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Interview with David Shapiro

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**INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SHAPIRO
MAY 20, 1975
INTERVIEWER: UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE**

Original transcription completed June 18, 2012

[Note: In this interview, David Shapiro describes to an unidentified female interviewer a conversation he had with William Gropper.]

PH: PATRICIA HILLS

DS: DAVID SHAPIRO

Female voice: Unidentified female interviewer

[Side A begins.]

PH: This is an interview between David Shapiro and William Gropper held on May 20th, 1975.

[Recording begins mid-conversation.]

DS: — heart attack, as I learned tonight from [inaudible] as well. When I came in, he looked very, very, old, very tired, very worn, as if he had aged 10 years since I last saw him, which was early this year. Very pleased when I gave him the award, very, very pleased at that. And he started telling me some of the things that had been happening to him, and we chatted about this and that. I mentioned the meeting, the symposium at John Jay College, and it amused him that Ref [Anton Refregier] and Hugo Gellert spoke at a policemen's college at the City University [laughs], and that they spoke on this [cuts off - "topic"?]. [Tape stops and starts again immediately, as if edited.] And I was telling him exactly what had occurred at the symposium, and he was very, very impressed. He said, "Hugo Gellert, my God, he's older than I am!" He said, "These Hungarians, they just go on and on." And "Ref," he said, "you know, his heart, he had —" And I said, "Yeah, he

had open heart surgery, but he was feeling fine, except that he had a cold that day." It was a very interesting symposium where these two kids were doing what Hugo and Ref had always wanted to do, make art for the people. They don't care about the galleries or the museums. As far as they're concerned, the art is for the people, in people's neighborhoods, on the walls, for these people. And Ref said he doesn't even consider it art, really, you know, it's graffiti. But by the end of the meeting, they were looking up to Ref, they had looked up to him all along, because to them, these two young people, Hugo, Ref and the artists of the '30s were the great cultural heroes. And it ended very, very nicely. Ref invited them to come to his studio in Woodstock. And Hugo had mentioned at one point, quoting from an article maybe in *Artforum* magazine, that bigwigs in the art world had used art, American art, as another weapon in the Cold War. And it happened that I was sitting next to the woman who wrote this article for *Artforum*, and I introduced her to Hugo after the meeting broke up, and Hugo was very pleased and delighted to talk to her about the ideas which she had on that subject. So it all ended very, very well.

But then he mentioned to me, Bill did, Gropper, that he'd had a letter somebody sent from the National Archives. And he says, "Look what he showed me," and he held up photos [inaudible - "for that"?] of a room which was wrecked. And it was an IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] meeting room. And he says, "In the letter he wrote to me that 'since you were there just before this room was wrecked, with the reporter from the *New York Tribune*, what sort of abstract paintings did they have on the wall? If you look closely at the picture,'" he had written, "'you can see that there are abstract paintings at the wall.'" Gropper said, "This guy's got it ass-backwards. They weren't paintings, they

were slogans. Notices. Members would put up signs. That's what they were. There were no abstract paintings." Then he said, "We went down there, it's true. Our editor sent us down — and he was a drunk, he was always drunk — he sent this fellow Bob Reece [phonetic] who was a reporter and me down there to do a story, and he told us that it was going to be raided, and he wanted us to be there to make pictures and write about the meeting and the raid." He said, "And we got down there, and there was this man, Lee Chumley." I said, "The one who had the restaurant?" He said, "Yeah, he had a restaurant, but he was the head of the IWW down there. He was sweeping out the place." And they said, "Is this the meeting of the I Won't Work, Wobblies [inaudible]?" And he said, "Yeah, that's what it is." [Apparently shifting to Gropper's point of view.] "And we talked, I looked around. 'What are those things on the walls? Who makes the paintings on the walls?'" [Back to Shapiro's point of view.] He says, you know, it was not just plain inscriptions; they try to make it look interesting, the lettering. So Chumley said, "Members. Everyone's an artist. We sing. We're the only political organization in the world that sings at its meetings. We have poets. We have artists. We have painters. We have dancers. We have writers. We're not like other political parties." "Oh," said Gropper. "Where are the bombs? I understand you have bombs." [Back to Gropper's point of view.] "So he reached behind the counter, Chumley did, and he hands me a little red book, and says, 'Here's our bomb.' And that book is the membership book of the IWW." [Back to Shapiro's point of view.] And he said, "As soon as I read the first word of that preamble," said Gropper, "where it says, the very first sentence —"
[Loud rushing noise and beeping.]

PH: [Over the noise.] This part of the tape seems to be erased by David Shapiro.

[Loud rushing noise continues for about a minute. Recording resumes mid-interview.]

DS: So he made some drawings right on the back of the IWW paper, the [inaudible - "Worker"?], which were later reproduced in the *New York Tribune*. At that point, they warned Chumley that he was going to be raided, that the police were going to raid [inaudible].

Female voice: How did they know?

DS: The editor had told them before they went down there. That was why he sent them down there, so they could cover it from that point of view.

Female voice: Did he write all of this to Garnett McCoy, who had [inaudible - "written"?] the letter?

DS: I don't think he did. I don't think he did. He didn't say that he did. But he had written to McCoy, who had asked about these abstract paintings on the wall, that they're not abstract paintings, they were slogans. And what more he wrote, he didn't — I said, "Who was it from the museum?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "It must have been Garnett McCoy." "Oh, yeah," he said, "that's right, that's the right name, that's the one." I said, "Yeah, he was giving a talk on radical art of the '20s at Wilmington." That's why he was asking for information. Oh, he had written him, and been through everybody's archives, everybody's documents in the archives, Louis Lozowick's, Max Weber's. He says, "But I haven't been able to find yours." He says, "He doesn't know mine are at Syracuse." So that's what happened. And we talked for a few more minutes about this and

that, and about his cartoons, and [inaudible] people, some of the questions that they asked him. He had this exhibition in San Francisco of 30 drawings which he had done white on black. I said, "They're very amusing, Bill. Not really cartoons, but they're amusing drawings. I had a lot of fun." And he says, "You know, I had nothing to do, two weeks with nothing to do after my show opened, so I made these and had another one. And I framed all the pictures myself. At the opening of this show [inaudible], I called some old friends, you know, Sam Jaffe," he said, "I used to know all of them, Eddie Robinson, you know, they're gone, they're dead now, so few that are left. [Hard to hear, but sounds like [Jacob] "Kainen"] and other people came. And there was a man who was a professor from the University of California at Santa Monica who asked me how I'd gotten started, where I'd begun, where I'd come from. I said, "I started with Bellows and Henri." "Bellows and Henri!" He said, "I've never met anybody, I didn't know anybody was still alive who studied with Bellows and Henri." [Laughing.] He says, "What sort of teaching did he do?" Says, "I can't tell you now." The guy says, "Come down, talk to my class. We'll make a tape." And picked him up and drive him down to Santa Monica, and he said, "It's not just a tape, it was a video camera! With a big thing, a stick that came out, where they tape your voice at the same time." And says, "In between breaks, when we'd got tired, we'd go downstairs in another room and there were the monitors with my picture being shown!" So I said, "What sort of questions did the students ask you?" "What? How?" None of the students asked him — you know, some just wanted to be on TV, so they asked any sort of silly question. He says, "Some was amusing, and some of it became serious. They asked me," he said, "how did Henri teach you how to draw a hand or how to draw a figure?" He said, "Henri didn't teach that. Henri taught concept. Henri

taught things about life and living. He used to say in the classroom, Henri did, to the model, 'Take off your robe. Very slowly.' And she would take her robe off. And he would tell the students, 'Don't make a new drawing. Just watch her. Don't draw. Just watch.' And then when she took off her robe, he'd say, 'Now put it back on again.' And he says, 'Don't draw, just watch.' And then he would tell her, 'OK,' tell the model to leave the model stand, and he'd then tell the students, 'Let's see you put down what you thought of what she was doing. Let's see you draw that.' See, that's the way he taught. He taught concept, how to live. And we put up the drawings afterwards, he talked about the weather. The response to life. He didn't talk about art as art; he talked about living, about being [inaudible - "a mensch"?] in the world. That's what he talked about." I said, "Didn't this professor know that's Henri's teachings have been put in a book by Marjorie Ryerson, who had also been a Henri student?" He said, "No, he didn't." He says, "I didn't know either." [Laughter.] And he was very surprised. And he said he was very impressed with the videotape. He went down there three times, he did three different sessions, and they're making that as a pilot film, and it's being made into a 60-minute film. It's to be shown at all the different schools and sold in the California system to raise money to make a whole series of artists, so there'll be a record of them before they go. He was very, very much impressed and thrilled with that, really thrilled with that. Absolutely thrilled. [Inaudible] his life. And when I told him I had, we had missed him greatly at the conference, everybody asked where he was and how he was and so on, I said, "But I tried to make up for not being there by talking about your art, and I talked about you, and the cartoons you did for the *Freiheit*, and for the *Worker* and for the *Masses*, and I showed them slides that I'd made from the cartoon which I borrowed from you last year. And everybody is very,

very pleased with all of that. [Inaudible] wished that you had been there, could be there."

I said, "But in the fall, we're going to have something again. You just get well. We're going to talk about it then." And that's the way it ended, pretty much. He was very tired and he really asked to be excused. At that point, I just got up and left.

[Recording stops, resumes briefly with DS's voice (words inaudible), then stops again with blank tape for the remainder of Side A.]

[Side B blank.]