

I: Dean, can you introduce yourself and tell me the name of your piece?

DR: **12:56** My name is Dean Ruck. This is my piece, called Big Bubble.

I: Why is it called the Big Bubble?

DR: **13:07** Well, obviously it's a big bubble. It was – part of an idea that came from Bayou Master Plan that the city did some 10 years ago – 15 years ago, probably – where they wanted to create this emerald necklace along the bayou that connected – I think – from Memorial Park all the way up to the turning basin, and create focal points along the way, and – I was part of a – a national invitational competition to create artworks along Sesquicentennial Park here. **13:45** I was fortunate enough to win that competition to create three different pieces down here, so this is one of the pieces I did for this project. Part of – one of the things that the Master Plan said was that they needed to – to improve the health of the bayou by increasing the aeration in it. **14:06** So, this is one idea I had to help that, and – and otherwise it creates sort of a focal point along the way – a point of wonderment and interaction for the – the public that wanders down here.

I: What was the inspiration for it, Dean? How did you come up with an idea like –

DR: **14:23** It does come from that idea from the Master Plan to increase the aeration in the bayou, but also – I've always had this fascination with water flow and activation and kinetic sculptures – I – I – I'm very much a child of nature, so I like playing with the natural elements, and I wanted to – to put something in the bayou to point out the importance and the vitality of the bayou itself. **14:52** I mean, this is a body of water that – it may be hard to tell – but it is teeming with life, and it's really a valuable resource for the City of Houston, which, you know – they're obviously trying to develop and – and make more of an attraction – more of a prominent point than downtown life in Houston.

I: How does – how does it work?

DR: **15:12** Well, there's a – it has a compressor system up on the banks, and basically all that it does is release a large volume of – of air through a piping system down into the center of the bayou. There's a red button up in tower #2 that the public can activate to release that air. **15:33** It's also on a timing system so that it'll go off automatically at – at different intervals.

I: Now – now why did you decide for that location for the bubble, and to not label it at all? What was your thinking?

DR: **15:49** Well, the location for the button itself was just something that was accessible to pedestrians up there. It is not labeled, and that is important to it – from my idea that – I didn't want to announce it as a piece of art. It's – it's an

occurrence, an event, a happening. The button itself is up there unannounced, and so it creates a – a real curiosity to people that come across it – it's just a red button. Do I push it or don't I? – You know? What's it gonna do? So, I liked that idea that it's not a labeled or plaque piece of art. It's just something that people discover. **16:30** Obviously it's – there's a certain ephemeral quality to it because it's not always there to see. It happens occasionally. You have to be – here at the right time to see it. It creates a certain mythology of its own by what's going on there, what it's for, what its function is, how it's – how it's created. **16:49** So I like that idea of it not being thought of or – or seen as a piece of art, but it just – something in the bayou.

I: [inaudible]

DR: **17:14** There's been a lot of great reactions to it over the years from – one time I saw – there was a guy fishing down stream here a little bit, and he saw the bubble go off and he came running up here and threw his line right in there, thinking he was going to pull out the – Moby Dick or something, I'm not sure. Also, it's just – can be very startling when you don't see it coming. People walking along the promenade here – if it goes off while they're standing there, they tend to jump out of their shoes a little bit. **17:45** And it's – can be kind of amusing and entertaining to be up there at the button and waiting for people to walk by and time it right and have them sort of lurch back and jump and – they'll stand there and stare it. It's like, you know, what was that? And – after a while they'll let it go and start walking away, and you can push the button again while they're – have their back turned to it, and they'll come right back to it and sit there and scratch their head and not really know what's going on. **18:14** But I – I think it also does create a certain mythology of – of what is in there. Some people might think – might ask what it references, and I've heard all kinds of things from old military hardware, bombs going off, you know, sharks in the ocean or sharks coming up the bayou – all kinds of things. **18:47** Got a little reaction there, huh? [Snickers]

I: Do you love when you see that?

DR: Yeah, it's – it's very amusing I – I gotta tell you it's a – it's a pleasure to see, actually. I come down and watch sometimes and play with people.

I: Can you say that again, 'cause Laura told me you had said that – that you come down occasionally and –

DR: **19:07** I do. I come down occasionally and – and just wait for people to walk by so I can push the button and take a certain amount of pleasure in seeing their

- surprise and wonderment and fascination and – and their perplexed look. They certainly don't see it as – as artwork, I don't think. **19:24** It's just – something that happens and they'll probably go home and talk about it and wonder what that was.
- I: Since you were talking about art, what – well, actually, let's go back to some of the specifics about it. When was it ...? What's it made of? You know – just that sort of stuff.
- DR: **19:47** Well, the project – if I get my dates right – the project was commissioned in 1998 as part of the whole construction of the Phase 2 renovation of Sesquicentennial here. **20:02** It was put in place soon after that – has been upgraded a couple times since, but – it's essentially just a compressor system housed up along the walkway up on top with a plumbing or piping system that runs underground down into the bayou, and there's – there's a large air storage tank at that equipment site, and there's a large valve that – when the button opens, that valve – it just releases a – a large amount of air. **20:35** And it just pumps down into the – into the water here and releases from the bottom. It's pretty simple and low-tech engineering – just a hose – and runs out in the bayou. There's a bunch of concrete blocks that hold it down, and it just – the push of air coming from the compressor.
- I: What challenges did you face, Dean, putting it all together? Were there any?
- DR: **20:56** Oh, there were plenty. The conception of the piece during the competition – I had set this up in a – an aquarium, I guess – like a 30-gallon aquarium – and I had set this sort of – a little bell jar underwater with an aquarium aerator. I ran a little hose – air hose down into it, and it would bubble water into that bell jar, and as the water accumulated in that, the gravity of it would – would eventually turn it over and release that body of water. **21:26** So that's sort of how it was conceived of functioning, but that wasn't really that practical when I was actually commissioned to do it – which was a big surprise in itself, so – I had to sort or redesign – re-engineer it. But I just came up with the idea that I could just use a reservoir of air offsite and pump it down there. **21:48** The – the bayou itself, everybody knows, fluctuates a lot. It is a – a storm runoff, so when we have floods, this place does fill up with water in a hurry. You get some very strong currents that run through there. It has – I altered the location of it on occasion or **22:07** – I've had trees get caught up in my piping – had to put divers back in there and clear it off and reset it. It did take a good size crane on the top of this bridge here to set dead man weights down in the water to hold that pipe in place.
- I: Do you – why do you think public art is important?

DR: **22:30** Well, I think public art's important so that we see more than billboards and concrete in Houston. This is not the greatest landscape in the world to live in. We have a lot of great architecture. **22:45** Certainly a lot of improvements have happened, but you might say we're a little visually defunct in Houston sometimes, so anything that we can do and design in art to improve that is – is going to be a big improvement to – to our living space and what it is to live in Houston.

I: Do you – what do hope people experience when they check out the Big Bubble?

DR: **23:14** I hope they experience – just something that they haven't experienced before. It's – a very unique thing. It's not something that you would expect to find down here. You certainly wouldn't expect it as art or recognize it as art. It's an occurrence in the bayou that – is very curious and perplexing. **23:36** And I – I think that's important just to help people remember being here, to – raise some awareness of being here, to get them to think about what the bayou is and how it interacts with their – their environment and the – the downtown environment here.

I: Anything, Dean, that I might not have asked about the Big Bubble that you wanted to talk about?

DR: **24:06** I think we've covered it pretty well – I might just say – talk about the – the competition process of it – the process of getting selected to be here. I don't know if that's in interest of what you're doing here.

I: No, it's fine. [Inaudible]

DR: **24:25** There was – back in '96 – a call or invitational – let me start that over. **24:31** Back in 1996, there was a – an invitation for a competition to solicit projects for the bayou down here – part of the Phase 2 renovation of Sesquicentennial Park. I got short listed on that – in that process, and subsequently created three different ideas for the park down here, along with three other finalists, and was selected as the finalist to do those commissions. **25:01** From that point it was commissioned contract, and implemented the ideas over the next couple of years.

I: You know what? You just reminded me of the Sounds of the Past. Can you tell me a little bit about that one – that piece?

DR: **25:18** The Sounds From the Past – is just upstream from here, and it's more specifically referential to the steamships that came up the bayou here from the – the Gulf of Mexico, and that was really the basis of – of founding Houston and

creating an inland port here, so it's an important aspect to the history of Houston. **25:43** It's a – solely a sound piece down under a bridge just upstream from here. It's activated by pedestrian motions as they walk along the promenade. It's also on a timer. It goes off on occasion, and it's a digital recording of a steamship, its horn, and the paddle wheel going off and – and just creates – creates a visual image through the use of sound. **26:11** That sound – sound often has a – a sort of a more stationary or long-lasting aspect in our memory than – than visuals do. So, I wanted to use that and – and just create another curiosity point, another aspect to – to wonder about down here. Something to explore and experience and discover.

I: How did you come up with the idea for that?

DR: **26:37** The idea just spins off of what the history of the site is. It's celebrating this location as really the founding point of Houston. I also did quite a bit of research through the library – through the photo archives of the library, and there was a lot of great images of old steamships being anchored at the Main Street point just up the – up the stream here. **27:07** So, I just played off of that. I created a – a digital sound that could be piped down under – under the bridge that people would hear.

I: What kind of reactions did you – have you gotten on that piece?

DR: **27:19** The Sounds of the Past is a much more subtle piece. It's – it's not a blaring sound. It's – it can be rather quiet, and it – it echoes under that bridge a little bit, but it's a little more subtle. People will catch it out of the – you know, out of the corner ear, so to speak, as they're walking along – may or may not even recognize what it is, but somewhere it's sinking into their head that they just heard a steamship. **27:48** They may look around, wonder what it is, wonder if there's actually a ship there. Obviously, there's not, but I think it probably creates some image of what the times used to be like when commerce was very heavy on the bayou here.

I: Great. Thank you, Dean.

I2: I was – you remember your roadhouse installation and your placard on the outside? It said something about – you were somewhat skeptical about those – relevance or viability of art – public art specifically. Could you – could you expound on that a little? I always wanted to ask you what you meant about that.

DR: **28:32** Well, help me think about it. What was your reaction to – to that statement and that piece?

I2: Well, I don't remember the piece and the house as much as – as I –

DR: **28:44** That was the Treehouse.

I2: Was it the Treehouse?

DR: Yeah.

I2: I don't – I don't really – I don't really – I really – hardly I don't remember the piece, but I remember reading the placard. Because we were shooting a documentary at the time. I don't think I went to get in, but – no, I was just interested – you had – you had an interesting take on public art – on –on art and it's effect or relevance or necessity. I was wondering what – what – what are you doing with that statement. I mean, what were you saying about – was that – that tied to the piece? Not really relevant to this, or –

DR: **29:15** It – it – it wasn't necessarily specific to that piece. It's – it's more of a general statement by me. And as far as public art, there's – there's a lot of different ways to approach it. Just like any other type of art or any other activity. Everybody comes at it from their own – their own bases. **29:36** My approach is to really involve the viewer in the experience and where they are in time and place, and – the history of public art is varied, of course, but it primarily started with monumental steel sculptures being plopped in a plaza somewhere. This is the – the artist's or the sculptor's fabrication coming out of their studio or out of their shop, plopping it down, without really a lot of relevance to where it is and – and its context of where it exists. **30:15** So, I approach things a little bit differently, I think. I consider the viewer – that's really the primary aspect of what instigates the work. There really needs to be a synapse between context, the viewer – the audience, and the art itself. So it – it's not about the art itself being a statement or an opinion or a reflection upon me, it's really the – the synapse between the viewer and the art. **30:45** That's – that's where the – that's where the creation is. That's where the energy is. So, yeah, I have certain skeptical viewpoints about what the typical public art object might be. That's changing a lot nowadays. I mean, it's – the – the public itself is actually much more involved in what might get commissioned into a space, and that's – that comes with pros and cons itself. **31:16** Stepping back, I – actually, one aspect of what I proposed for this project was a public art project – or a public art creation where I would have had a large block of stone up in the common area and this apparatus that would've been a carving tool that – the public would've actually created the sculpture itself by using this apparatus to carve the stone. So it would've literally been a public art piece. **31:45** There were logistical problems to that, so that kind of sort of fell by the wayside. We didn't do that piece. It ended up being more of

the – the photo montage timeline along the promenade instead. So, the definition of public art for me is – is maybe not what most people will think of it. It's not – certainly not something that's created by the public – maybe commissioned by the public. **32:11** They may have a voice in it – in it's fabrication or its design – its conception, but really they're – they're sort of – they are to view the process and to contribute the process. But always, it's going to be the artist that is implying themselves or putting themselves in the public realm. **32:34** And that's a – you know, the public realm's a much different setting than a gallery or your own studio, where you can do what you want and you don't have to answer to anybody. In a public setting, it's much different. **32:47** You – you do have different constituents that you have to take into consideration that are going to want some answers for what you do. But I approach it a little bit differently than I think most people do.

I2: When I worked with you on Chain Reaction, one of the important things was to have a ... interactive space. And they – these pieces are still interactive. You have people walking through and button pushing. Can you kind of expound on what that is? I mean, you say the public is involved in making art, you can argue [inaudible] the piece is being made by the person pushing the button. I mean, what is – what is that synapse – you talk about a synapse. What is that connection.

I: Right. What role does the public play in public art?

DR: **33:28** Well, the role the public has in this piece specifically is – is actually activating it, and I sense – in a sense I guess you can say they are creating that bubble themselves, or they're at least instigating it. That obviously gives them a one-on-one connection with the – with the event or the occurrence. So – you know – and that's their role, and – and the public also has a strong role in just viewing it and experiencing it and – and then creating the mythology behind it and telling people about it and – maintaining a memory about it and talking about it to other people. **34:08** Most of my work is done on a temporary basis. It's created – it's – has a time span of its own, and then it goes away. I tear it down, and it exists in photographs. But it also exists primarily in memory for the people that saw it, and that's – and it's a very powerful thing, and – obviously a memory can change over time, and it changes as people talk about it, and then people have a memory of what somebody told them and – a chain reaction to that – that's part of the dynamic of the – the sculpture itself. **34:48** That it – like the bubble itself, it has a rippling effect. Those ripples reach out across the bayou, they help the – hit the other banks, and they'll ripple back. It creates sort of visual poem of that action, and people talking about it do the same thing – the memories, the experiences of it – they do the same thing. **35:08** And they ripple out to other people. Those people talk to people. They create memories, and the memories

ripple back – maybe to me or to whoever and – you know, they're often very different from what – what might actually be here, but it's an interesting process.

I: Perfect. Thank you.

???: Anytime, ...

DR: You know ... ought to get one more shot.

???: You ought to throw a rock.

???: Rolling.

DR: **35:52** You see me?

???: Ready?