



Artists Documentation Program (ADP) Interview Video Index

Artist: George Herms
Date: November 19, 1993
Location: The Menil Collection
Interviewer: Carol Mancusi-Ungaro
Video: Laurie McDonald / **Edit:** Laurie McDonald
Total Run Time: 01:41:19

Abstract:

Artist George Herms discusses his work with Menil Chief Conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro. The discussion focuses primarily on the materials and methods that the artist used to create his found object assemblage sculpture, *Greet the Circus with a Smile*, 1961, owned by the Menil Collection.

Controlled Access Headings (Library of Congress):

Corporate Name(s)

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Artists Documentation Program
Harvard University. Art Museums
Menil Collection (Houston, Tex.)
Whitney Museum of American Art

Genre(s)

Interviews
Oral histories

Personal Name(s)

Mancusi-Ungaro, Carol
Herms, George, 1935-

Subject(s)

Art--Conservation and restoration
Artists' materials
Art--Technique
Assemblage (Art)
Found objects (Art)
Sculpture

Exhibitions/Works:

Names of exhibitions and works referenced during this interview appear below in gray cells.

Controlled Vocabulary:

Except where indicated, all keywords employ Getty vocabularies (AAT/ULAN/TGN). Those marked with (*) employ Library of Congress Authorities. Those marked with (**) employ local terms.

| Time | Contents | Subject Keywords |
|----------|---|---|
| 00:00:01 | Opening Credits | |
| 00:00:43 | Prelude George Herms silently reviews <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> prior to the interview. | |
| 00:01:27 | Introduction Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, George Herms Mancusi-Ungaro mentions a 1990 Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation panel in which she and Herms discussed art conservation and the respective roles of the conservator and the artist. | Frederick R. Weisman Foundation* Gregson, Edwin* |
| 00:01:39 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i>, 1961 The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:02:24 | Process of Creation and Concept/Nature of Work Herms describes the circumstances that led him to create <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . He also discusses the concepts underlying the work. | Apollinaire, Guillaume assemblages (sculpture) feather (material) found objects Larkspur sculpture in the round tar (bituminous material) Seitz, William Chapin* |
| 00:03:10 | (Exhibition Reference) "The Art of Assemblage" Museum of Modern Art, New York October 4-November 12, 1961 | exhibitions (events) Museum of Modern Art |
| 00:03:20 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i>, 1961 (two perspectives) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:05:30 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i>, 1961 (details of tar and feathers, occult diagram, Kennedy photo, and Paul Mystery) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |

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| 00:06:00 | (Image) George Herms <i>The Librarian, 1960</i> Norton Simon Museum, Gift of Molly Barnes | assemblages (sculpture) Norton Simon Museum |
| 00:06:41 | Process of Creation Herms describes his creative processes, including his tendency to use worn or aged found objects with muted values. | altars (religious building fixtures) found objects love letters Motherwell, Robert natural aging patina (condition) self-taught artists value (color property) |
| 00:10:13 | Conservation Issues and Concept/Nature of Work Herms continues to discuss his use of naturally aged materials. He and Mancusi-Ungaro reflect on the importance of youth and age in contemporary society, as well as the challenges that are inherent in conserving contemporary art. | accelerated aging materialism (cultural attitude) natural aging public art |
| 00:12:18 | (Work Reference) George Herms <i>Moon Dial, 1988-90</i> Public sculpture displayed in Beverly Hills | public art |
| 00:14:26 | Conservation Issues Herms and Mancusi-Ungaro discuss the importance of dialogue between artists and conservators. Herms expresses his opinions regarding the preservation of his work for future generations. | artist's intent artists' materials conservators preservation (function) |
| 00:16:57 | Conservation Issues and Historical Anecdote Herms provides his opinions on the current condition of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . He also outlines the work's provenance and exhibition history, including the story of its acquisition by Edwin Gregson. | Corcoran, James I. W.* Gregson, Edwin* Johnson, Robert Emory** Kessler, Chester Newport Harbor Art Museum provenance visual inspection |
| 00:19:02 | (Exhibition Reference) "The Prometheus Archive: A Retrospective Exhibition of the Works of George Herms" Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA Traveling Exhibition, 1979 | exhibitions (events) |
| 00:19:28 | (Exhibition Reference) George Herms, Solo Exhibition Batman Gallery, San Francisco, CA May 1961 | exhibitions (events) |
| 00:20:12 | Historical Anecdote Herms continues to trace the provenance and exhibition history of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , including its discovery by Menil | Corcoran, James I. W.* Gregson, Edwin* Hopps, Walter Janss, Edwin Jr.** |

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| | Collection Founding Director, Walter Hopps. | Schimmel, Paul* |
| 00:22:09 | Conservation Issues Herms describes a vandalism of one of his works, <i>Max</i> , at the Pasadena Art Museum. | collages (visual works) composition (artistic arrangement) flags Hopps, Walter Norton Simon Museum restoration (process) Schwitters, Kurt vandalism Weyden, Rogier van der |
| 00:22:19 | (Exhibition Reference) "Kurt Schwitters" on view with "Collage: Artists in California (Directions in Collage)" Pasadena Art Museum, CA June 19-July 20, 1962 | exhibitions (events) Norton Simon Museum |
| 00:26:56 | Conservation Issues Herms assesses the current condition of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> and details the types of restoration that he thinks would be appropriate for the work. | mannequins (costume equipment) mirrors optical illusions springs (elastic objects) visual inspection wing nuts |
| 00:28:07 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , 1961 (detail of wooden stick inside of mannequin) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:28:43 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , 1961 (details of mirror and wooden stick inside of mannequin) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:30:34 | Conservation Issues and Exhibition Herms continues to assess the current condition of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . He describes the restoration methods that he thinks would be appropriate for the work. He also offers suggestions for exhibiting the work. | exhibiting velvet (fabric weave) visual inspection |
| 00:31:44 | (Work Reference) George Herms <i>Temple of the Sun</i> , 1964 Collection of James (Jim) Elliot | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:32:28 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , 1961 (detail of Kennedy image) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |

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| 00:32:49 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (details of LOVE stamps)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:35:02 | Conservation Issues Herms reflects on an artist's choice of materials and how that relates to a work's conservation. He also continues to offer his suggestions for the future treatment of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , emphasizing its paper and metal elements. | inherent vice nails paper (fiber product) rust staples |
| 00:36:36 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (details of nails and staples through paper)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:37:55 | (Work Reference) George Herms <i>The Librarian, 1960</i> Norton Simon Museum, Gift of Molly Barnes | assemblages (sculpture) Norton Simon Museum |
| 00:38:40 | Conservation Issues Herms expresses his opinions regarding whether conservators should replace any missing or damaged elements in his works. He uses <i>The Librarian</i> as an example, emphasizing its paper elements. | curling (structural change) Méliès, Georges paper (fiber product) photographs |
| 00:40:06 | (Image) George Herms <i>The Librarian, 1960</i> Norton Simon Museum, Gift of Molly Barnes | assemblages (sculpture) Norton Simon Museum |
| 00:41:12 | (Image) George Herms <i>The Librarian, 1960 (detail of central photograph)</i> Norton Simon Museum, Gift of Molly Barnes | assemblages (sculpture) Norton Simon Museum |
| 00:41:59 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (details of curling paper)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:42:52 | (Work Reference) George Herms <i>Iris Firewater Collages</i> Begun 1965 | collages (visual works) |
| 00:43:08 | Conservation Issues Herms discusses his use of materials that possess a high degree of inherent vice, e.g., rubber bands. He also demonstrates how and | nails plastic (organic material) rubber (material) |

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| | where to reattach an element—a toy airplane—that became detached from the work. | Welch, Lew* |
| 00:48:28 | Conservation Issues Herms and Mancusi-Ungaro discuss how they might restore a specific area of loss—a torn photograph. | curling (structural change) paper (fiber product) photographs restoration (process) |
| 00:48:36 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961</i> (details of Paul Mystery photographs) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:49:02 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961</i> (detail of torn Paul Mystery photograph) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:51:24 | Concept/Nature of Work and Conservation Issues Herms reflects on the life of a work of art after it has left the artist's studio. | Cornell, Joseph crackle enamel paint industrial paint natural aging provenance tar (bituminous material) |
| 00:52:17 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961</i> (detail of curled photograph) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:52:34 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961</i> (detail of cracked paint on light fixture) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:52:53 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961</i> (detail of tar) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 00:53:51 | Conservation Issues Herms and Mancusi-Ungaro inspect and discuss an area of change and corrosion on <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . | corrosion (condition changing process) kites (equipment) springs (elastic objects) visual inspection |
| 00:54:13 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961</i> (detail of spring) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |

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| 00:57:28 | Conservation Issues Herms expresses his opinions regarding the cleaning of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , specifically, his level of tolerance for dust on his works. | cleaning color (perceived attribute) dust dusting brushes (maintenance tools) natural aging patina (condition) |
| 01:01:32 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , 1961 (detail of gold hand/area where Mancusi-Ungaro dusted) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:01:47 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , 1961 (detail of hanging natural fibers on work) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:02:52 | Conservation Issues Herms offers expresses his opinions regarding the replacement of deteriorating, ephemeral elements on <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . | deterioration Kienholz, Edward Museum of Contemporary Art natural fiber restoration (process) wire |
| 01:04:01 | (Work Reference) George Herms <i>The Poet</i> Collection of Arthur J. Neumann, M.D. | assemblages (sculpture) |
| 01:05:02 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , 1961 (detail of hanging natural fibers on work) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:06:51 | Conservation Issues Herms expresses his opinions regarding other individuals restoring his work when he is no longer able to. | artist's intent restoration (process) |
| 01:09:03 | Technical Specifications and Conservation Issues Herms describes the materials that he used to construct various elements of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . He also reflects on the conservation problems that each material presents. He and Mancusi-Ungaro discuss methods for treating areas that were restored by other people. | concrete glue newsprint restoration (process) rubber stamps wood (plant material) |
| 01:09:09 | (Images) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> , 1961 (details of cast concrete glove) | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |

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| | The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | |
| 01:10:09 | (Work Reference) George Herms <i>The Zodiac Behind Glass (series), 1965-66</i> | assemblages (sculpture) |
| 01:12:12 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of "LOVE" stamp with original "O")</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:12:42 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of rooster on paper)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:13:30 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of panel with text)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:14:13 | Technical Specifications and Conservation Issues Herms continues to describe the materials that he used to construct various elements of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . He also reflects on the conservation problems that each material presents. | blood (animal material) cotton (textile) seats (furniture components) sheets (bed coverings) stuffing (upholstering technique) tears (conditions) |
| 01:14:24 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of stained bed sheet)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:14:58 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of seat and stuffing)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:15:49 | Technical Specifications and Conservation Issues Herms continues to describe the materials that he used to construct various elements of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . He also reflects on the conservation problems that each material presents. | Berman, Wallace crayons (drawing material) curling (structural change) disintegration drawings (visual works) enamel paint torches (heating equipment) |
| 01:16:15 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of stains coming</i> | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |

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| | through wood) The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | |
| 01:17:31 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of crayon drawing)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:18:54 | Technical Specifications and Conservation Issues Herms continues to describe the materials that he used to construct various elements of <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . He also reflects on the conservation problems that each element presents. He conducts an additional inspection of the work, offering his opinions regarding the work's conservation. | Gregson, Edwin* labels (identifying artifacts) natural aging visual inspection |
| 01:19:08 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of LOVE stamp, rearranged to read LVOE)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:23:32 | Conservation Issues Together, Herms and Mancusi-Ungaro adjust the mannequin and airplane elements in <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> . | mannequins (costume equipment) springs (elastic objects) washers (fasteners) wing nuts |
| 01:32:28 | Exhibition and Concept/Nature of Work Herms and Mancusi-Ungaro discuss viewing <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile</i> in the round and the effect of three-quarter perspective on the viewer's experience. Herms also describes his compositional modes and points out an area that had once been vandalized. | alchemy composition (artistic arrangement) occult sciences three-quarter views vandalism |
| 01:35:00 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of occult sign)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:36:54 | Conservation Issues and Historical Anecdote Herms discusses the fates of his various works and the level of care that is provided to works in various settings. He also discusses his own history of frequently relocating. | collectors L.A. Louver Gallery preservation (function) |
| 01:36:57 | (Image) George Herms <i>Greet the Circus with a Smile, 1961 (detail of phonograph part)</i> The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Edwin Gregson | assemblages (sculpture) Menil Collection |
| 01:40:28 | Closing Credits | |