

## 12 William E. Parker, Lecture at Visual Studies Workshop, 1977

Notes on the transcription: Comments made by Parker during the reading of texts are set in ( ). Additional information set in { }. Inaudible or gaps in tape indicated by ... Parker laughing indicated by {laughs} Students laughing indicated by {laughter}

Transcription by Bob Martin

### **Reel 12: Conclusion, continuation of subjective/objective issues, Ella May Rivers covering herself with photographs, Parker getting struck by lightning.**

Even the recent *Time* magazine on genetic coding, grafting, issues of this nature. You see whether you are in favor of or opposed, one thing is, we know we can graft human to animal in terms of, what do you call them, the things that inhabit the stomach, surely you read that *Time* magazine article on genetic engineering, it is the thing that enables digestion. At this point plant life, a plant's cellular structure can be grafted onto these organisms, these cells that inhabit our stomachs. So in essence, at least in a sort of ecological, semiotic combination I say the human onto the creature level, or plant level. And scientists that are in favor of this state, we don't care about the postulate of disaster, you know, the Andromeda Strain. They deal with postulates about the fact that this will be the case, not in terms of proleptic anticipation, they say it *is* the case that cellular protoplasmic structures are reproducible and can be developed. They deal with issues without consideration of the consequence of the strain. I don't even care to enter in to whether it is moral or immoral, those opposed say we are in danger because manipulating matter in that nature means that we are interfering with what we might call phenomenology which should be operative independent of human interference. You see it is like the same argument of whether the world should be forced to obey our subjective interests, or whether it should be permitted to be observed as a phenomenological consequence separate from our interference. There are certain developments in Physics and Chemistry. I have a friend getting a PHD working in Penicillinase and that staphylococci, for example, a strain that has become resistant. We are now entering a phase where they are, the staphylococci organisms are preparing their own resistance to penicillin, now penicillin doesn't work on certain strains. Penicillinase is the chemical that staphylococci form to protect themselves from penicillin. She has spent four obsessive years using an electronic scanning microscope and I have even seen the crystal and the nuclear structure of the penicillinase particle. It is worked on all over the world, in Edinburgh, in Milan, Italy, in Texas, in Connecticut, trying to discover what is it in nature that enables an organism to refuse to be disturbed by our inventions as it were, still using nature's chemicals and other components. And she says we have reached the stage, and she points out these seven postulates which

they accept to be the case in order to solve the problems they have to solve and there is no evidence for it and never will be. In other words, postulates that determine the next stage in their experimentation which would seem like star-struck fantasies. Fantasies that have to be postulated in order to even make the next measure and the next sub-level of the micro-scanning...and I said what do you mean that you have to accept it? I thought you people went around having to have at least hypotheses that could be proved. "Oh no, Bill, are you totally unaware that science has entered a new stage? We are now becoming more the new Romantics. We have to now deal with issues that can never be proved in order to prove what we are dealing with before us." And I said oh really. And she showed me a number of evidences. It is like saying that wall is there. On another level, for anyone involved, I would say it is just simple living, simply because we accept it to be there without having to prove it to be there. So when I asked you that question...I am sure you thought I was after some special scientific measure or possibility of perception, or whether it was extra-mission theory, or information theory, or some law of physics. No, it is the principle that we too have no problem with photographs representing a past-tense mode, or that the world is an illusion, only insofar as we accept the fact that it is still there. We don't even have to touch it, we don't have to be present for us to have made that acceptance and for it to exist beyond the fact of our existence. It is a rather complex issue. It sounds moralistic, it is as though I need my little entry into the Royal Photographic Society bulletin with my little advisement about behavior. It has nothing to do with that. It says that we may have come to the point that pictorial forms are dangerous. They remove us from the context of the world we experience and inhabit. They are not dangerous insofar as we simply *cognitively, consciously*, state, IT IS THERE, and not have to be able to prove it. Because there is no proof, even at this point in time that confirms that either the picture is the world, or the world is the world, or my measuring mind is the confirmation of the world. It is obviously a symbiotic relationship between all three. And that you and I are also accepted by the matrix of the environment which sustains and supports us, whether that be what we breathe, or what we eat, or what have you. By the same token as it confirms me, and accepts me, I then have to take the same position and say it is not my mental cognitions or my sensory responses, or even the wonder of the defects in my eye, or the fact that I can make a record that comes close to the phenomenology of light. Why should I care whether one makes the mark, and it is no more than a crude testament to having been present in relationship to matter like the macaroni mark on the wall of a cave. Or that I can take a photograph and know that I can come close to a very strong representation of light having been active in relationship to a light-sensitive receptive material. Or that I do this in the service of transferring my own urgencies, emotions and even positions I take on this world: if I dig a ditch and point the camera upward or record the events that are occurring around us, or what have you. All of these things do not confirm or take away. Essentially what it becomes is, at one point in time,

if I don't *lose* the world, then I have to accept it. And I do that simply by saying, *it is*. So you might say, *that* is mind confirming matter. Yes it is, just in the same way, as dumbly as matter accepts me, confirms me, without asking me questions about who I am, what I am, why I am about things, what I conceive it to be. As some people would take something, and take a piece of clay and squeeze it into a utilitarian pot: we don't ever ask the question, does the pot know the hand or the mind is forming it. No, it accepts the pressure, just like those twigs or those threads as Bachelard says, accepts the pressure of the breast of the mother bird. Or by the same token it is like saying also, that world which supports me and I which accept it, using both in the sense of the three categories of knowing in that first essay I asked you to read, it is a form of symbolic relationship, not only symbiotic, an ecological interconnection but symbolic relationship. The world accepts me without my ever having been asked a question to justify. I then now maybe in the first moment in time where I don't need a theory to support the fact that what I see, or what I think about the world, or how I am emotively affected by it, is not the issue. I no longer need those justifications, those analyses, those print-outs, those test tubes, those petri dishes: those submicroscopic levels to confirm that the great chain of being does indeed extend down into something. I can go right to the middle of those indefinable areas and say, let's not give up the work of knowing more, but let's start for the first time in human existence and say, it is, not I think therefore I am. You notice what that does. That takes away the world. Why not just say, I am, it is, we are. Accept the reciprocal relationship between its mute acceptance and also the fact that I can't be mute nor can I mime. We can even hold an image of 'it is,' or we can just forget the argument. Matter, spirit: both are supported. You can enter into the third level of that by saying that at some point in time perhaps you or I will have some conclusion to become aware of, or some transformation. But insofar as I am concerned, the only linkage that we can find significant in our own time is not to assume our eyes send out confirming particles, or to assume there is some medium between my eye and the object that is set into motion and causes vibrations that also enter into my eye and move back to my soul and confirm knowing or even existence. Nor to assume that the object itself sends out some material and enters into my optical receptor and thus confirms itself. Nor that I have to deal with the reciprocal interaction, something happens from the eye outward, something happens from the object inward. Or nor do I have to go upon century after century and worry about the question of how vision occurs: we should know what they were worried about in each time, the part that we are not going to get to, but I am at least giving you a sketch. And tomorrow when I get it typed up I'll give you the rest of the outline to read...And the sense that, we have arrived at the point in time where intra-mission, extra-mission, mediumistic, wave energy theory or what have you: that will have nothing to do with the ability to be able to witness images, witness pictures, and give up that ridiculous, absurd argument about something is more credible than another. Photographs *aren't* credible. If anything they are a

greater lie than practically any other pictorial mode and they are subject to grand schemas of alteration. They *do* give us what we think is evidence because of the phenomenology of light. Paintings give us evidence of dumb substances being manipulated to some hand, whether they become phenomenalism or it become reference. But the wall can only be there insofar as a human being is responsive, simply because of the fact that we accept it is. Not by any other means or measure of proof. I would suspect that even creatures already have achieved that recognition and we have yet to arrive at it. Now you might not like that conclusion, as I told you. If I had said to you, well how do you know the wall is there and I said, accept it. You have got to figure out what acceptance is. But it damn sure ain't through reason, it isn't through sensation, it isn't through intuition, and it isn't through feeling. *It is*, because all you've got is the capacity, whether you use any one of those measures, or whether you use all four simultaneously, even the hidden one you can find. Or use one of them. You can just simply say and confirm that *it is*, and get about the business of experiencing it. This is Fred {Sommers} saying, "They all ask about a return to nature or about the world, I wonder where they think it could have been." The answer is only to be given to that person who can accept it. Whatever your ritual of acceptance is, I don't know. I suspect it can never be accepted by any pictorial mode, but that does not mean stop taking pictures, or we don't need pictures. We do need them. Acceptance comes from a much richer level of perceptual confirmation. It may be that just that simple recognition that as *it* supports you, the world, you then can do the same thing, you can support it. And that doesn't mean watching out for particlization in the air, or exhaust emission, or smoking yourself to death, or not. It is another level altogether. And I can't tell you what it is, I know how I deal with it, or I am doing it. You have got to find out how you do it. Because when you do, it will be like, and this is my little moral lesson: it would be just as I said the other day, like showing the sequence of taking a robe off of yourself in gradual transition to throw before a visitor. That's all. And when you do that you will change human consciousness when you accept the world and know the wall is there by virtue of that confirmation, even though as you say it you're immediately wiped out. Ok? The end. {laughs} Who was it who said that, you were the one who said that phrase...shall we begin? {laughs}...that is the point...for the pre-history of photography.

Student: Who is the woman's name you said you saw through the keyhole?

Varnetta Croy...you know I learned every dirty thing in my life from her brothers. C-R-O-Y...they were filthy but I loved them. And another person I learned a lot from was a woman named, oh my third reason why I love photography: there was a woman in our community. I don't know what it was but I always had a penchant...a certain degree of bible belt righteousness in this, I used to think I could be like...and go out and heal the sick, I was always bringing anything home to their surprise, and my mother and father

would say get the hell out of here with that dead cat, but I can bring it back to life Momma! {laughs} I will never forget Ella May Rivers. I wrote about it in childhood and so on. I remember her Dad once had a real psychosis when I was about seven years old. All I did was draw pictures that were called the 'Death of Ella May.' And I had to go through a sort of catharsis, I did my own psychic healing by locking myself in my room. And my family had to deliver food to me for literally a four month period. I never left that room. I had to get into the camera and make my own pictures. And I went through a whole psychological catharsis, and my friend brought me these crayons. I used forty-three boxes of crayons. I burned all except one later. I am not exaggerating. Ask my wife, ask my family and they will tell you I did it, destroy the evidence. But I had to make these images to deal with something about, a lot of things, like earth, because I was leaving it. So you might say, Parker, that is your problem, all you have to do is accept it, see? Uh-huh. What I experienced, everyone else has to too, I know that. But I knew this woman named Ella May Rivers. We lived here at 117 South Street, and that was very near the ocean, it was I'd say less than a half a block, and it was not interrupted except by the Croy house which was right here, oh a spitting distance away...and then there were sand dunes and the ocean. Ella May lived right down on South Street, but I had to cross First Street which was our main boulevard, and Ella May lived three houses down on the left. There is a patch of woods right across First Street behind the Niehaus's, and that is right across the street from us....Near the ocean...pass by...there is one interrupting house, and then the Niehaus house, that was their name, they were Germans, and you can imagine what we called the Niehaus boys at the advent of the second world war, Nazis...no, we were friends...Anyway, behind them was some woods, and these woods went in a kind of tubular form and they were called scrub oaks and they get very impacted branches, and they went down and connected to Ella May's backyard. And what we would do is build tunnels, because scrub oaks you can't kill or hurt, so we would cut tunnels through the tops of the trees, and you can work your way into them. And as kids we had the best time, we had tunnels all through these trees and we would play. And every time I would come to Ella May's backyard, while everyone else was cutting up or doing something else or being dirty, I would look over and see her hydrangeas growing against the back of her yard. There were these gorgeous little flowers with multiple blossoms of pink and blue, and I'd see this woman drunkenly stumble around her backyard. And absolutely, she was *the* village drunk. And she was despised, and she was also very wealthy. And the reason I say that is because she had been exiled by her family. She had been brought up by a wealthy family...Jacksonville, Florida, they lived in Ortega, even to this day is a very elegant part where the rich folk live... and Ella May had been... and was completely supported by the extended, you know, put out to pasture, and stuck in this little town of Neptune Beach, Florida where not much happened...and never got to Jacksonville, that kind of...see and tell... and that kind of issue. And I would watch her fall around and slobber, and she would fall into

the hydrangeas, and I always felt, looking from my little tree tunnel lookout, this is no exaggeration, it is not a metaphor...it was like, you know the old Julie Harris...I am a camera thing. I would look at her out of these openings in these trees and I'd watch her, and I see her, and I felt a great sense of poignancy, a pain for her, but I never would have talked to her. Until one day, I can remember, some of these things you are not going to like, but they are vivid images and none of them in my mind are exaggerated: Ella May became what we might call an unwitting prostitute, I am sure she never received money. But you could to see her, you used to pay a nickel to ride what was called the...a little bus that would putt-putt up to Jackson Beach and then would go back down, and it would go twice a day. She would leave in the morning because it came by at 8 or 8:30 she would go up in it and she would drink all day and she would come home and it usually wasn't one sailor, it was usually four or five military men...and it was very evident that these young guys wanted to be entertained and she didn't know what she was doing. You could always tell that poor Ella May would appear the next day battered and beaten and that sort of thing...And I used to watch that, I used to spy on her all the time, not only from the tree hut. But I would purposely make up like I had something to do and I would walk down South Street and see if I could see Ella May. I never would talk to her, but she fascinated me because all the other people, my older sister and my other sister were always yelling at us to behave with others...I didn't feel left out, I just liked people who were interesting. So at any rate, one day I walked down to the ocean, and the sand dunes, it wasn't just like one little hill, there were dips, concave areas, and the palmettos, and for some reason I thought my brother and the Niehaus kids, and the Croy boys were down there, and I came upon, I have to act it out, I was walking up and I said hey Dan, where are you all? And I walked over this...like right out of Edward Weston and there down in this sort of basin was Ella May, completely drunk, out of her mind, and covered with photographs...covered with photographs. She was going through her mementos and she had stumbled down there and she had a bottle. She looked up, and you could see the signs of a very beautiful woman in the way she appeared, but she was fat... broken veins, slobbering mouth, half-witted eyes, and she looked up, and she didn't call me by my name, and she said, "Do you want to see something?" She showed me a picture of her shaking hands with Mussolini. She had traveled all over Europe. She had consorted with extraordinary people, and I knew who Mussolini was...Hirohito, well no, not Hirohito...and that just entranced me. I thought I had been given the treasure of all treasures: there was my Ella May Rivers, the subject of my voyeurism, a person I would never talk to, who I found inadvertently when I stumbled upon her in the basin of the earth, who hands me a photograph of evidence of where she had been at one time, at some point, you see I knew damn well she grew great hydrangeas, and she grew them. And there she was, she was a lovely person in that period of her life, a lovely person. And she was an unbelievable alcoholic who had been exiled by her family, and there she too tried to find

the evidence of her past-tense identity through the evidence of the photograph. And it just struck me, somewhere that was indelibly linked in my mind that I thought that photographs are immeasurably linked to people's needs...And that may have not been THE event, and I am sure there are other events in your life where you got interested in photography, but for me, I think really I am just one of those people where it does really serve a psychological necessity. So I love that project that Brenda...is working on, about head trauma and photographers. Have you all been tested here? I hope you have...her thesis is she has been working in Connecticut, it has to do with tests with how left brain/right brain works and rapid eye movements. You are asked questions about, do you see the image of Lincoln's face, and she is not interested in your answers, she is watching the way your eyes move. And then she found out the incidences among people, Bob Fichter, and a whole bunch of people, in this thing they go through, you have been through it so you know what I am talking about {to a student}...one of the issues was did you have any head injury, or were you knocked unconscious, or any kind of head trauma when you were young, and the incidences of people who say yes, as a matter of fact I did, is astounding, and the tests that she did right here have attracted a considerable amount of attention not only at the University of Connecticut by her former professor there, it is going to get some real attention. There have been a number of inquiries...and we have to look at the evidence...what are you doing wrong, and she said Oh my god I want to just know what I am doing, because this can't be, the national average only shows something like 18 percent out of the total number tested, and here at the Visual Studies Workshop it seemed as if there might be something like 43, wasn't it at one point, that 42 that had head injury or head trauma? And she came to see me, and I told her about being struck by lightning. There was another image of the respect I had for light {laughter}...Well this time I am in the fourth grade, and I was sitting in the window and doing something mindless...and Minnie... a woman used to come to help my mother with the washing and ironing, she was a black lady and she was a very close friend of ours. And she came and was at the other end of a big long living room in our garage apartment. She was ironing away, and I remember the hymn she would sing, "In the time of battle use the battle ax, in the time of battle use the battle ax." And she used to sing that song all the time, and I'd go, dah-dah-dah; dah-dah-dah... and dance around {laughs} And the storm clouds gathered and there I was, at the other end of the room, and I said look Minnie, it's getting ready to rain, and I pushed the screen out and went, "dah-dah-dah-dah," screaming at the world, singing like a nut, a crazy man, and Minnie said, "Child, get inside that window boy," she said, "There's lightning coming up and you're going to get struck." Oh no I won't Minnie, and keep singing, "dah-dah-dah-dah," when suddenly this bolt of lightning hit a reserve pipe that let gases come out of the basement toilet area, and I am telling you folks, it didn't hit me but it was close enough that it knocked me all the way off half way up the room, my hair standing on end, every light socket in the room, the iron blew up, and Minnie is going, "Oh my god,

oh my god,” and I am unconscious...about fifteen minutes later, I thought the lamentations and supplications... that little child sitting there with his hair standing on end, with no pupils like Little Orphan Annie {laughs}...{laughter}...They rushed me to my uncle, but no one was home and the next door neighbors were yelling that I got hurt. I was knocked completely unconscious, and wasn't standing on my feet for about two days. But then I learned to appreciate light as a phenomenological reality that became a presence in my world {laughs} let's quit here. That'll do.

Students: Thank you.

Does anyone want one of these EA Scholfield things, let me...why don't you take that now and I'll get more and bring them in the morning.

End reel 12