



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

**GEORGE HERMS
NOVEMBER 19, 1993**

**Interviewed by:
Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director,
Artists Documentation Program, and
Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection**

**Video: Laurie McDonald | Total Run Time: 01:41:19
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This interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums.

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About the Artists Documentation Program

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

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[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection; George Herms, Artist.]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[Note: Recording begins with nearly a minute of Herms silently reviewing his sculpture, *Greet the Circus with a Smile.*]

[00:01:27]

CM-U: Today is November 19, 1993; and I am honored that George Herms is here in the Conservation Studio to discuss two of his pieces, one titled *Greet the Circus with a Smile*, which is this piece, and another, *Untitled*, paper work. Both of them, of 1961. The pieces entered the collection in 1985 as a gift of Edwin Gregson, which – I don't know if you knew that. That's how they came in.

George Herms: Oh, he did – that's good, yes.

CM-U: And we are indeed pleased to have them as part of the collection. I just would like to also say that George and I were on a panel together three years ago in Richmond, Virginia, sponsored by the Frederick Weisman Association, at which point we discussed conservation and the role of conservators and artists. So I really am thrilled that this is kind of a next step of that discussion, where some of the issues were raised; but now actually he and I will have an opportunity to explore his piece.

George Herms: Um-hum.

[00:02:24]

CM-U: Let's start by talking about when you made it, and where you were, and...

George Herms: It was made in 1960 in a small town in California called Larkspur, where I lived with my wife and our infant baby. No electricity. We ran a hose from next door. There was a series of houseboats, and the place we lived was actually the boathouse in the thirties; and then it had just decayed. And a wood stove for fire, and a little shed in the back that was my studio. And this volcano of work came out of this kind of humble dwelling, and it's where

[William] Bill Seitz from the Museum of Modern Art came, and saw, and picked out a work for that *Art of Assemblage* show [Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 4-November 12, 1961].

George Herms: So *Greet the Circus with a Smile* is the beginnings of 360-degree sculptures. In other words, the works that – the word “assemblage” hadn’t even been coined then, but the wall hanging pieces which are frontal collage and assemblage works, gradually – there is a need, in a sculptor, to make things that are viewable from all sides. The tradition in sculpture is that a hundred years ago, you knew what was on the other side of the sculpture; and this is a 20th century child, in which there are surprises as you go around to the other side. And the techniques, if they could be called techniques, that I used at the time were taking objects that I found. There was a dump in Larkspur that I used to go to at dawn, play a little bamboo flute while the sun came up, and then gather my materials from the dump that day that I would use. And that’s the source of the mannequin, the mirror. I think the pieces of wood. Maybe even this crate. And the spool, the cable spool on the bottom.

CM-U: So these were objects that had been discarded?

George Herms: Right. Yeah, they are all discards; and then I bring them back into the flow of life as a work of art. They have already had one life, and then they are discarded. That’s kind of the philosophical underpinnings of my work. And the other big – from the beginnings of the twentieth century, this need to expand the raw materials and the ideas that were proper for a work of art began. You know, [Guillaume] Apollinaire saying that anything should be able to go into a work of art. And so that feeds into my way of working, so that you have photography; you have pieces of paper that come out of books. The tar and feathers are – that’s an old – *Tarzan Feathers* is a persona that I worked with as a – in the theater. The occult diagram. I mean, there’s pictures of Kennedy [JFK]. There’s a stack of photographs I found that I assigned a character to, named *Paul Mystery*; and he appears on this in different places.

George Herms: And at that time I did two what I’d call realistic portraits. One of them is called *The Librarian* [1960, Norton Simon Museum] – it is all made out of books – that looks like the librarian in Larkspur; and a tableau called the *Meat Market*, [1960-61], which was inspired by the meat market in Larkspur. And the *Circus* then becomes an even freer piece, in that I’m not trying to duplicate something that previously existed.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And the actual greeting of the circus with a smile is kind of exactly what I want people to come to my work with. That they don't get too pompous on me. So that's kind of a general background of what spurred this into being.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:06:41]

CM-U: So when you went to the dump in Larkspur to collect pieces...

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...were you taking elements at large? Or did you have this piece in mind at that time? Or was your studio full of lots of parts?

George Herms: Yeah. I do not have an architectural blueprint when I start. So this piece grew organically. It is the same as beachcombing. You know, you pick up the seashells that you are attracted to. And so, as I would go through the dump, I would pick up things that I was attracted to. What that particular vocabulary of objects is, in hindsight, we can look back; but at that time it was purely intuitive. And I had seen *The Dada Painters and Poets [An Anthology]* book that [Robert] Motherwell edited, so I was aware of that tradition; but my roots were all in California, small town boy with, you know, the frog in the pocket; and that way of gathering things that are meaningful, maybe only momentarily. But to put them into this other context of sculpture and art, that's kind of tricky because we all have our little personal shrines and altars. But then when you make them become part of the public domain, you are kind of stepping out. It's as though you are making these little love letters to everyone, not to a specific person.

CM-U: It's been pointed out that – or, I wonder – it has been pointed out, and I wonder what an impact or factor this was for you in your choice, that also in the fact of choosing objects that have been used by others, they were naturally worn, and their colors were not so bright...

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and there was kind of a subtle grayness to everything.

George Herms: Right.

CM-U: ...and that was also attractive to you. Is that so?

George Herms: I think that there – you know, at this point we can be cerebral about things.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: But at that – I would say that the color schemes that I saw in old master paintings that are yellowed and darkened and aged, somehow I short circuited that, and the found objects that I used were already weathered and aged. So that I didn't have that disappointment, years later, of seeing the painting faded. You know, it started out faded. There are – I did, because I am self-taught – I did go into painting and drawing, and explored a lot of lithography, photography, a lot of different things, and I have come full circle back to working with found objects. And I work with a hand press where I print books of poetry, and I use very high value colors, brilliant things, in that printing medium, for years; and then I gradually come back to this other. So it's like a pendulum that swings, and I have – my natural instincts go to the – I associate them with the Southwest a lot, and the fact that Los Angeles is a desert until they bring water in, and these colors that have been beaten by the sun, and rained on. And what's left after that, you know, that's – I now collect things from the High Desert that – rusty cans that I go once a year, and I turn them over. It's like a rotisserie, so that they get the patina, you know, it gradually becomes uniform on a cylinder.

[00:10:13]

CM-U: So you are using the aging at this point both as an indication of where it would be, or that it has already aged, as well as a visual – you are playing with it in a way that has visual impact as well?

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: Like by accelerating the aging, or evening...

George Herms: Well, you can't really accelerate it. I've tried that, and it just doesn't work.

CM-U: Yeah. It never looks the same, does it?

George Herms: It doesn't work. It does not work.

- CM-U: It really doesn't.
- George Herms: I mean, Mother Nature does it right, and...
- CM-U: That's right.
- George Herms: ...and the other, it becomes like junk food or something. It's too – it just doesn't make it. The really bottom foundation of all of this is that all material things decay, and only the creative spirit lasts. So, I mean, that really, when you come down to it, this is an indictment of materialism – this whole body of work.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- George Herms: I don't want to get on a soapbox this morning [sounds like]
- CM-U: Well, I'm interested in that because obviously it has a major effect on our effort to try to preserve it.
- George Herms: Yes. That's right.
- CM-U: Both in terms of at what moment do we try to preserve it in the life of the work? Or do we do it at all?
- George Herms: Well, this we got into before. This is a major issue in that, because all material things decay, there is this beginning, middle, and end. And I come along somewhere in the middle and say, "Oh, God, that's beautiful." You know, "Freeze frame. Stop right there." And we take it back indoors again.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- George Herms: And we, in our team effort, try to keep it at that moment.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- George Herms: And my problem with doing public art was that if it went back outdoors again, you know, it would just decay, and you'd end up with powder. So I've had to deal with that conundrum in public art.
- CM-U: Which is indeed an issue.

George Herms: That's right.

CM-U: I mean, that's the end of the piece.

George Herms: Yeah. Yeah. And so I work with things that have been out of doors for several winters and are kind of at home outside. Those then are the raw materials that I work with in public art pieces.

CM-U: What about that piece in Beverly Hills? Was it *Moon Dial* [1988-90, Beverly Hills]?

George Herms: The *Moon Dial*. Yeah. Yeah. I still have the components for that.

CM-U: That was put outdoors and then taken down. Is that right?

George Herms: Yeah. It got run out of town.

(laughter)

CM-U: It got run out of town? Why? What was the issue there?

George Herms: Well, it – people just objected to it. And I think that...

CM-U: You mean, the look of it? The worn look of it?

George Herms: Yes. The fact that I was putting forward this thing that these were aged objects that had been in the ocean, and had patina barnacles on some of the buoys. And my wife felt that in a town where facelifts are a major industry, that I was pointing out the passage of time, and that was a no no.

CM-U: I mean, that's very true. I mean, that's one of the issues that we face as conservators, dealing with the art market in general.

George Herms: That's right.

CM-U: Owners want everything looking new.

George Herms: That's right.

CM-U: We live in an age of youth.

George Herms: Right.

CM-U: Everyone wants to not have the wrinkles...

George Herms: Oh, that's right.

CM-U: ...and have the art looking just like it did.

George Herms: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, these are issues that are here to stay. You know. I mean, we are not going to put them to bed. But I think that through education – and that's the function of a museum – you can gradually broaden people's definition of what a work of art is. You know – and this is something that we got into, too, is this idea of permanence. Permanent-ized. How do you make something permanent? And my original intent, which was – this period we are talking of, 1960, there is a mushroom cloud over the culture; and the atomic bomb gave a kind of a chill to all the aspirations of people wanting to make things that would last forever. And it seemed as though we'd better live fast and leave a good-looking corpse. You know, that spirit was abroad. And so now, you know, thirty years later, as we want to try and preserve some of these things, we are running into, you know, staples that were just bam! Get it up fast. Say what you have to say, and move on. You know. So there was that spirit.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:14:26]

George Herms: But then, my education from you is that, in trying to make things permanent, you could look for glues that are the strongest glues that last the longest time. And then the concept of renewable, reversible glues.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: See, that's something that I've gotten from conservators. And this then opens up a whole another way of working. I think that the dialogue between conservators and artists is a very rich field right now; that we can, you know, through such efforts as this morning, you know...

CM-U: Um-hum. I think one other thing that came out of the seminar that we were both on, too, was – or panel – was, it's not the role of the conservator to limit the choice of materials in any way.

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: I don't believe – and it sounded like my colleagues didn't either.

George Herms: Yes.

CM-U: And that's not the role. The role is, if you are going to use a glue, use this one instead of that one because this one is going to last longer. That kind of thing.

George Herms: Right.

CM-U: Which I think would be helpful.

George Herms: Well, I noticed none of you ever answered my question. I wanted the – like George Carlin's, "The seven words you can't use on television." I said, "What are the seven materials that you would prefer we didn't use?" And I noticed that no one ever really came out and told me. Because I probably do use all those things. I mean, the plywood that off-gasses. But even Winsor & Newton, in their oil colors, they have A, B, and C in terms of the effect of light on them. You know, there are certain colors that you just cannot let light get near.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: And we have the tradition of illuminations that are kept in a book and then opened.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: And then, on the other hand, we have this egalitarian strain in us that says, "Have it be out there for everyone at all times." And even though this period that we are talking about, works were thrown together; then the people that threw those together went on to have children – and in my case, grandchildren – and a kind of responsibility that I, as an artist, feel that someone a hundred years from now gets the same ride that people, you know, that were there.

George Herms: You know, this is not a theater piece that is just a one-night stand. That's the difference. I do work in the theater, and there is that wonderful magic that is just there momentarily, and that's part of the magic of the theater. But these are meant to go on, and someone a thousand miles away should get the same

ride as someone that is there in the studio that day. It's a responsibility. I don't say all artists assume that, but I assume it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:16:57]

CM-U: Well, let's talk about this piece. How does – this is the first you've seen it since it entered our collection, probably?

George Herms: That's right, yeah.

CM-U: Is that right?

George Herms: So the last time...

CM-U: Did Gregson – was he the only owner of it, as far as you know?

George Herms: Yes. Eddie – just the provenance. Eddie Gregson, uh, Dennis Hopper brought him to my house, and he wanted – this would be in Topanga Canyon in 1962...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: ...and he asked me for the best. You know, what did I consider the best of what I had. And I still had the *Meat Market* with me at that time, but I felt that this was the best example of my work that was available at that time. And so we put this in the back of his convertible with a sheet over it, and we drove down Topanga Canyon, and through Los Angeles, and up to his home in Beverly Hills, and took the sheet off, and placed it in his home. And I gave my first telepathic bill to him. And this was my best piece. And so the biggest number I could think of was 3-3-3. So I gave him this telepathic bill, and he gave me a Charlie Mingus record of *Tijuana Moods*. And I was very thrilled to get this jazz record; and I took it home, and my wife said, "Well, what did you get?" And I showed her this. And she didn't like that method of billing.

(laughter)

George Herms: But it was a 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM record, so I figured I got through a little bit. But I got the numbers there, but the decimal point was not, you know, in the right place.

Which he did, eventually, you know, pay for. And then Eddie Gregson, from going around and wanting to buy the best of what artists had, became a trainer of horses, and years later won the Kentucky Derby with Gato del Sol. And I walked through Westwood Village one day, and there he was. He was on his way to the bank. And so I walked to the bank with him. He had meanwhile given this to be in storage with Jim Corcoran...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: ...and when my retrospective in 1979 came around ["The Prometheus Archive: A Retrospective Exhibition of the Works of George Herms," Newport Harbor Art Museum], we got it out of storage, and those are the photographs that are in the Prometheus Archives catalogue.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And so at that point the state is very close to the way it is now.

CM-U: And that's probably the earliest photo documentation you have? You probably didn't photograph it before _____ [phrase inaudible]?

George Herms: There would be – in Batman Gallery, where it was first exhibited in San Francisco in May of 1961 [solo exhibition], a photographer, Chester Kessler, came around and shot black and white photographs of everything in the show. And when I go back to the studio, I'll look and see. I'm almost sure I don't have one of the *Circus*, but I will see if they are in there. Because he sent me a beautiful box of 8x10...

CM-U: Do you know if he is still working?

George Herms: He's no longer alive...

CM-U: He's no longer alive.

George Herms: ...and someone named Bob Johnson is the – took over his negatives and...

CM-U: Is he in San Francisco also? Bob Johnson?

George Herms: Yeah. Yeah.

CM-U: Hm.

[00:20:12]

George Herms: I'm trying to think where else this has been shown. But after the Prometheus Archives, then it stayed at Newport Harbor and was exhibited there a couple of times, you know, out of their collection. It was on extended loan from Eddie Gregson. And then Eddie Gregson was the nephew of the wonderful collector Ed Janss.

CM-U: Oh.

George Herms: That was the connection. And Ed Janss, one evening at dinner, [Menil Collection Founding Director] Walter Hopps asked Jim Corcoran and myself, "Where is the *Circus*?" and we said that it was still at Newport Harbor. And Walter said, "Gee, I'd sure like to have that." And Jim and I said, "Fine." You know, I mean, we didn't have any particular ties to Newport Harbor. And so that's when the transfer was made. And you say this is 1985?

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: And Walter was...

George Herms: I got a very irate call from Paul Schimmel at the Newport Harbor Museum...

CM-U: (laughs) Yes. I bet he wasn't happy about it.

George Herms: That we were pulling it. But, I mean, Newport Harbor had many opportunities to buy my work and hadn't, so I didn't...

CM-U: And Walter had seen this piece from early on, probably?

George Herms: Yes. Yes. He visited me where this was created in Larkspur. In fact, one of the things I will do in a theater piece tomorrow night stems back from something that I did to Walter on that visit.

CM-U: Oh, good.

George Herms: And Walter also walked out with many of my works that time. I've since had to pat him down, you know, whenever he leaves the studio. Actually I was doing that before...

(laughter)

George Herms: ...and he's listed as El – well, we won't get into that here.

CM-U: All right. Right.

George Herms: But, yeah, he knew this work, and he, I'm almost sure, saw that Batman Gallery show in San Francisco.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:22:09]

CM-U: I wanted to ask you, just before we really get on to the physicality of the work, a story I read about a piece called *Max* that was on view once at the Pasadena Art Museum.

George Herms: That's right. Yeah. They had the Kurt Schwitters show ["Kurt Schwitters" on view with "Collage: Artists in California (Directions in Collage)," Pasadena Art Museum, CA, June 19-July 20, 1962], which I'm wearing a *Merz* button...

CM-U: I noticed that...

George Herms: ...for the hundredth anniversary of his work in the Pasadena Museum. And Walter [Hopps] had something – I just called it the *Collage* show, but I think it had something – *Directions in California Collage*. And there was one wall that had a hundred artists' collages on it. And then there were three other walls, and one of them had kind of a one-man show of Bill [William] Dole's collages. And then – I'm sorry, I forgot – somebody that used billboard, things pulled off of billboards. And I've forgotten that name. And then I took a corner, which, on the other side of the wall were the Kurt Schwitters works. And I was very honored and pleased. And I hung this tuned corner of thirteen works with a special piece right in the corner hanging down suspended. *The Librarian* was part of it. And *Max* was one of the pieces on the wall, and it had an old American flag in it that, when I lived in Larkspur, the woman on the houseboat next door took down this faded old American cloth flag and put up a plastic one, which I thought was obscene.

CM-U: _____ [word inaudible].

George Herms: And so I had a – there was a tire on it. It's illustrated, actually, in that catalog.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And there was a painting which I years later got to see in London of a great lady by Rogier van der Weyden. And so there was, you know, a classical painting. A rubber tire. And this soft cloth running through it. Well, the American Legion flipped out when this opened and threatened to close down the museum. And...

CM-U: And this was at the Pasadena Museum...

George Herms: At the Pasadena Museum. And when the Schwitters show was up. And so the Board of Directors – well, first they called and asked if I would take it out, and I said, "No, that..." You know, because this was a finely tuned corner.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: You take one thing out, and it's – it just screws up the whole composition. So I refused to remove it. So the Board of Trustees met, and they pursued this case. If it had gotten up to the Supreme Court, how the justices would actually vote on it; and they figured it would come out five, four in our favor. So they voted to reopen the museum the next day. Well, that night, someone broke into the museum...

CM-U: Hmm.

George Herms: ...sawed through a pipe to get through a gate. Jimmied, I guess, two or three doors to get back to this room where the piece was, and ripped the flag out of the piece. Left the piece there on the floor. So I get the phone call, and I go over to the Museum in my old clunker. Drive across Los Angeles. And I went, and I looked at the piece. And the way these things grow, they are organic. And so there's the bones, the skeleton, and then the muscles, and the skin, finally. And so what was left was the skeleton of this piece. And it had obviously been clawed out. But I wrote a little note that said, "This piece has been raped by a madman, and despite this degradation, the forces of creation will go on." And signed it, "Love, G.H." Put that where the flag was, and hung the piece back up on the wall. And they opened the museum, and the show went on.

CM-U: Is that the way you see the piece now? Instead of trying to replace it with...

George Herms: The piece no longer exists.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: See, and I don't know what happened to it. I moved up to Redwood Forest, and I'm not sure what happened to the remains of it. It's distasteful to see one of your works vandalized like that. But at the same time, I just – I didn't want to cave in. I wanted to somehow say, "You're not going to stop me."

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: "You know, we're going to go on." Even though – and of course, you know, many battles were fought over that issue then in the coming years, and now you can get, you know, bikinis made out of the American flag.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: And...

CM-U: But it has various implications on different levels. I mean, you – sometimes an artist's work is vandalized, and the first instinct is, "Well, let's restore it. Let's repair it."

George Herms: Yes.

CM-U: "Let's put another one back in."

George Herms: That's right.

CM-U: You know, "Let's replace the missing part."

George Herms: Uh-huh.

CM-U: But it seems, in your scheme of seeing these objects as timelessness...

George Herms: Uh-huh.

CM-U: ...the timelessness of them, you just accepted that and...

George Herms: Yeah. I was not happy with it, but there wasn't – it was never ever shown again.

CM-U: Did they ever find out who did it?

George Herms: No. Not to my knowledge. I don't...

CM-U: But maybe they got Legionnaire's disease or _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: Yeah, right. Or it's like the people that bomb the abortion clinics or something. I mean, you just – you can't, uh...

CM-U: Yeah.

[00:26:56]

CM-U: Well, how does this look to you? So you haven't seen it since '79?

George Herms: That's right. Well, I saw it, I think, once after that when it was on view. But it's been, you know, a good fifteen years probably.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: It looks very good to me. You know, I am kind of – it may look from this work, but I am a kind of perfectionist, and...

CM-U: Sure. I can understand.

George Herms: ...and there are things that I notice, you know, that I would change. And you'll have to kind of guide me on this because I am a rather direct person, and if I see something...

CM-U: Sure.

George Herms: ...that needs to be changed, I would reach in and change it. But I thought I would wait and see what your feelings are on it, and whether you would rather do it, you know, under slower circumstances where...

CM-U: Well, do you mean change it in terms of getting it back to as you remember it...

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: ...or that you are rethinking it?

George Herms: Well, no, there are certain things that I see. In other words, there's a...

CM-U: We can get up, by the way.

George Herms: Yeah. There's a stick, and – do you want to just talk about this area here...

CM-U: Sure. Let's do that.

George Herms: ...of the mannequin. The mannequin, there are about three things here. One of them, this stick, this leg of a chair or something...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: ...I believe has dropped down. And I believe this end used to be up...

CM-U: Up there, where there's...

George Herms: ...up higher.

CM-U: You can see where there's a subtle...

George Herms: Yeah. In other words, so that it's at the – in other words, it's at a plane that when you – this is a law of vision for two-eyed creatures. So that as you come, and there's a mirror at the bottom, which I would dust.

CM-U: Okay.

George Herms: I believe in '79 I did dust that mirror.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: Because the trick doesn't work through the dust.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: I mean, it does a little bit, but it's more effective. And as you look down, you can see your face, and there's this stick – or, you know, this leg of a chair – that's in the middle of your face. And because you are a two-eyed creature, as you go down, looking at yourself in the mirror, it splits your head wide open.

(laughter)

George Herms: And I just – you know, I mean, these are things that, you know, give an artist a great deal of pleasure. And also there are some wing nuts and washers and springs that came off of this...

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: ...in transit. There's three wing nuts over there.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: And you can see that there are these metal slots and a screw that is going down through there. So what has happened, I believe that this thing is just a little sprung...

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: ...and that those wing nuts need to go back on. This chair leg needs to come up, and then as these wing nuts are tightened on, I think it will pull together. It's not sprung a lot. We're talking probably maybe half an inch or something.

CM-U: Well, is that something you'd like to do now?

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: Shall we look at the whole piece and then come back to it?

George Herms: Yeah. I mean, yeah, today...

CM-U: And then we'll sort of see where our time is?

George Herms: ...if we have time.

CM-U: Or we can take a short break, and I can do it.

George Herms: Right. So the wing nuts would go on.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: This would come up. And that would be dusted.

CM-U: Clean it.

George Herms: Those would be the three things. And then we are actually, you know, right exactly the way it was from the very beginning.

CM-U: And this is alright up in here? (touches small velvet curtain)

George Herms: Well, this – and this, I don't know...

CM-U: Oh excuse me, before we leave this, George...

George Herms: Yes?

CM-U: ...how about the color? [referring to mannequin] Is that pretty much what you...

George Herms: The color is pretty much the same. It was faded in the beginning...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

George Herms: ...and I don't think – I mean, there may have been always on the interior fabrics, you know, where light hasn't got at it, it's still richer. But I don't remember it ever being, you know, a bright like this color.

CM-U: Okay.

George Herms: You know, it was always a faded, muted purple.

[00:30:34]

CM-U: All right. Well, let's come back to the mannequin. In the break, I've cleaned the glass so we can look at that again.

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: But let's kind of review...

George Herms: Okay.

- CM-U: ...the physical state of the rest, and we'll come back to actually working on that. So, how about the rest? The velvet, and the paper? Phototography – photo paper?
- George Herms: Now the velvet...
- CM-U: You can turn it a little toward you.
- George Herms: No, that's okay. The velvet. And this is something that, you know, they talk about interactive art nowadays, in the nineties. And at this time, I meant for people to lift this up. Now in a museum situation, obviously, it has to be only upon occasion. And sometimes with our new technology you can have, you know, it available on video, you know, that people can see what's in here.
- CM-U: Oh, so if we did – you know, when we do put this on exhibition...
- George Herms: Uh-huh.
- CM-U: ...should we encourage, allow people to lift it? Or, what do you think?
- George Herms: Well, the problem is that it's not going to last very long if you encourage people to do that.
- CM-U: Right.
- George Herms: So in a way, what I've done when there's – like in '79, when this exhibition went on, they did videotape works, and there's a *Temple of the Sun* [1964] that Jim Elliot owns that has a coil of drawings stuffed in this old steamer trunk, in the pockets; and so we pulled them all out, and we showed them. So that is available to the public in that form. Whereas, if, you know, each time somebody took them out, these are butcher paper drawings, and, you know, they wouldn't survive. And if somebody did this every time they wanted to look, it would not survive. And it was meant to be this kind of mystery, too, and maybe a kind of – I hate the word – “elite” or “in crowd” thing. But certain people that knew would know that there was something in there worth looking at.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- George Herms: So the Kennedy cabinet is in there. And I'm not sure about the angle of this. I mean, I'm happy with it. It may have been horizontal at one time. It looks

fine to me now. And I realize that my L-O-V-E signature love stamp appears about many times on this piece. It's probably easier to see up here, but there's just a small version of that...

CM-U: But it's different – the E...

George Herms: ...in place.

CM-U: ... you have turned the E on the one inside.

George Herms: Right. Yeah. Eventually this E is always turned...

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: ...and becomes the – but everything looks fine in there. The placement of these papers. See, there's a staple up here.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: So that was obviously stapled onto there, and appeared – I don't know if you can see, actually see any paper, or any hole where the staple was. But my sense of what time has done to this is okay. You know, I don't have anything...

CM-U: Well, is it something that – if we see a shadow where the staple may have – no, I'm not certain that staple would have been through that paper because it would have had to have been torn if it was holding it, right?

George Herms: Right. It's been stopped by this nail here. And everything is visible. You know what I'm saying?

CM-U: Yes.

George Herms: So the artist's intent is still working here. The information is getting across. On a piece like this, where composition is so erratic, it's hard to say, you know, that something is out of place unless it just rubs me the wrong way. And there are a couple of things like that that I will point out.

CM-U: Right. Which is important. That's what _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: Yeah. That one doesn't...

- CM-U: So you would live with that? You think that that's okay.
- George Herms: Yeah. That one I would live with. And this piece of paper may be floating in air.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- George Herms: So that you may need to do a Chinese flap thing at some point in the future.
- CM-U: Right. Secure it some way behind, yeah.
- George Herms: In some way. It would be something to keep an eye on. This piece of paper in here. I don't know what's holding it in place either.
- CM-U: Um-hum. And if there is nothing, you wouldn't object to our securing it in some way, especially for exhibition?
- George Herms: Yeah. No, I would not object to that. And I would have complete confidence in your doing it in a way so that visually...
- CM-U: Right. You can't see it.
- George Herms: ...no one knows the difference.
- CM-U: Right.
- [00:35:02]**
- George Herms: So something like that, I mean, these are problems that I did not think about at the time and had no concern for. And there is something called inherent vice...
- CM-U: Yes. Inherent vice.
- George Herms: ...and which I became known as the inherent vice lord at one point.
- (laughter)
- George Herms: And I really sense that there is a way of, you know, meshing our needs with the artist's intent and this problem of inherent vice. You know, that – in other words, if something is – what is the nature of any of these materials in terms

of a hundred years. You know, fifty years. I really feel that there is very little on this that could not be kept the way it is for another hundred years.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: You know, as I looked over it this morning, I don't see anything that is like really a fugitive. 'Cause these things were all thrown away once. And if they were gonna go, they would have kept going. You know, taken back to the dump.

CM-U: They might.

George Herms: Gone.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: You know.

CM-U: And in the museum environment...

George Herms: It's like this is junk sculpture, and if it's treated like a Tiffany lampshade, you know, everything will be fine. And we have arrived at a point where junk sculpture is not, you know, abused anymore. So that's _____ [phrase inaudible]. All of these things where nails have been put through paper, and there's no backing on the paper, and the nails rust. The same thing with – you can see there's three staples have been put through here. And those staples are metal, and rust began on a couple of those. But I don't – if I had this, and there was ever a problem with the staples, I would probably go to some sort of gluing hinge on the back and not really worry that that line of the staple wasn't there. 'Cause that was never really important to me visually.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: It was an adhesive.

CM-U: It was just a method of attachment.

George Herms: Yeah. Yeah. Rather than, you know – an important stroke.

CM-U: So it wouldn't be important to replace the staple. Just to secure the paper in a way that's non-visible.

George Herms: That's what I would do if I had it. And I do have a couple of things from that period, and that would be my approach to it. Now something which I just don't know what to do about are these pieces of paper that go out into space.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: Because if you apply any sort of varnish or something to, you know, make that paper fiber stay together, the weight will hasten the gravity pulling it down. So I've always – with *The Librarian*, we had to go over it with the County Museum when it came finally out of Norton Simon's collection to be on view. And we had to make some executive decisions about whether or not there was – there was one book that was totally fanned out. And originally it had not been totally – all the pages hadn't – the spine was broken, and the book was completely spun, and before it was only, say, a quarter spun. But to move those pages back into that quarter spin would have, I'm afraid, damaged things. So we left it, and we photographed it, and said, "This is 1991, or whenever that was. You know, this is the state of it, and it had the artist's approval to be on view in that state."

[00:38:40]

CM-U: Um-hum. I remember when we were at the conference in Richmond that you mentioned *The Librarian*. Or it came up in conversation. And you commented that one of the books was actually missing...

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and that you didn't feel it should be replaced 'cause somehow you thought you ran a risk of damage. I think it – the word was used, "damage," I don't know if it was your word or not...

George Herms: Yes.

CM-U: ...the idea of furthering it [sounds like].

George Herms: Yes.

CM-U: Would you comment on that?

George Herms: Well, people – I used to have people come in and throw their overcoats over it, you know, with their six pack of beer under their arm. And people checked

out books, and there was a beautiful photograph of a nude that was taken off, ripped off by some kids once when it was in a garage. And, you know, a lot of things were checked out of *The Librarian*...

(laughter)

George Herms: ...over the years. And so it – and that's not the original base. In fact, with these Chester Kessler photographs, there's a picture of the original base, which is a very large circular spool. And at one time it had two loving cups hanging from either side. It really was a Libra balance piece. And then in the moves, and my keeping it together, the base that's on it now comes from the basement of the Pasadena Art Museum.

CM-U: And when was that base put on?

George Herms: For the Kurt Schwitters show [1962].

CM-U: Okay.

George Herms: To – I had the components. The crosspiece and the upright. And then I made a base in 1962, I believe it was. It was that red chair and a box on a red stool.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And it seemed to fit perfectly. I mean, it looked like that was the original base. Before, it had a kind of a more open, expansive quality because the base was circular. But when it came time to move from Larkspur, we just – you know, the first date I picked to move, only one bicycle showed up. I didn't own a car myself. And then the next day we picked, there was a trailer and a car, and we just – we took as much as we could, and that base just seemed as though it was something that could be picked up at any time. And I just never ever replaced it.

CM-U: But other things, like the photograph of a nude and so on and so be it, they were gone?

George Herms: Yeah. That couldn't – I suppose one could – it was a Jean Méliès photograph – one could track things down like that. But the nature of this, the found objects in the path that one goes through in life, it's rare that one turns around and goes back and tries to find those things. And the nude was replaced with a beautiful black woman wearing a welder's cap.

CM-U: Hmm.

George Herms: You know. So that's – I don't know what the connection is.

CM-U: _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: The Jean Méliès nude was wonderful, because she was going through water like that. It was a very graceful diving thing that sort of echoed the structure of the piece. I mean, all that's in hindsight, you know. And I don't know that I was conscious of it then. But the issue of pieces of paper that are in space...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: ...runs throughout all my work, you know, up to now, where I do glue those things down. But even so, there are works from the last few years where it just seems that this thing coming off the edge of a piece, of a wallhanging piece, that will be on a board ground, but then this piece of paper is out in space. And, you know, you get into the nature of fibers, and how long those things are going to last.

CM-U: But am I getting a sense from what you're saying about this that these papers were originally flat, and you actually preferred them – I mean, they are becoming active now in a way that they were not?

George Herms: No. No, the curling of photographs. I mean, this always had to curl in order to fit there, you know.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

George Herms: And these were stapled merely as attachments.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: So the flatness – we are talking maybe a quarter of an inch of curl, you know. And these were not things, as I say, that were glued as a two-dimensional piece. That amount of curl doesn't affect me because, you know, everything is curling out into space. The feathers are curling out in space. So flatness has never really been a concern of mine in this kind of work. You know, later on, with the *Iris Firewater Collages* [begun 1965], where they are just booze ads cut out of *Life Magazine*, those were meant to be a two-dimensional work.

[00:43:08]

George Herms: And, let's see. The other thing that did not work out over time – and it is an expiration of materials – were rubber bands...

CM-U: Yes.

George Herms: ...that did not last. And things made out of rubber. And they were a great disappointment because they would originally be, you know, something that you could play almost musically. And then it's just like an automobile. Those rubber hoses on cars, those are the first things to go. That's what has to be replaced.

CM-U: Yes. I should add though that recently I was in an office supply store, and they now have plastic "rubber" – in quotes – bands.

George Herms: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

CM-U: And one can have that same quality of elasticity and quickness of use...

George Herms: Really? Huh.

CM-U: ...out of something plastic. I'll send you a box.

George Herms: Okay. Yeah, but what is their life span? _____ [phrase inaudible]

CM-U: Well, I don't know what it is, but I suspect it's longer than...

George Herms: Longer than rubber. Yeah. Well, that was a lot of World War II, was about rubber supplies, you know.

CM-U: Yes it was. Yes it was.

George Herms: I'm trying to think where there were rubber bands on this because I remember the poet Lew Welch once saying that my works didn't do anything. And I went over, and I showed him that he could play some rubber bands on one – maybe it wasn't this piece.

CM-U: Well, we'll turn it around. But I guess I'm holding in my hand the biggest piece that's now in space. (Hands toy airplane to Herms)

George Herms: That's right. Yes. Now what I was doing is, I had a little torch, a little tank with a nozzle on it; and I was – this start – this was the middle of the fifties, actually. And I began to turn a torch on all things plastic. I was just opposed to plastic, and I don't – it was distasteful to me. And so I would melt toys. Anything made out of plastic. And in the body of work there are every once in a while these gnarled, melt-down shapes that were plastic. And in this process, I found that you could heat up a nail and push it through plastic and to attach something. So in the middle of this airplane, there is a nail that was heated up. And when it's hot, it will push through this plastic just like butter. And it was a finishing nail. You can tell by the head. And this, it was a German junker, it says right here, which applies to my sculpture quite nicely. And I also have a Germanic background.

George Herms: Now what has happened, the other half of this nail is right up here at the top.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And this rested – I mean, once this nail was put through, then one just had to drive, bang, bang, bang; and the tip of the plane...

CM-U: I think it was actually the other way. Look (holds up photograph). What do you think?

George Herms: No, I disagree. Oh, this way. Oh, I see. I see.

CM-U: Yeah, that was how it was.

George Herms: I thought you meant front to back.

CM-U: No. No.

George Herms: 'Cause this is the head of the nail.

CM-U: Yeah, that's right.

George Herms: Okay.

CM-U: That's it.

George Herms: All right. There. Okay. So, you know, it rested. There was not a real gravity problem. And I'm not sure why that nail broke.

- CM-U: It looks like it didn't actually touch there. At least in the photo.
- George Herms: Well...
- CM-U: Or do you think it's just the angle of the shot?
- George Herms: It actually looks like there's maybe something in front of it.
- CM-U: It looks like it was up like that. Is that – I mean, that might have put the stress on the nail.
- George Herms: Okay. All right. Maybe that's what did it. Maybe that's what did it, yeah.
- CM-U: Which we could definitely replace.
- George Herms: Yeah. Okay, but that's where it goes. And you do have the photograph. But isn't there a space right here between the tail and that – maybe it's the angle. That's what it is.
- CM-U: I think so. You're more three-quarter – you're more sort of...
- George Herms: Looking at it – that's right. Looking at it from here, you can see space through it.
- CM-U: Let's just turn this around.
- George Herms: Okay. Okay. All right. Yeah, that matches now. Yeah, that's where you can see the space to it.
- CM-U: Right.
- George Herms: So it doesn't go down on that wing.
- CM-U: But I noticed in the photo that it was indeed broken, that wing.
- George Herms: Yeah, that's a question. Now there is a crack on here [referring to airplane], which I have a hunch that's a very weak spot.
- CM-U: Yeah, I think...
- George Herms: Yeah, it's cracked through. They have plastic glues, you know.

CM-U: My inclination is to secure that.

George Herms: Yeah. And I would advise that being a good thing to do.

CM-U: Okay. Good.

George Herms: So we can't be too cavalier with handling of this.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: But that is its position. And how to heat this up again. I don't know if you can put something hot that just touches the nail so that it can come out. Remove that nail.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And then just go up to the next step of a finishing nail. You know, next size higher.

CM-U: I think that's possible. I think that...

George Herms: And heat that nail...

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: ...to go through here. And then attach it. I think it would, you know, be exactly the way it was.

CM-U: Right. Why don't I just set it aside?

George Herms: Okay.

CM-U: Intact [sounds like].

George Herms: Okay. Now...

CM-U: Let's...

George Herms: Yeah, you want to work on this side?

CM-U: Turn it. Yeah, let's turn it...

George Herms: Okay.

CM-U: How's that?

[00:48:28]

George Herms: Now what immediately jumps out at me. This is Paul Mystery. This was – I found a cache of photographs and assigned this character the name Paul Mystery, which is merely an old version of palmistry that I tore out of the dictionary. So he appears in different places. But the bottom of this photograph, which curled out into space – and this is that problem of paper in space – has been broken off, and it's resting here.

CM-U: Oh, that's what this is.

George Herms: That's what that is there.

CM-U: Oh, I wondered what that was.

George Herms: And this, again, is one of the situations of – you know, because it actually followed the curve of this and then sort of out, you know, like a ski slope kind of situation. And the amount of effort that it would take to duplicate that, is it worth it?

CM-U: Well, supposing this could be reattached to that, but would still maintain that curl...

George Herms: Well, it could be reattached, but you would still be – you know, there's parts of it here missing.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: I don't know if this is part of it here, too, maybe. Yeah, this is probably that other corner. I mean, you would have to take the staples out and back it.

CM-U: Well, it might be able to be done in place.

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: If it could be. I guess the question is, if it could be done, and this could be reattached, is that something you would want to be done?

George Herms: Yeah. I am ambivalent about it in the sense that I am not upset. You know, as I went around, until I found this...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: You know what I mean. So my...

CM-U: I see.

George Herms: You know what I mean? If this wasn't here, I would be hard pressed to say there's something missing here. My initial reaction to it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: You know, to be honest with you, I – until I saw this, and wondered, you know, why, where, what did that go to? And then looked up and realized that was the bottom half, or a third of it.

CM-U: Well, then maybe is it something you would prefer that we just preserve? Just put it in an envelope and just put it in the file, that it was originally part of the piece?

George Herms: Well, you know, there is – the way the leaves come off trees, I talk about that to people about this body of work. You know, that we are keeping it together as best we can. And if something major like the airplane comes off and can be replaced, yes. But I would like to sort of keep this decision in abeyance.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: Now whether you would be comfortable exhibiting it without arriving at that decision or not, that's another point. If you feel like exhibiting it, then we have to kind of press on, and cross that bridge, and decide yes or no, do we want to attach that.

CM-U: Well, I think that ultimately the decision of how you want it to appear when it's exhibited would probably very much go back to what your opinion is, as well.

[00:51:24]

George Herms: Yeah. See, you know, what I've realized is that a work of art has a life of its own beyond the artist. I mean, the god-like artist that does it. And then it leaves the artist and goes through changes and provenance. And you know, there are many factors. And oftentimes what I thought was the proper path for a work to take, you know, it's veered off.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And I've had to learn to respect the integrity of the work. You know, it has its own life. I am really waffling on you. I mean, it's...

CM-U: Alright, well let's just let it go.

George Herms: But let's – could we just table that one...

CM-U: Yes.

George Herms: ...and maybe at the end we come back to it. I mean, there are things like – this is obviously curled more over the years, and it's beginning to separate.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And none of that – but this was curled originally. See? So I can't fault and say, "Well, one is no good, and the other is good." You know, that it's bad that this is curling, but it's okay for this to curl. You know it's the same thing with cracking of paint, which I am attracted to, and which I find out that Cornell baked things, you know, in order to do it. I find them that way.

CM-U: Right. You're already started.

George Herms: So, you know. And I'm not sure about some of the marks on here. I know that, in working with tar, which just reminds, you know, that it would get all over things, I just don't know...

CM-U: That this is paint? Or this is tar? This is tar.

George Herms: This is enamel.

CM-U: This is tar. This is enamel.

George Herms: Yeah, that's enamel. And this is tar. And I'm not sure what's causing – this maybe is from the paint here. This would be house paint. You know, white house paint that has bled in here. And of course that doesn't bother me at all.

CM-U: Hmm. I hadn't realized that was a change. I thought maybe that just was on the paper to begin with.

George Herms: Well, it might have been. But, I mean, I can't figure out why the enamel wouldn't do it. You know what I mean? Given the materials used at that time.

CM-U: These enamels that you were using, they were just industrial enamels you get at a hardware store or someplace.

George Herms: That's – yeah. Rust-Oleum. The stovepipe black, I used a lot because I had wood stoves, and oftentimes would have to paint something.

CM-U: I see. Sure.

[00:53:51]

George Herms: Another change from the photograph, as you compare, is this spring, which used to come out and stick out a ways.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And it is now closer in. And this is one of those executive decisions. I find it says what I had to say just fine, the way it is today.

CM-U: You mean the part that is still sprung like this. Not this part.

George Herms: No, the – this one that's stretched out. It's a stretched out piece of spring. And it used to stick more straight out.

CM-U: I see.

George Herms: Now if we go to pull that, we're gonna snap it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

- George Herms: Because it's such a fine – and it has such an advanced degree of corrosion. So the whole purpose of putting something like this is my continual need to, you know, poke things out and to break planes. And it is breaking that plane. I mean, that's the thing. They go to crate my work, and there's just no – never a single plane.
- CM-U: I was just going to say, we do have photos of when it arrived, and that's exactly probably...
- George Herms: Yeah, that's the problem.
- CM-U: But it's also possible that with some gentle heat that we might be able – I mean, you do run the risk of snapping it, it's true.
- George Herms: Well, it's different than it was originally. And, you know – and oftentimes, see, I am still moving around some of my work. And every time there is a move, there are changes. I mean, it just happens no matter how careful I am. You know, and they've been through floods, and fires, and – but if you were to see – it may – I don't know which photograph – excuse me for a second... (picks up photograph)
- CM-U: Yeah.
- George Herms: This shows that – here it is. See how that spring...
- CM-U: Oh, yes.
- George Herms: ...comes out?
- CM-U: Indeed.
- George Herms: It's just a single strand. Now...
- CM-U: But where does this one go?
- George Herms: Huh? Well, that's another part of this spring here.
- CM-U: Oh, this just moved down here [sounds like].

- George Herms: Yeah. See, this is – this was attached here. So it might be advisable to – well, I don't know. See, that really is just going through and held on by the threads of the kite.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- George Herms: That's what's holding it on.
- CM-U: Oh, look at it here, George.
- George Herms: Um-hum. Yeah. It's a beautiful line, and the line is still there. But I don't know if heat. I don't know if there's enough tension still in the steel to – you know, tensile strength – to keep it out in the air.
- CM-U: Right.
- George Herms: So maybe it just sort of wilted over the years.
- George Herms: But obviously this is going to bother you, because there is hardly anything. It's just looped through, and it was coiled up more. I mean, I can't quite make it out from the photograph, but it was obviously coiled up more and closer.
- CM-U: We may have a closer view. I think your slide was an angle of this, wasn't it? I don't know. Maybe...
- George Herms: Yeah, yeah, the slide does. But that doesn't mean we'll get more detail of that side on it.
- CM-U: Yeah, that's true. But basically, I mean, if we are not able to do that, if the risk is too great, you think, you know, it's still coming into space [sounds like]...
- George Herms: Yeah, this side of it really reads as close to the original...
- CM-U: So this was a kite? Part of a kite?
- George Herms: Yeah. Yeah. There's little threads. Oriental kite.
- CM-U: Oh, I see the wood, yeah.

George Herms: Yeah. Balsa wood. And then just after all that Oriental delicacy, George comes along with a staple gun. “The fastest staple gun in the West,” is what I used to bill myself as.

CM-U: The colors look remarkably preserved on that, don’t they?

George Herms: Yeah. Whatever they used, they are certainly lasting.

[00:57:28]

CM-U: I’d like to talk to you a little bit about dust.

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: And just how – as I explained yesterday, I did dust some of it. Then I stopped.

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: So I’d sort of like to know what you think about it. And I’ve also given it a thought in regard to this piece.

George Herms: Okay. Well, my working rule of thumb was sneezing. In other words, if you go, “A-choo! Poof!” like that, and blew it off, rather than actually touching it, that’s my dusting procedure.

CM-U: Oh.

George Herms: And anything then that lasts after that is meant to stay there. But now as time goes on – and there are different kinds of dust. I mean, there are some that really are gritty.

CM-U: Um-hum. That’s right.

George Herms: Downtown Los Angeles smog grit, you know, is a different thing. The only thing that I’ve ever enjoyed dusting with is velvet, you know, because then you don’t really – I mean, you just sort of go over it and catch it. There is such an air of agedness about my work that it really doesn’t need dust.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: It looks dusty even when it's been dusted. So I have no problem with things being dusted, with a mirror being cleaned.

CM-U: I think that – excuse me, go ahead.

George Herms: Because what we have – you know, the color range that I work in looks as though there is a patina of dust on it. And so taking the real dust off – which often, you know, you ran your finger over the bulb [referring to lightbulb]...

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: ...and you are getting more of the browns instead of the grayness of the dust.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: See, and I would opt for the brown range, is what most of these things are.

CM-U: I think that's what I came to. I felt that, even with the areas that I was – had cleaned – there is still a dust sense on it _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: That's right. Right.

CM-U: I like the idea. I'm bothered sometimes by airborne dust sitting on objects because it can give the feeling of, "Oh, it's just not cared for."

George Herms: That's right.

CM-U: And I think there's a fine line between having the beauty of something old and worn and something that is uncared for. And I do think you sense that. The spectator does.

George Herms: Yeah. Well, part of the question, an artist – she's an artist now, Barbara Smith, in Pasadena was a housewife; and she said, "How do you dust your things?" I mean, that was always, you know, an immediate question. And I – just very carefully, you know. I mean, that's – the nature of the dust really comes into play, and there is, as you say, a kind of patina of neglect that most of these found objects have already been exposed to.

CM-U: Um-hum.

- George Herms: So that where it's like – and by doubling up that neglect, are you really enhancing the piece? And many times, you know, I stopped painting on objects at a certain point and allowed the patina of the object itself to be – I mean, it was found, and it's the found patina that I'm attracted to. But I used to paint extensively on things, and I stopped doing that. But at this period, really the colors that I am applying, I really wanted you to see, you know. So they were part and parcel of what I was trying to project. So I think dusting is, you know – I mean, you run into areas that are almost impossible to dust.
- CM-U: Let's bring it around now.
- George Herms: Yeah.
- CM-U: Is that a good angle?
- George Herms: Yeah. Good for you? Okay. In other words, crevices, you know, that fill up with dust. That's very difficult. But also with sculpture, like, how far down into the crevice is the general public going to see?
- CM-U: Right.
- George Herms: So you really have to kind of have a common sense approach to dusting. I sometimes just a small brush go in and clean things out.
- CM-U: When I was doing this, for example [referring to gold hand], like this...
- George Herms: Where do you want to start on this side? That's right...
- CM-U: ...I left – I don't know why.
- George Herms: Because, well, the residue...
- CM-U: Then other things were kind of attached.
- George Herms: Yeah. The residue of spiders.
- CM-U: I mean, I felt that didn't come from when it was in the museum.
- George Herms: Well, it could have been part of the fibers off of this. See, the nature of fibers is really – you know, that, from wood to fabric to paper. I mean, this is something I've never studied, but I've become more and more aware that that,

you know, how do they – what keeps them together, and for how long. These are issues that I have never academically approached, but they are real issues that, after thirty or forty years, you begin to differentiate. You know, this is something, if I use it, it's quite temporary. And if that's all you care about, fine. But if you want it to last, then, you know, you may need to put a counter. You know, go against the grain with another layer. It's probably why wood panels – you know, traditionally, in ancient paintings, they had a linen on top of wood because you've got two sets of fibers. One we think of as not fiber, the wood; but it really is.

[01:02:52]

CM-U: The one issue I could – okay.

George Herms: Go ahead.

CM-U: The one issue I could foresee on this side of it is...

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...a material like this [referring to natural fiber component] that is by nature very ephemeral, is also a major design element.

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: It's a major element here. And almost of the importance of the airplane, in a way.

George Herms: That's right.

CM-U: But of a material that's certainly, doesn't have the life...

George Herms: In process.

CM-U: _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: It's in process.

CM-U: So, I mean, supposing that truly deteriorated. I mean, at some point in the future when neither of us are around...

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: ...is that something that an attempt should be made to replace an old [sounds like] with an old material?

George Herms: Is there a wire? There is a little bronze wire running through here. Do you see that?

CM-U: I see that.

George Herms: And those bronze wires I used a lot at that time...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: ...and they, if there's no moisture around, or corrosion, they will hold up. But in a certain kind of atmosphere I've lost them over the years. Some of these bronze wires. But they were nearly invisible, and if visible, it was just a little very slight gold line like a hair. And there was once a cord. I don't know if it was a velvet cord or something that really – no, it wasn't a velvet cord. I know now. It was *The Poet* [1960], a piece called *The Poet*, it had a manuscript that washed in from the sea. It's in the frontispiece of that catalogue. And Ed Kienholz ran a wire through that once because the fibers had gone. And so the piece was on – and then it came down to MOCA for a show. It was the first time it had been seen for years and years, and I actually put what I use extensively now is rusted baling wire.

CM-U: Hmm.

George Herms: And I looped it around, and it looks like it's been that way forever. But it replaced that problem of this fiber going. Now when things are tied, I don't know how you can run a wire through something that's tied. It might be that some sort of linen could be dyed the color of this and attached.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: It would be a major, major piece of business to deal with.

CM-U: Well, I mean, that's something...

George Herms: I mean, you'd have to somehow – the weight, the gravity, is in this bow here, and there's a knot there. So you would – and that's obviously why that brass

wire was there, just to – otherwise I could have just tied that whole fabric and kept it there.

CM-U: But I really do want to press on this issue...

George Herms: Yes. Okay.

CM-U: ...because I'm foreseeing it as a possibility. Not just with this element. All right. Maybe you did answer it with the airplane. If the airplane had been lost...

George Herms: Uh-huh.

CM-U: ...*finis*. That's it. So just the piece is without it. But here we know this was like this. It's that piece of fiber. It's been documented. In the event of accident, or just truly it disintegrates beyond any kind of possibility of resecuring it...

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...is it something that you would feel in a future generation should try to replace for the sake of the unity of the work?

George Herms: Well, there's replacement, and there's the continuation in the state at which it is disintegrating. And I don't see how you could replace something like this. I mean, I have replaced things on my works. I've gone in and carved out of wood a little robot that replaced a totally rusted out robot that dove off a cross that Michael McClure had.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And, you know, with spit, and glue, and hair, and fire, made it look very much like the original. It is probably possible to duplicate this, you know, and to replace it. The other path is to, as this thing obviously becomes less and less, to continue to try and keep something in this space that is very true to the original, but it's kind of shrinking. In other words, there needs to be something there...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: ...like this.

CM-U: All right.

George Herms: Does that answer your question?

CM-U: It does.

[01:06:51]

CM-U: Of course it brings up the issue that we always come to.

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: Which was, when you are no longer able to make that decision, is that something that you entrust to the caretakers of the works?

George Herms: Well, would they be able to carry out what I just said?

CM-U: I think that is the whole...

George Herms: I would be...

CM-U: My feeling is yes, and that's my hope, certainly.

George Herms: Yeah. And I think, you know, there are different situations. Like here's a little blue thread, you know, that's coming off the back of the warp or the weft of that. And, you know, where there are – I would like to see always something like this. And I would not be opposed to a creative attempt to duplicate that, you know, with stains and fabrics. I mean, at this point, it's mysterious; and that is one of the elements of my work. It's that you do not know what something is. You know, what its materials are. And I, to this day, I try to put forward this idea that what we don't know isn't going to hurt us. So something that, you know, is mysterious is not necessarily a threat.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: I mean, that's part of the message I try to get across. Yeah, what happens with me – and I'll be quite honest with you – is that when I go in to restore something, I'm all thumbs, and I sometimes break more than I restore. And so I call it restoration comedy. You know, when the artist comes back in. Because it's very difficult to get into the same spiritual place you were thirty years ago.

CM-U: Well, precisely. It's _____ [word inaudible]

George Herms: I mean, you have a kind of adolescent angst or something. And then later on you are serene. It's very difficult. But this piece, for somehow, I feel it's just the way – I feel about it the way I did when I made it. You know, I don't have this distance, and it doesn't seem that it was done by a foreign artist. Do you want me just to go over things...

CM-U: Yes. Should we – yes, please do.

[01:09:03]

George Herms: This is a sculpture that I made with a glove, pouring concrete into it. And then I painted it gold so that – this is when, you know, I am still applying paint to things. And there's a little cigarette paper there with some top tobacco in it, which was, of course, meant to represent like a roach or something. A marijuana butt. And its placement is – you know, it's just held in by gravity. Although someone has put glue under it. I'm not sure that was me. But you see the nails?

CM-U: I see it.

George Herms: Yeah.

CM-U: The nails, you did, or not?

George Herms: The nails I did.

CM-U: You did.

George Herms: And that's the way I would have placed it because I – when I teach sculpture now, I talk about the two hoops. The first hoop is movement because you can set up a little composition of objects, but then, okay, try and move it across the room for me first. That's the first hoop. The second hoop is called transportation. So you've got to ship it to New York.

CM-U: (laughs) Right.

George Herms: That changes, you know, what kind of sculpture you're bringing to me. And neither one of those – well, the hoop of movement I got to, but the hoop of, you know, that something could be in a crate, and the crate could be turned

upside down, wasn't until 1965, when I made Zodiac boxes [*The Zodiac Behind Glass* series] that had a glass front, and I would take and shake them like that and see if they – you know, make sure they wouldn't break the glass out. So this idea that gravity held it in place, I think, was probably – 'cause that's not the kind of glue I would have used, I don't think. No, that's really a – almost like a resin type glue.

CM-U: It is. That's exactly, and it's...

George Herms: And I didn't get into that until the seventies.

CM-U: Is that something we live with at this point? Or _____ [phrase inaudible]

George Herms: I think so.

CM-U: Yeah.

George Herms: I think so because, you know, the alternative to get that stain out of the wood, to me would be horrendous. I mean, a lot of things that seem like a monumental task to me are maybe everyday occurrence for you.

CM-U: Well, what could be done is that pigment in resin could be put in, but dry pigment, to mask it. I mean, it would be a cosmetic treatment. It would be going in and just matching the orange, and the dirt, and the brown up to the hand itself just to hide the shine of the glue. That would be possible.

George Herms: Yeah. What I have grown to appreciate is that the viewer does not see glue. You know, I mean that's from a lot of collage work. I don't like it when it bubbles out, because it's like it distracts from the actual two-dimensional image. In this case, given the kind of baroque nature of this, you know, I just now noticed that glue. Just as we were speaking. So I wouldn't put that on a high level of priority for things to be done on this.

CM-U: Okay.

George Herms: Let me turn it a little bit for the camera and just go down this –

CM-U: Oh, I'm sorry.

George Herms: No, I was going to work on the inside here.

CM-U: Okay.

George Herms: This, again, is the LOVE stamp with the original O, which my kids at that time shortly ran off with. And then there comes the rubber stamp O is a Higgins ink bottle top now, and you'll see at a certain point. So this precedes, I'd say, I forget when. I look at them fondly because there are not that many of them that have that original O on it. And the application, you know, of nails and staples with glue here on the little rooster...

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: ...so you see, that glue is probably the Elmer's White Glue of 1960.

CM-U: So that was whiter at one point than it is now?

George Herms: I'm – you know, the aging of newsprint. You know, it arrives at a certain place and stays there. And I do this with the sun now, and things, and it's about ten days before the yellowing is really starting to get into my range of – from a daily newspaper. So it's probably closer to the cardboard now.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

George Herms: But it was going in that direction even, you know, within ten days of my having put it on there. And let me step around here. This panel, again, the glue, you can see it here. It's put on. That's that same white glue, which works good for paper and wood. Here are the staples and the curling, and you can see the parts, the edges of this photograph, are cracking off. Maybe that's what this one piece is here. And, you know, wood checks. That's the other thing, too.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: That's something that we think of, "We don't have to deal with this." But actually, you know, there are probably going to be – you know, I don't know how, what the timing is [sounds like], but the wood will separate and come apart as well.

[01:14:13]

George Herms: Now this is a bed sheet in which my first daughter, Nalota, was born on. So there is blood and placenta, and, you know, effects from the birth. So that's

what these stains are in here. And I don't know the nature of preservation of, you know, cotton sheets that have blood in them. But that's the content of this piece.

George Herms: And the other thing that I've found that's an ongoing problem are seats, or something that has stuffing in them, that eventually the fibers in the covering fabric start to go. I have some theater seats that I just love, and they are beginning to separate at the top. It seems always at the top. But to try and stop that process, you almost – it's invasive, you know.

CM-U: Right. The tear, you mean – if I'm understanding you correctly – that it was already worn and torn, and...

George Herms: I'm pretty sure. I mean, I am just – I am going from specifics to generalities...

CM-U: Right. Right.

George Herms: ...in seeing this because that's a – I'm sure it was there. Yeah, see. See? It was there. But, I mean, that's the nature of something like this, [it] will gradually more and more expand, and really nothing can be done.

[01:15:49]

George Herms: It's just like also the book, you know, the pages are going to curl. The edges. And here we're out in space. We're at a point where care will keep it the way it is, you know. I think...

CM-U: Um-hum. And a steady environment.

George Herms: Yes, that's right. That's right. Now I wanted to just say a little something about these stains that are coming through the wood. They are glued with the same glue, so that staining is not a glue effect. You know what I mean?

CM-U: Hm. Yeah.

George Herms: And I'm not sure. It's almost as though at one point there was some moisture or something that took out of this piece of wood a brown. Or maybe from the glue that was behind here. Because it doesn't affect the ones on the side.

CM-U: You mean, originally, as far as you remember, these were all the same?

George Herms: They were all the same. But, see, they are disintegrating here.

CM-U: _____ [word inaudible] here. Yeah.

George Herms: And this is just a kind of a drawing that I did, once again, with those enamels. That's Paul Mystery again. Another photograph of him. And the champion being knocked out of the ring.

CM-U: Dempsey.

George Herms: Right.

CM-U: And Michelangelo...

George Herms: And then there's a little dust and particles that have fallen down in here. Probably, you know, some of the powder from that. This is done with crayons. This is one – you know, Wallace Berman, the only – he never, ever discussed anything, but there was one piece of mine that was all found objects except for one area that had some drawings of mine sort of like this. I call them airborne drawings. They were just enamel dripped in the air and made some things. And he pointed out that there were these two things. The found, very much like this area. It's called the *Saturn Collage* [sounds like]. And I thought about what he said, and so I put a detour sign and covered up all those drawings. So under that piece with the detour sign, there's a bunch of drawings of mine. But this is the kind of drawings, you know, that I did at that time. And so that's crayon. This is that torch that I told you about.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

George Herms: Bubbling the thing, and then I think I just scratched. You can see that the torch also went over.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And that was a way of kind of instant aging. You know, just to run fire over something, and all of a sudden it looked much older than it was. Because if you look down here, you can see the institutional green that was on the side of the – this was a drawer.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: Yeah.

[01:18:54]

George Herms: And that [appears to be pointing at a large, red stripe] was not, you know, in my range of favorite colors. And there's a wonderful variation of the LOVE stamp back in here as L-V-O-E. Can you see it?

CM-U: Oh, that's terrific.

George Herms: Yeah. So the LOVE stamp has gone out under a lot of different colors. And I think that brings us around.

CM-U: Yeah.

George Herms: Is there anything else that you can think of that – yes?

CM-U: Let's see. This is some sort of windpipe or something? What is that? A spool of thread? At first I thought it may have held the balloon, which is why my eye went to it, to ask you about that. But now I see it's not. It's...

George Herms: You know, that's over one of the nails. You know what I mean?

CM-U: Yes.

George Herms: And I'm not sure that it was always there.

CM-U: Well, I wonder...

George Herms: And I don't know how we could ever – I mean, maybe with a magnifying glass you could look and see. I'm not sure if this slide would give – I don't think – the slide comes in from the other side.

CM-U: No, in this you can't see it here at all. I mean, this – you wouldn't see it from this angle.

George Herms: Right. You know, my sense is that that – maybe it was always there. I have no memory of it.

CM-U: All right.

- George Herms: So, again, it's like the glue under the hand that, you know, I did not – you know, there's certain things that when I've looked at this, I've said, "Oh, wait a minute, that's..."
- CM-U: Oh, look at this, George. This has a – it's a label. It's an exhibition label.
- George Herms: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- CM-U: But it says, "*Greet the Circus with a Smile*, owned by Edwin Gregson." So that must have been added, no?
- George Herms: [reading label] "Long term loan." Yeah. So that has been slipped under here.
- CM-U: So that's not part of the piece.
- George Herms: Well, except that it would have been added on one of its things.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- George Herms: I saw that and accepted it as being, "Well, where would you put the sticker?" You know what I mean? If this came to a museum, and...
- CM-U: Oh, that's an interesting question. Well, you could have tied it on. Let's not – we don't have to get into that.
- George Herms: Right.
- CM-U: But I guess the issue is, now that it's there, it wouldn't be difficult to remove. Or shall it just remain?
- George Herms: Well, you know, what's happened, there's another chunk of stuff on the end of that that's holding it down in place. Because as I blow on it, you know, my sneezing, see, that's a bunch of cobwebs and things that are holding it in place. And with those leaves – again, this is that sneezing thing. You know, I blew quite strongly to make it lift, but just an ordinary sneeze would not have lifted that off. Because you know – spider webs are one of the strongest of all connective. You know, that area, I – in a way, I would accept the falling leaves theory...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.

George Herms: ...that the things that have gathered back there are an accumulation that this piece – some of it internally. The label, externally. I've been very lucky with my work. Rarely, except for that American flag, has anything ever been removed. And they are extremely vulnerable. But there is something about the vulnerability and the general public, that they respond to my act of faith, you know, that they will not. I've had things added.

CM-U: I was just going to say, I must admit, though, that I've seen pieces added sometimes with work like this...

George Herms: Yeah. Up in – *The Secret Archives*, when it was in Oakland, somebody put their wallet in there.

CM-U: Oh geez, was there any money [sounds like]?

(laughter)

George Herms: See, yeah. No, there was no money in it. But in a final go-round, my question, you know, "Should this be painted gold, the hand?" Again, and I'm afraid that it would just jump out of...

CM-U: I agree.

George Herms: ...out of key so much.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: You know, the idea that it was a gold hand is still implicit in it. And obviously the reason it got glued down is that it fell and got hurt at some point. And the last, the curling of things, you know, it's like the hair getting grayer as you get older, you know. It's still the same. And, again, my feeling that if any of these things you tried to flatten them out, you would crack them.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: And you would do more harm than good.

[01:23:32]

CM-U: I wonder, with what little time we have left, we shouldn't try to get some of the mannequin form back in place.

George Herms: Do you want to try and work on that?

CM-U: Do you want to do that?

[What follows is the conversation as Herms and Mancusi-Ungaro make adjustments to the mannequin element in *Greet the Circus with a Smile*.]

George Herms: Okay. We need to make a choice of – well, the first thing I'd like to do is pull this stick up...

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: ...to where I believe it should be, which is there. Now, see, nothing moved when I did that.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: But now this effect of looking down...

CM-U: Was it higher still, do you think? Was it up as far as that? It's kind of worn up there. That's worn all over _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: Well, it's at the same plane as the mirror...

CM-U: Okay.

George Herms: ...which I think is what you want.

CM-U: All right.

George Herms: Now I'm not sure. Do you have a set of these?

CM-U: These are springs and washers, and then wing nuts.

George Herms: The washer goes on first. I'm going to do this one first 'cause it's the most noticeable, and I'm really sure that we are in the right place. Well, alright, I'm going to do this one first, and then do that one.

CM-U: Right.

George Herms: Okay. The washer goes on. The spring goes on.

- CM-U: Do you want me to hold it while you hook [sounds like] it?
- George Herms: Well, let's see if I can do it.
- CM-U: Okay.
- George Herms: Mmm. Let's see if that will catch. Is it catching? It feels like it's catching. Okay. I'm not going to tighten this up too much, just enough to get it on there. We can tighten it more. All right. That pulls that forward. Now we need to get it. This will do it, I think. Once we pull this back to that plane, I think we'll be really close to the original.
- CM-U: Okay.
- George Herms: It's just sprung a little bit right now.
- CM-U: Well, I certainly understand the movement of a body in aging.
- George Herms: In what?
- CM-U: It tends to spread (laughs).
- George Herms: Okay, now I'm going – let's see. I want this to go a little bit more. Okay, now I'm going to try and tighten this one up so that it stays in that place. I'm not sure how much that required. Now, if I can get this. Hmm. I almost want this to slide over more. So we have this gap now. Hmm.
- CM-U: Well, we have got now...
- George Herms: It – I wonder if it could have slid.
- CM-U: Would it be better if we just sort of turned this a little bit?
- George Herms: Hmm?
- CM-U: So we are doing this, kind of this way (turns mannequin), and we can see it. Okay.
- George Herms: Okay. We are really missing that. I think I'm going to go ahead and put this one on. Let me just look and see if that – we've got one missing there. One missing here. And one missing here. Let me look at the photograph of that

from the front 'cause we do have a really good – all right, it does look cocked to me.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: This gap here. So maybe I'm not – do you want to...

CM-U: Yeah. Let's bring it _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: Do you want to look at this with me? So we're over about here. It looks like this should go back in more. I mean, frontally, it's really going that way; but I'm not sure that that's...

CM-U: It looks like it may have always been that way, when you look at this juxtaposition...

George Herms: Yeah, that's what I'm – Yeah, it really is. And my sense of it not being quite so opened up, that's gone now. I don't feel that. So why don't I go ahead and put this one on here. Or should I try and do – I really feel, you know, there's three other places that we could put wing nuts down in here.

CM-U: Do you think we should do that anyway? Just get some old rusted wing nuts and do that?

George Herms: You see right here?

CM-U: Yeah.

George Herms: That one?

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: This one?

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: And then this one really is quite far out.

CM-U: Um-hum.

- George Herms: Let me just push in and see what happens. I don't think, if that goes on, it doesn't really move the entire figure, see?
- CM-U: No.
- George Herms: That's why I don't think that's a crucial one to get on. And these others are really just sort of in place, you know. No movement there.
- CM-U: Right.
- George Herms: Not really any movement there. So I think this is the one, up here, just to make this.
- CM-U: Right.
- George Herms: Okay? So we'll put this one on. Go on, catch. I'm right handed, so this is not the smart way to do it.
- CM-U: I think you've caught it, though. It's on.
- George Herms: Well, I'll pull this out just to here. Okay. Alright, that makes me feel better. That has a kind of – it's like not flying apart as much.
- CM-U: Right.
- George Herms: Okay. Yeah, really if the plane was put on, I would say that all of the other problems are extremely minor with this.
- CM-U: Oh, I think – let's just rest it here while we just sum up. Just to see the plane kind of – even though I know we...
- George Herms: Yeah, the plane, there is something about the...
- CM-U: There is something wonderful about it. Let's see, I guess it goes with the broken side down. There we go.
- George Herms: And I think it may have been exhibited like this at some point with it just resting there. But that's the – the gesture is that...
- CM-U: _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: Yes, that's the gesture.

CM-U: It really counters _____ [phrase inaudible].

George Herms: Right. And it also then – when it does get up, it reads even more from this side. You know, with the...

CM-U: Well, maybe just holding it, let's turn gently. Okay? So you can get that. Okay. Great.

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: Yes, it does indeed.

[01:32:28]

CM-U: Well, it looks wonderful.

George Herms: Um-hum.

CM-U: It really does.

George Herms: And, you know, I just hope that everyone does greet the circus with a smile. Because when I would exhibit, you know, in a retrospective nature, usually when they got to this period of work, that's the first thing they would see as they would come into a room. You know, that would be like the initial impression.

CM-U: So you couldn't see the piece on an angle, on the side.

George Herms: They would see this. They would read this, you know, as a – yeah, that's the lovely thing about this, is that it has that – it's almost like the human face, that three-quarter view is the most interesting.

CM-U: That's true. Certainly the most evocative of its essence.

George Herms: And, you know, a lot of what I'm doing today is to try and keep alive the spirit of this piece. You know, I have realized that I talk about dartboards and tossed salads as being my two compositional modes that I work in. And every once in a while I realize I'm doing all these dartboards with this very precise central imagery, and maybe I've lost my ability to do tossed salads. And so I

come back to this, and it really – it does breathe through the current work today.

CM-U: And so this is both dartboard and a tossed salad?

George Herms: Yeah, right. You have both of those elements going in this. I mean, this is a very traditional kind of formal way of composition. And also the theatricality of this kind of box, and the other side, which maybe I should point out that there has been vandalism on this piece.

CM-U: Oh.

George Herms: When it was in Newport Harbor, some German teenagers, as I was told, came in and put something on this. And I can't see it.

CM-U: Yeah. You mean they added something to it?

George Herms: Yeah. Yeah. They did graffiti. That has been – had graffiti put on it.

CM-U: Oh, it's been erased, maybe?

George Herms: And I just – when I came...

CM-U: What is this?

George Herms: When I came in today – oh, that's something from the, you know, ancient occult. It's mostly in French, I believe; and these are alchemical – you know, there's the *corpus* is body, *anima* is soul, and then *spiritus* is spirit. And these are alchemical procedures, separation, extraction, and dissolution. And what got me into graphic arts was seeing a page of symbols that were white on a black ground for urine, and saltpeter, and mercury, and things. And I just – I couldn't see, you know, why this symbol meant vinegar or something. And so I started painting. I thought my tradition is black on a white page, and so I started doing those alchemical symbols, and alchemy leads you to astrology; and obviously what I am is a contemporary alchemist who is trying to take things that are gross and make gold out of them. Make something fine out of them. And all of these kinds of charts are that need of a young person to sense that there is some sort of Swiss clockwork mechanism at work in the universe. Because life is so chaotic.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: So that's what the attraction. And then of course it is completely surrounded with tar and feathers, so there goes your Swiss clockwork, right.

CM-U: Well.

George Herms: But, you know, it has the kingdoms, the vegetable, the mineral. The astral is the star, or the soul. Animal. And these, water, fire, air, earth elements. That's a side of me that went to the college engineering, that did trigonometry and calculus, and then had to leave when electronic brains _____ [word inaudible] brains. And the chill goes through you. And lucky for me, you know, poets and artists came into my life.

[Break in video]

[01:36:54]

George Herms: This was the phonograph...

CM-U: Oh, you mentioned the phonograph.

George Herms: ...that I mentioned. I think this probably still comes out. I like it in myself. But I had a baby and a windup phonograph. There was no electricity, so you had to wind it up. And I got so that I could hold the baby in one arm, put a foot on the phonograph there and wind it up, and put the thing on it; and I listened to my records. There's a very ship-like quality to this, too. I'm – this kind of proud figurehead thing of it sailing through the...

CM-U: Yes.

George Herms: ...I'd forgotten about. It's really a tribute to the care that can be taken, you know, with a work. I mean, this has had a good life. The show that this was in, in Batman Gallery, I had 77 works in it.

CM-U: Hmm.

George Herms: And I have photographs of them, but...

CM-U: And these were all 77 of your own works?

George Herms: Yeah. Seventy-seven works.

CM-U: Oh, seventy-seven.

George Herms: You know, many of them of this caliber. And we don't have that many. *The Librarian* we have. We just don't have that many. I still keep *The Meat Market* intact.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: Some are in private collections, and some just are no longer extant. You know, so that's what makes this special, you know, for me.

CM-U: So really, in that case, it really is an issue of those that went to collectors and museums had a better fate? _____ [phrase inaudible]

George Herms: That's right. And I'm very appreciative of this, you know, from my viewpoint now.

CM-U: Um-hum.

George Herms: Having tried to keep things together, you know. But in our times, you know, my life has been one long string of eviction notices. They had a show of – going back to this era, at L.A. Louver, and they had all this memorabilia from The Smithsonian, and photographs. Many, many photographs. And they had a picture of my studio where this was done. And I had just been given an eviction notice in my current studio in downtown Los Angeles. This was a year ago last June. And I am very upset about that eviction notice in 1992. And I look down, and here is this picture from 1961 of – and I got evicted from there. And I thought, “Jesus. Doesn't this guy learn anything?”

CM-U: (laughs) Right! _____ [phrase inaudible]

(laughter)

George Herms: You know. And someone was there, and I said, “Oh, that's – yeah, that's my studio. You know what? I got evicted from that one, too!”

George Herms: And the camera is still on. When that's off, I'll say something.

CM-U: Well, I think we can turn it off. Unless there's anything else you want...

George Herms: No, I'm very thrilled....

CM-U: Okay. I think we are _____ [phrase inaudible]...

George Herms: ...to have this in the camera, you know.

[END RECORDING]