Artists Documentation Program

Interview Transcript

SOL LEWITT AND SUSANNA SINGER

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Interviewed by:

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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): Sol LeWitt, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Susanna Singer]

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm just going to say the date if I remember. We're the 22nd of February, 2005. And I'm here with Sol LeWitt and Susanna Singer in Chester, Connecticut. I'm interested, and maybe we can start talking about the structures and maybe the early white cube structures. Is there -- were they just mainly painted wood at first? Were the first ones wood and painted?

Sol LeWitt: The first ones were painted wood.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And was there anything particular about the color or the paint itself?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I wanted it to be a high-gloss kind of industrial look to it and bright colors.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And, were they -- did you go right into doing metal? Were you doing metal at the same time? Or the metal ones came later?

Sol LeWitt: Oh, much later.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Much later? And that was, again, looking for the industrial look?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. Well, it was just that the kind of ideas I had lent itself to industrial fabrication.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And over the years, how have they aged? Have you seen a change in them over the years?

Sol LeWitt: You mean, do they yellow?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Sol LeWitt: Well, if they do, they're repainted.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Both the wood ones and the metal ones?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And do you repaint them yourself, or do you have someone else do it?

Sol LeWitt: No. I have somebody who can do it a lot better than I.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I know you're comfortable with that, because that is sort of your --

Sol LeWitt: I'm very comfortable with that. In fact, it's a defining issue with my art.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I know, yeah. Did you feel that way from the very beginning?

Sol LeWitt: Well, as a matter of fact the first time I used an assistant was when I -- the original ones, the painted wood ones, I did myself. And then I wanted to have a -- I was to do a show at the Dwan Gallery. I think it was around '66 or so, '65 or '66. And I wanted to do a large-scale piece. And I just didn't have enough real expertise to do it. But someone turned me on to a carpenter who did work for artists sometimes, and he put it together. It had to be put together and taken apart because it couldn't get out of the loft otherwise. But it worked out.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so you just painted that with some kind of industrial paint or an acrylic artist's paint, or do you remember?

Sol LeWitt: Oh, I don't know. I don't remember. Probably house paint, nothing esoteric.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then, over the years, as these change and others repaint them, are there people that you authorize to repaint them?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you have trained people, or they just know what you like?

Sol LeWitt: Well, sometimes it's my people. But other times we just tell the people to find a good spray painter that's competent. Any professional can do it. It's not a very special talent. It's just a lot of people can do that stuff.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And you're looking for evenness and just kind of very industrial?

Sol LeWitt: Spray painting is a little treacherous because if you paint it too close or too much paint, it drips. And then you don't have sharp edges. You have globby-looking. So, it has to be well done.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I've found in my experience that the most talented people tend to be people who painted, like, Mercedes and Ferraris. The people who do fancy cars are great spray painters.

[00:06:30]

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. That's a lot like making art.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah? Needing that kind of surface?

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Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, have you ever seen one that was repainted that you didn't like?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. That was repainted?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, that someone repainted that you didn't like.

Susanna Singer: I've seen incomplete open cubes that were painted the wrong color because -- I think you should talk about what color. We do often use car painters to paint the aluminum pieces.

Sol LeWitt: There's no specific color because I just tell people to go to an auto body shop and get it painted. So, there's no right white. There's no correct white. It just has to be white. And sometimes when you get separate pieces put together from different sources, then you see different colors. But otherwise, if they're isolated, there's no way to control the color because they may not have that color in France or Japan, the same color, or in Ohio.

Susanna Singer: Right, but you want a semi-gloss white, right, not matte, not gloss? Semi-gloss?

Sol LeWitt: But we're talking about the color.

Susanna Singer: Yeah, but the color and the finish are important.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, in the case when one would think about needing to repaint, it would be because there would be chips in the paint or losses, that sort of thing?

Sol LeWitt: What?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: If there were chips in the paint or the edges were nicked, that's when you need to repaint it?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then generally, instead of just filling in those areas, you repaint the whole. Is that right?

Sol LeWitt: Well, that's much easier because if you try to spot-paint it, it always -- it never works. You can always see the difference.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's true. But generally they've probably held up. So, at what point do you decide that -- or let me phrase it this way. Have you ever looked at something and thought it's not really damaged, and it's not really nicked.

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But it really needs to be re-freshened, or it really needs to be repainted? Have you ever felt that way?

Sol LeWitt: Often, because the paint is not necessarily very professional. I mean, it's professional, but it's not very high grade. And it yellows or turns color. And so, it should be renewed.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And freshly, feeling freshly?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, the sense of aging, per se, is something that you don't particularly wish to keep in the works?

Sol LeWitt: What?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The sense of aging, you look at the piece --

Sol LeWitt: Oh, no. I hate that. It's romantic.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Good. Let's talk a little about that.

Sol LeWitt: I mean, I think that it's --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's romantic in the sense of having time?

Sol LeWitt: No, I think it's sentimental, and it has to do with ruins and things of that sort. I never liked ruins.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay, good. And that obviously fits in with the rest of what we're going to be talking about today with your work as well. What about the works on paper? You tend to them with gouache? Is it gouache, or someone -- I've read somewhere that gouache is a favorite medium for you. Is that so?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And you have always? You still work with gouache?

Sol LeWitt: No, I used to do pen and ink drawings or pencil. But I do use gouache now.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And what about -- I jumped onto the works on paper, but I had wanted to stay with the structures to ask about the concrete works. Have there been conservation issues with those or difficult construction issues with those?

Sol LeWitt: Well, in this case also, they have to be built on the site. And wherever the site is, you have to use the local professionals and the available concrete blocks,

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which differ sometimes. Well, they don't differ very much. In Europe, they're in centimeters, and here they're in inches. But they're very close in measurement. But at times the aggregate is rougher, and sometimes it's smoother. And I prefer the smoother.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So again, that idea of that kind of very finished, industrial type of finish?

[00:11:20]

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. Well, it just shouldn't be crumbly.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And, are you able to have control over that, or not really? I mean, it depends upon --

Sol LeWitt: Not a lot. But I haven't really ever seen one that was built that I thought was all that poorly built. Can you think of any?

Susanna Singer: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, they pretty much are able to meet your --

Susanna Singer: Some are more beautiful than others, but I have never seen any that I thought were unacceptable.

Sol LeWitt: Usually a collector or a museum or a gallery would try to do it the optimum way. And they find the best masons, for instance, to do it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do you write a -- I mean, do you explain that you, like, want it as smooth as possible? Do you have a group of set specifications that you give them?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. The detail, we try to foresee whatever detail has to be taken care of, try to make sure that it's the way I want it.

Susanna Singer: And they often send Saul sample blocks in terms of color and so forth that he can choose.

Sol LeWitt: But not always.

Susanna Singer: I said often.

Sol LeWitt: Not often -- sometimes, in fact seldom. But it does happen.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's interesting to me from your choice, from moving from wood to metal and then concrete. And then to go to something like Styrofoam just seems like such a very different type of material in terms of porosity.

Sol LeWitt: Well, I use material like Styrofoam if I have to do an interior piece that the weight is a problem. I don't like to. In fact, I have an installation now at Wesleyan where they use white cardboard boxes to simulate the stone, which I originally -- this is a recreation of a piece that I originally did in Austria. And they had lightweight stone in the right proportions and the right size. But, in this case, the floor couldn't take it, so we improvised. But it's like a pretend.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I was going to say, how does it strike you?

Sol LeWitt: It's a pretend block.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does it still work for you?

Sol LeWitt: Well, visually it works. But I know it's not right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You feel it. I understand that. Okay, I was curious about the splotches, right?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, right. And I did want to ask you about the fiberglass works as well.

Sol LeWitt: The splotches?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yep. And what specifications do you usually give for those?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I do a flat drawing of the footprint of the work. And, on an overlay, I put the heights of the different projections and, on another overlay, the color. And then I send it over to Yoshi who is the fabricator of these things. And, he takes it, he takes that drawing, and makes it into a computerized realization. And then he goes on to build it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Has the computer -- how has the computer affected your work, do you think?

Sol LeWitt: In that way.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: A clarity?

Sol LeWitt: What?

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: A clarity for you in terms of seeing it immediate? I mean, does it change?

Sol LeWitt: Oh, I don't use the computer at all.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, you just -- you do it, and then they take it, and then they do it from there?

Sol LeWitt: I just do it flat, and he does it on the computer.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And again, in terms of condition, those works have been fine?

Sol LeWitt: What?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: In terms of condition, those works have been in relatively good state? You haven't had any problems with them?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I don't know. I guess I'll have to tell you in about six or eight months because I'm doing the pieces for the Metropolitan, and they're going to be outside. And, I've been assured by everyone that they'll be all right in terms of color and in terms of the form. It would withstand a test of the weather. But I have never had one outside for that length of time, so I have to keep my fingers crossed and rely on the best advice. But it still hasn't been proven to me in reality.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What kind of paint do they use on those? It's some kind of marine?

Sol LeWitt: Acrylic.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's acrylic, acrylic paint? I've had experience with fiberglass when we were trying to design a shell for a fresco, actually. It needed to be strong, very strong, but light in weight. And so we ended up going to marine technology because that's what they use for boats. And it was amazing how strong these pieces could be. So I suspect they're going to weather quite well. They're certain -- in a certain way fiberglass is an ideal material for that.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. And I think that acrylics, we have tested acrylics over the years outside, and it seems to not change.

[00:17:08]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Your materials have evolved. They haven't maybe gone a huge span, but you have made steps in changes, especially in the wall drawings.

Sol LeWitt: What? The steps?

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: In changes from the original wall drawings that were in pencil. Is that right?

Sol LeWitt: Well, yes. I used pencil, and then I started to use crayon. And, as they got larger, I went to ink, black ink first, and did them black and white, but then, I want to do them in color. So, we devised, or my assistants devised, a method of a series of washes superimposed to make -- to build up the color. And then, these colors can be superimposed on one another. But each color has six to eight or nine washes. And then, if it's three colors on top of each other, so it's that number times three. So, it's arduous. But I didn't want to get this kind of blocky. I wanted it to be transparent and a little translucent and have some life and character to it. The colors were subdued, usually. I didn't use bright colors. But then I decided to use bright colors, so I went to acrylic.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then the process must have really changed at that point because you probably didn't do as much layering, is that, right?

Sol LeWitt: No. With the acrylic, they do put it on in layers, but not to the extent. And they're not transparent, so they're mixed. But I only use primary and secondary colors.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I wanted to ask you about that, because that really -- that's a huge difference of the color coming through from multiple layers of inks as opposed to actually mixing the color.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, so that there's only, well, three primary colors, three secondary colors, grey, the different greys -- there's four or five different greys -- and black.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, the exact colors you use are red, yellow, blue --

Sol LeWitt: Orange.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- orange, green --

Sol LeWitt: Purple.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- purple?

Sol LeWitt: Green, and then the greys and black and white. White usually is the wall anyway.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And that is the same palette that you used with the inks as well?

Sol LeWitt: The same palette as what?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: As you used with the inks as well.

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Sol LeWitt: Well, I only used primary colors with the ink. But they were all superimposed on one another, so they became much more -- had a greater, much greater range.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And do you determine how many layers are put on, or is that --

Sol LeWitt: No, my assistants work it out themselves.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so, the actual -- if we take a green, for example, in the inks, where he or she had been mixing the blue and the yellow, the determinant of the green would be their determination?

Sol LeWitt: No. I give them a very specific -- I know what the green, what the yellow and blue end up being. And then I make a determination of what colors go where. And then it's still tricky because sometimes if you put one color on top of another color, it's different than if you put -- if you reverse them. And even though there's the same, it's -- the one on top takes certain precedence.

[00:21:15]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's quite a system to work out. It's very complicated.

Sol LeWitt: It's a very complex system, and frankly I wasn't quite sure what I was going to end up with in all cases.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, you're an artist. That's why.

Sol LeWitt: I just hope for the best.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, I understand your reason for going to the acrylics for the brightness of the color and the hue and the ability. But what was the transfer from the pencil to the crayon to then to the inks? You used the crayon?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I started to use the crayon when I was doing location drawings. And all the steps that led up to the drawing of a, say, a line or a square, whatever, were done in pencil. But the actual image that I was ending up with was done in crayon to make that differentiation. And, in some cases, I did some wall drawings entirely in black crayon. But I never used color crayon.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, I see. And, I apologize in advance if this is such a basic question, but at what point -- when you make a wall drawing, in your mind it's a permanent drawing. And then, does the owner decide then that they want to change or paint over? Or do these remain permanent?

Sol LeWitt: What?

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When you've done a wall drawing, do they remain permanently in that place? Or have you seen some of them change over?

Sol LeWitt: Well, they're permanent until they're painted out.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. And then what happens? And then, when they're painted out, are they finished forever?

Sol LeWitt: It depends. Sometimes they can be adapted. But, it's a big problem in site-specific work that no two sites are the same. And, in some cases, they can be adapted. But in other cases there's no way they can be adapted. They have to be rethought completely, even though the basic premise is the same. But still, the actual work on the site has to be different.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I can understand that completely. Your space must so much dictate the feeling.

Sol LeWitt: With all kinds of installation art, no problem with the first installation. But it's the second or third that is a problem.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Have you had an instance of that, where one has been installed?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. Well, there have been cases where I have to refigure the whole installation. But then, if I'm not around to do it, then there's the bigger problem because no one else can do it except me. Some of the installations are easy to recreate because they're done within a circle or a square. And some walls are -- if it's a fairly square wall, can be transferred from one fairly square wall to another as long as the proportions and size are more or less the same.

(break in audio)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let's go back over some of the discussion about the inks, sort of where we stopped. Did you want to add something about that, Susanna?

Susanna Singer: I just wanted to add that the red, yellow and blue are mixed according to a formula that's all approved and that the assistants helped to create. Although there can be slight variations, there shouldn't be very much. The more complicated part of the ink wash drawings, which we didn't get into, I think, is that they were originally done in Pelikan ink. And Pelikan went out of business. It went to Kramer ink, and now we're struggling with getting the correct formulas for the last go that we're doing now --

Sol LeWitt: Acrylic.

Susanna Singer: -- which is the acrylic ink.

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Sol LeWitt: We're trying to do acrylic in washes thinned down with water. And it's quite difficult because it's really probably almost impossible to recreate the kind of look that the ink wash had with the acrylic.

[00:25:57]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's such a different method. I mean, it's such a different material.

Sol LeWitt: Well, that's the problem. For instance, we just had to relocate quite a large ink wash drawing in an Indianapolis museum. They did a renovation and an addition. And part of the renovation was destroying the wall that the original wall drawing was done on. And, the new wall was in a new addition. So, we had to do it. And it ended up like the Tower of Babel because we had the original guy who was doing it, Thomas. And then Susanna and Jo Watanabe, who really tried to invent the formula for doing the acrylics, went there. And each one had a different idea. And, it ended up as a real mess. But, in the end, Thomas took care of it. I think he said -- he didn't say anything when we were on the phone. But he said he knew he could do it. And it was halfway done when you were there anyway, so that everyone had a different idea. And it sounded like it was a total disaster. You saw it. You saw it at the end.

Susanna Singer: I didn't see it at the end. I'm going to go back when I go to Minneapolis. I did see one that he's working on now.

Sol LeWitt: The people in Indianapolis seemed to think it was pretty close.

Susanna Singer: And I think he got it right because I saw one that he's working on now, and it looks great.

Sol LeWitt: But in a way, it's almost like an ad hoc thing because whoever's doing it has to know what they're doing and has to know what it's supposed to look like and how to achieve that. So, it's not quite an exact science, quite.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, it isn't, right, nor should it be. So, how do they know what you want? Exactly like you said, they know what it should look like.

Sol LeWitt: Who's the "they"?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm assuming you mean your assistants.

Sol LeWitt: My assistants?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Sol LeWitt: Well, they're the ones that did the original ink wash drawings in many cases.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So they knew the effect you were --

Sol LeWitt: They know what it's supposed to be.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- the effect you were looking at? Did you want to say that, when you went to crayon, that you used black, but you also used color in some?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, in a few cases I did, only red, yellow and blue, right?

Susanna Singer: Except for Miami-Dade, which was the first one that used secondary colors. And that was crayon. With that exception, yes, it's true.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The only time we ever spoke before was when we met in New York. And, you said that you -- what I remember you saying is that, as an artist, you think of yourself as the composer, I think you said. You may have said conductor, but I thought you said composer. I kept crossing out words in my mind what exactly you said, and that you made the plan but then someone else executed it, and that you were perfectly comfortable with whatever that might be.

Sol LeWitt: As a matter of fact, it never can be done the same twice. And different people do the same thing differently. And so, those variations are quite acceptable.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But this must be a very carefully chosen group of people who execute these plans for you.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, we have a group of people that have been -- most of them have been working for quite some time. And, lately we've had new people. But they're mostly doing the acrylics which can be more easily learned. But some of the new people can't do the ink wash with the acrylic. It's too tricky.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And, I remember you were talking about the pencil and the touch of the pencil to the wall and the way it looks. And that's so personal, too, it seems to me.

Sol LeWitt: That's personal, too.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, how do you choose these people who do the work for you?

Sol LeWitt: Well, two or three of the people have been with me for -- since the 70s. So, they know more or less. Really, the pencil drawings, which I'm doing more and more of, there are only a couple of people that can do them really well. And, we really have to train more people to do them.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. Are these people artists who you hire? Or were they trained as artists or architects?

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Sol LeWitt: Well, Jo Watanabe is a printer. His wife Sachi is a photographer. And, Anthony started out as a painter, but he doesn't do very much anymore. I think I take up all of his time.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Are there certain qualities or criteria that they have? I mean, they must be perfectionists in a way. There must be something you look for in them.

[00:31:30]

Sol LeWitt: The more perfect the better, but there is no such thing as perfection. But, some people do it better than others.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I should imagine. I know something else we talked about that I thought was interesting is that I seem to remember you saying that you believe that the wall drawings should be recreated every five years. Again, what I understood that to mean was that aging wasn't a part of this process.

Sol LeWitt: Well, not five years. But I think that if they show evidence of age or discoloration, they should be renewed. But if they don't, then they shouldn't. It's only -- it's like the three-dimensional pieces that need repainting. But I don't think that we've ever renewed a piece that wasn't moved. Do you know of any?

Susanna Singer: I can think of some that need to be.

Sol LeWitt: Like what? Oh, the one in Brussels?

Susanna Singer: The one in Brussels. The one in Pittsburgh, I know you want to move that, but something has to happen.

Sol LeWitt: Well, I don't like the site. But it's not that it deteriorated.

Susanna Singer: Oh, yes it did. It's complete --

Sol LeWitt: I've never seen it.

Susanna Singer: Yeah, it's really faded.

Sol LeWitt: Well, that was the problem also with --

Susanna Singer: Oh, and the High Museum. That's a very -- the High Museum we renewed.

Sol LeWitt: Well, it was painted out.

Susanna Singer: No, but before it was painted out, it was redone in acrylic.

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Sol LeWitt: Yeah, that was one of the problems with the ink, was that over a period of time some of the colors faded, although we were assured by the ink people that they didn't, or they wouldn't, but they did. And that's another reason that I wanted to do the acrylic washes to take their place.

Susanna Singer: That was actually an interesting controversy, the one at the High Museum, because it was done in this original ink formula. We saw it. I saw it. You saw it. It looked very faded. We thought it should be redone. Ned Rifkin, who is the director, didn't think it looked bad at all and compared it -- we asked him to compare it to transparencies. He said, well, transparencies change as well. So, it became a real battle, almost. In the end, Sol won, and they redid it at a terrific expense and then painted it over. And then with the renovation of the High Museum they decided to bring the Richard Meier building back to its original state and painted out this wall drawing that had cost tens of thousands of dollars to redo two years before.

Sol LeWitt: Especially since it just had been redone about two years before.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What a shame.

Susanna Singer: Oh, it was pretty --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: More than a shame. It's a loss, really.

Sol LeWitt: Richard Meier is not a great fan of mine.

Susanna Singer: Especially after they did that wall drawing.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, that's unfortunate. Well, anyway --

Susanna Singer: But it's a question of when, in fact, it is no longer the way the artist wants it.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, as a matter of fact there are others, like the Albornoz Hotel in Spoleto was redone.

Susanna Singer: That's right, and that wasn't re-sited.

Sol LeWitt: Because, almost all of the original ink wash drawings that were done more or less as a permanent installation have to be redone with the acrylic.

Susanna Singer: If they were exposed to sunlight at all.

Sol LeWitt: Even if not, because the one on the Albornoz had no direct light.

Susanna Singer: I thought the Dallas Museum looked good, for instance, the stars.

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Sol LeWitt: The colors were very simple. There were almost primary colors.

Susanna Singer: Yeah, that's true. There weren't any superimposed colors, yeah. So, anyway, it's complicated.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Just, if you don't mind, just walk me through sort of the process of preparing the wall before -- some of the buildings are old buildings that you're doing them on. Some are new. What about the state of the wall?

Sol LeWitt: Susanna does that. She sends everyone a letter telling them exactly how to do it -- what kind of paint to use, how many coats of paint to do on it. And we try to standardize it. But, almost invariably, I would say 90 percent of the time they do not do it correctly. And then, our people come, and they have to -- they start to do the wall drawing, and they see that it's not going right. And, they have to paint it out. They have to redo the whole wall. So, my people get a lot more money than their people. And by trying to cut a corner or two, they lose a lot of money.

[00:36:32]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And there must be imperfections in the wall in some cases. In some older buildings, there must be imperfections in the wall.

Sol LeWitt: There are, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But your people just deal with that, I guess.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. We try to make it as smooth as possible because all of the imperfections are exaggerated and magnified when you put the paint on.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And what kind of paint is it, Susanna?

Susanna Singer: It's very simple Benjamin Moore paint in America, just flat latex paint.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Flat latex?

Susanna Singer: The wall preparation differs with the different types of drawings. And, whether it's an old wall or a new wall affects the preparation of it as well. And we have very -- we know that certain paints work. We have paints to work in France, paints that work in Italy, local paints. They don't listen to us anyway. It's true. But we are very -- we try very hard to make it as easy as possible.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: At one point, I read a statement that you said that the process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. What does that mean, that the process is mechanical and should --

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Sol LeWitt: What process is that?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I don't know. I think you were talking about the painting process. I guess it was just the idea of once you've done the plan or the diagram, then --

Sol LeWitt: Oh, yeah. Well, then it, in a way, becomes mechanical. The people follow the plan.

(break in audio)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: One of the thoughts that comes to mind, I was really interested in what you said about how the colors could be different when they're mixed by layering, the process of the layering. And also the nature of the medium, of course, affects also the appreciation of the color. Do you have a way of recording the color exactly as you would want it?

Sol LeWitt: There's all kinds of color charts. Jo Watanabe has a wall full of colors and the matching acrylic colors. He's been working on it for years and years. And then every time it's done, something goes wrong. It's almost a comedy because he's been so diligent about it. He's always figured that he's got it now. Now he's got it. Now he's really got it. And then we try it out on a location, and it's a disaster. We have to improvise and all kinds of things. So, I say it's not an exact science quite yet, but we're trying to get it so that -- because we have to replace ink blotch drawings with the acrylic. It just has to be done.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, what you're trying to do is get the same visual effect as best you can with the acrylic?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's the trick.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, the same look.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I was also thinking since we last spoke of a way of kind of recording if there is a color change so that you can actually demonstrate that there's been a color change. In our field we use these colorimeters, which are these small instruments that just take a reading. You just put it right up to the wall, and it takes a reading, gives you a digital --

Sol LeWitt: I don't know if anyone's ever done that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It might be interesting.

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Susanna Singer: I remember that you talked to us about it, and it would have been interesting for this High Museum situation. I don't know what it would have done.

Sol LeWitt: It should have been done.

Susanna Singer: Yeah, but for us, the yellow faded the worst, so those colors that had yellow in them, not just the yellow but the green or the orange --

Sol LeWitt: And the blue faded also.

Susanna Singer: And the blue faded in a different way.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, maybe the colorimeter would have been good. I don't know.

Sol LeWitt: Well, it would have systematized the whole process rather than relying on what the eye could recall.

[00:40:44]

Susanna Singer: Could we use it now? Would it help us now?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You could take readings any time. They just give you a digital readout, and then every five years, every one, every year.

Susanna Singer: No, but I mean while we're making it and trying to match it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, sure.

Sol LeWitt: What really would have had to be done is that the reading would have had to have taken place immediately after the original ink wash drawings were done. And then, then you can match.

Susanna Singer: But I wonder if it makes sense now to do it while we're trying to match the color so that if we finally get colors that you like, when somebody's redoing a wall drawing, they would get the same readings out of each color.

Sol LeWitt: There's so many subtle things that I don't think you could really do that. It would just be almost impossible to get that kind of systematization going on that. We know, though, that once we get the acrylic right, it'll stay. There's -- it's practically inert, I think.

Susanna Singer: The other thing maybe you should talk about is actually how the ink wash drawings are drawn as opposed to -- that they're drawn with --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh yeah, the method.

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Sol LeWitt: There's a lot of latitude. Different people have put it on differently.

Susanna Singer: Mostly they're done with rags and tapped and padded.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And this must be a system that you worked out or you worked out with your assistant.

Sol LeWitt: No, actually, I didn't work it out. It was worked out by my assistants in practice.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So they certainly get into the process of doing this in terms of getting to an end effect as well.

Sol LeWitt: Oh, yeah. But the trouble is that, even though these people have been working for all these years, they can't agree on anything.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You mean among themselves or with you?

Sol LeWitt: Amongst themselves. We try to get it so that -- we try to get one to use the formula of the other, and he says, "I always have to change it."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You mean so they have their own individual ways of getting to the same end?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Susanna Singer: It becomes competition, and Nico and --

Sol LeWitt: They're very competitive amongst themselves.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And do they wait for your arrival to see the final to sort of decide?

Sol LeWitt: I sometimes never see the final. I mean, I'd like to, and I should. And I feel remiss that I don't.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You can't.

Sol LeWitt: Actually, if Anthony or Jo or Sachi say it looks right, I'll take their word for it because their eye is as good as mine. And, actually, when I do these things, I don't have a picture in my mind of what it's supposed to look like.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Really? What do you --

Sol LeWitt: I just do it as a -- in terms of a formula. And, I have no picture in my mind of what these things are going to look like.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Have you ever had huge surprises?

Sol LeWitt: All the time, sometimes good and sometimes bad.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's the fun part, right? (laughter) And that's the part of being an artist.

Sol LeWitt: One of the first great revelations I had about myself as an artist was that I was a poor technician. And the second great revelation was that there's always somebody who can really do it well. And the third one is to find that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Exactly. And that's the heart of this discussion.

Sol LeWitt: And once you find them, don't let them go.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's so true.

Sol LeWitt: Well, there's a history of that, of people doing -- artists don't work in a foundry. They send a sketch to the -- I mean a Renaissance artist, whatever, historically, they don't do a lot of the casting and all the preparatory work. Even Rubens, of course, had his little factory or big factory. All artists had -- some artists only did skies and landscapes, and some only did foliage.

[00:45:36]

Sol LeWitt: You know, it was -- it's -- farming out work is truly traditional.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It is. And it's sort of -- those individuals' hands were never important. It was the overall, which is sort of very much where you are, too.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Sol LeWitt: So it's just a matter of finding people. There are so many different kinds of things to -- that have to be done. You can't be an expert in all of them. And in my case, I'm an expert in none of them. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But you are the artist. It's your work.

Sol LeWitt: Except that I do myself and my studios. Then, that's what I'm an expert in. But no one else can do those. And so that's what I do. But other work -- almost all the other work, I only -- I used assistants at the beginning for wall drawings because when the space got too large, I couldn't do it myself. And so then I find out that a lot of people could do it very well, much better than I could.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I mean, other than fading, are there other kinds of damages that you can remember that occurred?

Sol LeWitt: Well, there's usage.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Usage. Right. Chairs hitting it or s--

Sol LeWitt: People bang into things. In some cases, the site is poor because it's on a staircase or a corridor, and it gets heavy usage, and then it has to be renewed. And I try not to do things in spaces like that unless they're so private that only a few people use it, or that it's guarded by a railing or something of that sort.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Have you ever been tempted to develop some kind of coating for them in some way, like a varnish -- not so much a varnish, a sealant of some sort?

Sol LeWitt: We use a varnish under the pencil drawings.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, you do?

Sol LeWitt: Of course, as soon as you -- someone touches it, it smears. So that has to be fixed with varnish.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And is it fixed with a spray?

Sol LeWitt: Hmm?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: A spray?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Susanna Singer: And we originally varnished the ink-washed drawings with a UV protection so that they wouldn't fade quite as quickly.

Sol LeWitt: But that --

Susanna Singer: They no longer need that anymore.

Sol LeWitt: That didn't work.

Susanna Singer: It didn't work. We tried it. (laughs)

Sol LeWitt: It did -- it -- yeah. We thought it would work, but it didn't work.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It didn't protect them in (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Susanna Singer: Not enough.

Sol LeWitt: No, because the inherent quality of the ink was unstable, so that it changed all the time.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. And to put something on that would really protect it that would have to be so thick and so yellow to cut out the ultraviolet that you would be losing the work of art. I mean, I always say that when people say to me about their works of art, "How do I protect it from UV?" I say, "Well, you know, you can put it like the Declaration of Independence under this glass that's completely yellow." But you can't -- you know, it doesn't matter what the color of the Declaration of Independence looks, but a work of art is something completely different. You live with it. It's the nature of the work.

Susanna Singer: Even the varnish that's on the pencil drawings yellows them just a bit.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. So you've never -- so even if a chair gets banged, or if there's some local damage, they -- you really have to redo -- recreate the entire work? You can't -- you never go back in locally and try to -- it's impossible to do.

Sol LeWitt: Never go back to what?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: In locally to try to put in some color.

Susanna Singer: (inaudible).

Sol LeWitt: Oh, no. It just --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's impossible.

Sol LeWitt: Again, can't do it. It doesn't work.

Susanna Singer: I have to [look?].

Sol LeWitt: Unless it's a whole large area, a discrete area that can be [redrawn?].

Susanna Singer: There are discrete areas that are done all the time. There's a wall drawing in the lobby at Christie's, which we are constantly sending people to touch up. So the -- it is possible sometimes to do.

Sol LeWitt: But when anything is touched up, it's, like, not just one little scratch, but they have to do a whole -- the whole area.

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Susanna Singer: The whole area, but they don't have to recreate the whole drawing.

Sol LeWitt: Because it's too difficult to do, a scratch, or something.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, that's the issue with monochromatic painting, also. You know, the scratch destroys the whole plane, the whole form. And you have to really do the whole thing. It's very, very hard to do.

Susanna Singer: But one issue that is -- doesn't exist in painting is that most people who have a painting that's scratched want to get it repaired. A lot of people who have wall drawings that are damaged, allow that damage to remain.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm. How does that strike you?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I'd rather it be redone, but if we don't know about it, how can we do it?

Susanna Singer: And they don't want to pay for it, too.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Have you ever known that restorers went in to do your work, that restorers have ever gone in to restore it?

Sol LeWitt: I don't think I know of any case. Do you?

Susanna Singer: I know that museum restorers have sometimes done little things on wall drawings that are there for a long period of time.

Sol LeWitt: But usually --

Susanna Singer: But not usually.

Sol LeWitt: Usually their work is much more time consuming and expensive. (laughter) And we just send someone in to redo the whole thing. (laughter)

[00:50:53]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, that may be so. And it's also often not as effective. It's very hard to go in, as you say, with (inaudible). What about the kind of sheen on the wall? When we started this morning, we talked a little bit about semi-gloss. But it would seem to be that the different paints, especially acrylic, as opposed to ink, as opposed to pencil --

Sol LeWitt: Well, I try to keep the acrylic fairly flat and -- but the metal, three-dimensional pieces have to be a semi-gloss because of cleaning.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because of --?

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Sol LeWitt: Because of -- if they're matte, they attract dirt, and dirt becomes part of the thing. With a semi-gloss you can just wipe it off. So it's a -- I'd rather have it matte, but it's impractical. But the semi-gloss is not that shiny.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. So that was a compromise you made in order to be able to clean it and keep it looking as -- yeah. But the pencil drawings have -- I mean, the pencils, in the very nature of graphite, gives you certain, subtle sheen to a surface, which is something. And I suppose a coating -- well, you say you do fix them in some way. It even it -- evens that out.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. They're varnished. Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. And what is that varnish? Do you know?

Sol LeWitt: What is the varnish?

Susanna Singer: It's a Lascaux varnish with a UV protector.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Now, what about working on plasters, per what we've been talking about so far. You've also worked on brick. Is that right? (inaudible).

Sol LeWitt: Well, I have, but it -- I try to -- if I do, I try to use the brick as a kind of matrix to do the work. But you can't do s-- many of the things can't be done on a brick wall. It has to be plastered over.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because it's too porous or has too much texture? Everything about it, I supp--

Sol LeWitt: Well, no. You get the --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And, plus, the pattern, I suppose.

Sol LeWitt: You get the brick. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. You get the bricks (laughs)

Susanna Singer: It's [too brick?]. (laughter)

Sol LeWitt: All you see is the bricks.

Susanna Singer: It's too bricky.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK. (laughter) This has been wonderful, Sol. You've answered, I think, most of my questions.

Susanna Singer: There were some acrylic wall drawings that dealt with flat and glossy paint.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I mean, in the same wall drawing?

Susanna Singer: In the same wall drawing.

Sol LeWitt: That was one thing that we battled, you know. It was a big problem. I did a show at the Ace Gallery, where the premise of the work was flat and glossy. And we tried and tried and tried to get a mixture for glossy paint. And it never was flat enough. It was never -- it never worked until, at the end, after about two weeks of battling it, someone came up with the idea, why don't you just paint a varnish on it? And that solved the problem.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That did it.

Sol LeWitt: It was the simplest solution and the first thing we should've thought of, or the last thing. But after that --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But the simple solutions were always the hardest ones to come to.

Sol LeWitt: What?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The simple solutions are always the hardest one to find.

Susanna Singer: But there were several drawings that used that idea, flat and glossy, some very successfully and quite beautifully.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. Well, that -- but after that, it was easy because all he did was do it flat and then do the glossy parts in varnish.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. Yeah. I think you have answered any of -- most of my preconceived questions. I guess the big issue is, as people continue to execute your work, and training these people to do it, is sort of what are those criteria that one should seek in someone to do this?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. They have to be very diligent. They have to be very patient. They have to be very intelligent. And they have to want to travel. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. Yeah. Yeah.

Sol LeWitt: That's -- is that -- it always happens that, oh, after a while, they always come up and say, "I don't want to travel."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm. They had lives. They do other things.

Sol LeWitt: But some of them love -- like to travel, like Anthony. He doesn't mind traveling at all. He likes it. Sachi, it seems, looks forward to it. (laughter)

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[00:55:33]

Susanna Singer: We have all of those issues, too, the personality issues.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It must be like a family in a way. You've worked with these people so long and, I mean, it must be just --

Sol LeWitt: Well, we always send one of our people, maybe two, but usually one, and then they recruit people for -- on the spot, so that the client, whoever it is, pays for our person transportation, per diem, and so on. And then they pay their --

Susanna Singer: Local --

Sol LeWitt: -- gnomes that they -- (laughter) whatever they negotiate. And then I usually send them a drawing or a small gouache or something, --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's nice.

Sol LeWitt: -- because I know that they're negotiated down to almost nothing. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. Right. The privilege of doing it. Yeah. That's very nice. Yeah.

Susanna Singer: But it is like a family with us, and these -- well, and our crew.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Sure.

Sol LeWitt: What is it? They --

Susanna Singer: A dysfunctional --

Sol LeWitt: A dysfunctional family. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, that seems normal. Maybe dysfunctional, but it's real and typical.

Susanna Singer: That's normal. Oh, gosh.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Are there any other comments that you'd like to make about -- thinking about future preservation of the works?

Sol LeWitt: Well, the big problem that we have now is that, what's going to happen to the work after I'm gone, and that some of the work has to be redone? And it -- there is a -- we said earlier, there are certain ones that are easy and certain

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ones that are impossible. But there's a grey area in between that is a little bit -- well, we haven't really decided how to handle. And the only thing that I can say is that, if any kind of aesthetic decision has to be made, then it can't be done, because the artist is the only one who can make the aesthetic decision. And as far as adaptation from one space to another, if it involves any kind of aesthetic decision, it cannot be done. And it only can be done on -- when there's no question. If there's a question, then it probably shouldn't be done. But that leaves a lot of people -- it's a little unfair to people who buy a work, and then move, and want to do it in another place, and they can't. There isn't another site that's similar at all to what they did. They just lose the work.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, they made the decision to move, I suppose, so that's part of it.

Sol LeWitt: Well, they --

Susanna Singer: They can also sell it.

Sol LeWitt: They have to understand that when they get a site-specific kind of installation. That's part of the --

Susanna Singer: But can't they sell it? I mean, we could -- they can also sell it, and hopefully somebody who buys it will buy it with the same proportions. One of the issues that we're going to address in this wall-drawing book is to notate which drawings can never be redone, which ones require a certain -- same proportions, and so forth, and --

Sol LeWitt: Well, I don't -- it's rather obvious in most cases. It's only the grey area that there might -- but if -- as soon as there's a question, that's the answer. You know, if there's a question, then it shouldn't be done. It just distorts the work. It's distorted. And I remember in one of the documentas in the '70s, I did the inst-- reinstallation of a Eva Hesse work, which was the one from the ceiling that --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The rope piece?

Sol LeWitt: The rope -- yeah. And the thing is that I had a photograph of how it was done, but the space either was -- I think the space they had for it was a corner, rather than on a wall. And I said it can't be done. They said it had to be done. So I had to adapt the piece to that. And I realized that it's not the same. But then I realized it's never the same. I mean, no matter how close you want to come to the original, it's not the same. It's never the same in an installation piece. So there's that indistinct area. You really have to -- that's why we were talking about setting up some sort of study center, where the people who know how to do the wall drawings now could teach other people to do it and to do preservation, and reinstallation, and things of that sort, and that we wanted to -

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- I wanted to make sure that the people who knew the work the best would be involved. And it comes down to three people. Susanna is one, and Anthony Sansotta, and Jo Wantanabe, who have been working with me, all three of them, for 30 years or maybe more, and who know the work, even though they don't agree. (laughs) But still, since there's three of them, there's always a two-to-one vote. So then they know how the work should be, and how it can be recreated, and how it could be taught. So I think that I do want to perpetuate the work, and that was the best way we could think of doing it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What kind of disagreements come up? With regard to what?

Sol LeWitt: Mixing the colors, for -- mainly. And doing the pencil work. The pencil work is -- in a way, it's like a -- again, a composer writing a violin sonata. And two different violinists will play it differently. They're both correct, but they're different. So there's disagreements on that sort of thing. And I'm -- it's not surprising that, with the amount of work, and the different varieties of work, there will be some kind of disputes or d--

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Different ways of seeing things. Yeah.

Sol LeWitt: Differences of opinion.

Susanna Singer: Well, there's also a lot of -- I mean, actually, Sol and I are removed from a lot of those disputes, although we hear them and try to mediate them, because we're not actually doing the work. But for those who are, it's a very personal thing, and they're very -- they take great pride in their own work, and think that their own work is better than somebody else's work. So that's --

Sol LeWitt: They're very, very competitive.

Susanna Singer: They're very competitive with each other. And that doesn't mean they're --

Sol LeWitt: They're all -- amongst the people who we're talking about, they're all correct. It's just that they have different points of view. So --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So how do you resolve that? W-- you send out one person to do a wall drawing, right?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You don't have -- you wouldn't be sending out Jo and Anthony.

Sol LeWitt: Oh, no.

Susanna Singer: No longer. We can't. (laughter)

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, hold that. I got to change the battery.

(break in audio)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK. We're talking about differences of opinion when people are out there actually, doing.

Sol LeWitt: Well, it's not a matter of being wrong; it's a matter of being different. But there are differences and there should be some method of resolving them.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How do they get resolved now?

Sol LeWitt: Well, whoever I send out does it their way.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does it their way? (laughs) I see. I see. Mm-hmm. We were talking about that grey area with regard to recreation, where the artist is really the only person who can -- and we were talking about different recreations in different sites or different sizes, even, and what a problem that would be.

Sol LeWitt: Well, they all -- for instance, size and proportion are very important. You can't do little, tiny -- a large wall drawing on a little, tiny wall, even though the proportion might be the same. And th-- you know, it has to be very similar. So I tend to think that you have to be very severe in the deciding which ones that can't be redone in a different space.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Have you been thinking about that? Have you been -- how you make notations about that with some ones?

Sol LeWitt: I've been thinking about it and we're doing a catalogue of wall drawings and I think that there has to be some kind of statement in the -- in that book, pertaining to this problem.

Susanna Singer: And I am going to try to mark each drawing with some kind of notes about the--

Sol LeWitt: I don't think that you should have to do that because I don't -- I think that, just a general statement, should take care of -- and any kind of aesthetic decision cannot be done. I think that has to be the statement. That has to be the rule.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But you said in some -- you said that there were some that could, some that definitely couldn't, and then there was this grey area in between.

Sol LeWitt: Well, at -- if a suitable replacement area is found, then it can be done. But if it isn't, it can't be squeezed -- you can't make too many compromises. And the more -- you know, you really shouldn't make any compromises, but there -- as we were saying, that installation art is -- after the first installation is all

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compromised. And it's because there's never two spaces exactly the same. And things can't ever be done the same twice. So that's a grey area. Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, maybe in the future, walls have to -- in order to do it again, they have to reconstruct the space. That's part of the --

Sol LeWitt: That's --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's part of it.

Sol LeWitt: That's a possible solution, but on the other hand, one of the premises of doing the wall drawings is that they're done for the site. So if you make the site that --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. It's a different impetus, isn't it?

Sol LeWitt: It's a inversion of the idea.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, it is. It is.

Susanna Singer: I think there are certain groups of wall drawings that can absolutely, certainly be redone that don't require all that many --

Sol LeWitt: What?

Susanna Singer: There are certain types of wall drawings that can easily be redrawn and those can certainly be pointed out. And there are a lot -- there are also, as Sol said, certain that are obvious that they could never be moved, no matter what, including an outside of a church, for instance. But then there are these others. The question that you're going to have to think about, I think, is what constitutes an aesthetic decision.

Sol LeWitt: Well, it's obvious that an aesthetic decision is any change in the work. That has to be decided -- you know, that if it has to be changed, that's changing -- that's an aesthetic decision.

Susanna Singer: If the drawing, itself, has to be redrawn, then it's -- that's an aesthetic decision.

Sol LeWitt: If it has to be changed, then who's going to decide what the change is? Nobody can decide except the artist. So that -- it's -- in a way, it's very simple. And if there's a question, that's the answer.

Susanna Singer: The answer's no.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think that's right.

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Susanna Singer: But there are -- that leaves many that can certainly be redrawn as long as they're drawn in the same size and proportion. We recently had a problem with a drawing that was miniaturized.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah. You know, when you come right down to it, walls aren't all that different. You know, when you -- there's, like, apartment house walls, and there's museum walls, and there's bank walls, and there's -- but, I mean, from one to the other, within that group, there's not that -- all that much difference. You can find -- if a piece is done in an apartment, you can find a wall that -- on another apartment that's similar in size and proportion, and therefore, it can be done without any mischief to the concept. So, then it's OK. But it's when you start to have to stretch and, you know, try to shoehorn things into things that they don't belong. Then, if you have to do that, then it's not a -- then it's obviously wrong. So I think that, when you're -- if you take up each one -- each wall drawing, if you look at it, the grey area shrinks a lot.

Susanna Singer: I think so, too. I mean, I'm working on it now and it really does, because there are so many there are so obv-- so many that can -- especially in the early ones -- go on almost any wall.

Sol LeWitt: As a matter of fact, for a time, I was doing work that didn't have a specific wall, but it was done -- within each wall, the drawing was done on the basis of that -- of a particular wall that could be done on another wall just as easily because it was based on any wall. And because it has to do with s-- a line drawn from the center of the wall to the upper-left corner of the wall. So --

Susanna Singer: Right, those are easy.

Sol LeWitt: All walls have a center and most of them have a corner. (laughter)

Susanna Singer: All of those are easy. And arcs, circles, and grids are easy. There are plenty of drawings that are easy.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, that's helpful for you to think about that, though, because that may minimize this -- the problem areas, which may be more comforting to think about.

Susanna Singer: There are, I should tell you, 1,150 wall drawings.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh. Oh.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, but they --

Susanna Singer: A lot of them are similar to each other.

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Sol LeWitt: They go and they -- there aren't that many different types of wall drawings. Then, within a certain type, the -- each one answers the question for all of them.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So that would be interesting to think about them in that way, in the types, and how you feel about that. It would be comforting for you, it would seem to me.

Sol LeWitt: What?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It would be comforting for you to resolve it in that way.

Sol LeWitt: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. But I don't think it's a big problem because I think that each one answers its own question.

Susanna Singer: The other thing that I'm dealing with, which also is obvious to us, but I don't know what -- that it would be obvious in the future, is that, originally, trained assistants weren't always necessary for the wall drawings. And now, I would believe that you think the majority of them do require trained assistants.

Sol LeWitt: But I do -- also, I do wall drawings for untrained people, for students, for instance, or, you know, at a school, or something of that sort, or something that people follow directions. They -- one type of piece is that anyone makes a line -- a not-straight line going from left side of the wall to the other, and then different people with different color markers try to imitate the line just below it, so that they would alternate red, yellow, and blue, for instance, and red, yellow, and blue, till the whole wall is filled, top and -- you know, above the line and below the line, each one trying to imitate the line above it, so that anyone can do that, and sometimes the results are sort of hilarious, too. (laughter)

Susanna Singer: But the orig--

Sol LeWitt: But there's no optimum answer to that question.

Susanna Singer: But the original perception of wall drawings was that anybody could do any of them, and that has certainly changed over the years.

Sol LeWitt: Well, at the very beginning, you know, after about doing two or three wall drawings, I realized -- and I -- by the time I did the second -- like, the first real show of wall drawings, I realized that it wasn't true. You know, it -- at first, I thought it would be a very democratic way of doing art, you know, that everybody does it and can do it, and it's always different, and it's always personal, and it's always OK. But then, when they had to be well done, then that's --

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's different. (laughter) Is there anything else you want to say about the study center at Yale or what your thoughts are with regard to that?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I was just waiting to see it exist. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. Well, it's a good solution. It's an intelligent solution. Let's talk a little bit about what we were going over, over lunch, because I don't think we talked about that so much, which was the nature of different acrylic paints and your preference for a certain brand.

[01:14:53]

Sol LeWitt: It was, we started to use it. And one of my assistants got in contact with the manufacturer. And they worked out a deal so that we could get it in bulk.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And this was Lascaux paint? And so you'd order it. Do you work with a technician in Lascaux? Or you just order what they make, and they ship it to you?

Sol LeWitt: Well, we order. We gave them colors that we use, which is fairly standard primary and secondary colors. And they gave us what we wanted. And then we use them, as we use them.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Had you worked with another type of acrylic before that?

Sol LeWitt: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So Lascaux has been the choice you've worked with. We talked about the inks a little bit last time. But over lunch, you were mentioning again how, over time, they changed. And that was really a concern to you.

Sol LeWitt: Well, that's true, especially in light. But even not in light, certain colors seem to change. Yellow faded the worst, and then the blue. And so in many cases, the inkwork was mixtures of different colors. So the yellow element would fade out, for instance, if it were yellow and blue, which would be a green. It would turn out more blue in time.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Over time. And then when that got to a point that it was really no longer what you wanted, then it was time to repaint.

Sol LeWitt: Well, then we had to redo it. We couldn't redo it, because they stopped manufacturing the ink. And anyway, it didn't have a great track record, so that using it again wouldn't do. But we decided to try to use acrylic in a similar manner. And we're still trying to arrive at a definitive mixture, formula we can use.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How have you had to try to adapt the acrylic, to emulate the black, the ink?

Sol LeWitt: Well, it's mostly trial and error. It's just that the ink tended to be a little grayer, and the acrylic a little brighter.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you had to make adjustments. And how did you make those adjustments? With layering or adding?

Sol LeWitt: Well, if it didn't work, we --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Trial and error.

Sol LeWitt: Throw on a coat of gray. Something of that sort. Well, we haven't had that problem too often. But recently, we did have the problem in the Indianapolis museum, where we did, some years ago, an installation with using the ink. And they were doing an expansion. And they had to demolish the section of the museum where the wall drawing was. So they gave us another area that we could work in, but we had to do it with the acrylic. So eventually it worked out. But we had to make adjustments throughout.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's a hard assignment, because there's a memory, of one. And then, especially for you.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, especially for the people there, they knew what it looked like. But then again, some of the colors did fade. And so that their memory of the original wasn't as accurate as a photograph.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's true. That's true. How does one deal with that? One's memory of color is so different. Were they upset by it? Or they just noticed that it was different?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I don't know if they were upset. They eventually accepted what we did. So I'm sure it was OK. The person that did it had to, just had to make certain decisions at the time. I have good assistants that can make good decisions.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm interested in your saying that. Because in one of your writings, or one of the things I've always thought about, is that your method of doing diagrams and having others execute it was, in a way, to eliminate the necessity for decisions. That the execution -- but in fact, in art, we never do that. Is that right?

[01:20:07]

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, we can never get it down to a formula that's foolproof. But we're working on it.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is that a goal?

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, it is because otherwise, it would be just too subjective. You have to have it quite specific at a certain point. And it becomes a matter of taste. But again, as we said before, nothing can be reproduced exactly. And nothing is the same the second time around. And so you just have to make it work.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's so interesting to me. In the beginning, of course, you did your own drawings on the wall. What was it like, technically, to see someone else doing it? Was it, there must have been a real leap there.

Sol LeWitt: Well, in some cases, the people that did it, did it so much better than I did. So I was very happy about it. So we kept those people on.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You said earlier that there were points where the colors had changed so much that it was time to redo them, you felt that it was time. How would you know that? Would a collector call you? Or would you see them? Or how would you know that something --?

Sol LeWitt: Well, the way I've done it is just that I had seen them, and they didn't look right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Can you think of an instance?

Sol LeWitt: Any specific? Well, I did one in Spoleto, Italy. It was in a lobby of a hotel, and not a lobby, a sitting room, whatever. And I used to go there periodically. And also, the artist who did the original used to go there. And I said to him, take a look at that, and see what you think. And he said, well, you know, it's changed. I said, well, we have to do it again. But we have to use the acrylic. So he took the formula, and he did it. He made some changes. But it worked out OK. And then the one in Indianapolis, also. That had to be changed, anyway.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When you're working out the formulas, do you use -- you must do it here in Chester, in your studio. And do you have small samples that you work on?

Sol LeWitt: Well actually, the studio in Brooklyn does all the stuff, Jo Wantanabe. He has different walls with different comparisons between the acrylic and the ink drawings. So that he's the one that's trying to arrive at the formula. And as soon as we think we've got it, we don't have it. There's always a problem. But eventually, we'll find it, you know, find a solution.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does it interest you to do this?

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Sol LeWitt: No, that part of it is technical. And technical and possible and feasible and doable. And I think that, I believe in technology, that anything can be done with technology. So the kind of things that we do, anyway.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So Jo's there, working it out, trying to solve these problems.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, every time we do a thing and something goes wrong, it goes back to the drawing board. And tries to figure out a different -- it's not easy. But we're edging toward it. And the whole thing is that, when I'm not here, I can't say that this is right and this is wrong. Or say the person that did it is not around. So that it becomes more of a subjective than an objective problem.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And does that disturb you?

[01:24:58]

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, because things can get way off track. And the whole idea was that, instead of having art crumble before your eyes and become ruins and become different and changed, that it would be better to find a way to renew it every so often. So you won't have a, for instance, a painting by, I don't know, Rembrandt or somebody, that is completely different today than it was the day it was painted. And or you have other problems with the restorations that were done in the past, and varnishings, and things of that sort. If the thing were redone exactly as it were, you wouldn't have that problem. So it's like putting you out of business.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, good. I'm very welcome. Thank you. That's fine with me. I'm trying to anticipate what sorts of challenges there would be for us still, because I know there will be. And as, well, one of the things we talked about earlier today is localized damage to a wall drawing. And clearly, you can never go into a small area. You have to pick a larger area. And making those determinations is really restoration.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, that has happened several times.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the methods of doing that, and how one goes about doing that, is very key to something we might have to do in the future. We may have to do that in the future, so that's important to understand. But again, your team of people.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah, to try to imitate the colors or the technique is always chancy. It may not be at the time. It may look alright. But then it may age differently.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And in your view, when it ages in such a way that it becomes obvious again visually, that it's time to redo it.

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Sol LeWitt: Yeah. I think that the thing should be always like the day they were made.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So aging and time on the wall is not something that's part of the concern.

Sol LeWitt: Well, it's a way of defeating time. In fact, one example, there's a Japanese temple in Kyoto that's rebuilt every 75 years or so, a wooden structure. So that it's always perfect.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How did you come to think -- when you started your work in the very beginning, was that always in your mind? That aging was not really --

Sol LeWitt: No, it wasn't at all. The older I get, the more it is on my mind. But doing it originally, you don't think of things like that. It's like people think they live forever, but they don't. And the art changes, and especially if you are young and poor, and you use poor materials. And you happen to make a good work of art that will fade away, that's not a very good prospect, is it?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But it's interesting how it is age-related. When we're younger, we don't think about those things. Also, with your experience, you've had more evidence of works of art changing. A young artist doesn't. You just don't have the experience of it.

Sol LeWitt: Of course, yeah. Well, with my own art. I'm sure other artists have the same problem, using inferior materials and then having them turn on you.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So in your view, at this point, if you have a work of art that's one of your earlier pieces and done in materials that's changed, your view would be to try to repaint it in a way --

Sol LeWitt: In some cases, it can't be done. When I was, in the '50s or so, when I was making paintings, they can't be repainted. They have to sink or swim as they are.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So much has, when I think about your allowing or encouraging or enabling other hands to actually produce your work, I think about artists that either had large studios doing that, or in fact, I think about an artist like Rothko, who had other people paint the Rothko Chapel paintings. Had his assistants do it. Do you see yourself in that category? Or do you see it as just a different methodology?

[01:30:28]

Sol LeWitt: Well, no. The methodology, if I do it by hand, I do it by my own hand. But if it's done by formula, which are mostly the wall drawings, then it can be done by different hands.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. So you actually, because you are constantly doing your own work at the same time, your own hand at the same time, it's not really a disconnect in general, just with regard to the execution of the --

Sol LeWitt: I use different materials and different paints and things that, on my own, I don't use on the wall drawings. It's like an artist doing prints, for instance. You can do a drawing on a plate, or you can make a drawing on paper or something of that sort. And the printer takes over. And then you look at, the printing ink is such. And you have to adapt to whatever the materials are. It's not that much different. And sculptors, of course, make clay models and have them cast. Even the fresco painters would have people paint in the larger areas. And they come into the smaller areas. It's been done forever.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's helpful. That's really interesting to think about it in that way. So the work where your hands are still on, how, are you always experimenting with new materials, new effects, and that sort of thing?

Sol LeWitt: I would say no, because I just sort of continue along with what I'm doing. And if it changes, it changes slowly. And I don't try to experiment all that much. But I have different things I want to do. And I keep doing them. I don't think of -- as a laboratory.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's more organic progressions.

Sol LeWitt: Well, things, they change organically. But not conceptually. Run out of questions?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, I have other questions. I'm just curious to know where your interest lies, in terms of -- I've been interested in reading your writings. And I know when one writes, it's what you think at that time. And you tend to maintain those ideas, but you don't always. And some of the things that interest me, I wanted to ask you about. I'm always interested in your comments about materiality. And based upon what you've said today, I certainly understand your statement about, with regard to materiality, the danger is, I think, in making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work, another kind of expressionism.

Sol LeWitt: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And does that kind of fall in love with the materiality, that it takes you in a direction that is quite different from your impetus?

Sol LeWitt: Well, I think that it does. I think that, in my case, I wanted to stay with my mental construct, rather than have the medium take over. And try to impose my ideas on what I'm doing, on the material, rather than the other way around. And it does change, but it changes slowly.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I didn't understand this one, so maybe you can help me out here. The conceptual artist would want to ameliorate this emphasis on materiality as much as possible. Or to use it in a paradoxical way, to convert it into an idea.

[01:35:00]

Sol LeWitt: Well, you can do it ironically, for instance. You can use, for instance, paint as an anti-art kind of statement. Or you can mock painting by using paint. Or you can use materials in a subversive way. And that becomes the idea, rather than the material itself.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That makes sense to me. This is really, I think, the essence of what you and I talk about, because we talk about process. And it's probably where we should end. Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist can now imagine. These may be used as ideas for new work. Has that happened?

Sol LeWitt: Well, you're not, you have to mitigate some of these statements, because they're a little bit overly ideological. But the thing is that you do have to, you can't follow things absolutely blindly because, if you see and understand something as way off track somehow, you have to do something about it. Either stop or change. And so that you can't follow it totally blindly, but it's a good idea. It's a good idea to begin with. But if you have to save the piece somehow by doing something ulterior, you just have to do it. These statements are not iron-clad.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, that's completely understandable. After all, you're an artist. That's what an artist does. Thanks, Sol. It's great. And if you have something to ask me or talk about, we can.

Sol LeWitt: No, but I hope that you can write this up. It'd be really, very important to the book. Because bring everything together materially and ideologically and everything. As a matter of fact, I think that if you have an essay that's as comprehensive as I think that you probably will, I don't think we need another essay. I think it would suffice for taking everything. Because you take not only the materials and the problems of, technical problems. But also problems of thinking about how the work is made. So that's the whole thing. So I'm glad you're doing it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, thank you. I'm honored by your confidence in me. And I really appreciate your time doing this.

Sol LeWitt: I'm sure it's not misplaced.

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Thank you. That's great.

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