

Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.

Interview with Al Shands

January 30, 2009

Interview conducted by Greg Willihnganz

WILLIHNGANZ: Thank you Al for taking time to do this interview, and perhaps you can tell us initially, a little bit about you and your wife Mary's involvement with the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft.

SHANDS: Well of course Mary should be giving this interview and not me. She was the one that really was the, the founder of the organization anyways, and I was sort of a bystander. Sort of went through the process with her, but she was the one who was experiencing it first hand, and doing first hand. So my, my view is, would be somewhat different, I'm sure, from hers. This whole thing began with the, what was known as the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation. It was started basically because of Phyllis George Brown. She had become the first lady of Kentucky. She wanted something that would be identified with her name. It would sort of make a place, a notch for her in the state. And, she decided it would be Kentucky craft. And so, she came to Mary, and at that time Mary was very much involved in sort of public issues within the state. And, asked her if she would be willing to start this up, and so, and of course, Phyllis didn't really know anybody much in the state when she came here, and Mary knew a lot of people. So, Mary was able to start off, basically, what was originally a women's organization. There were no men involved in this at all. Which I think was a very smart move. The group had no men for a long time. And, these were started off with friends of hers, but also there was a sort of key player like Lois Matheus, who was...now Mary didn't really know a lot about Kentucky craft, I must say, but Lois did. And, there were others that did. And, they were able to sort of get the thing going. Which she was...Mary at heart is sort of a camp counselor. And so, she was very good at sort of raising the flag and getting all the rules together, and doing these things.

And, it was a lot of fun, because Phyllis was enjoying, was in it. And, a lot of meetings took place at the Governor's Mansion. And, it became somewhat, also sort of, a glamour thing because of Phyllis. Phyllis was always tied very much to, to selling, and she still is. And so, she had a good friend who was the head of the, of the Bloomingdales. And so, she got this idea, maybe through him, of having a Kentucky Craft Shop at Bloomingdales. So, with her staff and with his staff there's these sort of events arranged at the store in New York, and we all went up there. And, she would bring all of her New York friends in, and he would bring all his in, and really kind of quickly they sort of conjunction of Kentucky, and craft became known nationally. There was a lot of advertising about it. So, that was one thing that was moving all the time.

At the same time they wanted to start a gallery here, and they had a person in mind who was sort of beginning to stir the pot a little bit, and really didn't seem to be getting nowhere. Finally, the lady left, and I don't know under what circumstances, and they selected Rita Steinberg to be the head of the organization. That was a very bold stroke, and a wonderful stroke, because she had been involved with the...was it League of Jewish Women? I don't know what it is, something like that. And she had, she was very, very much sales oriented and had tons of friends. And, I think the fact that it started off with a Jewish leader was very important to the organization. One thing I think that Speed Museum has suffered from, over the years, is that it really wasn't until

the last fifteen years they even had any Jewish people on the board. And, I think that the arts, all of the arts, suffered tremendously unless you get that contingent. Rita was able to do that very quickly. And, all of a sudden they move into this space downstairs. Holly Cook had a bookstore downstairs that was also dying out and that failed. And, they moved into the space. So it was always, although they had shows and the curator, it was always, it was very oriented toward selling. One of the main reasons for this organizations, it set up was to teach crafts people how to become economically self sufficient with their art. And, they had all sorts of seminars, and things like that, to teach. And, they had gotten away from that a little bit, but they keep coming back to it. But, it's really important I think. So, very soon they had a curator, Albert Sperath who knew the craft field, particularly the folk art field here in Kentucky very well. It was off to a really good start.

At the same time...Mary...we had to attend these craft fairs, and I had never been to a craft fair in my life. And so, she was kind of dragging me off to places, to Berea, and things like that. I, and this is what started my whole interest in collecting contemporary art, was through this, and I realized that at one of the craft fairs that she took me to, that there was one artist that was better than anybody else, in my taste. Who was...he is on your list...stopping here. He is, here we go, Wayne Ferguson. And, I became very much enamored with his work. And, I remember seeing it for the first time there, and buying a piece, which is totally unlike me, just to buy something without thinking about it. And, as I took it back to the car, I turned around and bought two more pieces of his. That was sort of the beginning of the end in terms of my involvement with collecting art, really. So, I really owed that to the organization. And then, the collections went on and on. Twenty-five years later we have a huge collection, and basically was Wayne that started it off...and has remained a good friend. We still have a large amount of his work. So anyway, that was going on, and it was...I forgot the question from you.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me about the amount to which the Government played a role, in terms of getting funding together, or was this privately funded, or did you see foundation support?

SHANDS: It was founded...it was funded...well I'm a little vague about this. I don't think they got hardly any money from the state at all. Certainly they got no national money. I'm sure of that. I mean, they were always out for grants and that kind of stuff, but my, my perception, which may not be totally accurate, is that basically, that one of Mary's jobs was to raise the money for this. And everybody, everybody on the original board realized that, that was why they were there. I think that very often, when these organizations particularly, when men get involved in them, that they look at this as a kind of prestige thing when they are on the board. And, they'd be somebody that, you know, their secretary or their assistant or something, is going to do things, and give money through the organization. But, not...they don't have to really go out and raise it. And, I think it goes so, goes so much muscle right from the start, that everybody had to produce, because it was a, it was sort of a beginning thing. Nothing like this really had been done before much on that level. That was where the money came from. Mary, Mary herself was always very generous to it, and I think still is the largest contributor to

the organization. It's, it's still her baby very much, but I think that is where it came from, I think.

WILLIHNGANZ: So it started in this building?

SHANDS: It started in this building. This was...it was sort of odd because we actually owned the building. And originally, Holly Cook had been downstairs, and we rented the space out to them. And so, we ended up renting out space to the Art and Craft Foundation at a somewhat reduced rate. But, it was here in the building. And then, finally, they outgrew the building, and they wanted quite rightly their own building, which they finally were able to raise the money for, and it has just moved down the street. But, this is where it all started and it was here for at least ten years, maybe more than that.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me some more about some of the other personalities that were involved over the years, there were quite a few.

SHANDS: Yeah. Well, all the usual suspects (laughing). There were, you know, most ladies with artistic interest. And one reason that made it easy was, that compared to other art, craft art was very reasonably priced. You could start off becoming a collector of craft art without making too much of a dent in your pocket book, or making any serious mistakes that you regretted later. It was in the, you know, this, and also, they would also have these things at Christmas time, where they would have these, sort of, what they called Holiday Dazzle things, where they got everybody in to buy their Christmas presents here. And, we still have a, in terms of presents...we always think about the Art and Craft Foundation first, because we know that, that they really need the money. And, and you're getting some quality thing there that you might not get at a department store.

WILLIHNGANZ: Where you aware, as this was starting up, of other organizations in dealing with craft?

SHANDS: Well, yes. Because, just about this time we began the National Craft Organization, the American Craft Counsel, Government takes some notice of this. They had, I don't know, there was some kind of craft show here...that they sent somebody down from New York for this, and I met them. They realized that, that we were collecting and were knowledgeable about the whole craft field. And, I got on the board of the American Craft Counsel, because of that. So, I was always sort of a messenger of what was happening nationally, to the board, and was very aware of these two entities. And, it was that, that help, and I think, that, really that, what do they call it now, The Museum of Art and Craft...I guess they call it now...is really, in some ways, of having a national model...has become a national model. Certainly in that, certainly top five or ten craft groups in the United States, because they're being expansive and getting into the whole educational side. That's been one of the important things to them.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, we've had kind of a unique experience in this state, because we have had, with varying degrees of success, a lot of support from our government. I mean the state government started in 1960 with the craft train. I don't know if you were aware of that at all, it was going for about seven years.

SHANDS: Well, it came here.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah. The Guild, basically, that was their first big project. And, they were essentially put together in order to do that project. And, that got a lot of support from the railroad and from other groups, and traveled all over the state. And, made a lot of people aware that crafts were not simply indicative of the culture, but also a way of making income, and hopefully got more people involved. I can't find any way to measure what the effect of that really was, but certainly the government was, the state government was very involved at that time. And, when Phyllis came in, and became very interested in bringing in the marketers, and it changed again, and I'm wondering, you know, when you looked at or started collecting pieces, what type of art where you collecting?

SHANDS: Well, the collection started off as basically, something that was sort of comprehensive, Kentucky collection covering all of the bases. We felt that, we had, in this building...we had a little gallery in our own office. And, I can remember, maybe less than a year, we had a show. We invited people up for cocktails, in the building, and just to lay all the stuff out that we had collected were, you got a sort of smattering of it. And then, we, at that time, we got an apartment in New York. And, we decided to, to emphasize Kentucky crafts entirely in the apartment. And, as a result of that, a magazine, sort of a shelter magazine, came, and did an article about the apartment. Seeing all Kentucky crafts in it and the furniture, everything was Kentucky. We had also...a local designer helped us, called Scott Titchener. Whose died since...and that...so the publicity, there was national publicity. And also, we always said where you can buy this stuff at the end of the article. And, I think, they got a lot of phone calls...this artist from that article.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's great. So, this was I assume, pots?

SHANDS: It was everything. It was furniture, pots, baskets, folk art, you name it. And, we mixed in some Kentucky antiques with this stuff, so it had a kind of rural feel to it, you know.

WILLIHNGANZ: And, as you collected this and you got involved with these different commissions, and what not, what was your feeling about Phyllis George's push to go to New York and sell?

SHANDS: Well, you know, I think Louisville, in Kentucky, is at its best when it gets some type of national attention. You know, it's a sort of down home kind of place. But, it needs stimulation from the outside. And, I think she did a brilliant job in providing that kind of stimulation with, between New York and the national. And also, I provided a

little bit through the Craft Council there, awareness here, and so I think that, that Kentucky needs that, and craft needs that, and I think...I mean, we started off with Kentucky Craft. And, the collection began to change as we got our feet into that, to really, ceramics. A lot of...part of it, were Kentucky ceramics and part was national ceramics. And, we traveled a lot in those days. And, we always looked at what was happening around. And so, in putting those things together so that, I mean, you don't want any kind of original art to get isolated, and to think of it just as something in itself. I think this is a problem that all communities that have art groups face in America. You attend to think, well, let's support the local artists. Well, that's great. But, you want to see the local artists against the background, some sort of national background, and that's how local artists get stimulated. That's, and so, that sort of interaction between the two. That's something that has happened more. In the beginning, you know, we were just emphasizing just Kentucky, but I think they've moved now into a somewhat broader thing, which I think is good.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, the energy that you and Mary both put into the whole craft movement...was this primarily for supporting the individual artists over there, or improving the general culture of the city?

SHANDS: Well. I think a lot of it has to do with the individual artist and their art. You get intrigued with a certain artist, and we knew practically all the artists in the collection. We still do. I think that that is, I mean, in a...since you realize that you're helping everybody and the movement, but I think a lot of it is that the, a lot of it is the object itself. Often, you are sort of enchanted with the object, and, and the person that made it, you know.

WILLIHNGANZ: How much does the history of the art itself, in addition to the history of the artist, does the piece affect your choice to be involved with a real collection?

SHANDS: Well. I'd say, you know, if our collection has any problems, it is that it has, it has a lot to do with personal taste. And not...we are not really curators. And, I think that if we had a curator to do our collection, it would have been very different. I think that...we once had a show of all our ceramic arts at the Speed Museum, and they sent down a very sort of high-falluting arts writer to review the collection. I got a telephone call from the head of the Arts Council saying, "Look. We are not going to print this". It was not very flattering, and the reason was it was all about our personal taste. It wasn't about that, you know, we had some sort of specialized knowledge about craft or ceramics. It was just what appealed to us, and, and of course most people who are writing about art see it as much more of a historical aseptic terms. It...but that, that part of it...I mean I'm not a professional curator. And I want, I want the art that we buy...I'm going to live with, and for instance, in our collection, we have no storage at all. I've never been interested in storage. A lot of people just buy stuff because they think it is important, or something like that. And they, it might never have been seen, you know, it's just in a storehouse somewhere. That is of no interest to me whatsoever.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, with that being said. What do you like?

SHANDS: Right, right, right. Well, I mean, I think as time kind of...I guess why craft sort of got to me in the beginning, was that I'm very interested in things that have a sort of earthy start to them. What, what sort of comes from the bottom up is much more interesting to me than what comes from the top down, things that are more cerebral, or just have to do with ideas. I'm very interested in materials, how artists use materials, that even I want to touch the stuff, you know. Or, it's a very kind of sensual kind of feeling about the art itself. And, I think that, that, that craft, the folk art did that for me in the beginning. And then, I realized what I really was interested in was ceramics, because that was from the earth. And, I've never had any interest in glass. Glass just bores me to tears, because it's much more cerebral.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's interesting.

SHANDS: And, it's cold, and it's cerebral, and it's distant. And, it wants to be distant. And whereas, the way the craft, or ceramics are much more towards you, and then, what finally has ended up as basically sculpture. And, that's what I discovered was, was my main interest. And, this is what the collection is now, is sculpture. But that, but unless I started off with craft I probably wouldn't have gotten there. I think I would have been a little fearful about venturing out ascetically into the realms I really didn't know much about. But, I developed the confidence as a collector. As I knew from crafts to ceramics to sculpture. And, I still love materials that the piece, and how it is made, is still extremely important to me. It's not just, it's more cerebral than it was, but still has a very much of a craft bias to it.

WILLIHNGANZ: I had a great interview recently with Mary Reed, who is a corn shuck artist, and she takes these shucks of corn on her farm. She collects a lot of them, and dyes them, and trims them, and then shapes them, and forms all sorts of things. Angels and figures and different things, and she said that what she's encountered is, that when she is selling this, that the people always want to know about the art form itself. And, of course, corn shuck dolls and corn shuck art actually goes back to the pharaohs. It's hard to believe this, but apparently this is a very ancient art. It's been done by American Indians and Europeans all over the world. And, I just wonder how much of your interest in art has come that way, through knowing the story and history of the particular pieces that you have.

SHANDS: Well, probably some. But, I mean, no matter what the...I've had a very immediate emotional reaction to objects and also to people. I, you know it's sort of on the list or not, you know (laughing). I, I don't know, that, that I'm not moving to exactly to what she is saying, I guess. I mean, I don't have to know a lot about it to like it, you know. I either like it or I don't (laughing).

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, with Wayne Ferguson, a lot of his art is social commentary, and he has very strong and very clear obvious political feelings. Is that part of his appeal for you?

SHANDS: Well, I think its part. I think as a person I mean...I, I, I think that how the artist's personality comes through the work of art is a great interest to me. I probably am not as wildly liberal as Wayne is, but I love his art because it is. And also, he's that, you know...Wayne is kind of out of the box. And this is what, this is what interests me in art. That's why I'm interested in collecting art, that it takes you out of the box. You have a, sort of, set way of thinking about things, and your friends tend to think like you do pretty much, and. But, an artist is what challenges that and, and moves you into another direction that you didn't realize. You...that, that is part of you, too. That's something there for you that you might not face everyday, but it's important in your perception of the world.

WILLIHNGANZ: When you collect items and whatnot, and add them to your collection. Does that then become part of your living space in your home?

SHANDS: Absolutely. The home...you'll have to come see the collection sometimes, because it...we got to the point we were living in a, in a 19th century farm house, originally. We started collecting this art, and it just wasn't working in the house. It was too big. You couldn't get a way to look at it. It was...the house itself made such a statement. It was such a confining statement. Everything was very rectangular. And so, we ended up building a house for the art. Which was a fascinating process. It is basically, it is kind of built as a house museum. It was built for two people to live in, my wife and myself. But also, it was built for a very large art collection. It, but it's that, to me the art, the architecture and the landscape are all a part of the same thing. So that, that, and also, I think a lot of it what's, you know...having a big art collection is like having a large dinner party. You want, you know, everybody the same. Even on some bad boys who can still...you don't want too many of them, but you want some of them (laughing). And, that's really what I see our collection as. They all, the, all the works of art...I have a very strong emotional tie to, and it's important what you put next to what. Because there is going to be a conversation that's going to go on. And I, and also I don't want too much.

The two collections that I dislike the most, where there is too much art in the collection, you sort of feel like you want to get out, because it's impending on your space too much. Or, what I would call blue chip art. You go into apartments in New York, and these very rich people have bought very expensive art. Which is highly saleable. They, you know, that maybe not this year, but certainly last year, that they can take any of this to auction and get much more for it than they paid for it. And, it all has to do with ego and money. That's the danger in art, and it's always been there. But, I think it's gotten worse in the last generation in America. And so I, I, the art that interests me the most are really...is, is art that is domestic. That is intended to be domestic. To give you some examples, I mean the, a collection that is on a totally different playing field than my own. But, I'm very fond of the placing of the Frick Museum in New York. This man...he built the house for the art, and of course, you know this is real, real, class art. It is fantastic. I don't inspire anything like that, but it was...it was for certain compensation. And, I think that, that, that's the kind of art that we buy. Is art that

makes you want to stop and look at it. And, and there is an old fashioned word that we don't use much more, called gaze. You want to be able to gaze at the art and, and to figure out what the message is for you. And, the message is always changing because you're always changing. You'll always see new things in the art, and you shift things around a little bit, so you get some feeling about that. But it's, it's, you know, its something that is intended for the soul. That, that, and it...so finally it...you enjoy having people go through and see it, because they see, they are excited about it. They see things differently than you have, but it's fresh, and I think that that the art that interests me is art that stays alive, which you, which you can never totally comprehend. There's always something in it. It's just beyond you because it's always something in the artist created is just beyond him or her. It's a, it's a, like life itself. It has...it takes a life, you know, you can never encompass life or, or control life. You know, and that's what you want in the art. You want the art that continues to live and to puzzle you in a certain extent.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, there's a couple, I believe, they're on the Speed Board. Adel and her husband.

SHANDS: Leonard.

WILLIHNGANZ: Leonard.

SHANDS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: Have you been to their house? I'm surprised to hear you say you don't like glass if you've been to their house.

SHANDS: Well, they, they, they like glass, they still have, they just don't collect glass. They collect pottery. They collect some sculpture, but they, but I don't know glass people. That's fine for them (laughing). I'm delighted. I just don't. Some of my best friends collect glass (laughing).

WILLIHNGANZ: Well. I've seen a variety of houses, and how people choose to set up their home always interests me, and frankly, it humbles me a bit when I look at my own, and what I haven't been able to do. Starting to collect things, but it is a way of basically explaining who you are by putting things out there which represent your view of values, and cultural norms, and a lot of other commentary. So, I'm always interested.

SHANDS: Well, also I like things (laughing). Things interest me a lot. I, you know, you have to tailor your interest. You know you can't, like...when you get interested in things, you have to, you have to eliminate the things that really don't make the statement. You know? And I find that is important to create breathing room.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now. Is your collection pretty much static? Do you change over a lot?

SHANDS: Well it's, well it, over the years it sort of, it's like particles settling. I move the stuff around in very different configurations, and different ways over the years. And finally, I discovered how I really like it. And so, that the, the big, the bones of the collections will not change. We change small things around, and of course, every time you buy something, there is something that has to be rearranged, or go or something like that. We are now moving outdoors because the house is pretty much the way I like it, and I'm not going to make any major...not likely to make any major changes. But now, we are doing conditions with artists where the landscape becomes part of the piece itself. And so plunking right down in a field. The...you have the artist come and look at what's been done before, before them. And, they look at the landscape and they, they can place the art wherever they want to place it in relationship to landscape and other pieces of art. And so that...that interests me a lot because it brings the...again the whole out...outdoors in, and there's a lot of art that looks really...that suggests the outdoors that looks better indoors, because it's, it, you set up attention between outdoors and what's indoors. That makes it interesting.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me about other organizations that you may have had contact with about the Highlight Guild artists. How have they shaped craft in this state?

SHANDS: Well. I'm pretty...I'm not very knowledgeable about that. I mean, I'm vaguely aware of some of the things that they've put up, that I've been asked to contribute to it, but I'm not. I think one thing that I think is encouraging right now, is there is a committee for public art in the city. Which I'm sort of vaguely aware of, but it's...I think they have gotten a person down there from...who does this in New York, to advise them on public art. And, you have to work through our Mayor, who isn't very interested. And, he has this horrible phrase, "Artsy Fartsy", which he (laughing) loves to bring out. Maybe he's changing. I don't know. But, I mean, right now, for instance, at the area they are talking about putting a piece of art in front of the area. Well, I don't know what that will produce, but there, this committee of the kind of the brightest and best here locally, who are knowledgeable about the national scene. And, I think that, I think that is very encouraging. But, the other stuff I'm not so aware of.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, well there has always been the sort of, almost a differentiation between the craft people and the real art people, and you look at the Speed Museum, which of course, you have been very involved with over the years. And, how many artists in the Speed are actually Kentucky artists.

SHANDS: Well, not so many. The person that did this best is, unfortunately, has gone. This is Julian Robson, who used to be the Curator of Contemporary Art and Speed Museum. And, he was very, very good at seeking out local artists, but, always combining them with national artists. I think that, you know, there is sort of tension about local artists that they're not paying enough attention to our art. We're doing all this art and no body knows about it. But it's, but you don't want, you don't want to ghettoize local art. You want to, you want to put it with national pieces that, you want the local artists to be able to see national pieces. To go to museum shows in New York, and whatnot, and get excited about what's happening outside, and bring that, that drive

back to the local scene. So that, that in the old days they used to have regional art shows at the Speed Museum. They've stopped doing this a long time ago. But, I think they were ghastly. Because it, it tends to bring out the lowest common denominator. There's no, there's no, nothing that holds it together. It's just the region itself holds it together, but I mean you...stuff like southern art doesn't interest me a lot. I mean, there are museums of southern art. And, you know, that's okay, but it...it can't be the last word. I mean, you can ghettoize it for awhile, but then it has to be combined with other things that are going on (coughing).

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, what's your feeling about, for instance, the St. James Art Fair?

SHANDS: I don't go. Art fairs, I think, on the whole, are pretty discouraging from my taste. It's all what sells. The, the, you know...never underestimate the public taste (laughing). It's pretty ghastly. And it's...and also over-commercialized, you know, and it's too much of everything. It's too many artists...too many people. You can't really take it in. You know I would rather spend my time doing other things. It's too much like a circus, you know.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, it has that aspect about it, that's for sure. My concern has always been that it's so poorly represented of what I consider craft work.

SHANDS: Yeah sure, sure, sure.

WILLIHNGANZ: It's much more people who are very artistic who are at the high, high end, who come from California...all over. And, I just have questions. Is this real craft from the people?

SHANDS: Well. I think one of the problems with art, there, there are too many artists. There are too many artists. There are too many galleries. There are too many artists. There's too much of everything. There are too many people in the world. And it is, and now on top of that we have, we have this sort of international sort of art where it's not just American art anymore. The art fairs...there's stuff from Japan, India, China, everywhere. China...look at the big impact of China on the art world. How can you take all that stuff in, I mean the human mind. I can't take it in. I mean artists demanding it and makes you want to stop. And, I think, in the old days, when everything was less, you really had more in many ways. And it all becomes about selling. And then, people with tons of money won't...are afraid they are going to miss out unless they buy it today, and the price will be doubled tomorrow. And they just, and it's not just a very seemly scene. I mean, you know, commerce and art have always been connected. But, I think we, we, you know, we, we sort of turn the spigot on this stuff, and now it's pouring out (laughing). And, you lose the personal aspect of it. And, people become much more concerned about making money than doing their art. I mean, art world, by its nature, except for a very few artists, will always be a kind of a people living on the edge. You know, people, you know...but that's, that's why they are good. You know, and I think that we, we spent. I mean you don't...you want to

encourage them to be self, self supporting in that kind of thing. But, but, but I thank God that Bybee didn't do that, you know. It remained what it was, and, and the future will be far more valuable and interesting. That's...suppose George Orr had done that (laughing). You know George Orr? He's a, he's a very highly respected potter, around the 1890's in Alabama somewhere, and his stuff now, it's in museums. But, you know, he was very clever. You know, if they had gone to him and said, you know, we'll make a company out of this. He wouldn't, you know, wouldn't have been the same. You know.

WILLIHNGANZ: Uh, huh. Yeah. I looked at some art, Chihuly glass.

SHANDS: Oh my God, awful, horrible, awful, awful. He didn't. A lot of time he didn't even...I think somebody else is doing it, totally.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah. I think he has whole shops.

SHANDS: Yeah, it just turns it out. And the sad thing, in terms of what's valued in America art today, that's true. I, I've been to Jeff Coon's studio in New York and he had, it's a factory. He has, while I was there...I was with a group from the Museum of Modern Art. He was working on five paintings. Huge, huge paintings. Each painting had five artists working on it. He has two artists that are just mixing colors for him. And, and these pictures are selling for millions and millions of dollars. There is another room that just has nothing but sculpture. And, and the same thing. Is just turning it out, it's, it's a factory. And, and, and it's crazy. You know, I wouldn't buy one of those things in the world. You know, but people, or you know, get on this band wagon. They've got to have Jeff Coon's art. Or Damon Hurst, you know, people like that, you know. It's dreadful I think.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, in your collection I assume you have sort of broader range of people and?

SHANDS: Uh, yeah. We have evolved. I'm interested in artists with no career. I'm interested in artists that are not necessarily household names, but are professionally known by other artists. I...when the artists come through our collection, they always ask them, "Who are the artists that you can see in this collection?" And I go and visit those artists. And that interests me a lot. I'm...we have a lot of women in the collection. I'm very interested in, in women's art. I think that, that, and I can't tell you why exactly. But for some reason, many, many of them, and certainly at least half of the artists which are unusual in the collection are women artists. But it's, I forgot your question (laughing).

WILLIHNGANZ: Well. I really was just talking about the whole issue of how you choose.

SHANDS: Of how you choose, yeah, yeah. Well. I mean, one kind of leads you to the next, I would say. Right now we have two collections that are in the works. One

is a sound commission. I never thought I would do that, necessarily, but it's a woman who is from Scotland, but works in Berlin, and she has been in the Carnegie International. Here's a good example. I mean she is a woman; she's probably late 30's. She's, she's had several new art shows. She's been in the Carnegie International. She works in Berlin, which is a great art center today for a well known international artist. And she does sound art. She is, if I mentioned her name to a curator at a museum, they would say, "Oh, yes. I know who she is." But she's not...I mean nobody has ever heard of her. I mean, you and I, her name is Susan Phillips. That's who she is, you know. But, she's very highly respected in the museum world particularly. And she is working on a commission now. It will be the largest thing that she has ever done. It has three outdoor sound pieces. It has three locations. Each one is different. There are three terraces at our house, and when you walk up to this thing you're presence activates the sound. And you hear singing. But she is singing different songs and different places. That's an example of the kind of art that interests me. Or another, the other thing we have in the works, an artist named Pollensa, who did the, you know, the Millennium Park in Chicago? It's huge.

WILLIHNGANZ: I've heard of it.

SHANDS: Yeah. Well, anyway, he did it. He was commissioned to do a large piece for that, and he's commissioned to do an outdoor piece for us. Again, unless you're a real art rat, you're not going to know his name. But he's, he's working on a piece for me right now. Like the best example is, is a, let me think of her name. Oh gosh, she's international, and we have her in our collection. Anyway she's, she does pots, but she does, she can make them anthropogenic. You look, they're still pots, but they look, they look like people. They suggest people.

WILLIHNGANZ: Really?

SHANDS: But, she doesn't go. She never wants to lose the pot form in what she does. And it works extremely well. She pushes it as far as she can go. But, she doesn't go over the line to try and do something that she really shouldn't be doing unnecessarily.

WILLIHNGANZ: How do you determine what they shouldn't be doing?

SHANDS: I think it is totally inexplicable. It's something that's, I mean you...like if you are a writer, where do the words come from? You know, I write a lot and every week, and I, and words come to me. My God, I'm shocked. Where...that is a word that I never use, never think of, and it's just the right word. You see. And, and you don't, it's true with artists you know. Where does this stuff come from? It's just there, you know. You can't, can't explain it, possibly. Its beyond, this whole thing is beyond you. That's what makes it interesting. That's why you are an artist.

WILLIHNGANZ: Should we be doing more in our educational system to make people aware of craft?

SHANDS: Well, I think so, absolutely. I mean, I think that it is so sad that, you know, that the art and music are the first thing to go in the educational system. It's pathetic. And, and so you get, you get a kind of dumbed-down populist with no, no historical background and nothing. I mean you look at how, for instance, how dumbed-down architecture had become. Because, we don't have any real architecture, we just have builders, and they get the stuff out of some bodies. And the stuff looks ghastly. You wonder, you know, in fifty years or one hundred years, what people are going to think of this stuff. You know it's ghastly.

WILLIHNGANZ: I certainly agree with that. There are some terrible buildings.

SHANDS: Awful, awful. Awful buildings and it's so sad. Because it could, you know, for the same amount of dough, they could have built something interesting.

WILLIHNGANZ: The Humana Building I think is wonderful.

SHANDS: Wonderful, wonderful building.

WILLIHNGANZ: Terrific building.

SHANDS: And, one reason I remember going to the...when they had the opening of the building, and they had a huge dinner party at the top. Michael Graves was giving a presentation, and he spoke, and said it's been wonderful working for the met issues. And (laughing), and that's what it was. You know, saw the gains, and they were high-flying days at Humana. They gave him total scope. Do what you like. And, he used very gorgeous expensive materials. Which make it look really good. You can see what he did in Portland, where he didn't have that luxury, and it doesn't look good, it's all falling apart. It looks ugly. This, this will be looking good forever. Yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, in thinking about what my goals were, trying to get a certain perspective on what the contribution of the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft has been, and where do you see it going in the future?

SHANDS: Well. Well, first of all I have the best thing that can possibly happen to it if the, if the American Craft Council decided to move. I think it would be really, really exciting, because that would give all the stimulation...because I mean...the magazine. They publish a magazine which is a national magazine. It covers the whole gamut. I think that, that would be a sort of wonderful trickle-down experience between the people and the magazine. The magazine staff would be here, and, and that...you would get all that stimulation, I think. I think that that needs that a lot. I think that that it's going through a period. A sort of aging period, the organization. Which has lost a lot of its initial vitality that it had in, in that everybody had to pull their own weight. And now the board, I think a lot of the members are there, because it is a very established organization. And, I don't think that there's as much work produced by the individual board members as was true in the old days. I think they have to kind of reinvent

themselves in a way, and I think I mean the Bourbon Ball is an example. I think because the Bourbon Ball has become, because that's their main fundraiser. But, they had to join with this film thing last year, which was, I think, was a disaster. I don't think they are going to do that anymore, but it's, it's...and a lot of this...they are still relying on a lot of the same people. In the beginning, to keep the thing going, and that, that, they need new blood. And, but Louisville has changed a lot. It's not like it was when the organization was started. And of course, all arts organizations are having these huge problems. Well, they always did, but the problems are worse now because of the economy. I've kind of pulled away from it. I mean, I've sort of done my own thing there in a way. I mean, I'm very interested in the organization, but I, I'm an honorary board member. But, I don't go to meetings really. I, I hear about things that are happening. One of the interesting things, you know, we are going to change the name of the organization. We went through...I'm not sure if you are aware of that, but it was going to be changed. Marlene wanted to take the word craft out of it.

WILLIHNGANZ: Really?

SHANDS: Yep. So we went through a period of being, of it being called the Kentucky Museum of Art and something, Design. See, they took the name out of it in New York. It's now...it used to be called the Craft, the American Craft Museum. Then they became the Museum of Art and Design, and they moved...they moved the location up to Columbus Circle. And they got this...a lot of controversy involved, but they finally got the, got the building, and its open and operating. In New York, the word craft is a no-no word, because it's, it's thought of as being inferior. And, there is no craft guilds in New York. There used to be a craft guild in New York, and I used to, we used to buy a lot of our stuff from them. But, it went out of existence. And so...and if you are trying to raise money in New York, avoid the word craft. If it's in Kentucky, keep the word craft. Craft is really important to the sort of self-knowledge of the state. About who it is. And so, it has a very old and revered name in the state. Even though it's a lot more than brooms and baskets (laughing). It's how people think about it in very nice terms. I think that, I think that the success is really the, how ingenious they are about marketing, and also about...mainly thought in the galleries and shows that they put up. And, I think that they have to be very selective in, and careful about, what they do and, and there's always a big problem about...I used to go to meetings there, and what the process is on how you decide what the shows are going to be. I mean, do these ideas for these shows come from the curator? Do they come from a committee of the board, or are they coming from the director? Who are they coming from? And so, I think, I think there's a fair amount of confusion about the, this sort of esthetic of what they are trying to do. And, I think that that needs to be clarified. But I, I think that they still get good crowds down there for the shows. I think there is still a lot of interest, and I think, I think also that, that the craft has always been a form of art that the public can relate to more easily. That, that the, that the fine arts, particularly ones in view with modernism are difficult for people to, who are not knowledgeable, to grasp. There is something, something familiar about crafts that...and also they're in terms of collecting, they are affordable. I think that I, I do think whether you're talking about the Speed Museum or the Museum of Art and Craft. I think that, that, collectors are crucial. So, I think that,

that what they need to do, as much as anything, is to try to foster collecting. To find that, I don't know exactly how you go about that, but I think that that is really important. They should be on the board. Collectors should be on the board. Artists should be on the board. Collectors should be on the board, and then just business people should be on the board.

WILLIHNGANZ: Let me ask you one final question.

SHANDS: Sure, sure.

WILLIHNGANZ: What do we need to do to attract the American Craft Council to move?

SHANDS: I think that it is, I think it, is going to be money. I think that if they can, if they can, they're looking at...I'm sure that it's the finances that make them want to move. Being too expensive in New York, and the location is fine, you know. The whole thing about Louisville is within you're now one hundred miles of everywhere. That's good. There's an airport here and you can get in and out easily. I think that if they can, that, I think first of all if they can...if the art museum of Art and Craft makes a big play for them. I think that would be really important to make it, to try sweetening it, and making it as attractive as possible. I think that they need to get business people alike. A wonderful example actually would be Christie Brown, behind it. Who, people have money. And to show them and, and the, I mean that the buildings are not that expensive compared to New York. They could do just as good a job here as, as they could do anywhere in the United States. And, I guess, the Presbyterians are happy that they did it. And, I guess, Embroiders Guild are happy. There are other organizations. There is sort of a trend of national organizations that have a headquarters here. If, if they can get some good feedback from these organizations, I mean, I don't know whether it's good or bad. You know. It would be good for Louisville.

WILLIHNGANZ: Very good. Okay Mr. Shands, thank you.

SHANDS: Okay. Well I'm delighted, I'm delighted.

END OF TAPE