine by the Power Department?

HF: No one queried me, so I just went. The terrace house next door became vacant because it was a university lease and they were going to demolish it eventually, so during the summer vacation I pulled down the fence and built a foundry and a kiln and we occupied that. We occupied sheds and spaces as they became vacant. I also opened them up to local Aboriginal groups for poster printing. There were students who wanted to do this and I said they could, so they came in and started printing. And there was one element who regarded the Sheds as theirs, and they started to sleep there, about a half-dozen to a dozen of them. They started to sleep and to cook there and the rats came and the thing became impossible and other students became threatened by them and I asked them to put their bedding away and wash up after they'd eaten and they wouldn't do any of this, like 'You don't tell anyone what to do' – it was all part of 'authority sucks'. So one Monday morning when no one was there I called the university garbage truck and I put on everything of theirs, all their bedding, possessions and cooking utensils, every bloody thing there was, and they came and it was, 'Hey, hey, what's happened?', and I said, 'Well, like, man, I had to do it', and most of them stood there and then said, 'Yeah, right, OK, cool'. Tim Burns, though, came at me. I said, 'Come on Tim, I'll have you', and he said, 'Fuck you, you're too confident' [laughs].

DE: So, in the end, how would you describe this period for you? It sounds full on.

HF: Full on. That's all I did really. Keep the lid on it somehow but keep it open, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and that for me is the formula if you want a vital hub where people are interested in art. I tried at the time with the [Walter] Burley Griffin [designed] incinerator at Pymont, I think. They were talking about tearing it down. It was a great space and I tried to talk somebody into making that into a community access thing – employ a couple of sculptors who could live there and have it open to everybody, so that people could bring their trailer in and weld up the axle, but they see other people welding up sculptures until you start to get a feeling of familiarity of belonging – but nothing ever came of this.

DE: It speaks of a great deal of idealism about art production. Those years strike me as both crisis years and years of real optimism.

HF: Absolutely.

DE: What happened in the end? Where were the academics? Did they too gravitate to the Tin Sheds?

HF: Very little, if any. They'd pop in. There was indeed a lot of discussions. I think every Monday each week there was a lunchtime discussion – I think it was probably Donald's idea – about what art is. And I remember Tim Johnson, he and his partner [Vivien Johnson] had just had a thing up in Brisbane, where they made love in the art gallery and had a film made of it. Well, they were part of this talkfest. Tim came in one day and submitted an artwork for discussion. He'd gotten into a train somewhere and smashed all the light bulbs. Can this be seen as a work of art if it is submitted as a work of art?

DE: Donald had done his PhD in Canberra over 1962–65, I think, and then he was brought in to the Power Institute as a senior lecturer in sculpture.

HF: Yes, by Bernard Smith.

DE: Yes, he had been a practising sculptor and his thesis was on sculpture. I'm interested to know if you had specific discussions with him about the form, the theory. I think he had a sculpture exhibition in 1967.

HF: I don't know this. At Max Hutchinson's?

DE: Not sure. [*Postures and predicaments by Donald Brook, Gallery A, Sydney and Melbourne, March 1967*]

HF: There is one Donald Brook sculpture here, not a Nigerian head [it is a welded wire/metal assemblage], but he had two exhibitions at Max Hutchinson's.

DE: The welded things often have human figures in them.

HF: That was on the theme of 'man engaging the universe'.

DE: He seemed most interested in how you define or measure quality in art or indeed if that was relevant. There seemed to be a lot of reading of [philosopher Ludwig] Wittgenstein.

HF: Yes.

DE: Was that a debate or conversation you were having with him as a sculptor?

HF: Well, I was part and parcel of the discussions. I followed them with great interest. I am a great fan of Donald's theories, I think they are impeccable, logically, but I have never taken any notice of those things when I make stuff; there is a different motor cuts in.

DE: It seems to me that you can encompass all of those positions at the time. You engage with formalism and at the same time there are works like *Colonial cottage* [also known as *Australian cottage* and *Pioneer cottage*] at '73 *Sculpturscape* [the 1973 Mildura Sculpture Triennial] or the ceramic works you exhibited, the female torsos ...

HF: They [the latter] were whimsies. I never signed up for a particular thing. I went where it took me. I made a funny pot because I was staying with Les Blakebrough at Mittagong, only for several days, and I went down to the pottery on the first day and generally made a nuisance of myself. And on the second day Les said, 'Come and I'll show you something', and he rolled out a dozen coils and pinched them and started building. So I did a bust, and then I did a large pot, and then I did three six-foot figures with the pinch marks very apparent – they look like grass trees, the spears. I borrowed from all of that. Then we fired them and

stuck them between some trees at the pottery and sometime later some local lads took to them with four by twos. But that was the beginning of my coiling adventure because it was easy and it was quick and I could do it. Then, making these pots, it very quickly became apparent the incongruities you can build into them. You know, the battle between function and the rest of it, whimsy, jokes, purely sensuous things.

DE: 1969 seems to be a turning point or pivotal year for you. You also begin to work on the tetrahedral [sculpture].

HF: It was a statement by [Richard] Buckminster Fuller. He said that equilateral tetrahedrons are the building blocks of the universe. It then struck me that all these platonic solids and others [were] solids that could not be simplified, only elaborated. And that started me. I wanted to make irreducible solids with the authority that sticks to that. You can't argue with them but of course you can put them together. You put several together and then you start turning one and turning the other and you create complexity out of the conglomerate, and that's how building blocks work.

DE: Was that an epiphany for you?

HF: Yes, it was. It was extraordinarily exciting, an extraordinary discovery.

DE: Within two years you have that extraordinary solo show at Watters [Gallery in Sydney].

HF: I had been making the solid things and then one day I drove behind a truck. I drove behind a truck, the sun shone from behind my right shoulder and the back of the truck was open but it had two gates made out of wire mesh, reinforcing mesh, and the sun illuminated this whole thing and suddenly I saw them quite differently. I could see that you could see the drawing of the solid and the solid as a drawing and so I made a tetrahedron solid and then a tetrahedron out of the wire mesh and they both represented the second stage, and both about a sort of order.

DE: Order and anonymity. It is fascinating, an irony, that this 'anonymity' becomes a signature for you.

HF: Yes, I know, I know, but I took one of the wire tetrahedrons at Watters and I put it on the wall and then I had two light sources with an alternating switch and so the tetrahedron would cast a shadow down the wall like this [gestures] and then it would switch and was down the wall like that [gestures] and if you adjusted the speed you got a pendulum, which was beautiful.

DE: There is a mention of a show you had at the Hawthorn City Art Gallery in 1970. I thought Watters was your first showing.

HF: No, I first showed with ... that was the Strine Galleries. They couldn't accommodate it at their exhibition space and so exhibited at the Hawthorn gallery.

DE: So you showed with Strine Galleries first, in Melbourne – it already has a lively scene – but how did you come to do that?

HF: I don't know how I got there. I don't recall that at all, but the gallery was run by the Reeds' son ...

DE: Sweeney [who had been adopted by John and Sunday Reed].

HF: Yes. And so, once I knew I could exhibit it like that, I had the six tetrahedrons and then I decided to take it further. They had these distortions on them, lumps, which meant that you saw the side of the tetrahedron as an object, with distorted reflections, painterly distortions, and then there was this convex bump on it, circular, which gave you a panoramic view; in other words, the whole outside was pulled into these bumps.

DE: I thought it was about subverting the 'geometric' with 'the organic' but it's about perception and viewing.

HF: It was another view. So what I did then, I made eight or ten frames, made out of eight-inch timber, eight by one inch, and I made square frames, stretcher frames, out of those, reinforced corners. And then I went to the Marrickville Colourful Canvas Company, which sold awnings, and I bought ten different pieces of canvas for different awnings and I stretched them over the frames. And then I built frames in front of them and then the old football bladder trick, I distorted the canvas – convex, not concave – and then I would fibreglass it from behind so it became rigid and then I would remove the scaffolding. In fact, although you kept them thinking it was some kind of optical trick like Bridget Riley, it was in fact a reality, which tricked them into thinking it was a fantasy – a double somersault as it were. And they were on the wall, and they were, of course, reflected in the bumps on the tetrahedrons on the floor. There was an interaction between the entire exhibition. And then the National Gallery of Victoria borrowed them for six months and exhibited them in the back garden where they were architectural conceits about the pool, which are upside-down equilateral tetrahedrons, so suddenly they related to the building in that way which made me hope they might buy the damn things.

DE: Why didn't they?

HF: I don't know. I didn't know anybody there.

DE: What happened to them?

HF: They sent them back to me.

DE: Did the show have an impact? Would that have been the first they had heard of you down there?

HF: I knew [George] Baldessin and I knew ...

DE: John Davis appears to have had the stature of a 'sculpture guru' down there at the time.

HF: [Laughs] Right.

DE: It strikes me as a much more lively scene, sculpture wise, down there than in Sydney. You leave in 72. I have a sense that Watters takes on the role of a kind of informal sculpture centre in Sydney given the scene is so quiet.

HF: I tried to have another show with Frank [Watters] and he said, 'No, no good'. He said, 'Well, I think your work is extremely good and will make extremely good public sculpture and I've been around every architect in Sydney and alienated all of them trying to flog your work because the bastards wouldn't see it. So there's no more I think I can do for you. You should try someone else'. And I said, 'Well, where do you think I should go?' And he said, 'Try Annie [Ann Lewis] up at Gallery A and if you can't do any good there, forget the rest of them'. But Annie took me and I had a show there, and James Mollison [from the National Gallery of Australia] reserved *The knot*, which stood across the stair as you entered the gallery there, and then she told me at the end of the show that he had pulled back on it. He

decided not to have it. She said, 'He said he wanted something more major from you'. And I said, 'The hell he wanted something more major. He has just tried to get out of this one, that's all.' She said, 'Make a maquette for him', and I wouldn't do it for a little while, and then I decided you've got to have a go, and so I did the *Cones*.

DE: That was about 1976, and they finally went in, completed, in 1982, I think.

HF: In time for the opening.

DE: They caused a splash.

HF: [Laughs]

DE: By the time you had the Watters show in 72, you had pulled back from collaborative work to specifically wanting works in public spaces, to animate public spaces. It makes sense, but were you developing a view that art has to be about more than self-exploration?

HF: That you can do other things as well, that you are never married to everything. In 75 I buried the tetrahedrons in Canberra [for the Australia 75 festival as a work titled *Earthwork*] and in 75 I also made the *Pioneer cottage* in Mildura [actually 1973].

DE: So you were still moving around a lot and that suited you.

HF: Yes.

DE: You would have been looking at some pretty appalling sculpture in those years in public places. And Stephen Walker is part of your generation ... that strong thrust of the organic. There seems a very strong move in Australia from figuration to an intense organicism.

HF: Yes. The three major sculptors, public sculptors, were Inge King, Margel Hinder and Norma Redpath.

DE: Tom McCullough approached you in 1975 to see if you wanted to do an earthwork.

HF: And, of course, there's only one answer to a question like that and it's yes [laughs].

DE: Ever thought of digging them up? I know aluminium decays but not in 20 or 30 years. I know you produced, not quite a homage, but a related work when you later floated the tetrahedrons on the lake [in Canberra, for the Australian Sculpture Forum, 1998].

HF: It was ... the thing was called *Six tetrahedrons revisited*.

DE: I saw that, it was great. That was filmed, I think. Do you know where it is?

HF: I have no idea. I think the University Art School in Canberra might have something.

DE: Maybe just a few questions about Mildura, but before this. Who is doing your stainless steel works in Sydney? I know you found a great fabricator in Adelaide but in Sydney?

HF: The Comalco Prize [for the 1969 Comalco Invitational Sculpture Award] was a cube with bumps in it. It wasn't cast, it was fabricated, it was welded, six sides made and hammered for the distortion and then welded.

DE: By you?

HF: No, I did the distorting but I didn't do the welding. That was done by a neighbour of mine a couple of doors down in Oyster Bay. He worked in a shop that made aluminium boats so he did it for me.

DE: The Comalco Prize seemed to play an important part in having artists look at stainless steel, don't you think?

HF: Well, Ronny [Ron Robertson-] Swann won it but they wouldn't build the sculpture that he had won it with. They commissioned, I don't know, Inge King or Norma Redpath. One of them did the actual commission, because Ronny was a bit radical.

DE: Yes, he rages on.

HF: He does. Remarkable survival [laughs].

DE: What about the 72 show?

HF: I was at the Tin Sheds and off Parramatta Road I found a fabricator, stainless steel sheet metal worker. Commercial people are good, they know what they are doing. And so I'd made cardboard models and did the dimensions and everything. And I took them to the fabricators and asked if they could do it. And they said, 'What's it for mate?' And I said, 'Display'. 'Righto mate, we'll do it.' If I had said 'sculpture', they would have thrown me out but I learnt to say 'display' and immediately you are in.

DE: I remember reading that you always said that, although the work might be fabricated, your hand was always on the work for a whole range of reasons, not least of which is the scaling-up process.

HF: I discovered I have a knack for knowing what it [the material] is going to do. It seems reasonable to me that it will do certain things and it does do it.

DE: It was a material which you must have felt, at a conceptual level, delivered a lot of ticks because it allowed you to do things that were about modes of perception.

HF: It's the same thing with these clay structures. People said, 'How the hell did you fire that? It's this large.' They have problems with kilns, the thing develops cracks, and on and on. I used to demonstrate this to the first-year students: you have to have sympathy for the clay, know what it wants to do, balance it out so that the inside of the thick part dries at the same rate as the thin part. If you have this in your head, if you can think like that, then you can build anything. You have to be full of understanding of what it wants to do, how it wants to change, and you must make allowances for it.

DE: You became pretty involved with Mildura [the sculpture triennials]. McCullough said that the shows became a kind of national think-tank for contemporary sculpture. Can you sum up what they meant for you? Did you generally go to it?

HF: Yes, I was in Adelaide so it was an easy five-hour drive.

DE: Would a group of you go down?

HF: Yes, they'd take the students and go down with cars, caravans, god knows what.

DE: So do you think their importance has been understated? Overstated?

HF: I think Mildura was profoundly important, because it had this very sympathetic management and they left us alone. There was no interference, until the year when they did interfere and they published a catalogue afterwards, and then the council confiscated the catalogue and burned it.

DE: That was a loaded symbolic gesture.

HF: Yes. I was vastly amused.

DE: Tom McCullough told me what an appalling effect the whole thing had on him. I don't think he had a breakdown but ...

HF: He was very close to a breakdown.

DE: He was devastated, after the triumph of the [second] Biennale [of Sydney, for which McCullough was art director]. I think it had a shocking effect on his life.

HF: Absolutely, but he made the mistake of taking the world seriously, which one must never do.

DE: He was also scorched a little with the 1981 Sculpture Triennial in Melbourne. He held a forum where he had to take a lot of flack, I believe, from sculptors, that there had not been enough communication. It was not like Mildura, didn't have its atmosphere, the notion of a communal sculptural practice had disappeared etc.

HF: Which was the important thing about Mildura. It was an informal getting together and virtually living in the same encampment, and you'd walk along and sit down at another tent and have a glass of red. You can't stage a thing like that; you can only provide an environment that allows it to happen.

DE: Did you show at Mildura after McCullough left?

HF: No, I refused to.

DE: Another fascinating thing from this period is Optronic Kinetics. Can you talk a little about that? It was a group comprising you, Jim McDonnell and David Smith, with some student involvement. When and how did it begin?

HF: Have you got the catalogue? We had an exhibition in Melbourne.

DE: That was the beginnings?

HF: We were going strong by that time. The exhibition was at the Baillieu gallery [Realities, founded by Marianne Baillieu]. It was just the three of us. They came from electrical engineering and they wanted to make art. David Smith wanted to paint, Jim wanted to paint, and I suppose I talked them out of it. They came down to the Tin Sheds, students at the university. I had tried to persuade people from various faculties to do things they had expertise in. I had a medical student, for instance, and I suggested a series of transparent tubes and different coloured liquids being pumped through them as a sculpture and things like that because this boy had expertise in doing exactly that. It seemed to me a rich sort of area. So electrical engineering – what little I knew about it – I talked them into making things with programmed circuits so we would get a light play, and then of course the ideas came from them. Jim liked to play with, I think they were called, solid-state theremins, and they picked up sounds and reacted to sounds. No, they were called proximity sensors, and so if you went near the screen you would elicit a colour change on the screen and also a sound,

and so if closer or nearer, sideways or if you moved about you could get different sounds. David Smith, who was extremely musical, could actually get a tune out of the thing. And so Jim was experimenting with that and then Jim picked up a girl from the music faculty and she was into dance/choreography and Jim devised a number of computers/theramins on a stage and they would react to the movement of the dancer and produce the music.

DE: Was that piece put on at the Tin Sheds?

HF: No, I think it was produced down in the music department. She's dead, unfortunately. I can't remember her name, a strong girl, she went to India, cut her foot and got an infection and died. She was still a student. [Philippa Cullen 1950–1975]

DE: How long did the group go for? I think Julie Ewington told me she has an Optronic Kinetics T-shirt.

HF: Has she still got it?

DE: I think so. Was this another instance, like the *Black box*, where collaboration was central?

HF: Yes.

DE: What form did the show take?

HF: There were individual works. For instance, David Smith made ... What was it called? I can show it to you.

DE: You did *Cubed tree* together, didn't you?

HF: Yes. That was derived from David Smith's notion of the random movements of gas molecules. What do you call it? They move randomly, no system there at all – entropic matrix. The notion was to put down a regular grid. You took some steel washers and made a regular grid by having a spacer, a piece of plywood with spaces cut out that fit the washers. You put the spacer down for four washers and then take it up and put it down again until you have, say, a four square metre area, or 20 square metre area, whatever, covered with this regular grid of washers. And you do that in a place where there is a fair bit of pedestrian traffic and then you watched the gradual disintegration of the grid, in a random fashion, which is an illustration of the random running down, the entropy of matter. We set one up and did that. And there was a box – I have one – full of the washers and the spacer and instructions of how to go about it. But that was a David Smith special although it was under the umbrella of Optronic Kinetics. Then the 'cubing of the tree' was the same principle. We went out to Ku-ring-gai, into the bush, and found a suitable gum tree standing near the edge of a gully and as far as we could, with contact adhesive, we would stick wooden cubes in a regular pattern all over the tree – branches, twigs, everything – and the notion was Australian gum trees shed their bark, not their leaves, and that gradually the tree would shed these cubes, which would form a random pattern on the ground, which would disintegrate, disappear over time, absorbed in the natural process. Daniel Thomas indeed went back every year for several years and photographed the process. I've never seen it but that's what he said.

DE: Did you have a set of people involved? How did Daniel Thomas come to know of it?

HF: Well, after it was done and photographed and he saw the photograph, he went out. Donald and Phyllis came and helped, Julie Ewington helped, somebody else's student. Nobody knew where we were going. It was off-the-beaten track. We had these big boxes of

cubes because somebody had given Jim these bundles of two by twos which we cut into two by two by two cubes, and then contact adhesive, a dab on the tree and a dab on the cube.

DE: Would you go out every year and have a look?

HF: I never went back. I was busy, [doing] the next thing!, the next thing! [Laughs]

DE: What happened to the guys and to Optronic Kinetics? Did your going to Adelaide in 72 put an end to it?

HF: No, it came to an end in 72. I think they graduated then. David actually became an electrical engineer but Jim didn't. He finished up working as a technical assistant in the physics department or something, whereas David ended up going to Paris, as all artists should, and went to London and joined a monastery, a gay monastery. He was in that monastery for 15 years or more. Donald has letters from him, I have some as well.

[Break in interview]

DE: Some of the critics of the day found your stylistic moving around disconcerting. But you once wrote that 'dedication to only one mode of expression is an affectation'. That statement seems to underpin your various experimental modes of the late 60s and early 70s but, nonetheless, is there some view of sculptural production that you have held to, that has remained a constant?

HF: Not really, no. The constants are there but they run parallel to some other stuff as well. For example, the geometrical structures that started off with the cube and pyramid and so on. On the way I discovered a curious thing: that if I draw a symmetrical outline of a six-sided object and if I then lay that down flat on the drawing table and then somewhere within those confines I postulate an upright and I postulate the height of the upright and then I triangulate to the corners – $A^2 + B^2 + C^2$ – so I get all my measurements, what I've drawn there, and the information I get from it, is one half of the object. If I draw the same outline again, with the high point in the same place, and I put the two halves together, I have a symmetrical object. But if I turn it upside down, which I can do because it is a symmetrical surround, then I have a high point down there and a high point up here – I have made an asymmetrical object out of the same triangle. So with the same building blocks I can make a symmetrical or an asymmetrical object. Better still, I make both of them and put them side by side.

Now I worked on variations of that for ten or 15 years. And then I wanted to make a curved section and I couldn't find my way into how to make this, and I couldn't think what to do. I made lots of cardboard models, which is a quick way of testing a theory, and then I discovered that I could manipulate a curved section, cut out a curved section. If I cut out two pieces of curved section identical, if I weld the edges together, or sticky-tape cardboard, I had sufficient elasticity in that curved object that I could put a twist in it or turn it in the other direction. So if I can turn it in the other direction like this, and if I can fix it like that – imagine making it out of metal and you have the two sides standing on the welding table which is steel, and you weld the foot of that object onto the table and then you put the kind of twist you want to put into it, and then you take some rods and weld them to the table and to the object so that it's in a fixed position, and then you take a tracing of the third side and cut it out in paper and then in metal and you weld it into position, take the supporting rods out and you've got the exact position you wanted and it's solid still.

Now that was a supreme discovery for me, that allowed me to make the *Tetrapus*, and the *Tetrapus* throughout is an equilateral triangle in cross section, so the power of a geometric

construction that has to be consistent gives a backbone to anything you make; it makes it true in a geometric sense.

DE: In any larger sense? I don't know whether you have a sense of 'sacred geometry', of the underlying structures of the universe. The Fibonacci series etc.

HF: I do talk about them. I am willing to jump off the train anytime. And I did a series of paintings: take a square canvas, then put a curve so that the two sides are equal, so you have that sort of situation and then you can do this [demonstrates bending]. If you use colour to make it move, that could contradict the logic of tonality. You have a very compelling thing, and it's full of contradictions like that. So I did a whole series of paintings on that theme.

DE: In terms of site specificity, the 70s and into the 80s was the decade of your major activity in public works and quite a bit has been made of site specificity but I'm interested to know how site specific your works were because you appear to be making objects that can work in most circumstances.

HF: Well, site specific. With the Martin Place thing [his 1978 commission for a memorial to William Dobell], when it came up and I was invited, I flew to Sydney and spent the day in Martin Place looking at the specific site, and there was a brief and the brief wanted something that would give a unifying note to that great canyon. So I went to my collection of maquettes, geometric things, and I found the one that would fit the bill. I've been very fortunate. Most of the things I've made have been from maquettes, which meant that I always worked in areas that interested me, but only once or twice have I made site-specific works that didn't come from maquettes but that had to be invented. The [Lawrence] Hargrave Memorial is one of them – that flying figure on a truncated cone – you can see I managed to smuggle in a truncated cone.

As far as I am concerned, the maquette fulfilled all the requirements of the [Dobell memorial] brief and it was a great statement at one end of Martin Place and all the minor worries, the minor static of wastepaper bins and drinking fountains and benches and light fittings, carts with cakes etc, all that was given a place because of that one dominant statement. But then they immediately negated that by planting those poplars. They took the dominance away from the piece and so it no longer functioned as a site-specific dominant piece for this canyon. It became another piece of static. It was modified by insensitive planting. But when I first put it in, I think I told you the story that Lloyd Rees objected. He strongly objected to any sculpture being in Martin Place, and then he wrote me a letter in which he said that he had been slow on the uptake and that it was wonderful.

DE: I think I read that you were happy with the repositioning [to the corner of Pitt and Spring streets], being on the small traffic island, that it achieved on precisely the grounds you mention. It brought everything together on that slightly strange, intersecting place.

HF: Yes, I was very happy with that.

DE: This is the arena one heads into when one is producing commissioned sculptures, don't you think?

HF: Of course, Ken Unsworth did the one up at Kings Cross [*Stones against the sky* 1998]. That was a close competition. I submitted what was virtually a stage set. I had two ten-metre Corinthian columns, arches and walls surrounding the thing, and I had moveable props, as it were, where they could shift things about with only one hydraulic trolley, because they asked for a place where performers would feel at home. It was all out of form concrete, so it pulled it into the present, because it was a Greek stage set. I went for an interview, everybody was there and everybody asked a lot of questions, on and on, and I got away from that meeting

and felt that I had got it. [Gough] Whitlam was there and genially asked me why I had done this thing and said he always thought of me in relation to/in terms of large erections [laughs]. I said, 'Come off it!' He worked to get that in. Anyway, I didn't get it, Ken got it.

Well, I've lost more commissions than I can think of, one virtually an act of god, for the [Australian] high commissioner's new building in Singapore. It was an atrium and the piece I had designed, which went the whole five-storey height of the atrium, and I'd been to Melbourne and gone over all the details with the architect and everything was go ahead, then Whitlam was overthrown and the new PM cancelled all overseas art commissions within a week.

DE: On what basis?

HF: A waste of money.

DE: And never taken up again.

HF: No, never taken again.

DE: There are affinities between your work and [Clement] Meadmore's earlier, in the notion of having the material do the remarkable things. I am thinking of your *Knot*, for example.

HF: I saw it more as a geometric puzzle because, if you cut the knot in half, the two halves are identical but then, if you turn one half, it becomes the counterpart of the other and that's a very beautiful thing. You can see that easily if you take a thick piece of rope and make a knot and then discover that if you cut it there that you have two identical pieces. It's a great joy when you come across something like that.

DE: If, in the 60s, and with some works of the 70s, we can describe you as a conceptual artist, that changed, didn't it?

HF: No, all art is conceptual ultimately.

DE: But the division so many artists were working under in the 60s and into the 70s, between the so-called 'formalist' and the 'conceptual', you wouldn't register? Or you would think the boundaries were not so simple?

HF: I don't see how you can help it [describing sculpture as conceptual].

DE: But that notion in the 60s that there was a loss of aesthetic qualities to the sense of art as an intellectual investigation.

HF: Yes, put another way, I took possession of a vacant lot. The cubes and the pyramids were all there, to be used. Conceptually you not only see that but see the place in history and the place in building and structure and human development.

DE: Yes, with the buried tetrahedrons, for example, I assume that that is all there, that there is a whole range of quite self-conscious referencing to other buried sculptures, to antiquity, to various cultural histories.

HF: Yes, you are quite right. There are some things where the object is irrelevant, it is the idea which is primary, particularly the buried tetrahedrons – there's no evidence left but the plaque and photographs.

DE: One thing you seem not to have subscribed to during your long career is the notion of ephemerality, which became important in the 60s, indeed central for a lot of artists of that time. Hence the disappearance of such works except for documenting traces.

HF: There are two things. Yes, the permanence of the public sculpture is important to me. Again, it's in a way a constant attitude of going against rather than with. I like the idea that they will last a great length of time and will become landmarks, unless they are bulldozed or melted down or something, and it's in opposition to consumer society, that you build things to last six months or six years. In contemporary building now you also insert the pipes where they will eventually drop the explosives. I like the idea of someone doing that! [Makes a gesture with his finger up]

DE: It is also remarkable how much removing there is of public sculpture. Perhaps if you can bear another couple of questions about the 80s. It seems to me that dada and surrealist influences appear to have been central in 20th-century Australian sculpture and also a kind of arte-povera aesthetic. I'm interested in your opinion on it.

HF: Well, [Richard] Stankiewicz came out from America and was backed by Transfield and made a great many pieces out here.

DE: He had a bit of trouble with Transfield too, didn't he?

HF: Franco [Belgiorno-Nettis] [laughs] asked me to design a foundry which he was going to build in [the Sydney suburb of] Seven Hills, and Laurie Ware and I talked about it and we designed it, and Franco installed it and Laurie Ware went out and supervised the whole thing, and during that period I was a very important person to Franco and he would invite me to lunch at Transfield House in North Sydney. And one day we went to lunch there and there was about 14 to 16 people – the president of Coca Cola, the American ambassador and King Kong etc – and we finished lunch and he said, 'Well, I have just finished building a house not far from here and would like you all to come and see it', so we all went down to the limos and were driven to the house. There was a suspended driveway down a steep drive and a suspended swimming pool and we came to the house, travertine marble and what have you. In a fairly narrow corridor he had hung all of the Transfield paintings that he had got from the Transfield Prize, and we finished up two or three floors down and entered a courtyard and in the middle of the courtyard there stood an enormous sculpture. We had seen sculptures on the way, but there was this thing. And he said, 'This is a very important sculpture but I'll not say anymore, we have an expert in our midst, Bert Flugelman, and he will tell you more about it'. So I walked around this thing and I looked at it and I finished up and said, 'Franco, you've been had, it's junk, it's no good at all', and he looked at me and he looked around and he said, 'Interesting! I had it run up at the factory, I did it [laughs]'. Now he exposed me to the possibility of being very polite, of saying, 'It's very nice'.

DE: So it was a test.

HF: Inspiration of the moment or a test, I don't know what. Mischievous. That was a chance of being lauded as a sculptor by one who allegedly knew what he was talking about.

DE: Well, did he have aspirations to be a sculptor and did you offend those aspirations then?

HF: Yes, I believe he wanted to be a sculptor.

DE: What propelled you to leave Adelaide in 1983?

HF: I turned 60. I'd been there for ten years and I had the land in Jamberoo and if I didn't move then I'd never move, so my constant philosophy in life has been when in doubt, jump, and so I jumped, and I was right, I had another 20 years.

DE: The art school in Adelaide had been wonderful?

HF: Very good to me, but I also saw its gradual decline from the time I arrived there [at the South Australian School of Art]. And I arrived with an extraordinary contract because they sent me an appointment and I hadn't been interviewed or anything; that was on reputation from the Tin Sheds. They wanted me to do this and would I come down, so I said – well, I wasn't sure, you see – 'Can I come down and look at you and we'll talk?' So I flew down and they picked me up at the airport and we were still in Stanley Street in North Adelaide, and it was wonderful – a proper art school with a director and deputy director, a resident architect, a designer, a slide library, art library, a gallery. It was great, a bit crowded but great. And after I'd seen all these wonders they trotted me up before the director and he said, 'Well, what do you think?', and I said, 'It's wonderful but you are short of space, and I'll take the job but I have three stipulations. One is that I don't do any administrative work or attend meetings. The second one is that I do my own work in the studios and the third one is that I keep the place open as long as I like and weekends and all'. And he said, 'Yes, of course'. And they kept their word, that's the thing, for five years, and after that the head of sculpture went on sabbatical and they asked me to fill in for the year and so I did that, and then when he came back the head of school took a sabbatical and he took that job and so I had to have another year as head of sculpture, and after that it was an established fact that I was head of sculpture. And during this time I observed the gradual decline as we were absorbed, initially by colleges of further education, and after that when they were then absorbed by universities, so suddenly – we had had our own finances – when we joined Torrens College of Advanced Education we became one-seventh of something, and when they were absorbed by the university we became one-forty-second of something. And so I would go to a finance meeting and plead for money, things I urgently needed and I had Buckley's chance. And I recall one meeting where the director said he had received instructions from Canberra that preference was to be given to courses which had jobs at the end of them, and under those circumstances if there were any cuts in the budget it would have to affect the School of Fine Arts. And so I went away and I researched seven years of graduates and I traced all but two or three, I think. I finished up. There were some doing post-graduate work, two in graphic design departments and flourishing, there was one making architectural models, one a display director, three were framemakers, on and on and on. I had a 92 percent employment record and I tabled that and they said it was incredible, above accountancy, and went ahead and cut my budget [laughs]. So what do you do?

DE: In economic rationalist times the university doesn't want to understand that courses such as those may be better equipping people to get jobs.

HF: Intellectually they understand it but they are set on a course and can't change it.

DE: You had gone over there after [Gordon] Samstag was the head of school, I think. I think he left a year before you went over.

HF: [?] Ramsay was the director when I left.

DE: Adelaide was a quiet town, the city of churches, but by the early 80s there were cafes on the streets.

HF: I went down there first in the early 70s, and then Donald Brook came down, and then ...

DE: Noel Sheridan?

HF: Yes. I came up to Sydney to see if he would become director of the Experimental Art Foundation, and he would. There are countless stories attached to Noel Sheridan.

DE: Really?

HF: A quintessential Irishman, now dead. He went back to Dublin and then decided to sell up in Dublin and come back to Perth. They'd bought a place next to Donald Brook in the Fremantle industrial area, they built a studio in the back and Noel was apparently sitting up in bed saying we are going to put this here and that there, and then dropped dead.

DE: You were there for ten years. Did your sculpture course change in its basics during that time?

HF: Yes, it did because of the enforced introduction of more art theory, art history, than was healthy for us.

DE: Yes, art students are expected to produce thesis etc.

HF: Well, they are saddled with that. I think they should pick out the sense of all of this on the side as they make stuff, but when on the side becomes the driving force and the making disappears one is in a different ballgame.

DE: What about when you came over and were invited to set up the course in Wollongong [at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales]? That was very much an interdisciplinary course, wasn't it?

HF: Edward Cowie was professor in charge, and I had just come back and built this studio in the rainforest. The director of the Wollongong Art Gallery, Barbara Tuckerman, said, 'I think you should meet Edward Cowie'. She set it up, and we got on immensely well, and he said, 'Look, could you write a paper about setting up a sculpture department?', so I did a brief ten-page outline of what I thought they should do, and he took it to the university and they agreed to set up a sculpture department. So then they said, 'This is your sculpture department', a two-storey building, the ground floor of which was a parking space. They said that ground floor and the adjacent space was the sculpture department. I had a certain budget and found a very good technical assistant, a Pom, a North Country man, cabinet maker by trade, Dick Taylor.

DE: Was it important to you to show students the techniques?

HF: The first thing we did was enclose the space under the building and put a couple of walls up and then we built another building into the yard and then a third one into the yard. Bill and I did that after hours and on the weekends, we physically made it. If you work, it gets done pretty quickly. I grabbed students and asked them to come in and help and they did. They were very open to that.

DE: You were there until 1991? Seven years?

HF: I began in 1984 and I don't remember when I finished. They kicked me upstairs. First of all they gave me a fellowship and I became a professor, and then they said you are far too important to attend meetings or things, which is exactly where I needed to be to fight for finance. But I argued for finance for machinery and extensions to the yard etc. They wanted to get an extra two lecturers in art theory, so the safest way was to get me out of the way and so all I had to do was supervise five post-graduates, and that didn't suit me. I don't like reading theses and having to try and comment and tell somebody who is an Englishman that

his English is abominable. However I did that and I don't know when I knocked off. I thought I was there for roughly ten years, maybe less.

DE: I think I got the 1991 date from the Peter Pinson book [*Bert Flugelman*, Watermark Press, 2008].

HF: Well, I am perfectly willing to believe Peter Pinson. However, thinking about it, I'm sure I was there until 1993.

DE: For quite a few sculptors, having to take on teaching has been onerous, but you have said, I think, that ultimately teaching was a real positive for you.

HF: I got a lot from students, really a huge amount.

DE: I read someone who said that your practice was in essence rooted in the idea of mutability, in the essential neutrality of objects, but that content and situation imbues them with meaning.

HF: I'll buy that. Objects are neutral. They don't know anything, they just stand there and then we decide what they are.

DE: You have described yourself as 'interested in rational things'.

HF: The emotional life is a reality and to disregard it is folly, but to wholly go by the emotional ...

DE: Your works themselves and their titles over the past ten years are very different from earlier works. Could it be described as a move closer to nature, the organic?

HF: Nature is geometrical. It forms itself in the most rational way. They are the simplest forms that can possibly be made. That's the Buckminster Fuller 'building blocks of the universe' sort of thing. Of course, there is an end to it. The variations and the opposite holds true as well, I presume. We are dealing with situations where something can be here, where at the same time it is also in Perth. It defies comprehension in normal terms. I think you have to be a mathematician to be able to think sensibly about it. I can't.

DE: What about the notion of drama in your work?

HF: I am a drama queen, if you like.

DE: I don't want to say theatrical, they are not theatrical, but there is drama in your work, an animating principle. You have done a lot of that through surface, and of late, perhaps in terms of more dynamic structures. Any sense of why that has come about – the notion of energising structurally?

HF: I follow my nose. I go where it leads me. One thing suggests the next and then I run with it until something else pops up. You get to the end of it and then there's no more and you move on to something else. The main thing is not to stop.

DE: I think [Robert] Klippel worked like that too.

HF: I admire Klippel very much. His method of working and his drawings, his thinking – I think it was really wonderful.

[End]