

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

Interview with Marr Grounds

30 March 2015

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Marr Grounds on 30 March 2015 at Tanja, 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 as well as the acquisition of important archival material.

About Marr Grounds

Marr Grounds (born 1930) is a sculptor and pioneer of environmental and 'habitable' art. He also lectured in architecture and was involved in establishing the Tin Sheds workshop at the University of Sydney.

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 30 March 2015

Marr Grounds (MG): What always amazed me concerning the stuff I made was that a place like Watters [Gallery, Sydney] or art galleries would buy it. I sold everything! And my partners, like Tony Coleing and others, were always whinging about galleries' grants. I was treated fantastically. I have no complaints at all. But the social aspect of art, I wasn't interested at all. I wouldn't even go to my own openings at Watters.

Deborah Edwards (DE): Really?

MG: No, I don't feel comfortable. I am socially inept in large groups. One to one I am perfectly alright, but an art opening, I was never comfortable. The whole art world didn't interest me. But making art – I loved it.

DE: But surely artists interested you? Are you saying that it was just the market which didn't interest you?

MG: The market, but most artists are a pain in the arse and ego-driven. They are full of themselves.

DE: We can start wherever you like, but mostly in these interviews we start at the beginning and then we move on, I suppose, with questions about your practice and your attitudes threaded through. I've been through a few of your CVs and it would be good to resolve some of the anomalies. I have some information from the Tom McCullough papers as well.

MG: Good old Tom. I've lost contact with him but he was a key person.

DE: He was done over by Mildura Council, wasn't he?

MG: He and Bernice [Murphy] and Leon [Paroissien], were all done over by the system. Really supportive people. It's beyond me – art, politics – incomprehensible, I think.

DE: Tom has submitted a lot of papers to the State Library of Victoria that relate to the Mildura sculpture shows. He's down at Mount Martha in Victoria. So I need first to say, this is Deborah Edwards interviewing Marr Grounds at Tanja, Monday March 30th, 2015.

MG: I just took a dementia test last week and they asked what the date was and I didn't have a clue. So that was a big X [laughs].

DE: This is for the record. I just want you first to confirm firstly that you were born in 1930 but I don't have exactly when.

MG: I forgot [laughs]. 21 October.

DE: Born in Los Angeles when your father, Roy Grounds, was over there.

MG: Sir Roy.

DE: Sir Roy, I apologise.

MG: When he got that nod, he insisted that he be addressed that way.

DE: As a joke?

MG: No, deadly serious. I thought it was a joke but he took it very seriously.

DE: Did he? I've listened to a wonderful interview with Hazel de Berg. I don't know much about her at all but she did a large number of interviews in the 60s with artists, and including others, like your father and she deposited them into the National Library [of Australia] archive. Your father did a most charming and informative interview where he talked about going to Hollywood and about being horrified about war ...

MG: Horrified about war? Well, he was in the war. [Roy Grounds served in the Royal Australian Air Force in World War II.]

DE: He said he became even more horrified after the event and implied perhaps that he had something like a small nervous breakdown.

MG: You know more about my father than I do.

DE: I am sure not. I can give you a copy of the transcript.

MG: I don't know much about my father at all. Got a spare one?

DE: Yes.

MG: [Reading from the transcript] 'I am Roy Grounds ...' This is all new to me. He had a lot of ... He was very verbal but he usually had only one topic of conversation – himself. One of my regrets is that I felt I never really had a father, and when I look back in hindsight, little things come up where I can see that he actually tried to bond with me and I didn't click.

DE: One does get the impression from that interview that he was a workaholic.

MG: Yes, he was.

DE: There seems to be no question of that, and one can perhaps read the explanation of him later in life spending one week of every month down here and then six weeks over Christmas here as part of an antidote that he had to apply to himself for his extreme workaholicism, and that his health seemed to be on the table in relation to it. He does talk twice in that interview about breakdowns. I was just going to ask you then about early life. So you are born on October 21st 1930. Your mother ...

MG: My mother was Regina Marr. She was American. [Virginia Lammers, nee Marr, was an American divorcee.]

DE: So your father met her and married her in LA [Los Angeles, USA]?

MG: Yes, but that's a guess. I think he got deported because he was working in LA, at least that's what he told me. He had a vivid imagination. But that is the memory I have, of an illegal worker in Hollywood. And I was born there, and I came back to Australia with my mother and then they got divorced in the late 30s [actually 1941], and Roy ran off with Tom Ramsay's wife [Alice Bettine Ramsay]. He was 'Mr Kiwi Boot Polish'. It was a scandal in Toorak [an affluent inner-Melbourne suburb].

DE: You are listed as being back in Australia from 1933 to 1939. Six years.

MG: We were living near Frankston [an outer-Melbourne suburb] – Moonbria – where he built his first house.

DE: What happened between 1939 and 1945?

MG: I was in America.

DE: The whole family went back?

MG: My mother and I, not Roy. He was in the RAAF.

DE: Another six years in America. You went to school in LA?

MG: Yes.

DE: And then you are described as being in Australia again from 1945 until 1948, and then the next reference I have is that by 1951 you were in active service in the US Navy.

MG: Yes.

DE: You came back here with your mother after the war finished?

MG: Not with my mother; my mother had remarried. I came back to visit my father.

DE: You stayed for three years. What did you do?

MG: When Roy got out of the RAAF there was a soldiers settlement scheme and he got a block of land north of Melbourne, a place called Buxton, and I ended up there in the bush on a broken-down diary farm.

DE: How was that?

MG: Terrible, especially as I had spent the war years, my teenage years, in California, and I had my own hot-rod. I thought I was cool. Typical arrogant teenager. And I ended up on this bush block with an egocentric dad. I was miserable [laughs].

DE: But you lasted three years and then decided to go back to America?

MG: Yes, I think I ended up in a coaching college called George Taylor and Staff, cramming school down in Melbourne as my education was a mess. I think that college still exists [now Taylors College]. When I got out of the navy – I was in the Korean War – on the GI Bill and I came back to Australia again, what did I do then? Oh, I went to the University of Melbourne, which was a catastrophe.

DE: This is a very chequered early career.

MG: Yes, I was a mess.

DE: It doesn't sound like a mess but you are limbering up to be a cosmopolitan, that's for sure.

MG: [Laughs] But now I am a stable country gentleman!

DE: OK. It's to and fro between a mother and father for some time. You were called up in 1951?

MG: It's complicated. I volunteered to the navy to keep out of being drafted. In Australia you had compulsory conscription. In America you had a thing called draft, drafters conscription.

You could finish your college year before you were called up. So just before the end of the school year, I rushed off. I wanted to be a pilot. If I was going to be anything, I wanted to be a pilot. There was the army, the navy and the marines and they all had a branch of the air force attached to them

DE: And did you train as a pilot?

MG: No, I flunked out, flunking out as in I had defective colourism, a physical thing which I didn't know I had. So I ended up in a deck force. I had joined the aviation cadets to miss the draft, so with my defective colourism they threw me onto a deck gang.

DE: You were there four years and got out as soon as you could.

MG: Yes, well, you were stuck.

DE: What happens immediately after the Korean War? One reference says you are in Australia again 1955–57. But by 1962 you are listed as studying at the University of California at Berkeley. So when did you start to think you wanted to be an artist, or more specifically an architect, like your father?

MG: It's funny, in hindsight, reflecting, I guess he did influence me, although I had no bonding. My half-sister ended up being an architect too. Roy wasn't a standard, loving dad. He was egocentric, an extreme case of that, so it is funny that my half-sister and I trained in architecture. But I think architecture is an incredible degree, because it is broad-based, and after I did my architecture I got more and more involved in art, and at Berkeley I transferred over and did a masters in art. There is a real linkage there. Architecture was broad-based. You could be an engineer from doing that degree. I got a bachelor of architecture, College for Environmental Design, University of Berkeley.

DE: That was by 1965, and you followed with a master of arts (sculpture) in 1966 at the university, and then a teaching credential there also, so you could teach. So when did you decide you wanted to become an artist?

MG: Probably around that time. I had a choice in 1966 of continuing and getting a higher degree, and I was pursuing architecture and art and I chose art. It was a choice I made at the time.

DE: And what was the scene like at Berkeley?

MG: Fantastic! The time of free love.

DE: This was the time of [Allen] Ginsberg and co.

MG: And you knew those guys. I hung out with them, at the City Lights bookstore. Ken Kesey. A relatively small community. Now they're all a little hokey. Berkeley was a melting pot of that sort of thing.

DE: So you were becoming politicised soon after the war? I would assume that you were fed an extremely conservative politics in the navy. Did you have a reaction against the navy? Was it the crucible from which your left-wing politics emerged?

MG: Surely it was a crucible for me and a lot of people, and that's where I met my wife-to-be, Joan Grounds. We were both part of a very politically active group at the time, the anti-Vietnam war, the civil rights movement, that whole format was going on.

DE: She was also a student at Berkeley.

MG: We were both doing our masters in art. That's where I met her.

DE: You thought you wanted to be a sculptor with the masters [degree]. What did you want to do, to be?

MG: Make love, not war [laughs].

DE: Was your architecture degree affected by those counter-culture trends?

MG: It was a traditional degree but everyone was affected by counter culture. It swept the whole campus. It was a very exciting period and what was doubly exciting was when Joan and I ended up in Australia, me with my two degrees and Joan with her two degrees, because after we finished we didn't want anything to do with America. All of the flower-power thing had toppled and when Ronald Reagan became governor [of California] we said, 'Fuck it'. There were only two places in the world that weren't corrupted: one, Fidel Castro's Cuba, and the other, Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana.

DE: And that's how you ended up in Ghana?

MG: Yes, to get out of America.

DE: Were a lot of your associates doing this as well?

MG: Yes, there was a mass exit. With Joan and I, we went through that whole thing in Berkeley, and then went to Ghana, and then miraculously I was offered a job at Sydney University, by Robin Boyd actually, a really great guy, I bonded with him.

DE: In Ghana you were a lecturer in the faculty of science and technology at the University of Kumasi from 1966 to 68, two years. That must have been a shock to the system.

MG: Yes, in the sense that I went to join Kwame Nkrumah because he was the Fidel Castro of Africa, and to help establish a whole new school of architecture out in the rainforest. He had a lot of money, from gold and timber, so he just built this magnificent university in the middle of the jungle and, for Joan and I, it was, 'Wow, Kwame Nkrumah! We've got this great job'. But within days after our arrival there was a military coup and he was shot [laughs].

DE: Good you can laugh about it. That sounds a bit shocking. You had married Joan Grounds?

MG: Yes. I had married her only because you couldn't take your mistress but you had to take your wife, so we shot up to Reno, Nevada and married in a little chapel of the flowers, which took three nanoseconds.

DE: You had signed up to do a certain period there, I assume? A couple of years?

MG: Yes.

DE: Was Joan teaching in Ghana too?

MG: No.

DE: Was she beginning to practise as an artist?

MG: She was parallel to me. She was doing her masters of arts, in sculpture, at the same time as me.

DE: And would that degree have encompassed performance then?

MG: Barely.

DE: So it really was about three-dimensional art?

MG: Yes, but that was barely the cusp of the thing. The very influential critic Lucy Lippard wrote a book which was very important – *The dematerialization of the art object* – and that's when dance companies and events were starting to bubble through.

DE: And you were alive to all of this in Berkeley?

MG: Oh yes. For example, I got involved with Ken Kesey. He did a thing called Trips Festival. There was a bookshop, the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, where Allen Ginsberg was and Jack Kerouac wrote *On the road*. That's where they all hung out, and that's where the beginning of the commune movement was. I would periodically drop out of Berkeley and I started my own commune. We lived in the sculptures we made, had lots of car parties. These big structures I made on the San Francisco hills are from that time. A similar thing was going on in New York. Things like Drop City, where people like Bucky Fuller would make domes, and all the wrecked cars they would chop up with axes. It was a great time!

DE: It seems to have been such an optimistic time: the idea that one could change the world.

MG: The idea was to change the world by example. But what happened was that people sort of gave up when [Richard] Nixon became president [of the United States of America] and they started forming communes, alternate societies, and the pictures [in the file] are what I did with that. I was just one of many who were making ... That is what happened in Australia with Nimbin [a village in northern New South Wales known as a counter-culture hub].

DE: As you started to do your masters, with one foot in the architecture camp and one in the art camp, were you starting to read any of the major art magazines, *Studio International*, *Freeze* etc?

MG: No. [Laughs] I still don't! I do scan occasionally but that is a whole side of the art world that doesn't interest me. I mean, I am not a professional artist. I sort of come from this viewpoint and I ended up having shows, but that isn't where I focus. My colleagues Mike Parr, Ken Unsworth, Tony Coleing were really focused on shows and grants, where the art was sort of bled out of it.

DE: Are you speaking of conceptualism? Were you interested in art as an intellectual exercise?

MG: No, I wasn't an intellectual. I was interested in making things. I like making things. I am the equivalent of the arty in the shed. People like making things. What I didn't like was all of the pretensions and ego-tripping of the art world. I found that not attractive. I would go so far as to say I found it repugnant. Now that I have mellowed ... That is why I am here as a recluse in the bush, because I don't find that lifestyle very attractive. It gives me pleasure to have people like you come and we can have a bit of a rave, but it's nothing to do with my

own life, although I still go up to the shed and make things, whether it is 'art' or stumps [of trees] sitting out in the land. That's why I do it.

DE: So do you consider yourself a sculptor?

MG: Now?

DE: Yes.

MG: No. One is what one does, and I am not very productive now. I am 84, I've got my shed, I like my naps and having a rave occasionally. Another thing about the art world that I didn't like was every Tom, Dick and Harry smoking dope and calling themselves an artist. That is pretentious to me. This whole little district down here: half the people down here are surfers and those on the dole, but they call themselves artists or poets but they aren't writing poetry and they're not making any art, so I am very wary of that word. I don't call myself an artist because I am not putting in eight hours a day, 40 hours a week, doing it.

DE: OK. Going back to Ghana, when you were there, you were lecturing in architecture?

MG: Yes, I was always lecturing in architecture. But one thing which is great about architecture is that it is almost like a liberal arts degree; there is a bit of science, a bit of art, a bit of history – fantastic. And from that I started developing more and more interest in the art side of it.

DE: So you never wanted to be a practising architect?

MG: No. Even this house here I hired one of my students to do it, because the real architecture is a lot of hard work – working drawings, specifications, dealing with budgets, dealing with clients. It's like a business and I had no interest in it. So I hired one of my students to put into practice what I teach. I don't like elitism in architecture, like I don't like elitism in art, so this is an exercise in pre-fab, low-cost housing, and it also has a lot to do with environmental design. It is oriented to the north, has solar cells, is self-sufficient with veggie gardens and an orchard. So in my aging years I wanted to put into practice philosophically and architecturally what I have always raved about, so I got a pre-fab house, low-cost, and it is environmentally sound. For once in my life I have wanted to do what I preach.

DE: But wasn't living in a dome house for 20 years also practising what you preach? Wasn't it the dome house at Bithry [Inlet on the New South Wales south coast at a property known as Penders]?

MG: That's interesting. That barn that you saw there [known as the Barn and designed by Roy Grounds], Roy lived in it when he came up every month, but he had 12 workers who would come in and stock the fridge, make the bed and chop the firewood. And he would only come up during the good season. But living in there with my daughter was impossible, the wind would sweep through, so I built a little hut, which is down there near where the boats are, a little weatherboard shed, which I could heat, I could keep the rats off me, I could have a fridge. Roy built that dome, he was intrigued by Bucky Fuller, but I think it's falling down there. Roy made one sculpture, which I salvaged and remade, in front of the barn. I think he made it when Joan and I were coming to Australia and he knew we were serious artists and he wanted to make a bid. I think, in hindsight, that he was trying to bond and I missed the signals, which makes me sad now. In the art world there is a lot of ego – Ron Robertson-Swann, Mike Parr ...

DE: Did your mother have a profession?

MG: No, she was a real product of the roaring 20s.

DE: When you got to Ghana and they had the coup, how was the staying on? Difficult?

MG: Disillusioning, because I had fantasised about it. Here is this emerging country in Africa. I had been interested in 'primitive art' and there were great people in the villages making it. Ghana was the first independent African country at the time. And Kwame Nkrumah was brought up in the London School of Economics. He was branded a communist, but he was enlightened, in my opinion. He built this brand new university right in the jungle, so I left Berkeley and the civil rights movement. I was fed up with America in general. I was either going to Cuba or to Ghana.

DE: Cuba would have been closer to home.

MG: But I wasn't offered a great job in Cuba. Travel [to Cuba] was also banned at that time.

DE: I think it still is for Americans. When I travelled there ten years ago I had to get a detachable visa so that when I went into the US after Cuba, no one would know.

MG: Stop it! Stop it! It's all coming back to me! [Laughs] I visited Cuba, way back when he [Fidel Castro] had just taken over, and I had to do a similar thing. I hitchhiked to Florida and a sailboat came in, I went down to the docks and there was a kind of island trader and I worked my way down that way, and when I left I had to fly to Mexico to get out.

DE: You are an American citizen still or have joint citizenship?

MG: I renounced my American citizenship about ten years ago, I was so fed up with them, but it was a mistake, but anyway ... My protest didn't change things at all!

DE: I blame America for the Hunters and Shooters Party here, but we mustn't go there. Would you have been concerned about a backlash in going back to America after time in Ghana?

MG: I didn't go back to America! That's how we found our way to Australia. There had been a military coup, and it was particularly disillusioning as I had fantasised about their art and their villages. And all of my students in Ghana were chiefs' sons and they didn't give a stuff about the country, they just wanted to make a lot of money, so I was totally disillusioned again [laughs]. So through Robin Boyd, and I guess my father, I was offered a job at the University of Sydney. That's how I ended up here, because I was running away from everything.

DE: Had you enjoyed the lecturing though? Were you developing skills in being a didact?

MG: Yes, a fantastic lifestyle. I really enjoy teaching. Raving like this with the students, who were youthful and their energy was fantastic. I partook at Sydney University of early voluntary retirement, because after the Whitlam years, there were massive cutbacks in the economy, and I'd relied on part-time staff, and I started off by employing students as teachers, but that dropped out. But also the students were not interested in that stuff at all. Their favourite person was Harry Seidler. Issues like that. I had Germaine Greer in there as a tutor but they didn't want anything to do with that. Harry Seidler, Philip Cox. I would make raves like this to students but they didn't want to hear me, they wanted Seidler.

DE: That was by the early 80s, wasn't it?

MG: Yes, they weren't interested in me and I wasn't interested in them. I would talk about environmental design and they wanted to talk about colour, about painting the facade of the building. I wasn't interested.

DE: Campuses are full of the new conservatism, have been since the 1980s. Was Joan Grounds happy to come to Australia, rather than the US, from Ghana?

MG: She basically felt the same. She was very involved in the Sydney University art workshop, the Tin Sheds. Joan and I and Donald Brook founded that.

DE: By stealth.

MG: Yes. We moved into some abandoned CSR old sheds and it grew from there, and then the Earthworks posters came out – that was fantastic.

DE: You were appointed in 1968 as a lecturer in the architecture department of Sydney University. Was Lloyd Rees still there then?

MG: Yes. He was an institution, a real gentleman. He would never talk like I am talking now. He was a real gentleman, a lovely guy. Old-fashioned art in the old tradition – he was part of that generation.

DE: Yes, although Donald Friend was from that generation and he was nothing if not critical.

MG: Yes, he was like me – outspoken, cantankerous, alienated people [laughs].

DE: Well, he was a bit of a bitch. Donald Brook soon ran into trouble with Bernard Smith about the Tin Sheds, didn't he? What Donald said to me was that the initiative ... Actually, I assume that you met Donald Brook early on?

MG: We never really bonded but we were both part of all of these movements. Donald is a special case, as you probably know. But sure, we were both involved in the Tin Sheds and had the similar philosophies of art.

DE: He went through his own process of becoming politicised in the 60s, and also moved to an interest in a form of sculpture which was nothing like the sculpture he had been trained in, in England. And he went to Nigeria for a while, though he was sculpting very traditional heads when there. He also read Lucy Lippard. My impression, from him anyway, is that in relation to the university courses and regulations, there needed to be a place where architecture students could have some training in drawing, the life model etc, and for the Power Department he was interested in having practical courses alongside the art history and theory.

MG: And the architecture students. The Tin Sheds serviced architecture and fine art.

DE: Bernard Smith thought it was something that it wasn't?

MG: He hated it in the beginning, but when it became a success he claimed it. He wanted to change the name to the Fine Arts University Workshop.

DE: The Tin Sheds took off in 1968. How did you find the architecture department?

MG: Great. It was reliving Berkeley. Joan and I went through these incredible years in Berkeley, and then we came to Sydney for the fantastic years of [Gough] Whitlam [who was Australian prime minister, 1972–75].

DE: So it was a very optimistic scene. I have read somewhere that, like Donald Brook, you supported the idea that art was best taught in the university environment.

MG: Bernard Smith hated that. He called me over there when I first arrived and the whole thing was developing. He called me over, looked down his nose, and said, 'Art should be taught at the tech schools, along with the bakers and the butchers, and have nothing to do with the university'. But then when the Tin Sheds took off he tried to claim it.

DE: Were you basically setting it up as an experimental art studio? Donald and you and Joan, and how did Bert Flugelman come in?

MG: He was employed. He was funded from [the departments of] architecture and fine arts, the first person on the payroll. He was teaching sculptural things and Lloyd Rees was teaching 'proper art' – drawing, plaster, the Renaissance thing. Bert – silk screening, electric welding. There were elective courses for fine art and architecture students, and then it just blew, it took off. That was the beginning.

DE: And were you instructing in the Tin Sheds courses too?

MG: I did, a little bit, because [for] Joan and I, like any artists, studio space was critical. Because of our position, we ended up having one of the many tin sheds, which was about this big [makes a small gesture], which was our studio, and we felt obligated, for getting free studio space, to teach, so we both taught as well. Same with Earthworks posters. They got space and also taught students. A lot of well-known people went through that.

DE: Were you mainly pushing environmental art and architecture and sustainability in your architecture courses?

MG: That's what I was interested in. I don't want to sound too critical, but I wasn't interested in Seidler and [Glenn] Murcutt stuff. Like elitist art doesn't interest me, elitist architecture doesn't interest me very much, but the whole movement, what they call environmental art ...

DE: And was the architecture department a sympathetic environment for such teaching?

MG: We had a Dane there, Peter Johnson, who was sympathetic, or at least tolerant.

DE: Where did you live? Just in the context of pragmatic details.

MG: We had a tin shed in Glebe for a couple of years, and finally I bought a vacant block in Balmain and hired one of my students to handle all of the mechanics in building a house there. When Joan and I got divorced, I got chewed up and ended up in Paddington at that old factory with Tony Coleing, an old tobacco factory.

DE: There is a 1985 brochure for an architecture course that you ran, and in it you said, 'The aim is to explore the interface of art and architecture, and to place art and architecture into a socio-political context'.

MG: Sounds like me [laughs].

DE: Is that a good summary of a politic that you developed from the mid 60s onwards?

MG: Yes. I am a product of the 60s, and I still feel that way. I think it is generally accepted now, that could be part of the green platform now.

DE: I think your role as an educational innovator has been an important one.

MG: I want to emphasise this: it is through no 'genius' on my part, I am a product of that era.

DE: Well, you are a particular product of that era, an idiosyncratic or individual product.

MG: Yes, but what I'm talking about, general public sympathetic to the environment, its relevance etc, all these things, universities or academies didn't talk or think in that way.

DE: A lot relates to when your brain actually switches on, doesn't it?

MG: Well, it switched on relatively early. Unfortunately you've caught me just at the end because I've just had my driving licence removed because they think I'm suffering from dementia [laughs]. So I'm glad you've caught me today and not tomorrow [laughs]. They came here to test me for dementia and one of the things they asked me was, 'What's the date?' I don't have a watch. I don't watch what day it is.

DE: I guess once you are over 80 they test you every year, do they?

MG: I think they should watch people. I just resent that they yanked my licence before testing me. They should test me and, if I'm incompetent, they should remove my licence. I was judged guilty before innocence, that's what I object to. But I'm not very good with people in uniform. When a cop pulled me over and I said, 'Why don't you do something serious like catch another cop?' – bomb!

DE: Can you contest it?

MG: Oh yeah. Imagine me living here, alone, without a car. It's very difficult. It's not as though I can walk around. But it's OK. I just object to the way they handled it.

DE: Was David Saunders in the architecture department when you were there?

MG: Yes, good old David.

DE: Did you go to the Clement Greenberg lecture in 1968 at the Power Department ['Avant-garde attitudes: new art in the sixties', the first Power Institute lecture]?

MG: I doubt it.

DE: Do you remember *The field* exhibition?

MG: Can I interrupt you for a minute?

DE: Are you happy carrying on?

MG: Yes, I am, because this is a treat for me. I am a recluse.

DE: You are perhaps the most non-reclusive recluse I have met. You don't seem reclusive at all.

I am wondering if you could describe yours and Joan's Sydney milieu in the late 1960s, who you associated with. The Tin Sheds started to have quite strong links to Inhibodress and other experimental groups, didn't you?

MG: As far as I know the Tin Sheds was the only experimental venue at that time. Then Inhibodress – Mike Parr, Peter Kennedy – grew out of that, and then they proliferated,

alternate art spaces. The Tin Sheds was very important, and then there were alternatives all over the place.

DE: Were you an active player on the Sydney art scene? My impression is that your first show might not have been till *Morphological structures* at Watters in 1975.

MG: If that's what it says on there. Yes, 1975. That was my first one-man show in Australia.

DE: But you were getting to know people on the art scene before that? Peter Kennedy, Mike Parr, Tim Johnson, you got to know quite well. A meeting of the minds?

MG: Yes, well, Mike Parr, we were interested in post-object art, but Mike Parr – you have probably interviewed him, he is very important historically, he should be on your list ... Inhibodress was a little like the Tin Sheds.

DE: Ian Milliss?

MG: Ian Milliss is a very interesting person. He always had a contempt for the art world. He was always an intellectual and thoughtful guy.

DE: In the same way, perhaps, as you took the politic that you had developed in California to Ghana, he took his own view of where the development of art should go out of the market and into real life. For so many artists at the time, it was all about taking art out into real life, wasn't it? Of moving art away from what you have called 'elitist practices'.

MG: And Ian Milliss finally ended up in the [trade] union movement. I suspect because the art world was just so corrupt, he didn't want a bar of it. I feel a bit the same way, not actively.

DE: It has struck me that there was an enormous amount of conflict at this time, that there are very serious battles between artists – between Milliss and Parr, for example – each have conflicting views of what went on in that period. There was a very strong investment in those issues and those positions at this time.

MG: Definitely.

DE: I don't know whether it is the same now.

MG: I don't think so. I don't think it's relevant anymore. It's just a footnote in history. I am so detached from it all that I don't know and I don't have a sense of it. That's one of the main reasons that I left Sydney University. I kept going along at Sydney University and I was very interested in the students, but they weren't interested in what I was interested in.

DE: Ian Milliss has just written a contentious article in *Artlink* – apocalyptic.

MG: He was always a really bright guy. This here, this house, was an attempt to do everything I had lectured on, to be self-sufficient.

DE: How did you meet Tony Coleing? Or Daniel Thomas? Did you get to know him?

MG: Yes, the art critic. He was a very sound, sensible and generous person, Daniel.

DE: How was your show *Morphological structures*, your first show, reviewed?

MG: Well, I sold everything. I sold everything I ever made. I haven't sold any black stumps though [a reference to very large works on land near his house].

All that formalist stuff isn't interesting or relevant anymore.

DE: But I think at the time, in the mid-late 60s, there was a lot of discussion about Greenberg and formalism and other issues he threw up.

MG: I'm a shed bloke. I like making things, the physicality of it. Everyone likes making things. I think it's very healthy the way art has gone, the dematerialisation of it, video, multimedia, performance. It's very exciting, but I still like making things.

DE: Did there start to be a conflict then for you in the late 60s between the 'dematerialisation of the art object' and 'making things'?

MG: Not at all. There is not a conflict, they are parallel. I didn't find [conceptualism] a threat, I found it interesting.

DE: You participated in the Mildura [Sculpture Triennial] 1973 show. Were you getting around with sculptors in those years?

MG: All the names you mention – Kennedy, Coleing, Parr etc – I gravitated to because they had stimulating ideas. Ron Robertson-Swann, for example, I found a dullard. He was an Antipodean [Anthony] Caro and he was threatened by all of this stuff – anger! What he had to say just wasn't very interesting. I think Swann is a very competent Caroesque artist but I don't find it very interesting intellectually. And I think Kennedy, Millis and Parr were much broader. I didn't agree with Mike Parr but I found intellectually that he was involved with ideas. And I look upon sculpture or art, the parts that interest me, as just a manifestation of ideas, but the aesthetics of admiring a Caroesque thing are very limited in scope. I don't find it stimulating. I can enjoy a Ron Robertson-Swann [work] but so what?

DE: Formalism itself was shown to be a narrow game finally. But one of the myths of conceptualism, which was a backlash to formalism, both of them believed art prior to them had nothing to do with conceptualism or formalism, which is ridiculous. Isn't it just how the mix works?

MG: Nigel Lendon should be on your list. He is a very articulate person with balanced opinions. He lives in Canberra.

DE: Yes. Were you one of the architecture lecturers who took a group of students down to Mildura sculpture events?

MG: Sure, fantastic.

DE: Was 1973 the first one you were involved in? It was called *Sculpturscape*.

MG: Yes.

DE: Can you remember the work you had in that show?

MG: Not offhand.

DE: Did you take a group of sculpture students down to that show?

MG: I don't think I did take students down there. Imants Tillers was a student of mine and I arranged his first exhibition at Watters Gallery. And Alec Tzannes, who is now dean of

architecture [Tzannes was dean of the faculty of the built environment at the University of New South Wales 2016–18]. I think they both went down.

DE: Are you able to outline what Mildura represented at the time, the way it was viewed by you guys at Sydney University?

MG: It was fantastic. It was a very informal melting pot of artists together installing and making their artworks in a communal manner and, as far as I know, it hasn't been replicated. Poor old Tom McCullough later got chewed up by art politics machinery, and now there are triennials and biennales but it is a different – you get your degree, you do your stuff – but there were people actually doing their stuff on site, and sleeping and cooking, so it was fantastic, I loved it. It was a sort of Nimbin equivalent.

DE: Can you remember how long you were involved in it? Were you involved right up until the time it relocated to Melbourne Uni or RMIT campus in 1981? What is that CV you have there? I think it might be better than anything I have.

MG: I think I made you one.

[Followed by comments regarding some Grounds works, which had been with the Art Gallery of New South Wales]

DE: OK, what do you think Mildura did then for Australia? There was a period when interesting New Zealand sculptors came over, Jim Allen and the like. I am assuming there was a lot of debate and discussion?

MG: I would call it informal dialogue around the campfire. We'd be there camped out, eating and cooking and drinking too much. For instance, Ron Robertson-Swann had his yellow object on the lawn and we would go down and piss on it. It was informal. We were camping together and making our stuff. Tom McCullough had a couple [of sculpture exhibitions] down in Melbourne, but it wasn't that environment. I did one of my more interesting pieces down there.

DE: Was that the Lake piece?

MG: Yes, this is a replica of it [pointing]. I did that and, I remember, I did glass and water at La Trobe.

DE: Didn't you then take that work over to Toronto?

MG: Yes, to Los Angeles and Toronto, which was not successful. Well, I'm judging my own work. That piece at Mildura was, in my opinion, one of the more interesting pieces I did.

DE: By that stage were you becoming increasingly open to any materials and any techniques?

MG: Well, I like materials. The current generation is into digital. I think it's great, but I am old-fashioned, I have a workshop, I like responding to material, not in a highly crafted way, like these stumps are left after clearing the site and I responded to them.

DE: These are the up-ended stump sculptures. You would have needed a crane for this?

MG: I had the machinery then, bulldozers and cranes when we were clearing the site.

DE: In your degrees at Berkeley did you do all of those practical courses? Welding?

MG: Yes, welding, ceramics, glass-blowing, it was all part of it, the masters in art. You were required to do practical work and theory.

DE: What was your major work for the masters? And if you did a thesis, what was that on?

MG: Well, it was practical, it wasn't theoretical.

DE: OK. In 1973, *Message sticks*.

MG: Yes, that was my first show at Watters.

DE: There was also an Aleks Danko and Richard Tipping show. Did you know them?

MG: Yes, very well. Aleks used to be one of my best mates.

DE: The curator Glenn Barkley at the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney] is doing a show on Danko.

MG: Glenn Barkley, he's a wonderful guy.

DE: Tipping and Danko had done a work which was called *Soft riots* and you had done works called *Soft riot, leadwrap over bushwood* and *Soft riot, sheepskin wrap over bushwood*, which you said were 'sympathetic derivations' from the works that had been in the joint show of Tipping and Danko at Watters in December 1975. The interesting thing is that the strong thrust of that joint show was audience participation. So how important was such participation for you? The whole notion of the interactivity of the artwork.

MG: I had always probed that thing. I had exchange pieces – *Message sticks*. I had my workbench at Watters and I had a bunch of blocks of wood and some glue and other things, and anyone who came in was invited to graffiti them, to write on them and assemble them. A similar thing. You probably saw Yoko Ono's show? That was being done here at about the same time as the Yoko Ono show was on. I went up there with my daughter and she had a pile of glue and people made art. Well, that was totally independent, but that was the same thing. That's what that was all about.

DE: And how did people respond?

MG: Yes, kids would respond, everyone. It's a hands-on thing. It was a play situation. It gets back to my thing that everyone's an artist. Kids on the beach make sandcastles.

DE: But is everyone a good artist?

MG: I will leave that up to you to judge. That's the question. But everyone likes to create things. Everyone has a creative streak in them.

DE: But some more than others. I think we do make judgements all of the time.

MG: Of course we do. Like I don't like Ron Robertson-Swann [laughs]. It's part of a culturally informed decision I make.

DE: I guess what your saying is: 'I don't like Ron Robertson-Swann but other people might. I am not going to say it's not good art. I am just going to say that I don't find his art interesting.'

MG: Of course, whether it's good art or bad art is not for me to judge. I'm trying to be diplomatic.

DE: And that's the thing. I respect your views but I do think that one makes judgements about the resolution of artworks, let's put it that way, which is pretty much that one decides whether the art in question is significant or not. That's what curators say because curators spend their lives judging.

So *Message sticks* went well. Would you accept that people would probably say that that work/those works was your move into conceptualism, and would you accept that people would think of you as a conceptualist?

MG: No, I don't think so, because I'm using materials.

DE: Yes, but you are also setting up propositions.

MG: That's the case with everything I've done. Are you familiar with the one of mine in the Art Gallery of New South Wales [*Second art bit installation* 1976]? The sandbags, very material. I was there and I was interested in interaction with the public. I was in there with a hound dog. Anyone who discovered me, we would make art together and have a little chat. It wasn't just the sandbags, it was the labyrinth, the discovery.

DE: You are saying that your art has never been about a flight from the object, it has not been about a conceptual proposition alone, but it has actually been ...

MG: An in-your-face materials art, with ideas.

DE: But as time has moved on, the entirely conceptualist art, the art of a list of propositions or instructions on the gallery wall, has come to be seen as something of an arid end game for many, and most artists remain materially based, whether performative or not. There has remained a very strong material basis with artists who would describe themselves as conceptualists so maybe part of the problem is with the terms. I take your point that if you begin on the path of being an architect or an artist wanting to manipulate material then it is very hard to leave that entirely behind.

MG: Well, for me and for my generation. If I was born again, I would probably get wrapped up in video and performance. But I like welding and bronze casting. I still like the materiality of things. But if I was one of the young generation, brought up on a computer, things would be different, and I think that is just as valid. I made a lot of films and videos and stuff as well.

DE: How did you get into video?

MG: It was just documentation. I did a lot of the stuff, like *Dingo fence*, *Berlin Wall*, the only relics of those would be documentation – films or video, drawings – and then I would bring back relics of those and re-install them in a different context at Watters Gallery. Like this one, which was done on *The dingo fence*, bags of wool which were all along the dingo fence. It was in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. There was a big materiality of the things there brought into an urban context and documented, usually documented in both, and playing the same materials into the environment. That's what the films and videos are about.

DE: Were you able to juggle these things with your academic career?

MG: Oh yes, because they all mesh to me.

DE: You had a highly active and prominent practice through the 70s as well as a full load,

I presume, as a teacher.

MG: Those were the good old days [laughs].

DE: 1976. I have a note that you showed in the *Alternative technology sculpture* exhibition at Autonomous House, University of Sydney. Can you tell me anything about that? I couldn't find any information on it.

MG: I was very involved with the Tin Sheds, with architecture and with alternative technology, and our students built some alternative technology. It might have been part of that.

DE: Perhaps it was a student project?

MG: Perhaps we had an open house down there.

DE: OK. 1976–1977, *Alberto stripped four reconstituted*, presented by you as a 'rental sculpture' for Martin Place, Sydney, involving four commissioned lead poems stamped on a lead pyramid, and also one 'non-commissioned lead statement' by Terry Smith, also 'freelance scratches' by friends, and then anyone who wanted to come along to the event could participate.

MG: You know the response to Ron Robertson-Swann? Outdoor art is always vandalised and graffitied. You know there was that big thing about the work of his they called 'the Yellow Peril' [*Vault*]. Swann was outraged by it. Mine was a response to that: 'OK, graffiti it!' I encouraged people to graffiti it. So I actually had inscribed on the lid ... Well, I commissioned to start it off, I think, Terry Smith. He wrote a poem – this was during the Whitlam years – something about 'Fuck Kerr'.

DE: Yes, exactly. Terry Smith wrote: 'Kerr – Cursed; Frazer [with a swastika] – Fascist; Lynch should be lynched; Murderers of democracy. Maintain the rage!'

MG: Terry Smith! [Laughter] This whole dilemma of public art being graffitied. Ron Robertson-Swann, he was outraged. My work was against that, an invitation to graffiti. Do I sound like Ron Robertson-Swann? An opinionated old fart? [Laughs]

DE: Ah no, you don't. You sure don't sound your age. You sound like a 35 year old.

MG: Why then do the cops call me demented?

DE: I just don't know. [Laughter] Probably something to do with your attitude. [Laughter]

DE: OK, *The art thing*. *The art thing* was part of your installation at the 1976 Sydney Biennale. Two dogs, Mutt and Peter. You inhabited a sandbag bunker that you entitled *The art thing* that you built under the stairs and people could visit and contribute to your 'evolving concept of a participatory art practice'.

MG: That's well stated! Who wrote that?

DE: Not me sadly. It goes on, 'Visitors to *The art thing* poured sand onto prepared "art bit cards" and then took them away as part of their own work'.

MG: That is totally consistent with what we have been talking about.

[Followed by a short discussion about elitism]

DE: But the market itself. Don't you think this is one of the problems of being an artist in the late capitalist age? Your enemy is the market in that sense. And in the 60s, the market was considered the enemy by many artists.

MG: I'm not against it, it's just irrelevant. I'm thankful that everything I ever made has been sold. And I really think that people in the art world – Frank Watters, Bernice [Murphy] and Leon [Paroissien] and Tom McCullough, the people I knew then, and I am sure there were other people – were fantastic. But when I made my art, I wasn't interested in the machinery of making it or promoting it and so I was very thankful for people like Frank who did a great job. I am just using their names. There were a lot of people in the art community like that.

DE: There are also a lot of people who are dealers, pure and simple – dealers.

MG: Frank Watters was an art dealer.

DE: But Frank and Geoffrey [Legge] are one-offs. I think they have been considered unique in the art world for three or four decades.

MG: Why, because they are homosexual?

DE: Ah no, because that's hardly unique! Because they have maintained extraordinary loyalty to their stable. They got artists early and they haven't let them go. They were also highly experimental. They took risks for their artists, and sometimes paid the consequences of those, and they are also sympathetic to, indeed enmeshed in, what art is all about. Whereas for a whole lot of others it is simply the buying and selling of art.

MG: Plus all the glamour.

DE: The rate now is at least 54 percent for the dealer and 46 percent for the artist. That's a bit remarkable

MG: The way I feel about it – I think Frank took a third or a quarter – and I was so thankful, that I could make it and he could flog it. What a fantastic deal. I could make and enjoy it, and then I didn't want to look at it again. I guess I'm not a very good artist. I'm interested in making it but I don't want to look at it. When I'm making art, I'm interested in the history, the process. I'm not interested in it as a precious object that I want to hang. So when Frank Watters would flog it, wow, it meant that I could go back and make something else. So he earned his money, he earned more than it. Does Watters [Gallery] still exist?

DE: Yes. Frank might be in his late seventies?

MG: More my age, I think. [Followed by comments on Frank Watters' health]

DE: Yes. OK, the Biennale [of Sydney] work. How did that go? Did it work well for you?

MG: Oh, yes. Tom McCullough did that Biennale before he got axed in the art world. A whole new generation came in after that, as far as I know anyway. How would I know though? [Laughs]

DE: Who was the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales at the time? Did they take kindly to this? It was disruptive art, you living basically under the stairs. Did they let you come and go as you pleased?

MG: Virtually, yes, with my two dogs. If people found me in this labyrinth, we would do art together, just like Yoko Ono. It's funny, it sounds like name dropping, but Yoko Ono was doing it. It was kind of universal, this way of thinking. She was doing in New York what I was doing there.

DE: There is a zeitgeist to all of this, isn't there? And the whole thing about the elitism becomes the base for a set of small revolutions in art at this time across various locations, doesn't it? And participation ...

MG: These things could be interpreted as anti-elitism through the vehicle of art.

DE: And at the time wouldn't the Art Gallery of New South Wales have represented the pinnacle of a kind of conservative art elitism? So these are then subversive gestures, aren't they? And they are going on in other places. Who was the artist, I will try and remember his name, who brought a slaughtered animal to the steps of the NGV [National Gallery of Victoria] in the 70s?

MG: My god. You are going to be hopeless at 84!

DE: Yes, I know. The Biennale work went well you thought. It was a success.

MG: Yes, I thought it went well.

DE: And the duration?

MG: I was there every day, with my dogs.

DE: And then after that a lot of things happened to you. You went to the Cité [Internationale des Arts] in Paris in 1977 and you got an artist's residency in New York in 1977. Was that a sabbatical in teaching?

MG: Leave of absence. They were pretty flexible in those days. I would get these little fringe things and I could just walk off with full pay. Those days are done.

DE: What came out of those residencies?

MG: I did some exchange pieces at the Cité, which were all sold. I would half-complete a little box, and I would exchange it with another artist – Aleks Danko did one, Imants Tillers also. They would participate and when they were completed they were all sold at Watters. They were all colleagues and friends.

DE: An amplification of the *Message sticks*?

MG: Exactly, exactly, and the same as the work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Art can be a community and a democratic process. It doesn't have to be elitist.

DE: I think I remember reading that with the exchange boxes you said a third would go to you, a third to the gallery and a third to the one who completed the work – a very equal split.

MG: Yes, of course.

DE: What kind of critical favour were you held in at the time? Were you getting the 'I've got a migraine' reviews from James Gleeson? Donald Brook would have been reviewing you, wouldn't he?

MG: I don't remember many. One I remember was Daniel Thomas. He was a very sweet guy but he wasn't a severe critic on anything. I never remember a bad review, except once, and I couldn't believe it [laughs]. He was well known. John McDonald. He reviewed a show I had in Ivan Dougherty [Gallery, Paddington] and panned it. I couldn't believe it as I'd never had a bad review [laughs]. He picked up on one Aleks Danko did. These were the exchange pieces [*The Berlin Wall* works]. And I had canvases the same size. He was just ghastly.

DE: He can be unnecessarily savage, John McDonald.

MG: Well he's doing his job. He didn't like it. Fair enough. But it surprised me that I was really pissed off [laughs].

DE: I think it's probably very hard to bat off bad reviews, which is why so many artists never read them.

MG: I get that.

DE: OK. 1978, *Oxide Street Junction*. This is a very interesting project. You headed up there to the north-west corner of NSW with three university students, although one of them seems to be a visiting Californian professor of economics, John Leddell.

MG: Yes.

DE: And Doog Anthony. I actually remember Doog Anthony. I went through uni with him.

MG: Will I tell you a tale about that? I was teaching architecture and I started a thing called block teaching. Rather than the students doing a whole term of architecture, they could come and work with me in the outback for a month in block teaching, and one of the students who elected to do it was Doog Anthony. We went up there and did that installation and we made a film – you might have seen it, *Oxide Street Junction* – and on that you'll see Doog Anthony, and he showed it to his father, who was Doug Anthony MP, and his father was so pissed off that I had taken his son and wasted the taxpayers' money. I gave him a term's design teaching up there. We would be talking up there, we would talk about the environment, about materials. But Doug Anthony got a hold of the senate of Sydney University and complained bitterly about all of this [laughs].

DE: What happened?

MG: They just reprimanded me.

DE: And on you went. That must have been chronically embarrassing for Doog Anthony.

MG: Yes, and he's one of my old students that I keep in touch with every once in a while.

DE: The 40-minute film, *Oxide Street Junction*, we should have at the Art Gallery of New South Wales but we don't. You went to the far north-western corner. That was an interesting conjunction of environment, artwork, architecture, film, which you then applied to *The Berlin Wall* work little later on, didn't you?

MG: The film I made as a comparison, *The dingo fence* and *The Berlin Wall*, and the film actually cuts between the two.

DE: And both seen as environmental disasters, weren't they?

MG: The critical thing is here [reads]: 'The dingo fence stretches across the continent of Australia for 5000 kilometres. It was erected to prevent northern dingos from snatching the occasional sheep from the south, but its length is littered with the carcasses of nomadic animals seeking food and water. It is an ecological disaster. A lethal monolith which symbolises man's arrogant misunderstanding of mother Earth, his separation from nature.

'The Berlin Wall separates man from man and makes West Berlin an artificial and vulnerable island in a political power game. The visual impact of the wall perversely depicts its dehumanising consequences. Within this context, the artwork and film exchange was conceived. It refers to a previous artwork called *Oxide Street* which was recently made on a dingo fence in central Australia. This contrasting urban and rural environments on two sides of the world have been my reference. The visual key to the artwork and film is these two enormous worlds of misunderstanding. Marr Grounds, 1982.'

That's a bloody good statement. I didn't know I was capable of being so articulate. That summarises everything we've been yapping about, you know, environmental art, and I taught environmental architecture.

DE: You must be interested in the green Central Park building in Sydney.

MG: Yes, it's great. I think architecturally the world just gets better and better. The whole environmental consciousness of the world, on every level, to me is very gratifying. In the old days I was a fart in a windstorm. Everyone is involved now, in different ways.

DE: In the late 70s when you were doing these works, did you have a level of optimism that things could radically change? Perhaps the last vestiges of that are gone by the early 1980s. Optimism is swapped for pessimism. Would you agree?

MG: Well, I'm a recluse down here. I don't know what's going on. That sort of sentiment might have drifted away from the art world but I have some hopes, so to speak, because people generally are much more environmentally aware. It's in the press etc. This is a feeble little artist-academic saying something but everyone is aware of the environment now.

DE: Well, it's at a point of crisis, isn't it? It's now entirely acute.

MG: I don't think the world is done but I fear for my daughter.

DE: Why is the work called *Oxide Street Junction*?

MG: I never liked titling my work, but I got that out of the basket, because in Broken Hill the streets are named Oxide Street, Coal Street, so it was a whim from that.

DE: How did local residents respond?

MG: That treatment of film in itself ... That woman [imitates voice]: 'Those people coming up here working on the dingo fence!' ...

DE: OK. *Narrabeen Lagoon*, 1978, is also listed as having had a film made on it, a 35-minute black-and-white video with sound by the Sydney University sound unit. Does that ring any bells with you?

MG: No.

DE: OK. I'll talk to Stephen Jones about it. He might know. And the exchange boxes were also shown at the George Paton Gallery in Melbourne?

MG: Yes.

DE: What about *Sculpture at the top ends*? A book.

MG: The Art Gallery of New South Wales should have a copy of that. I'm surprised you don't have it.

DE: No, we don't. We have *Down under*. I did get some stuff from Watters' archive, and I also got some stuff from Tom McCullough.

[Break in interview]

DE: There was a reference to you submitting a maquette for a sculpture to go into Martin Place, by invitation, in 1977. Do you recall that? There is nothing else on file.

MG: I remember works being put into Martin Place temporarily. They weren't maquettes though, and that's when I put the lead poems work in.

DE: Ah, OK, so were you uninterested in sculpture being permanent at this time? Did the notion of art's ephemerality begin to interest you in the 1970s?

MG: I was never really interested in the idea of public art.

DE: The set up of Avago galleries. Claimed as the smallest non-art gallery in the Southern Hemisphere.

MG: The biggest little non-art gallery, you mean.

DE: Something like that. It was for, quote, 'non-artworks, artworks, exhibition statements and documentation', with Leon Paroissien as the national director and Marr Grounds and Tony Coleing as its project officers. Can you tell me about the conception of this space? I think you have already said that it was located at the ex-tobacco factory building in Paddington that you had purchased. How did that come about in 1980?

MG: It started during that Biennale, with an American artist, Michael McMillen, who was staying with me. He was kind of large. It was a tradition in New York and elsewhere of shop-front galleries, so we just put one by the front door. It was sort of a democratising of art. Ros Oxley was outraged by it being there. She took herself pretty seriously, Ros.

DE: Did she try and do anything about it?

MG: No, but she was not amused.

DE: You had a range of interesting artists, like Marilyn Fairskye and Robert Owen, participate.

MG: Do you have a copy of it [the Avago book]? We had different curators, like Bonita Ely ran it for a year, I ran it for a year. They put out similar publications.

DE: And how was it funded, given that the Australia Council refused to fund it?

MG: For \$1.98 a year. It was no big deal. We owned the place, Tony Coleing and I. We bought it. We didn't have enough money for a terrace house across the road, but we bought it. Tony and I, typical struggling artists, we were looking for a studio. And it was an old

abandoned tobacco factory, full of wrecked machinery. It had been on the market for about five years. We bought it for half as much as the terrace house across the road, \$110,000.

DE: But you had to get all of the machinery out?

MG: You see, I hired my architecture students [laughs]. I paid them for each floor. We had pot plants.

DE: Did Avago achieve what you wanted it to achieve?

MG: Yes. It was great fun.

DE: How long did it go for? About two years?

MG: More than that. We had different curators. It was a bit of work. You had to get the artist in. I did it for a year. Tony Coleing did it for a year. His girlfriend Shane Hickson did it for a year, and Bonita Ely did it for a year. I think this documentation [indicates material] is for the year I did it.

DE: This is from April to December 1980. Did you sell the factory after those curatorial periods?

MG: We ran out of steam. It was quite a bit of work opening it.

DE: I remember Peter Kennedy saying the same about Inhibodress. It was a cooperative with however many turned up to that foundation meeting but a few dropped by the wayside immediately.

MG: I think I went to that, but I couldn't stand it. Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy were having a shoot out or something, ego shit going on.

DE: In the end they basically folded because someone had to be there 24/7 virtually. Very hard to do if you are trying to do your own work.

MG: Mike Parr would, I think, be a very difficult person to get on with. A lot of egos there.

DE: 1981, the First [Australian] Sculpture Triennial. You have talked a little about that, and you have talked a little about heading off to the Toronto sculpture exhibition that you then went to do, also in 1981. I think you have said that when you participated in the Melbourne 1981 sculpture triennial that you already knew you were going to participate in the Toronto exhibition. I am wondering how Anita Aarons came into all of that.

MG: Through Tom McCullough or someone. Anita Aarons ran the Harbourfront Gallery there [in Toronto]. I think it was a municipal gallery.

DE: How did the Canadian show work for you? I think you have said somewhere that it didn't work as well for you as the Melbourne exhibition.

MG: Well, everything about the Melbourne one was spot on. I used the same theme – I think it was called *Sun trap* – and part of it was using mirrors and tracking the sun over reflection, over sunrise and sunset. There I used sandbags marking it, like a sundial. It followed from the one I had down over the water, which I thought was spot on.

DE: How long were you in Canada for it?

MG: A few weeks. Three Australians went. That's where I met Bonita Ely, the mother of my daughter. In fact she [their daughter] was conceived over there, I think, and born in Berlin. Fortunately, before I renounced my American citizenship, I made her a citizen.

DE: How about 1981 *Perspecta*? Bernice Murphy organised that one, and the catalogue essay she wrote on your work in it I thought very good indeed.

MG: Very perceptive, simple and to the point. A very good statement.

DE: And one of the things I found most useful in her discussion of your work was that she said that, because of your overlapping projects, they really needed to be looked at as parts of a larger whole. That it was often quite difficult to demarcate the works discretely. I wonder if you would agree with that?

MG: I'm not sure.

DE: Well, I guess what she is saying is that your practice or oeuvre can be looked at as one large work rather than a series of discrete works.

MG: Well, the things I was interested in came out of my works. You can say that for any artist. But I was interested in the macro view, the elements, water, rain, the sun, energy systems, human interactions. It was really an architectural approach, and that's why I called it 'environmental art' and, as far as I know, I coined that word. I didn't know in those days what to call it. Berkeley was a college of environmental design, and I was basically interested in architecture and environmental things, so I called it environmental art. Before that, I was most interested in what they used to call 'land art', because they worked with the elements. In the film of *Spiral jetty* [a 1970 work by Robert Smithson], they are talking about the machinery, the earth, salt water. So I was really ...

DE: So that affected you early.

MG: Yes, I was still a student. So the things that interested them were what interested me. I wasn't interested in just an object and all the aesthetics involved. Never did interest me, still doesn't. I guess the stuff I am making around here now, because I am demented [laughs], you know, that's burnt wood, clearing the forest, its material in its natural state, influenced by man. It interests me.

DE: Kind of multi-functional in that sense.

MG: That sounds architectural.

DE: 1982, *The Austausch/exchange*. Were you away for a year or 18 months?

MG: Yes, because I went to Toronto, then I had a short residency in a New York studio, and then I was in Berlin for a year, so it added up to a pretty long time.

DE: And you had taken time off work at Sydney University to do that?

MG: Well, those were the good old days. The Whitlam days. Leave of absence on full pay, not even sabbatical. Plus I got grants. A Visual Arts Board grant for both the New York residency plus the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin one, plus free rent.

DE: OK, wow.

MG: And I didn't even apply for these things. They were offered. I never applied for anything. Those were the good old days. The Visual Arts Board [of the Australia Council] could do things like that, no applications. Now everyone is offering massive curriculum vitae. Those were the golden years.

DE: What did you think of the *Austausch/exchange* project with Berlin that you then showed in Sydney and Melbourne? Were you pleased with it? Did it achieve what you wanted to achieve for it? And how did it go down in Berlin?

MG: Berlin is a hot bed of creativity. Some puny little Australian having a show there, you know.

DE: Still, over the course of a year, you would have gotten to know a circle of Berlin artists?

MG: Not really.

DE: Did you show work in a gallery there for sale?

MG: I didn't sell anything in that show. I was never into marketing. I showed the works at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, and then I showed them at the University of NSW. That's where I got the terrible review that I remember [laughs]. An artist, Tony Trembath, is part of that book [gestures].

DE: No, I don't think I have that book. So there is a book related to this project. There was a film also, wasn't there? So a three-tiered project: exhibition, book and film. What have you been doing since that time? The file notes said that you decided to return to the USA to live in 1987.

MG: Yes, that's when I quit my job, got out of the factory. I went back to marry my childhood sweetheart, so I did it for love.

DE: So you had been with someone early on who had not left you.

MG: Well, she left and I left and we moved on, but people have one big love in their life, there is one [explosive gesture] and that's what I had, and I was getting tired of the art scene and of the academy. I left the factory, I quit my job. When I was at Berkeley through all the student riots, we had a slogan there, 'Don't trust anyone over 30' [laughs], and I realised I was 50. In principle, these tenured staff who hang on ... Usually the mediocre staff stays on to the bitter end, they're tenured and they've just lost steam. The mother of my daughter is that way. There are a lot of young guns and then the old, tenured people.

DE: Some people want to stay on in their seventies. Well, you then came back from the USA. Why? When was that?

MG: Well, after that relationship failed. I tried living with her, and she had four kids from a previous marriage, but I couldn't handle it. But I still love her though.

DE: So you are still in touch?

MG: Yes, vaguely, sort off. I was a big love in her life.

DE: You were gone by 1987. When were you back? A couple of years? Around 1990?

MG: Yes, and what retirement village am I going to live in now?

DE: None, you will stay here. [Laughter]

[End]