

Interview of video artist Russell Connor

Edited interview with artist Russell Connor (b. 1929), conducted by John G. Hanhardt for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, at artist's home, New York City, July 22, 2014. [Learn more about the Nam June Paik Archive](#) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

[JH]: Russell, I'm delighted to be here in your home studio on 57th Street, directly across from Carnegie Hall. Really the center of the universe, shall we say? Manhattan. It's a place I know very well from having visited you here many times to look at videos and productions that you were developing. But now I'm surrounded by your paintings, and it's a great thing to see. I also have very fond memories of Arthur Danto's enthusiasm for your work and his writing on it. And I'm reminded as I'm sitting here surrounded by these canvases, about their art historical reference. It's interesting, because you studied art history and then played a key role in bringing the representation of art history into television through your activities and education. You also supported the medium of the late twentieth century that really has fundamentally transformed art making -- video, the moving image. It's fascinating how you kind of embody these ideas of art and art history, because your canvases are about ways of looking at the past, looking at iconic figures and images from the history of western painting. And in a sense, that's what video has done. It's now the art form that's changed how we look at art and make art.

I want to focus on the role you played in video, and don't worry I'm going to have questions for you. I was sort of setting this up as an introduction.

At the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, you were writer and host of the [series] *Museum Open House*, produced with WGBH for television. You really, again, played a leading and critical role of expanding the notion of education through television, which is now so prominent in terms of how we're trying to give a larger public understanding of art. You also interviewed Marcel Duchamp in 1964, and that's in the archive of our memories of that great artist, and [it was] a chance to actually see him in a conversation. In 1970, you had the first museum exhibition of video at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. And, for myself, as a longtime curator of video, that was, like the Howard Wise show, a landmark -- Howard, in the context of the art gallery, yours in the context of the institution of the museum. They were extremely important, the programs that you created.

From 1973 to 1978 really frames the years that you were working with Nam June, and which is really what I want to be the focus of our conversation. Russell, we see you in *Global Groove* from 1973 as a narrator. If you don't mind, I thought I might just sort of go through particular video tapes.

[RC]: That's fine. *Global Groove* is a lovely memory for me. But I feel a little bit immodest when someone calls me the narrator of *Global Groove*, because I believe I only read the opening line. I don't know what else I contributed to it. But I think Nam June and I sort of crafted that opening line together --

[JH]: "Imagine a future where the TV is as thick as the Manhattan telephone directory."

[RC]: Right. Yeah.

[JH]: But that's a question I had, quite frankly. Because that's a key articulation of Nam June's imagining and thinking about the capacity of television. How did that line come about?

[RC]: Oh, it was his line. We may have discussed whether it should be called "telephone book" or just a "phone book" or something trivial like that. I don't know. But --

[JH]: It became the "Manhattan telephone directory."

[RC]: "Telephone directory." No, it's his line definitely. But we worked a lot together on the shows that I narrated, because I would write something, and he would alter it or he would suggest something and I would alter it, so it was fun. It was creative together.

[JH]: How did you meet him?

[RC]: I met him at WGBH in Boston in 1967. I just finished doing the four years as writer/host of the Boston Museum series, *Museum Open House*, in which occasionally I would plea with the director or producer to try to be a little more inventive with the medium we were using. And then I discovered that WGBH was working on a program called *The Medium is the Medium*, with Nam June and other artists who were already involved in experimenting with it, and he more than anyone. So I had to go over to WGBH and meet him and watch the making of that show, which was a great revelation for me. And I realized how primitive my ideas were about what might be done with that medium, compared to what he had already been developing. I think his piece within *The Medium is the Medium* is an absolute triumph and just blew my mind.

[JH]: How did you begin to get a sense of how Nam June worked in the studio, fashioning these pieces?

[RC]: Well, his interaction with the staff of WGBH was interesting. Fred Barzyk was the most prominent -- and Dave Atwood. And it was always very good humor, and he would make proposals of doing something, which they would find difficult to absorb within conventional television. But they admired him just like I did, and they made every effort to try to get his vision onto the screen. It was a good time.

[JH]: Was it something about also his language? How did he explain? Thinking back to my time with him, as he would shape an exhibition or commission a work, I was always interested in how he would describe it. These are informative years -- in the mid-sixties. He's not the figure he was in 1982 at the time of the Whitney exhibition. Had you heard about him before coming into the studio?

[RC]: No. Not really, not really. I think I had one slight advantage in that I had lived for six years in Japan, and therefore I was familiar with -- I would never say that Nam June had a Japanese accent, but I was familiar with accents in that part of the world, and therefore, I often understood him when other people were having difficulty. And, of course, he always had

something brilliant to say, and it was worth the labor to figure out what he [laughs] -- what he meant.

[JH]: Was he hands-on in the studio?

[RC]: That I don't remember so much. I remember the dialogue. I was not really involved in the making of the show. I would have loved to be involved. I think I actually volunteered to narrate. At one point they needed a few lines in Nam June's piece, and he must have known my work because he said, "No, you're too professional."

[laughter]

[JH]: That's wonderful. [laughs]

[RC]: So Fred Barzyk, the director, ended up reading the lines himself. Remember the one about "half close your eyes"?

[JH]: Yes. Yes. That's Fred Barzyk?

[RC]: Fred Barzyk's voice. Yeah.

[JH]: That's his voice. I didn't realize that. So, the time between then at WGBH and 1973 -- there are certain sign posts: *Global Groove*, *A Tribute to John Cage*, 1973, *Nam June Paik: Edited for Television*, 1975, with Calvin Tomkins. There is *Suite 212*, you described, as I'll remember from 1977. You provide voice to *Guadalcanal Requiem*, 1977, and *Media Shuttle: Moscow/New York*, you contributed to that.

[RC]: Did I?

[JH]: Apparently.

[RC]: [laughs]

[JH]: You were producer -- you're identified as producer with David Loxton.

[RC]: Oh my gosh.

[JH]: Yes. And *You Can't Lick Stamps in China*, your voice is part of that Nam June/Gregory Battcock piece. So this is an amazing line up of pieces.

[RC]: [laughs]

[JH]: And you've often, I think, expressed some impatience with me, because you've said, "John, I wasn't just a narrator." I wasn't just, you know, a pretty voice, so to speak. But you have a voice that was perfect for television, perfect for Nam June, and is synonymous with it. You may not realize it, but I mean it's constantly being edited, shown, heard, and --

[RC]: Well, I remember something funny. Nam June, and I believe it was Charlotte Moorman, did some performance at Carnegie Hall, which I wasn't able to be at, but Howard Klein, of the Rockefeller Foundation, was there and when my voice was heard in something, whatever they were showing, someone in front of Howard Klein said, "It's the Walter Cronkite of video."

[JH]: [laughs] Perfect.

[RC]: Which is a pretty high compliment I think.

[JH]: Exactly. But, anyway, that trajectory of pieces, would you like to talk about each one? *A Tribute to John Cage* --

[RC]: I remember two tributes to Cage --

[JH]: There are two edits of that piece.

[RC]: Didn't he do one at the age of sixty and one at seventy, or one at seventy and one at eighty? I thought he did two? Maybe I'm wrong.

[JH]: Well, he did a number of tributes to John Cage. But this was the video tape with Alvin Lucier.

[RC]: Yeah. [laughs]

[JH]: Remember? And aren't you in that?

[RC]: Oh, no. That was hilarious. Oh, that story is funny. As a matter of fact, that was the one time when I --

[JH]: This is *A Tribute to John Cage*?

[RC]: [*A*] *Tribute to John Cage*.

[JH]: 1973. And, by the way, I was up at Wellesley, and we found the original version of *A Tribute to John [Cage]*, this tape. Alvin was celebrating his birthday, and they had me give a presentation of the tape. It's the unedited tape. Not the whole thing. So tell me about that.

[RC]: It upset me a little bit at the time when I realized what was going on.

[JH]: The legend is that you didn't even know when you went in that he was going to be starred, when you're interviewing Alvin.

[RC]: I knew Alvin from Brandeis, because when I did that video show there, Alvin was on the faculty, and so I knew about his speech issue. And therefore, when Nam June asked me to interview him I said, "Are you sure, you know how Alvin speaks? You sure you want to?" He

said, "It'll be all right. It'll be fine." I said okay, because I wanted to assist in this project. So there we are, a very minimal crew, I think, shooting this. I think maybe it was John Godfrey running the camera. Nam June Paik holding cue cards. Now that's already a vision you have to see, this pioneer in video art in the most primitive role in television, holding up what are sometimes called "idiot cards" for someone to follow and to read what they are supposed to say. [laughs] That was it.

[JH]: He was holding those up for you?

[RC]: For me and for Alvin, I guess.

[JH]: I didn't know that.

[RC]: Yeah. Primarily for Alvin, I think, because I didn't have a script, but Alvin did. Alvin had it in mind what he was going to say. But what I didn't know was that Nam June expected it to be a comic interview, and I didn't. I was suffering because I did not want to make Alvin feel that he had a serious problem. We're going to talk. We've always talked. Alvin, we're going to talk. [laughs]

[JH]: Oh my.

[RC]: But the funny opening was -- I was given the first line to ask, I was supposed to ask him, "Who was John Cage?" And he was going to quote Barbara Rose. Now, it came out, like, "Alvin, who is John Cage?" "Ba- Ba- Ba- Ba- Ba- Ba- Ba- Ba- Ba- Ro- Ro- Ro- Ro- Ro- Ro- Ro- Ro- Rose once said -- " I said, "oh God." I'm strangling, trying not to laugh. And this went on for a while, and then I noticed that Alvin was smiling. And I looked over, Nam June was dropping the cue cards laughing. He was having such a wonderful time. And I was the only one who was dying.

[laughter]

[JH]: The host. The interviewer.

[laughter]

[RC]: That was all right. I got through it. But I heard later that, somewhere down in SoHo, he showed the whole unedited interview to a very appreciative audience, I'm sure -- I must have looked like an asshole. But it was -- it would have been a very avant-garde piece to show at that point.

[JH]: Exactly.

[RC]: So I contributed unwittingly to a work of art.

[JH]: Did you know Cage at all? Did you work with him?

[RC]: No. I met him once at someone's home in Paris, but I never really got to know him. And so the only occasions were the two times I interviewed him for Paik's show, or maybe I only did it once, I don't know. But it wasn't a real interview, it was a conversation, [with] a few other people around.

[JH]: But it's fascinating, because from *A Tribute to John Cage*, where you set up this conversation with Alvin -- the next piece, *Nam June Paik: Edited for Television* from 1975, features you and Calvin Tomkins on the top of ladders in the Mercer Street studio of Nam June. Tell me about that. Who said get up on the ladders?

[RC]: That was all planned out without me. That was David Loxton and --

[JH]: Oh, he set that all up?

[RC]: -- maybe Godfrey, and I was just there. It was a little bit [of an] unhappy situation for me, because I was a host of this series at that time called *VTR*, Video and Television Review -- and the fact that they had brought in Calvin, who I had met but I didn't really know, suggested that they didn't think I could carry the interview myself, and that they needed the help of a weighty guy in the art world. But Calvin was wonderful. But I guess I was intimidated by the immediate rapport that they had. And they started off talking about Cartesian x and y and things that I was not familiar with. [laughs]

[JH]: But his *New Yorker* profile of Nam June -- was that around that time?

[RC]: That could have been. Yeah, I knew he did a profile of him. I had forgotten that it was before that, and that's probably why they invited him.

[JH]: Probably -- exactly.

[RC]: It made sense to do professionally in producing the show.

[JH]: I thought you handled yourself very well.

[RC]: Okay. Thank you. People said I didn't say anything. [laughs]

[JH]: You were struggling to stay on top of the ladders.

[RC]: [laughs] But I've since become really good friends with Calvin. We call him Tad. And he's quite an admirer of my paintings, which of course secures him a place in my heart.

[JH]: Exactly. [laughs] So, what I'm trying to get at in these interviews, these conversations, is something about what's missing. What we know about Nam June that might come from people who have spent time -- I mean you're so identified with him. Otto Piene was talking about his experience with him in Germany, and then coming to the United States. I'm going to talk to Carol Brandenburg, who worked as a producer on the global satellite pieces. And I'm talking to Steve Beck, he was an early video image processor, [about] how he saw Nam June from his

perspective. But you produced the *VTR* series, you worked with Bill Viola, Bill Wegman, you are identified with Nam June in the crucial years of some of his major single-channel [videos] and also, at the same time, installation pieces. I mean, you have to understand, Russell, that your voice looms large.

When *TV Garden* is installed -- again, that opening line is so important. And so it's interesting that a voice, and a presence, and a person that had [a significant] place in these seminal tapes of Nam June has become sort of iconically identified with the artist and is sort of a touchstone to what that work is for television. Because television was about broadcasting something to a large audience, and you had that voice that I'm sure is what Nam June recognized: a voice that could deliver a text and had personality. Plus he had an understanding of who he was, because of what you did at the Rose.

I mean that's pretty fantastic, isn't it?

[RC]: Yeah. Well, talking about my voice and Nam June, some of those narrations, I think, were recorded here, in a little room we have off the kitchen back there, and at different times of day. And I remember Nam June saying, "Your late night voice is best." You know, if I go and record at eleven o'clock, which would happen sometimes. [laughs] It's like an opera singer, they're not supposed to sing in the morning or something, it's better later in the day. I never heard that before, that my late night voice is best, but he was very sensitive to it. And I was honored to be involved. You know, I think that I was privileged to be part of all of that with Nam June, but in a sense I was also just a groupie, just an admirer, dazzled by his genius. And I wish I could offer more insights into his thinking at different stages along the way, but I was really just enthralled by the fun of being with him. And we improvised a lot.

[JH]: Did he give you any writings, letters?

[RC]: I have, I wish I could tell you precisely what it is, but it's a letter from him that he wrote from Tokyo at some point. And it involved a lot of -- I don't know whether I was still at the arts council, whether he was hoping I was going to get him some more money or something, but it just -- it saddened me that I had lost that letter, and that I don't even remember responding to it, or if I responded properly. I have a lot of funny little postcards and little notes, little scribbles, but nothing substantial.

[JH]: Well, if there's ever an occasion that you gather that material together, and would like to donate it to the Nam June Paik Archive at the Smithsonian American Art Museum --

[RC]: I'm aware of that value, and I'll try to assemble what I've got -- like most of my archive, it's in massive confusion at the moment.

[JH]: The role you played at NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts]-- if one were to talk to Howard Klein, I remember being at the Rockefeller with panels, with granting panels that Howard was putting together. Nam June had a large impact on Howard's thinking.

[RC]: He did.

[JH]: Did he have an impact on your thinking at NYSCA? I'm trying to put that together.

[RC]: Well, yes. In the beginning of the TV Lab, it was not called the TV Lab, it was called the Artist Television Workshop, and it grew out of my experience at the state arts council. I was in charge of television and video --

[JH]: From what years to when?

[*New Television Workshop* on WGBH officially started 1974 – but there were earlier broadcasts beginning in 1968]

[RC]: From June of 1970. I was offered the job because of the Brandeis video art show, so I came down in June of '70. And do you remember Ken Dewey?

[JH]: Yes.

[RC]: Ken was the guy who came up and saw the show and told John Hightower that you should get this guy, Connor, down, because the arts council had just gone from two million to twenty million dollars, and they were beginning to be the recipient of applications from video artists, and they didn't know what to do with them really. So Ken Dewey told Hightower, he should bring this guy Connor down from Brandeis; and he did.

[JH]: How long were you with NYSCA?

[RC]: Roughly three years, I think. I came in to work under Peter Bradley, it actually took a little while to get -- at first they put me somewhere else, and then they put me with Peter.

[JH]: Is that when you moved here to this apartment?

[RC]: I moved here in '74, so shortly after I left the arts council.

[JH]: Tell me more about the arts council. Did you engage Paik in that period at all? Because that's the period that you were appearing on some videos, you were contributing to his work.

[RC]: Well, I did it probably in a couple of ways. One was supporting Howard Wise's Electronic Arts Intermix [EAI] applying for a grant; and Nam June encouraged me to support them. And we did, I think, get the first grant to EAI. And then at a critical point in '72, somewhere like that, I was responsible for grants, not only for the video artists, a lot of the guys who I had shown at the Brandeis exhibition were now applying to me, you know, as -- hey, think we got a live one at the arts council now that Connor is there -- and Global Village and Raintance and all those folks --

[JH]: [The] Kitchen.

[RC]: Yeah. And I made an advisory committee, bringing in people that I knew were sympathetic. I brought down Fred Barzyk from Boston and Doug Davis and other folks who I knew would be favorable toward video art. And we got one application -- I was also responsible for the public television stations of New York. The principle one was Channel 13, but there were seven or eight around the state, and they all applied for money for different conventional television projects, productions. And one came in from Channel 13 asking for, I don't know, three hundred thousand, or something like that, for a series about ballet, which I'm sure would have been worthy, but I knew that my advisory committee would say well, gee, this sounds like old-fashioned television. And they did, and that's the way I felt, too, so I talked to them. I talked to the director of programming then, a guy named Kit Lucas, and I said, "You know, this is not going to work. But we would be interested" -- I made this up, I think -- "we would be interested if you would like to bring artists in to work with broadcast television and get access to the broadcast technology." And he says, "I don't know what you're talking about." He said, "But if you write it up, I'll send it in as an application." So, I did. It sounds, frankly, illicit.

[JH]: [laughs] It's fabulous.

[RC]: But I wrote out, as if I was at Channel 13, a description asking for modest amount of money, sixty thousand or something like that, to start an artist television workshop.

[JH]: Whoa.

[RC]: Before I wrote this letter, I consulted Nam June, the Vasulkas, Stan Vanderbeek, I think Jackie Cassen maybe had been involved. And then I wrote this letter. And not surprisingly, we voted for it. When my application came in, the council approved it. Now, Channel 13 hadn't wanted this; they didn't know how to deal with it. They put Jackie Cassen in as the first director of the Artist Television Workshop. And I didn't intimately observe what went on, but it was not a happy marriage. I think they may have brought in John Godfrey at that point as the engineer. And the rapport was not good between the video art community and the staff of Channel 13. So they had the sense to turn to the Rockefeller Foundation to try to expand it into something, shape it into something that they would be more happy with. Changing the name from Artist Television Workshop to the TV Lab, which would make it open to a lot of stuff that did not come under video art. And I remember -- when the Rockefeller Foundation made the grant to expand it into the TV Lab -- going to the announcement of this, somewhere, it could have been at the arts council. And Jay Iselin, then the head of Channel 13, got up and made this fraudulent announcement -- I almost threw up sitting back there. And he says, "Well, a bunch of us were sitting around my office wondering what can we do to really break out of the conventions of television and move into something more experimental and respond to -- there are artists out there working. And what can we -- how can we do this? And so that's how the TV Lab was born." No mention of the Artist Television Workshop from which it had grown.

[JH]: Or of you.

[RC]: Or of me. But anyway, so it was a good thing, obviously.

[JH]: But Nam June -- was he somebody you would call up? Or was it that way?

[RC]: It was not that formal or not that frequent. But I certainly knew that he would be the principle that could guide something like an artist television workshop.

[JH]: Here's a question. He came to the United States in the mid-sixties, here we are ten years or so later in the mid-seventies, and this Korean-born artist coming from Germany, this polyglot speaking these different languages, how did you initially find this person to be? I mean, he just seems so singular --

[RC]: Yeah. Well in some ways, it was because I liked him personally. Because I was still pretty naive about avant-garde art, and Fluxus -- I knew nothing about at that time. And even John Cage, I had read little bit of Cage. And so Nam June's philosophy and his whole intellectual equipment was -- much of it was pretty exotic to me, but I just liked him a lot. And I could see he was a brilliant thinker on all these matters, most of which I hadn't even thought about.

[JH]: But he was like flitting around, moving around constantly.

[RC]: Yeah. He was.

[JH]: It's not like he'd sit at his table in SoHo or something. He was constantly moving, generating.

[RC]: Yeah. I had a sense that he was not only brilliant, but that he was sensitive politically, that he would not insert himself -- he would choose what he would get involved in. And his support for the Artist Television Workshop was very firm, and that encouraged me to go forward, and then Channel 13 had to recognize him. I think that if you talk to someone like John Godfrey about him -- how putting with up with John Godfrey was not that easy for a lot of the artists, how Nam June managed it I don't know, but it -- Godfrey was a particular personality. I had on and off relations with him.

[JH]: Because he was in a pivotal position -- you needed to go through him.

[RC]: And he was not always polite to the artists that were brought in to work with. Aldo Tambellini punched him at one point.

[JH]: Whoa!

[RC]: [laughs]

[JH]: Wow. Well, he almost punched me, so --

[RC]: Really?

[laughter]

[JH]: Aldo was --

[RC]: Volatile.

[JH]: Yeah, volatile. [laughs] So -- Howard Klein and Nam June, did you spend time with both of them?

[RC]: Yeah. Howard, that's sort of a side story, not useful for you, but I recently got to know him again -- got to see him again.

[JH]: Where? When?

[RC]: At the Century Club. We're both members -- But he lives in Virginia. He's been there for years.

[JH]: Is he still -- is he around?

[RC]: He comes in a couple of times a year.

[JH]: Do you have any way to reach him?

[RC]: Oh, definitely. I have his email and all that.

[JH]: Could you give me his email?

[RC]: Oh, sure.

[JH]: How's his health?

[RC]: He's a wonderful guy. And I loved him when he was at the Rockefeller Foundation, and they were so lucky to have him there at that time. And we were all lucky.

[JH]: But is he well?

[RC]: Yeah. He was seriously ill back in those days.

[JH]: Yes. But when did you see him last?

[RC]: A couple of months ago. He stayed here. He came up --

[JH]: Oh, come on, Russell.

[RC]: Yeah.

[JH]: Can you give me his email?

[RC]: Absolutely. Before you leave.

[JH]: Oh, fantastic.

Now, did you keep in touch with Nam June through the eighties and nineties so much?

[RC]: No. That's sad to me. I didn't see as much of Nam June as I would have liked to. And even after he became ill, it became even more difficult.

[JH]: Well, you spoke very eloquently. I have a copy of your text at the memorial we had at the Guggenheim Museum. We'll reproduce this with the discussion.

This has been, I have to say, really terrific. Just what I wanted, Russell.

[RC]: Good.

[JH]: I mean, I don't know if my interview is up to your professional standards, but --

[RC]: [laughs] You're doing fine.

[JH]: Am I doing okay?

[laughter]

[JH]: Is there something else? You know, it's funny because artists, and Nam June, uniquely so, is so entwined or interlaced through this whole history, and to try to pick out individual strands of experience from different people, from different points of view -- it's not like I'm writing a biography, but I'm trying to create a kind of oral map of this guy. I know what I thought and saw and experienced, and I often think that something else going on in the mid-sixties when he arrived, and then with Charlotte, and then the mid-seventies. The period I keep returning to when you were a host, a narrator, a voice, a presence in those tapes, is the formative period to this art movement and to his single-channel tapes and his installations. Did you go to his gallery shows or installation?

[RC]: I did. At Holly Solomon a couple of times.

[JH]: Did you go to his studio? Did you spend much time at Mercer Street?

[RC]: No. It was very occasional. I remember having dinner there.

[JH]: But most of your experience was when you were doing this. When you were working -- and I identify with these particular video tapes -- was it at the TV Lab, at 13?

[RC]: Some of it was --

[JH]: You mention recording things here in your studio.

[RC]: Yeah. And I remember -- even when I lived somewhere else briefly, down on 23rd Street, I think I remember Nam June being there, whether he had a video camera with him recording

something, I forget what show it would have been for. But it was in different places, at the TV Lab, and I think we recorded some audio here more than once.

[JH]: Now, that show that you were so identified with at Brandeis and how that tracked you, so to speak, and identified you within that institution, to then come here -- to the NYSCA, and so forth. What exactly was your experience with Nam June?

[RC]: Well, it grew out of my meeting him -- first I had met him in '67 at WGBH. But then in '69, I went to the Howard Wise show, *TV as a Creative Medium* [1969], and he was there. Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette had that wonderful piece near the entrance.

[JH]: Yeah. *Wipe Cycle*.

[RC]: And Paik was just terrific and vital to that whole show, and that certainly planted the idea for me. I was already at Brandeis. I said, "Gee, if we could do a museum show" -- and I think the core of the people in that show, became the core of the show at Brandeis [*Vision and Television*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1970]. Even people like Paul Ryan.

[JH]: Paul Ryan. He recently passed away.

[RC]: Yeah. It's very sad.

[JH]: Does Brandeis have an archive from all of that?

[RC]: I don't know what they have. It was wonderfully popular with students and with dogs. Dogs loved the electronic -- they would clamor around the speakers --

[JH]: Russell, you're just --

[laughter]

[JH]: I think Nam June found a kindred spirit --

[laughter]

[RC]: Maybe.

[JH]: Absolutely. Are you kidding? That's the kind of thing he would have said.

[laughter]

[JH]: The dogs.

[RC]: Yeah. No, they were very much attracted to it.

[JH]: [laughs]

[RC]: But the faculty, the art department were not so fond of it, because they obviously thought the museum should be showing their paintings instead of this strange video stuff.

[JH]: Well, that experience of working with him, realizing that show --

[RC]: Oh, well, he was the key to it and he was the star of it. And he would be there almost every day -- in his corner at the back of the lower gallery, a whole big space all to himself. And he had a lot of the early work, you know, the magnets and -- he would entertain people. --

[JH]: At Brandeis?

[RC]: At Brandeis.

[JH]: So he would actually be there all the time?

[RC]: He would be there every day. I don't think through the whole show, but certainly at the beginning he was there. And it was there, you know -- you could walk into that place and wonder, what does this got to do with art, until you walked into his space, and then you knew. [laughs] You knew this is where it is. This is where what counts is happening.

[JH]: Were you on the set of *Global Groove*, like, when Charlotte was playing the cello and Jud Yalkut interviewed? It was interesting.

[RC]: I remember Jud.

[JH]: Jud asked her about the cello. He was interviewing her. Were you in the production at all?

[RC]: I wasn't there at that point. I was there a couple of times. There was a show that they did for CBS, *Camera Three*. Did you ever see that show?

[JH]: Oh, yes. Of course. That's a fantastic show, by the way.

[RC]: It is a good show. Unfortunately -- You've never had the experience, but like when your tongue gets stuck to the roof of your mouth and it's hard to speak. And somehow I got through it.

[JH]: You certainly did.

[RC]: But there was one point where I had to -- I had the idea that some word was not correct, that it should be "envisaged" instead of "envisioned." Except you can't say "envisage" when your tongue is stuck to the roof of your mouth, so I had to repeat it over -- this is the end of the show. I'm recording the narration. All the CBS employees are all standing around. We've been through it all with Nam June and with Charlotte and everything is perfect. The only thing left is to finish this little bit of the narration and get Russell to say "envisage" clearly. [laughs]

[JH]: Is that in the tape?

[RC]: No. No, it's not. Nam June probably might have enjoyed that.

[JH]: Yes. Exactly.

[RC]: [laughs]

[JH]: Channeling our friend at the -- what's his name? Alvin Lucier. [laughs]

[RC]: Yeah. Alvin would have turned it into poetry. That was a touching thing about the Lucier interview; the thing I remember the best was when he talked about how John Cage had helped him realize how beautiful his speech was. I thought, my God, now that's lovely.

[JH]: It is lovely.

[RC]: But -- no, the CBS *Camera Three* has some good stuff. And there's the piece where I'm next to Charlotte and she has the TV Bra, and I'm actually up here on the TV bra --I forget which piece that was. And then I remember all sorts of funny things, recording the *Guadalcanal* --

[JH]: *Requiem*.

[RC]: Yeah. With Charlotte crawling across the beach. I wasn't there when she was crawling across the beach. I wrote the narration with him, I think, mostly him I'm sure. I shaped it into something I could actually say.

[JH]: Did you keep the text of that?

[RC]: No. No, I didn't keep any of the text.

[JH]: But that was a give and take? You and he would talk about the narration, he would give you ideas? He felt very comfortable with you.

[RC]: Yeah. We got along just fine. He was not a drinking man.

[JH]: I know.

[RC]: So that was a problem, but I tried to overlook his inadequacy in that department.

[laughter]

[JH]: Did you see him in Paris much?

[RC]: No. I remember a funny time in Paris. One time, he came to where I was staying, and I cooked lunch for him. And that was very funny because I don't cook; but I made pasta and he

loved it. And he said -- you're going to laugh -- he said, "Oh, you're very lucky, an artist who can cook."

[laughter]

[RC]: I hated to break it to him but that was my only dish. That was it. Something else he said that day, which is not relevant for you, maybe, but it struck me. He began to look through a book I had come out with. This was -- my book came out in '97. What was it called? It was called something like *Masters in pieces: the art of Russell Connor*. [Boston: Journey Editions, 1997]. Anyway, he was looking through it. He saw some of my early work and some of the things I was doing back in the sixties, which were derived from television. I don't know if you remember. And he said, "When did you do this?" It's a black and white thing. I had taken an El Greco portrait and repeated it down the middle of a black canvas, as if there's something wrong, as if it's on a television image and there's something wrong with your vertical control. He said, "When did you do that?" I says, "'64." He says, "Oh."

[JH]: Is that true? You did that in '64?

[RC]: Yeah. He said, "Oh, life is not fair, is it?" [laughs] I guess he meant if I had done it in New York in the middle of -- it would have got the attention that --. But then he said -- this is a sign of how clued in he was about the workings of the art world. He said, "You know, I must tell you that your works are interesting, but even if you are the best," he was talking about appropriation, I guess -- "Even if you're the best, it's over." This was late nineties. Appropriation had something of a vogue in the eighties --

[JH]: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

[RC]: But he said, "It's over."

[JH]: Postmodernism.

[RC]: "It's over." [laughs]

[JH]: Was that before his stroke?

[RC]: Yeah. Before it. And we didn't discuss it any further. It didn't change the way I painted.

[JH]: Of course not.

[RC]: But it made me realize that it's not surprising if galleries are not standing in line to show my work.

[JH]: Well, let me see. This has been terrific. We've had a chance to speak for about an hour or so, and you've been candid and thoughtful and you know, it's a large career, yours, and I may come back to you, after the interview is transcribed -- to add a couple little lines or something, or I want to fill it out a bit. But, in essence, you've given me a very fine insight into who Nam June

was. When you see somebody, like yourself, who is so identified with him in these tapes, you always wonder, well, what does all that mean? How much did you see? How did that work? How was that written? And now I see it was a very amiable kind of process and conversation.

[RC]: One of the funniest times was when we were doing the scripts for *Suite 212*. And we were both contributing things about New York that we knew, making it up each time. The one I made up that I was proudest of was when we were covering, for some reason, -- he was very good at incorporating the works of his friends into that series -- and getting them a little money. And I forget who did the piece about the Tibetan Museum on Staten Island. I said leading off, "Tonight, off-track Tibetan."

[JH]: [laughs]

[RC]: And now that sort of pun that you don't often get a chance to deliver to the American people, but he let me do that. I remember going to Lindy's, down in Times Square, and they had on the wall then a lot of sayings about New York, quotes from O. Henry and other people in the past, and so I copied them and we incorporated as many of them into it as we could. So that was how my scholarship was done.

[JH]: The whole thing is about CBS, and the corporate media, and all that. That was *Suite 212*. Remember the girl is in the bathtub --

[RC]: Oh, that's *The Selling of New York*. Yeah, that was a funny piece. [laughs] I don't know how it holds up now. Have you seen it recently?

[JH]: Yeah. It looks great. It's surprising.

[RC]: He had done a lot of research on that. And I was, I think, astonished at how -- more and more, as I got to know him, how well read he was and well informed in so many things. And [laughs] the idea that I was to be the, kind of, mock announcer like the regular conventional TV announcer on the six o'clock news, giving all this stuff. And I remember one -- I think, this was something we may have recorded with him with a Portapak, somewhere down where I was staying on 23rd Street. And I had this script to have to keep in my lap, you know, I was talking to the camera, as if a professional newsman, but I looked down [laughs] -- something we had just made up, you know? And I can see that, whenever I see that, I can see the narrator looking down every now and then. I was reading from my lap. It was so funny. And that was done, you know, for \$4.98, that production, I'm sure. I don't know what -- I didn't get paid for anything, I don't remember. Except that he called me a genius. And that's all I wanted.

[laughter]

[JH]: Do you remember *You Can't Lick Stamps*? Do you remember that with Gregory Battcock? Because I think you're the narrator to that.

[RC]: I probably narrated some things that I don't remember. But if he asked me to do it, I would have done it. It was a wonderful time. It was great privilege to know and work with him. If I think of anything else that'd be useful, I'll send it down to you.

[JH]: And it's been a privilege to talk to you.

[RC]: [laughs]

[JH]: Thank you.

[end of transcript]