



**Artists Documentation Program  
Audio Interview Transcript**

**CAROL MANCUSI-UNGARO**

**JULY 23, 2019**

**Interviewed by:**

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Fellow, The Menil Collection**

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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, Whitney Museum of American Art; Christina McLean, The Menil Collection]**

**[BEGIN INTERVIEW]**

**[00:00:00]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: My name is Carol Mancusi-Ungaro. I'm in New York, and it is July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019. And I'm being interviewed by Christian McLean.

Christina McLean: Great. So maybe we can first talk about how the interview with Sol LeWitt came about?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. I was re-reading my notes from it, and that's always helpful, because memory does a funny thing -- especially as you re-tell stories. Apparently, our director, Adam Weinberg, thought that it would be good for me to talk to Sol. I had never met him before. And I don't know if that came from Sol to start with, because they're very good friends, so it may have been in a conversation with Adam that Sol was talking about his project at Yale or his intended project at Yale. This was in December of 2003.

And so Adam -- Susanna called -- who works with Sol -- she called and set up a lunch for the three of us. And it was at the Whitney, as I remember. But anyway. And then during that interview -- it wasn't even an interview; it was a lunch -- he was telling me, with excitement, about his project at Harvard -- or actually, at Yale -- he wanted to set up an endowment at Yale for a chair, but he was very excited about doing the wall drawings at Mass MoCA, so he was very excited about that whole project. And he talked about -- I don't know. We talked about -- I'm sure we talked about his painting and the way he worked. And I asked him questions and he answered them. And he was very insistent about others would be making the work. For example, he said it was really important to him what quality of the blue and yellow was, but he wasn't responsible for mixing them together to make green. So he accepted those variables in his work and in his intended work.

He said he would be doing interviews for the project at Yale, but he -- Susanna pointed out that in the course of our conversation, he said things that she'd never heard him say before. And so I think he heard that -- or I'm imagining he heard that and thought that meant something. Susanna did, and so I guess it was at that point during that lunch that he agreed it might be good

to have his voice recorded by someone else, so it wasn't just at Yale and the people at Yale, but also out in the world in some other way.

At the time I was -- I had a joint position between the Whitney and Harvard, and so I was back and forth between the two places. We therefore decided that I would interview him at his home in Connecticut -- which I did two times in 2005 -- early 2005.

Christina McLean: What -- so he proposed a format of transcribing the discussions that you had?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. You know, I've been doing these interviews for years, as you know. And every artist has their -- his or her own way of wanting to do it. He wanted to do it in his home. He did not want the camera on him. I had brought along a little video recorder, which had an audio component that was much better than any of the others. So I said to him, "Okay, I'm gonna set this up, and it'll be facing the wall, but I really want to get the sound using this instrument." And he was comfortable with that. One of the nice things that happened -- and I don't think we've ever used it -- is you see his hands. Every now and then they would come and front of the camera, which was kind of -- I thought kind of nice, because it showed how into it he was, and how very expressive he was as well. But basically, I was in a situation of interviewing a man I didn't know.

**[BREAK IN AUDIO]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I had met him many years earlier, when Elizabeth Sussman from the Whitney Museum, who's now one of my colleagues here, was doing an Eva Hesse show. And she wanted very much to show a work owned by the Guggenheim called the *Expanded Expansion*. So she called together some conservators and art historians to look at the very compromised state of the work in New York, and she invited me to come. And Sol was there, because he was such good friends with Eva Hesse. So that's really the very first time I met him. And I remember in those years, my mind was very -- very -- very much wearing a conservator's hat and having very much a conservator's attitude toward this -- that the idea of just tossing this away and making a new one was just totally anathema to everything that I thought I believed in or that I did believe in at the time. And that was his position -- his position was that it was really dead in the state it was in. And I remember hearing it, and I remember very -- being struck by it. But we never had a private conversation.

So the very first time I ever spoke to him was the luncheon in 2003. And so then the second time I spoke to him was at his home in Connecticut in 2005. He didn't mind being recorded, as I said, but he didn't want to have his picture taken, which was fine. He then suggested that the interview be transcribed, and if I had any questions, I should write them in the margin, and he would write answers. I was just re-reading, in preparation for this, a letter that I wrote to him -- I wrote him several letters -- artists never write back, but, you know, (laughter) I always write artists letters -- in which I said that I was -- had listened to the tape and I was very disappointed in my inability to listen well enough. I felt that there were topics that he raised that were really interesting, and we were just sort of getting into it, and in my sense of wanting to be sure to cover something -- everything -- I didn't allow it to be explored in the depth that I wanted, but I went on to another topic. And so I don't know if it was his suggestion -- it probably was -- where he said, "Okay, well then, let's continue this conversation in writing." That's what happened.

**[00:06:29]**

Christina McLean: Do you -- as someone whose work is created and then painted out, that idea of getting rid of the artwork once it's being [done shown?] -- what do you think the significance is of him wanting to reach out to a conservator?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. I really don't understand that. Except as it turns out now, all these years later, it was probably a smart thing to have done, in the sense that I can speak of him to conservators. I don't know. I've wondered that myself. In fact, I think I started my Forbes Lecture raising that point. I suspect the director of the Whitney, Adam Weinberg, just probably spoke of my interest in artists' attitudes towards aging, and my acceptance of whatever the artist thinks to really kind of deal with it. I think maybe that may have been what made him just meet with me. I don't know. I mean, that was a lunch, and if he didn't think we had a rapport, then he would not have invited me to continue. It was a trial. And I guess at lunch, enough came out, or he said things, or he felt comfortable enough that even though I was a conservator, it would be worth doing.

What I have discovered in my career is that conservators' questions are very different from curators' questions. Also, our engagement with an artist is very different -- you know, we don't -- we can't give them a show; we can't buy one of their works. You know, we have a very different association with artists. And maybe -- I'm not saying he was interested in either of those, because he had had all of that with the Whitney already, but he may have

enjoyed a very different engagement with someone in talking about his work. I don't know. I can't answer that.

Christina McLean: There were a few things that seemed to really resonate with you -- comments that he made in both the annotations and in the interviews, especially this one about the falsification of time. Do you want to talk a little bit more about...?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes. I am -- when I was given the Forbes Prize, which was such an honor for me, I knew I had a lecture -- it was associated with the acceptance of the prize. And frankly, I don't know why I thought of Sol. I've interviewed so many artists, and I don't know why there was something haunting about that interview with him. It's funny now to think back, why I chose that -- because I didn't set out with the idea of wanting -- in thinking about the lecture, I didn't set out an idea, wanting to say something grand about my profession. It wasn't that at all.

But that phrase, "no falsification of time," really stuck with me. And I think it was the use of the word "falsification" that really grabbed me. When the Forbes Prize Committee invited me -- or offered me the prize -- and of course I was honored and accepted -- they then asked me what I might want to write about, to let them know in a month or whatever, and what the title would be, because that they needed to publicize. And when I said -- submitted "No Falsification of Time" -- or "The Falsification of Time" -- they immediately responded and said, "Whoa, that sounds really interesting." (laughter) So I guess conservators have that reaction to a word like that. That's a very strong word.

And for -- I didn't know Saul well enough. Maybe that was just off the cuff, you know? Maybe he was the kind of person who -- he was very articulate, very well read -- if that was just his way of speaking, or if that was something that -- a very carefully chosen word. I suspect he did choose his words very carefully in reading the transcripts. I didn't have -- maybe I did have the feeling in his presence that he was choosing his words carefully. I never felt intimidated. I felt I was speaking to someone who was very serious about his art.

So anyway, I think it was that idea of falsification that really -- then, when I began thinking about that, it opened up all the questions of aging and all the questions that conservators deal with. But I never -- there's something about falsification that's an accusation. It's a negative. It's not just a change that we talk about all the time or an alteration that we talk -- or a modification or

evolution or all the words we use. Falsification is a negative action, and that made me think about, are we really falsifying works of art when we retain the aging in them?

**[00:11:40]**

Christina McLean: And especially when the immaterial is so dependent on the physical state, the interpretation of that immaterial aspect of the work is dependent on the physical state of [the object?].

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's true. And I think with art in general, that's true. Art is an expression -- it's a visual explanation of a thought. And so the material does matter. Even if it changes slightly with oil paint, maybe, it's not as dramatic - - it's not something we address so much. But the physical manifestation of an idea or a concept is what art is, and so that physical manifestation is something -- the character of it is something we have to consider.

Christina McLean: If you were to speak with him again after being able to ruminate on these ideas for -- I think it's been 14 years since you interviewed him?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm.

Christina McLean: Is there anything you'd ask?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's a good question. Yes. I would ask him if his ideas had changed, if he has seen the wall drawings installed in places that in the end he had second thoughts about that. I think I asked him a little bit about that, but I think I would have dwelled on that a little bit more. We live in a very different age now. We live in an age of 3D printing and replications and a lot of things that are considered normal, so his stance, his conceptual stance, is not nearly as progressive as it was at that time. So it would be interesting -- knowing the quality of that intellect, the extraordinary quality of that intellect, he'd be way ahead of us. So, you know, I mean, we're catching up now, but he'd be 20 years ahead of us. So I don't -- I would be so interested to know what he was thinking at this point.

I loved his scribble drawings, which is what he was doing toward the end of his life. And I remember one day getting a package in the mail from the Post Office, a great big plastic thing with a zipper or something, saying, "So sorry," you know, "this was damaged in transit." I've never had one before; I didn't even know what it was -- that something was torn in transit and they'd

put it in the big plastic things. And it was a postcard from Sol with a scribble drawing on it. (laughs)

Christina McLean: Of all the things to get damaged in the mail!

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I know! For one time in -- how many years -- how old am I? The one time in all of these decades anything's ever been damaged in the Post Office. It just wasn't meant for me to have. It just wasn't meant to be. Yeah. So anyway... Yes, I would love to -- I wish he were here, because I'd be very interested in where his thinking is now.

Christina McLean: And with the Replication Committee that you have here, it's my understanding that you began it thinking that some of these case studies could result in a more standard -- "standardization" is not the right term, but a way to think of other artists and to set some kind of mandate. It seems like Sol LeWitt could be one of those case studies that we can apply some of his conceptual framework to other artists.

**[00:15:11]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: He would never come up at the Replication Committee. The reason why he wouldn't is that he considered every iteration of a single wall drawing a recreation. So it wasn't a replication in anyway, right? It's a complete recreation. And again, rereading my notes from our lunch -- either then or later, I don't remember -- he made a big point of that -- that it's not a replication; it is a recreation. We understand that in conceptual art, and so we've never had a conceptual artist -- at least an artist who's -- you know, a conceptual artist [through a?] broader frame. But we haven't had a -- Sol would never be at the Replication Committee, no. Because he was very clear about that. He was also clear about his sculpture: If it was nicked or scratched, it needed to be repainted. So we've done that here with good conscience, because he was very clear about that. A very different mindset than replication.

Christina McLean: And an artist who is so clear and articulate about his desire for the art to remain contemporary and to look contemporary. Do you think there is any room for a plurality of approaches to the conservation, or is that...?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You mean, other artists?

Christina McLean: Other artists.



Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, it would be different. I mean, in the case of Sol, the work was created that way. Right from the beginning, that was the intention. That was the framework, conceptual framework, of the work. With another artist, if, you know, something was faded or something doesn't look quite as great as he'd hoped or she'd hoped or the main problem is it doesn't look the way I remember it because it was younger, then that's the grayer area. And we enter into very long discussions with artists about that -- and what would be acceptable. Because museums are basically keepers of history, and so we feel a responsibility to have a 1960s work look like 1960s -- I mean, you [don't?] want to keep redoing them and giving them facelifts. On the other hand, I have to admit that, again, given the age we live in, artists do want their work to look new. And I've spent a lot of time thinking now about the way in which we preserve art, contemporary art, and what our responsibility is to the object and history or to the artist, and sometimes they're not in agreement.

Christina McLean: And with Sol LeWitt, do you see them as being in more in agreement?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, I see it very clear with him. Because his art and him -- his art and his ideas were the same. I mean, he was very clear from the beginning that everything was to be remade -- recreated. No question about it. He talked about the Sistine ceiling, he talk about all kinds of art that he felt had been -- it was almost unethical for us to be looking at this aged. Yeah. So he was very pleased about the cleaning of the Sistine ceiling and the bright colors [back?]. I don't think -- he wasn't naïve; he certainly understood works of art that would have aging -- an oil painting or a temperate painting or something. It wasn't that he didn't understand that; that just wasn't his art. And I -- it's interesting, because I think he was -- he was very concerned about the role of the artist, the importance of the artist, the significance of the artist's intent and opinion. So it mattered to him. He was very pleased the Sistine ceiling had bright colors again. That was fairer. I'm putting words in his mouth, but I think he felt that was a fairer representation of Michelangelo's work than the darkened colors.

Christina McLean: And -- so what historically marks a Sol LeWitt wall drawing? If -- often we look at the materials or the techniques that point an artist to the history, the time that they're from, [but?] --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right, right. Yeah.

Christina McLean: So what is that? Was Sol LeWitt --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, well, that's a good question, because the materials changed over time. He understood that. In my first meeting with him, he felt they should be recreated every five years, and he was very clear about that. He also admitted materials change over time, so you can't get the pencil you could back then or you can't get the particular color that you had back then. He also had to go to acrylics at one point. He understood that there had to be changes in materiality, and he was okay with that.

Christina McLean: And we observed that happening in his lifetime (inaudible).

**[00:20:01]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes. Yeah. As long as -- you know, he had a problem if aesthetic decisions had to be made. If there were major decisions involving the aesthetics of the work, he felt that that fell in the domain of the artist -- himself, in that case. So that -- he did feel strongly about that. But otherwise, he felt that there would be changes in materials, there would be changes in people making them, creating the drawings. There would be -- and he was okay with that.

Christina McLean: So what fundamentally is the conservation of Sol LeWitt's artwork?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I would say it's the recreations. That's what it is. There really isn't conservation. Maybe the conservation is the conservation of his thinking, his ideas. Maybe this -- what we're doing now, what you've been working on for so long -- is the conservation of Sol LeWitt's work. That's a good question, and I think that may be so, in which case it's poignant and very important. So in that regard, again, maybe his decision to speak to a conservator was really a very smart thing. Maybe that was, in fact -- without my knowing it, that was the conservation of his work -- the conversation he was having with me. And I suspect he's spoken with other conservators, too; I don't know. I don't feel I had an exclusive relationship. I don't know, but I doubt it. Certainly I can speak of our engagement, and I think that that was -- we were talking about the conservation of his work when we talked about non-conserving it.

Christina McLean: And he established a materials archive at Yale --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Christina McLean: -- but also, I think, a part of their mandate is continuing the instruction of drafter to drafter and allowing that to continue. And then what's at Yale, I

believe, is in place, in case his work falls out of fashion and it isn't being exhibited and it's not being constantly installed, that maybe there's a place to pick up where people left off. But I think that would be really concerning -- to not have the drafters in continuation and training one another.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. No, that was very much in his mind. He described that process to me. I mean, he hadn't set it up yet, but he was working on it. Yeah. Which is interesting in and of itself -- that he felt it was important to have a lineage of people who made these, even though he was willing to have -- as I said, he picked the blue and the yellow, but you make the green. Even though he was willing to give that over, the lineage of people doing it seemed important to him.

Christina McLean: And the people who are making decisions right now still knew Sol. However, that's only going to last another 20, 30 years potentially -- [and those?] changes...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. And maybe that's where he felt the lineage was important -- they would know from experience, you know, what worked, what didn't, what he might not, what he wouldn't.

Christina McLean: Maybe we can talk a little bit about *Programmed*, the show --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The exhibit at the Whitney?

Christina McLean: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay.

Christina McLean: And I see -- well, there was a Sol LeWitt wall drawing installed --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes.

Christina McLean: -- there. So using him as a foundation for some of this software art -- how...?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, you know, I guess the quote is, "the idea is the machine," or something like that. That section of the exhibit was very much associated with the ideas as being the motivating force of the work of art. We own that wall drawing. That actually was one wall of four walls of that drawing, but Sol said that's fine -- we had in our records it was okay with him just to use

one. I documented that being made. In fact, you might like to see those images --

Christina McLean: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- of it being made during the lead-up to the exhibit. It was done with great precision and beauty, really. Yeah. No, we thought it was very important to be in that exhibit. I don't know that he'd ever been in an exhibit with new media before -- perhaps; probably with Casey Reas -- but we felt he was very fitted there. And he had a sculpture in the exhibit, as well.

Christina McLean: Installing one of four walls -- was it documented that that wall could stand for all of them, or could you...?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think any wall could have. We could have used any one. I think -- I don't know that for an answer, [for?] sure. I don't know that.

**[00:25:03]**

Christina McLean: And were some of these thoughts about the conversation you had with Sol LeWitt in your mind about working with some of the other artists? Did that inform your thinking about...?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think of it -- okay. I think every conversation with an artist informs where I'm going the next time, or informs my questions -- unwittingly, you know? They just do. So in retrospect, I think my interview with Sol was very formative, certainly for my ideas. And, yes, I think with new media artists, it is -- it's bringing up all of those questions again. It was interesting to see Donald Judd in an exhibit like that. You know, you always -- when you see Donald Judd, it's always minimalist sculpture, and it's already around his work and others of his peers who are doing the same, but never in with software art -- you know, this idea of the program. So I think that was -- it was refreshing to see these artists in different contexts.

Yeah. I mean, and then we spent a long time restoring Nam June Paik's *Fin de Siècle II*, and there were lots of decisions that had to be made there. An artist working very differently, but again, working with ideas. And we had to make material changes that he had not prescribed -- undoubtedly, for Sol, but didn't to our knowledge discuss. So I think -- yeah, but he did -- even Nam June had this idea that, you know, his attitude would have been, grab something new, just grab something off the shelf. So we did actually use flat-screen TVs at the very top when they no longer made the small ones -- the

CRTs aren't made for the small size anymore. We actually did that, and (inaudible) -- you know, we spent a long time thinking about it and we were fine with it. It's something he would have done. So I think that idea of grabbing new materials of your time to make your statement as true as possible definitely joined, in that case, Sol LeWitt and Nam June Paik.

Christina McLean: Is there any space to apply that attitude to artists who are more intrinsically involved in the making of their work, where their hand is intimately important to the work, as well?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's much more complicated with the artist's hand is an important visual aspect of the work, because you really can't duplicate that. Which is why replicas of drawings or watercolors are photographic -- I mean, or -- you know, they're digital, but they're not remaking, because the hand is not something that one can do.

Christina McLean: I'm thinking, too, about Richard Tuttle. You referenced him also in your Forbes Lecture, where he's so involved in the installation of it, so how he positions things is important, and how do we continue that?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. I mean, in order for his to work, it has to have a certain amount of physical strength, so a lot of his aged works just can't do what they were supposed to have done. So, yeah. I mean, that's when he said we'd all be remaking them and challenged me about that. And he's right. Yeah. It's interesting. Now we're living in a very different time, where having other people make your work is not unusual.

Christina McLean: No. It's happening a lot more.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Christina McLean: And any other artists that...?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, we have the Biennial up right now for example, and Biennial artists -- I think over 50 percent are under the age of 40, so they're young artists, and they're still experimenting with a lot of things -- not that older artists don't also. But they haven't had that much -- not all of them have had a lot of experience of installation. And so the Biennial is always an exhibit that requires a lot of intention, input, will, dedication of the staff that coproduce -- in the big general term of "coproduce" -- work with the artist to produce what they want for the Biennial. So -- and they're fine with it. Artists are fine with that.

Christina McLean: And conservation plays --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes.

Christina McLean: -- a big role in that?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We do. We do. The art handlers certainly do -- who are all artists anyway. But the conservators do, too, because sometimes the choice of material is not necessarily the best to achieve the visual outcome the artist is striving for. So the conservator would be involved in making suggestions for that. Yeah. It's very exciting. Biennial time is always very exciting. Very unpredictable. But for the conservator, it's very exciting.

[00:30:25]

Christina McLean: And you've had a few conversations, and you have a relationship with Mel Chin?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm.

Christina McLean: And he's someone who's, "I'll do it." (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm sorry?

Christina McLean: Where he is so important to that process --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes.

Christina McLean: -- and maybe isn't handing things off...?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, no. Complete difference. I mean, they couldn't be --

Christina McLean: (inaudible).

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I mean, Sol, for example -- and it's interesting, because conceptually, Mel is so engaged with ideas, but they're totally different in terms of the fabrication and physical manifestation of their works. Mel chooses his materials for meaning -- so it's not just how it looks; it's what the material is, in essence -- and then he manipulated it to serve his artistic purpose, but retaining the integrity of the material itself. So that's a very personal engagement with the creation and the physical manifestation of the material. So he is, as you know, very reluctant to have anyone else get in

there, because I think that relationship of himself with the material is that close, as opposed to Sol, which is very different. Very different.

I respect Mel, and as you know, I've interviewed him over the years, and his attitude has not changed. But I understand it's because that's the core of his belief. It's very much about his attitude toward the work -- and the work shows it.

Christina McLean: And would some change to the physical material be more acceptable in that case?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: To Mel?

Christina McLean: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I can't really see it would be. Again, it's... I'm trying to think of examples. I mean, some if it is living art, so, you know, of course that's changing -- plants and so on. I don't know. Whenever an issue comes up -- and they haven't many times -- about needing to conserve or restore one of his works, he says, "I'll do it." He's in it. And that's not because he doesn't trust me or anyone else; it's just, he does that. Yeah. I can't think of anything really needing major -- owned by an institution that was seriously damaged. I can't think of that.

Christina McLean: Okay. And is there more with the *Programmed* show that you want to talk about?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think what was really interesting about the *Programmed* show is that -- one of the things that was intriguing is that the algorithm, the program took precedence over the physical presence of the works. And I guess the work by Cheyney Thompson, was most symbolic of that. It's called *Broken Volume*, and it's based on a random walk algorithm. And so basically, he just -- he does the algorithm and it goes in and then it produces a form -- there are many steps in between, of course -- but a form is produced based on the algorithm, not based on balance, weight -- there is a certain weight -- this one was called *Broken Volume (10 L)*, so it's 10 liters of material, and each cube is one centimeter on a side. But that's it -- everything else just comes out randomly, according to the algorithm.

And the one -- the particular one we showed was one of his most difficult, he said, because when it came out, it was really -- he made it several times, in fact, he said, before the donor bought it and promised it to the Whitney. I

never -- we went and saw it. It was beautiful. We just loved it. We made a very fancy crate, we took all the care, and then when it got here it was broken when we opened the crate. And my heart just sank. I mean, I knew that might happen, but I didn't want it to happen on my watch. (laughter) And it did.

Christina McLean: (inaudible).

[00:34:59]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It happened. (laughter) And so I think as both curator and conservator of this exhibit, I had to face the reality of the fact that that was it - - that break was it. We called him in. He said, "Fine, you just show it in two parts," which is what we did. And he said, "It'll probably break again." And it just -- that's so counter to a conservator's drive or -- I don't know, everything about us, to repair and to fix and to make it look beautiful again, the way it was, and so on.

And so that -- I think that piece and that incident completely embodied the nature of *Programmed* -- and, I think, the brilliance of *Programmed*. It really showed that that's what this exhibit is about -- it's about the algorithms and the program -- and despite the beauty of the works of art.

Christina McLean: And they are beautiful.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, they were. They were really beautiful. Yeah, I had a conversation with the poet, Ben Lerner, about *Programmed*, and he was really pushing me, as he always does. (laughter) But there was a point at which I said, "It's art, and it's beautiful. Go down there and see how beautiful it is." Yeah. And it was. Yeah.

Christina McLean: With an artist like Sol LeWitt -- and potentially Nam June Paik, as well -- where the estate is so heavily involved in the decision-making that happens, what role can a conservator play in that? Specifically with Sol LeWitt, where, you know, they're really doing a thoughtful effort towards documenting the wall drawings and having this archive established.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think it is archival work. I think that's it with Sol. Because they're intended to be recreated and they are recreated, so the conservator's role, it seems to me, is to just document the different materials, maybe the makers -- you know, so on and so forth -- it becomes almost like an exhibition history of each piece, but never with the idea that -- when we normally do that documentation, we're always thinking we need to do it because we're going to



want to go back to the original or we're going to want to go back to the way -- never with that intent with a LeWitt. You're not going to go back to anything. It's just a form of information. And it might be interesting in the future to see what the evolution is, but it was never, ever with the intent of trying to retain the information of the original for reasons of future application -- whereas with other works of art, it is.

That's true of time-based media, as well. You know, we document all the different iterations of a work of art -- well, that's not true. I mean, yes, that is true, we do that, but sometimes there are curators that feel we should show the original installation and feeling that one had. So that's not a fair comparison to Sol LeWitt.

Christina McLean: Okay. I think it was -- you wrote a personal reflection in the GCI newsletter --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, yeah. That was ages ago.

Christina McLean: Yeah, 2012 -- something like that -- and you called the conservator an "arbiter of ethics." Does --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I called the...?

Christina McLean: A conservator the "arbiters of ethics" in that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Christina McLean: Do you -- I think that phrase resonated with me a lot.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, I think we are.

Christina McLean: Especially with Sol LeWitt, in the case where it is being remade. And thinking about the limitations of those limitations based on his desire -- or his comments that if it's an aesthetic decision, only the artist can make those decisions.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think we are arbiters of ethical decisions, because we're the hands-on, we're the ones who are doing it. You know, you can sit in a chair and have great philosophical ideas, but when something happens and you have to act, it's the conservator who's in the arena doing it. So in that way -- and sometimes, that's when our ethics are formed -- when we're forced to act. So I do stand by that phrase. With Sol, I'm not sure, because we're not acting in

the sense of physically doing something, but we are acting to preserve the fact that everything has to be remade. You know, there might be a point of nostalgia at -- I don't know if that's so, but maybe there will be. I mean, you know, the installation of Mass MoCA, of all of his drawings -- well, that's going to age. And there will maybe be a feeling about that -- some sort of nostalgic feeling about that -- they were made while Sol was alive and so on. So it's going to be, in this case, the job of the conservator to say, "No, the preservation of this work is to keep recreating it." That's such a conundrum, but that's the truth.

**[00:40:33]**

Christina McLean: And with Mass MoCA, there's been a few things that -- I think Sol was interested in the idea that a work could -- the same work could be shown in two places at once, but it's quite clear that there should only be one iteration at a time -- with the exception of Mass MoCA, where a work --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's like an archive.

Christina McLean: Yeah -- where it's shown there. And I think that happened with the wall drawing that was installed at *Programmed*. So is there anything different about the certification of that?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, it's like I said, I think it's an archive. I think it's like a photo archive. It's much better; it's the actual work. But it's not installed in Mass MoCA in a way to kind of -- for each one to have its full breath of a space and --

Christina McLean: Of course.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- and full interaction with a space. It's -- it is like an archive. It's beautifully done, very well done, but it's really just for you to get a sense of these different drawings -- at least that's my feeling. Like, if you go to see a Sol LeWitt drawing and it stands alone, you are just consumed by it, and you have all kinds of emotional responses -- at least I do. When I go to Mass MoCA, I'm definitely enjoying them and I'm definitely there for -- and participating, but it's not -- I don't feel consumed by any one. I don't -- that's my memory of it, anyway. Maybe it's because I know that it's the whole archive, you know?

Years ago there was a thought in conservation that -- or I don't know if it was a thought in conservation or just in my head -- but that there should be one

work of art by every artist that we don't treat. So there should be one Barnett Newman painting that goes down through history as just natural aging. And it should be owned by a museum that cares for it, but it just -- so we have an example. And in Sol's work, that example would not be for aging at all -- very different. Different things. So the archive there is not like having a precious Barnett Newman that you're going to watch over the years age, change; that one is really just to have an encyclopedic record of what they are. How do you feel when you go there?

Christina McLean: I do get that same sense that it's meant for scholars to come and see a large -- I don't want to call it sampling, but a large breadth of the wall drawings. There's 105 there, and I think over 1,300 wall drawings total, so what's also important about those is, I think Sol really acted as the curator of that exhibition, as well, so he saw these particular wall drawings as important representations of that work as a whole. I also -- in the same way, it is a visual archive, and it's one of the first instances where all of those wall drawings have been installed for such a long duration. So it was originally going to be 25 years, and now it's going to be 35 years. So...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I didn't realize there was a terminus date.

Christina McLean: Yeah. Originally, 25 years, so it's -- 10 years have passed, and then they decided, let's do it for another 25. So I think it's going to be really interesting to see how those materials do age, and at what point each wall drawing might need to be reinstalled. And that becomes really information -- that anyone who has an ink wash drawing with those color combinations might want to know, it will probably need to be reinstalled with this level of usage in this type of space after 20 years. So where Sol said, "refreshed every five years," maybe we actually explore the limitation of refreshing --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Recreating.

Christina McLean: Recreating -- thank you. Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, yeah. Hmm...

**[00:45:00]**

Christina McLean: But again, all the walls are approximately the same dimension, and everything seems quite uniform in there, so that's -- they don't have to exist on that format of a wall, so that does color the experience of (inaudible).

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It does. Your eye is distracted.

Christina McLean: The “wow” factor, the awe that you were talking about, standing in front of one -- and you don’t get that, because they’re so uniform --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right.

Christina McLean: -- would be my impression. I think you’ve answered all of my preconceived questions. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I guess I’m still going back to why I chose to do a Forbes Lecture based on that interview -- especially because it was an artist that had nothing to do with conservation. (laughter) I don’t know. Now that I think about it (laughter) I don’t know why I did that. But it really got me thinking in a very, I think, important way about what I do -- and about how what I do has changed during my lifetime. Yeah. I’m very glad I did it. I’m very glad I did it, yeah.

Christina McLean: It was great for me to read, and I think it’s a really important lecture that you gave about how our thinking as conservators is evolving, and Sol was a big part of that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: He was, by showing us that it didn’t need to. You know, right? I guess, again, we come back to that word, “falsification.” That would be the last -- I mean, every conservator fears falsification, so the fact that he’s made art that cannot tolerate it because of the nature of the work makes us think, well, how much tolerance are we allowing with others? And I think that’s what really intrigued me, and that’s why I wrote about it. Yeah -- haunting as that idea is. (laughter) Well, great. Thank you.

Christina McLean: Yeah, thank you. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Very good.

**[00:48:18]**

**[END]**