



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

**JASPER JOHNS
FEBRUARY 15, 1996**

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

**Video: Laurie McDonald | Total Run Time: 01:12:43
Location: The Menil Collection, Conservation Studio**

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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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Jasper Johns Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 02/15/1996

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[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director, Artists Documentation Program and Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection; Jasper Johns, Artist; Elizabeth Lunning, Associate Paper Conservator, The Menil Collection; Roberta Bernstein, Art Historian; David Whitney Collector.]

[Transcriptionist's note: Occasionally the voices of individuals speaking off camera cannot be identified and/or their words cannot be understood.]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[00:00:50]

CM-U: Today is February 15, 1996, and I am here today with Jasper Johns on the occasion of his opening of an exhibition of Jasper Johns' sculpture. Thank you for agreeing to come...

Jasper Johns: Thank you.

CM-U: ...and to talk about your paintings that we have treated. And I'd like to review with you sort of what I did, and decisions we made, and sort of how they sit with you.

[00:01:13]

CM-U: I'd like to start with *Gray Alphabets* [1956, The Menil Collection, Houston] which entered the collection in 1968. Actually, Dominique and John [de Menil] bought it directly from [art consultant] Ben Heller, who I think was the first owner.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: So we've just been really the second owners of it. My first encounter with the picture, in terms of treatment, was in '85. At that time, we were looking at the picture because of certain issues that had come up, and part of it was sort of determining what materials were used in it. Our feeling was, what we saw primarily, was newsprint and an encaustic mixture.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And the encaustic mixture, from what I've read – and if you would confirm, it would be helpful – was primarily beeswax and tube oil paint, as opposed to pigment. Is that...

Jasper Johns: Probably at that time.

CM-U: Um-hum. And maybe – and Damar resin?

Jasper Johns: Perhaps.

CM-U: Perhaps? Yeah. Right. Some sort of fluid anyway.

[00:02:16]

CM-U: In terms of attaching the papers to the fabric, was this mainly the beeswax, the medium that did the attachment?

Jasper Johns: If I remember, that's all there is.

CM-U: Uh-huh. Okay.

Jasper Johns: And I may be – I could be mistaken, but I don't think I am, in this case.

CM-U: Well, when we looked at the photographs of the reverse, that was the feeling I had, too. That it was very straightforward. Just that simple...

Jasper Johns: Certainly after this, that's true. I mean, when I began tearing newsprint and dipping it in wax and putting it on. Well, before this, even. So I would have done it to this, too.

CM-U: Just – it would just have been the beeswax itself?

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: Would have been – the paper would have been dipped and placed on...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

[00:02:58]

CM-U: What interested me at the time was, it was still on its stretcher, which is there, actually.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And the fabric that went around the back kind of had this – it looked to me like an upholstery fabric. There were parts of it where there were kind of little, little holes in it, where there may have been snaps of some sort. But, anyway, it looked – and you can sort of still see around the edges this kind of herringbone weave of the fabric. So it was kind of a heavier fabric, which actually served it very well because it was very sturdy, and certainly there weren't any issues with it. I've – here are a few pictures just to show the kinds of problems that occurred were just, you know, normal aging problems. Kind of fraying of the threads at the edge. But primarily the fabric was in relatively good state.

Jasper Johns: I suspect it was some kind of cheap drop cloth. That's just a guess.

CM-U: Oh, that could have been. And they could have been kind of fasteners for a drop cloth somewhere?

Jasper Johns: Perhaps.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

[00:04:09]

CM-U: How does it seem to you, in terms of the coloration of the wax and the newspaper?

Jasper Johns: Well, I don't think you really remember after all this time. I would – my guess is that the newspaper is discolored and is darkened, don't you think?

CM-U: I think so. And so maybe there's a different kind of dance across the surface in terms of the darkened color.

Jasper Johns: Maybe. I mean, it looks perfectly fine to me, but...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Jasper Johns: ...I know it's difficult to remember what something was.

CM-U: I don't have a sense that the fabric has changed very much because the part of it that has gone behind and was protected by the reverse is really very similar in coloration.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. Um-hum.

[00:05:02]

CM-U: The treatment that we undertook in 1985 was something that I am very interested to describe to you because I'm not – well, I'm very interested to know what your thoughts are on it. It was on the stretcher, and there was a pattern of breaks that went across – the patterns of breaks in the paper that followed the stretcher bars. And between the areas where there were no bars, the canvas sagged slightly; and it kind of put stress on those papers. So we had kind of a broken pattern of paper. And I outlined it – let me just go get that outline actually – this is – might interest you to see – that the red areas indicate where there was areas of cleavage, where there was just slight lifting.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And it tended to follow the patterns of the stretcher bars.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: So we made a decision to remove it from the stretcher bar and to put a solid support behind it, without adhering the canvas to it.

Jasper Johns: Right.

CM-U: But to offer some sort of solid support. And the choice of material was this, which was an aluminum Hexcel® panel that was covered with fabric. And then your painting was stretched over it.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: There was black tape on the edges of the painting, which is still there, that we removed.

Jasper Johns: I don't think I put it there.

CM-U: Oh, you don't?

- Jasper Johns: Uh-uh. I think probably Ben Heller did it.
- CM-U: Well, the frame is an aluminum welded frame with a black interior. And it looks like it might have sort of been a dealer idea of kind of neatening up. Yeah. Well, what's your thought about it? Do you think the tape should remain?
- Jasper Johns: I have no interest in it.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Jasper Johns: No. I remember when Ben had it framed, that he came to me and complained that – I don't know whether he complained or bragged – that the frame had cost as much as the painting.
- (laughter)
- CM-U: Great. And so here we have it. Well, I want you to know, I took the tape off very carefully, and in readhering used the same holes that the staples were in...
- Jasper Johns: Oh, really?
- CM-U: ...because I thought it was yours, and...
- Jasper Johns: No, I think it was his. I think that when I did it, it would have had wooden strips around it.
- CM-U: Oh, you would have just put like wooden lath strips...
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...just on it?
- Jasper Johns: Yes.
- CM-U: As the frame?
- Jasper Johns: Yes. That's the way most of – almost everything was done early on.
- CM-U: Um-hum. Just that very natural tone? I've seen it.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: I've certainly seen it.

[00:07:34]

CM-U: Well, now that I think more about your work, and the importance of the reverse as well – I mean, Brice Marden talks about you referring to a stretcher as a chassis of the painting, and this idea of the back being, you know, certainly an integral part of the work. I wonder about what I did to – to this picture. I mean, do you...

Jasper Johns: I think it was a good thing. What did you do to the edge of this? How is that? (gestures toward sample of honeycomb aluminum panel)

CM-U: We filled this in with a Bondo material so we could staple into it. Because I wanted to use the same staple holes that you had used on the side. And so that's what we did. And then I put a cloth over it because I didn't like the idea of it being on aluminum.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. What does it weigh?

CM-U: It's not really that heavy. In fact... (hands aluminum panel sample to Johns)

Jasper Johns: Yes.

CM-U: ...but, I mean, you know, that size, it's heavier. But it's easy – it's not difficult for us to handle. I'm not sure I would choose this material again, but I chose it because it was dimensionally stable...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and that was my main concern at the time, that we eliminate the uneven stresses that were on the support.

Jasper Johns: And what is this?

CM-U: I think it's some sort of Bondo, a vinyl acetate, maybe. Some sort of filler. I'm not really sure.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: I would have to review it.

Jasper Johns: You trowel it on, or something?

CM-U: Uh-huh. Um-hum. I have seen them made with wood inserts, which we've had made since. Which I think is a little neater and almost a little nicer.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: So you can have them made that way. Panels are made out of different materials, too. I've seen them, even with Rag Board [museum board] on front and back, which also might have been an alternative.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: But in this – at this time, aluminum was sort of the more prevalent material.

[00:09:16]

Jasper Johns: Well, I thought about it after talking to you in Washington...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: ...and it occurred to me that perhaps other pictures should be treated in this way. Because I think when the encaustic paintings are moved, they bounce about and probably, if it's cold, they crack.

CM-U: We sent this picture to Australia in '85. It was an exhibition that MoMA had organized, International... ["Pop Art: 1955-70," Traveling Exhibition Organized by MoMA International Program, February-August, 1985]

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...art exhibition. And we put it in a box – I've got pictures of it – Which was just a large, basically a white box, that – with Plexi on the front – kind of a shadowbox – with Plexi on the front – that was deep enough so you didn't have shadows, but not so deep that it became an object itself.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And it traveled exceedingly well. We had – there was reported, when it returned, a very minor bit in the bottom, but nothing really significant. In fact, one couldn't even find where it was.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: So I felt rather good about that. I felt that, you know, the solid support had somehow offered it enough strength or structure, support.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: But what about the fact that I've changed a stretcher out? I mean, that's...

Jasper Johns: That doesn't really bother me.

CM-U: Okay. Okay.

Jasper Johns: And I may adopt your practice.

(laughter)

[00:10:44]

CM-U: Well, it's certainly – we've had – I'm happy to report we've had virtually no problems with it since. We've had – there are minor – you know, there are minor bits that are missing because we do exhibit this without any cover at all.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: It's one of the few museums where we just put things out. But there's always a guard where the Jasper Johns room is. Which you didn't see because I was already taking it down. But we always have a guard there – always. But that was the choice that Walter [Hopps, Founding Director, The Menil Collection] had first recommended, and we've stayed with. So it's...

Jasper Johns: No, it's wonderful not to...

CM-U: ...really _____ [word inaudible]...

Jasper Johns: ...to have it not under glass.

- CM-U: Right. It's really _____ [word inaudible]. When we send it, though, to the exhibition in New York, we probably will put it back in our box. I don't know – that may be negotiable; but from this standpoint, that's something that concerns me about it.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: Because it's really – we've had virtually no problem. I mean, all of that cleavage has really resolved. You know, it's set down.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum. I last saw it in Dominique [de Menil]'s house. I don't know when it was. The only time I was in Houston.
- CM-U: Oh, here in Houston, you saw it?
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum. Yeah.
- CM-U: Well, it must have been before the [Menil Collection] museum opened [in 1987].
- Jasper Johns: Oh, it was.
- CM-U: Because it's always been up since we've opened.
- Jasper Johns: And John [de Menil] was alive.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. So in the early seventies, at some point. All right. So, removal of the black tape. And then that sort of frame. Or do you feel maybe it should go back just with lath? I mean, we do have pictures where we just put lath around instead of the aluminum – molded aluminum frame.
- Jasper Johns: Well, I really don't care.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Jasper Johns: I use a frame that imitates that, of wood, but with the canvas floating a little bit inside it now. But I just do that for everything.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Jasper Johns: But sometimes people who buy pictures change them.

- CM-U: Um-hum. But the Heller frame, the aluminum frame, is all right?
- Jasper Johns: It's all right with me.
- CM-U: It's all right with you? Okay. Let's go on and talk about the little green painting [*Untitled (Green Painting)*, 1954, The Menil Collection, Houston].
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: I'm going to also talk about actually how consolidation was done on *Gray Alphabets*. But I think we'll do it with regard to *Star*, [1954, The Menil Collection, Houston] maybe.
- [00:13:04]**
- CM-U: Let's look at the little green painting.
- Jasper Johns: You want to bring it over here?
- CM-U: Yeah. Okay. This was owned by Rachel Rosenthal...
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...as well, and was sold in the sixties. She sold it in the sixties. And then...
- Jasper Johns: It was owned originally by her mother.
- CM-U: Oh, is that right?
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: And who was – what was her mother's name?
- Jasper Johns: Mrs. Rosenthal. [Mara Jacobovitch Rosenthal]
- (laughter)
- CM-U: Okay. So you knew her mother through her?
- Jasper Johns: Yes.

CM-U: Yeah. Okay. And then, I guess, went through Irving Blum, I think. Through Ferus Gallery. And then I think Edwin Janss, to Francois de Menil, to Dominique. I think that's...

Jasper Johns: I don't know.

CM-U: You don't know? I think that's, anyway, the way it went. And it entered the collection here in '83.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And it was in this box. This is what it arrived in. We changed the frame later on into a white shadowbox that you may have seen on it earlier. The thought was, it was just simpler in the white box, than just put on the wall.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: In terms of treatment, we have done some, but very – you know, not very much.

[00:14:28]

CM-U: In Washington, we talked a little bit about the paper and the manipulation of it. And you talked about folding...

Jasper Johns: Yes, it's made of little rectangles of paper that were folded, and then torn, and opened, and attached – I was looking at the back of it. I don't know how they were attached. I thought they had been attached with enamel or something, but there's no sign of that on the – there (points finger at painting's verso).

CM-U: Yeah.

Jasper Johns: So perhaps they were just glued down. I don't know. But I think the paper was then covered with white. A white enamel, or perhaps a white oil paint. But I imagine a cheap, canned enamel. And then sort of glazed with this viridian.

CM-U: Um-hum. When I was in – when we spoke about this last time, I was asking you – it has come down through the records as oil on canvas...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

- CM-U: ...and it certainly has a translucency of enamel, you know, or oil, or whatever. But I was asking you about wax. And I remember your saying that, you know, your recollection was that it certainly was enamel or oil. The reason why I was asking you about wax was that, in 1990, in January of 1990, we had a cold snap and a problem with the system for a very short time, and the picture developed white crystals on the top of it. And the crystals were specific to the darker areas.
- Jasper Johns: Uh-huh.
- CM-U: They were very easy to just be brushed off, but I did take a sample and had it analyzed.
- Jasper Johns: Uh-huh.
- CM-U: And it came back – the results came back as being a type of stearic acid that would be predominantly found in a wax material. And we thought – Liz [Elizabeth Lunning, Conservator of Works of Art on Paper, The Menil Collection] and I looked at this, and thought that was very odd, given the kind of translucency of the medium and other aspects of it. But just the other day when I was looking at it again, and thinking again about this report, I was wondering if maybe, since the whitening was primarily on these darker areas...
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...that maybe there might have been some element of that. Do you have any recollection of that?
- Jasper Johns: I don't believe.
- CM-U: Don't...
- Jasper Johns: I don't have any recollection. That's for sure. And I don't think that I added wax to it.
- CM-U: Okay.
- Jasper Johns: Uh...
- CM-U: Well, that's fine. I mean, then that continues to be something that we investigate. Because it could also be related to linseed oil, perhaps.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. I don't know what medium I used, you know, to thin the oil with.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: I don't remember.

CM-U: Well, it's not a serious problem. I mean, it's something that's very surface-oriented, and it doesn't seem to detract, you know.

[00:17:29]

CM-U: What about the tape?

Jasper Johns: Again, it's not my doing.

CM-U: That's not yours?

Jasper Johns: No.

CM-U: Well, then maybe we could do without that, too.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. Perhaps there are staples there that they wanted to hide, or something. I don't know.

CM-U: Well, it looks like it's nailed on the back.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. It does.

CM-U: I rather like seeing it nailed on there like that. Well, good, then that explains that this arrow isn't yours either then?

Jasper Johns: No. No.

CM-U: All right. A question came up about orientation of it. And, as I was explaining, we just went back. It came – because of this arrow, we always showed it in this orientation.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And then we were – our curator, years ago, was looking through, documenting the correct orientation, and saw that it had been published in a – oh,

consistently published in another orientation. And that's the one in which we hang it in now. So I think we'll just – when the tape goes, the arrow goes; and then we don't have that problem anymore.

Jasper Johns: Oh, the arrow is in a different...

CM-U: Yeah.

Jasper Johns: I see. It shows a different thing [sounds like].

CM-U: Let me see if I can show you. (shows photograph to Johns) This is the way the arrow has it going. It says "UP formerly." Which is this way.

Jasper Johns: This way? (turns painting)

CM-U: That way.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. This looks right.

CM-U: Right.

Jasper Johns: But that may just be because that's the way it was lying here.

CM-U: No, I think maybe it was because you made it.

(laughter)

Jasper Johns: I don't know.

CM-U: No, actually we think it is – right, all the way – that's it.

Jasper Johns: (turns painting) All the way around.

CM-U: Yes.

Jasper Johns: (points at corner of painting) This is a smaller dimension. And this is a larger dimension. I have no idea.

CM-U: Do you see how – is the light – the light is raking. How you can see this whiting in there?

Jasper Johns: Uh-huh. I do see it. (visually inspects *Untitled (Green Painting)* for an extended period of time)

Jasper Johns: Well, I don't see any way to know for sure.

CM-U: Well, you know, maybe when I take the tape off there will be some indication, you know.

Jasper Johns: Maybe there will be.

CM-U: It could very well be. I've never taken the tape off because I thought it was yours.

[00:20:00]

CM-U: Do you have any comments to make about the papers themselves?

Jasper Johns: You mean, of which it's made?

CM-U: The newsprint? Yeah.

Jasper Johns: I don't know what it is.

CM-U: Yeah.

Jasper Johns: On the back it looks like it – that appears to be a darker color. That little rectangle.

CM-U: Liz very brilliantly suggested we look at it in transmitted light, which we did at one time.

Jasper Johns: What does that tell you?

CM-U: It actually showed us very much about the papers. Would you like to take a look at it in transmitted light?

Jasper Johns: Oh, sure.

CM-U: Good. Let's do it. Do you want to come take a look with us?

E. Lunning: _____ [word inaudible] It's such a small picture.

- CM-U: Okay. Now, this light gets very hot, so we can't put it too close.
- Jasper Johns: What do you do with it?
- CM-U: And very bright. We're going to hold the painting in front of it, and you're going to be able to see the papers...
- E. Lunning: And don't look at the light when Carol turns it on.
- CM-U: Okay. Roberta [Bernstein], maybe you ought to move aside so you don't get it right on either. Kinda, let's put the fan on. Okay, now I'm going to hold it this way.
- E. Lunning: Sometimes it works better one way than another way.
- CM-U: Okay. Let's just see. (rotates painting in front of light) Now we were actually able – I'm not seeing what we saw, Liz. We were actually able to see...
- E. Lunning: Try it facing back to the light. And maybe go up closer.
- Jasper Johns: Oh, I see. Bits of print.
- CM-U: Yeah, you begin to see bits of print. Right.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: Come take a look if you want, Roberta. It's getting all hot. There were actually little bits of letterhead even at one point, we thought. Here. Here's some writing, and there's some printing. Yeah.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum. I see it, but I can't read it.
- CM-U: Right. This looks like it's in an Eastern language. C-S-I-Z.
- Jasper Johns: That's an odd configuration.
- CM-U: Yeah. Well, that's a crack. Right. It's probably...
- Jasper Johns: Is it just a crack in the paper?
- CM-U: Uh-huh. Which also, this shows you the beautiful condition it's in.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: I mean really, there are just minor cracks. Here's a little bit of lifting, you see; but that's intended, I'm sure. I mean, there is— right — that's intended?

Jasper Johns: Yeah, well it isn't laid flat [sounds like].

CM-U: Right.

Jasper Johns: Yeah. Sure. Well, I have no memory, so...

CM-U: Okay. That's all right.

[00:22:52]

CM-U: Oh, no, I did have another question about green, the green painting. I have thought about filling the back with — again, with something that can be removed; you know, something solid, just fitting it in there for the same reason of stresses.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: To try to give it a little more — give the paper a little more support.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: What's your thought on that?

Jasper Johns: I don't really think it needs it.

CM-U: Well, it's certainly...

Jasper Johns: My feeling is, for something like this, that it needs it for — because it tends to do this (waves hand in and out)...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: ...and in hot and cold weather, the canvas changes its dimension. And if it's moved, it does that. I don't think this does that.

CM-U: Because it's so small, it's not necessary? Yeah.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: What we may do when it goes – what we probably will do when it goes on tour with your upcoming exhibition – is, it will be mounted on – like we have it – it’s on a white backboard, and the frame, the box goes over it.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And that acts as a solid support.

Jasper Johns: Right.

CM-U: Even though it’s not against the canvas, it still will protect it.

Jasper Johns: Right.

CM-U: And that’s probably what we would like to see it travel in.

Jasper Johns: Yeah, well, that’s reasonable.

CM-U: Yeah.

Jasper Johns: Protect it from the back.

CM-U: Well, good. Fine. And that’s what we’ll do with that.

[Break in video]

[00:24:06]

Jasper Johns: Well, immediately preceding these things, there is a piece, which is a kind of a box, with a plaster cast of a head of Rachel Rosenthal in the bottom. Do you know it?

CM-U: Yes. I’ve seen reproductions of it.

Jasper Johns: And above it, the pasted bits of paper, all of which were – had sort of exotic information, or came from odd places. And so this may have been out of that pile of material or something.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: I don't remember.

CM-U: We weren't able to see as clearly today, but we remember that there was – it seemed very much like a letterhead. Maybe bits of stationery or – I think there was a _____ [word inaudible].

E. Lunning: Old writing.

CM-U: Old writing. Kind of old type...

Jasper Johns: Uh-huh.

CM-U: ...all different types of – yeah.

E. Lunning: Like maybe even the nineteenth or early twentieth century handwriting.

Jasper Johns: Yes. Well, that kind of thing enters into this other work that I'm talking about. So I must have had a batch of it...

E. Lunning: It was just beautiful. And you could see it.

Jasper Johns: ...and it must have had a certain appeal for me at that time.

[00:25:23]

Jasper Johns: And then it switched to this more neutral, whatever was in the daily news (gestures toward *Gray Alphabets*).

CM-U: But there are bits of white paper here, too. Unprinted paper.

Jasper Johns: Yeah.

CM-U: I was looking carefully, closely on it. In the R, X.

Jasper Johns: It's interesting. None of the print seems to be going at a diagonal, at a – it's more or less horizontal or vertical, the orientation in the letters.

CM-U: Right.

Jasper Johns: I just noticed.

CM-U: That's funny. I suddenly – just having you just said that, I'm suddenly seeing a very strong diagonal.

Jasper Johns: But that's of the letters. Not of the print on the letters...

CM-U: Aha.

Jasper Johns: ...isn't it?

CM-U: Right. I see what you're saying.

Jasper Johns: It's the Z and the Y running through there.

CM-U: I see what you're saying. Right.

Jasper Johns: But the writing on the – you see, is going this way.

CM-U: Yeah.

Jasper Johns: Or is going this way.

CM-U: Right.

Jasper Johns: It isn't going that way.

CM-U: Right. Right.

[00:26:31]

CM-U: In terms of treatment of actually resealing some of these papers, I didn't want to use heat or anything like that because I was afraid of, obviously, softening the encaustic...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and having it change the tonality. You know, if it melted, became soft, and it would...

Jasper Johns: It would disappear.

- CM-U: Yeah. All those reservations.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: And I had read about a mixture that was used on fine portraits, which is basically a polyethylene glycol and water, with a small addition of Tergitol, which is a wetting agent. People at the British Museum, I believe, were using it to consolidate encaustic with warm water.
- Jasper Johns: Oh, really?
- CM-U: And I used it on this, and it was immensely successful.
- Jasper Johns: Really?
- CM-U: I had a lot of control with it, and it resecured the wax, and it was visually – it looks waxy when it dries. You know, when the water evaporates, it looks waxy.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: And I have passed that along, as people have called.
- Jasper Johns: Good.
- CM-U: So you should know that, at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, I've passed that along because we had such great success with it...
- Jasper Johns: Terrific.
- CM-U: ...on this picture. I tried other things before on other works – on this one, in fact – and I think this is the best that we've so far come up with. I have never replaced the newsprint, though. I mean, if a little bit like...
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...like, it breaks off, I just leave it. I mean, is that in keeping with what you would think?
- Jasper Johns: Yes.

[Break in video]

[Further discussion of *Gray Alphabets*. Elizabeth Lunning describes how wax impregnation changes the character of paper.]

E. Lunning: When it's impregnated with the wax, it kind of begins to take on the characteristics of the wax almost more than the paper.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

E. Lunning: The wax almost dominates.

CM-U: So the wax sort of becomes the carrier of it, then, would you say...

E. Lunning: Well, my _____ [word inaudible].

CM-U: ...in that sense?

E. Lunning: There's more of the wax. Its character begins to dominate the character of the paper. Although there are places there that I see plain paper.

CM-U: Right.

E. Lunning: So if you were to take one of those letters off, and to hold it in your hand, it would have no strength at all. That's why we never take them off.

(laughter)

[General discussion of the artist's preferences regarding stretcher depth...]

[00:28:55]

E. Lunning: Do you care about the thickness of the stretcher?

Jasper Johns: Well, to...

E. Lunning: I always _____ [word inaudible]...

Jasper Johns: ...in a general way. But not with any great precision. As a matter of fact, the first paintings I did – I don't know how many there would be to which I did this – I added to the – the framing was a strip of wood, and for many of them,

I framed them perhaps four inches deep, so that all of the – they all projected from the wall. And to me that was of just the greatest importance. And several years later, I took it all off.

(laughter)

Jasper Johns: But for a time it was very important to me that the pictures came forward from the wall, or something, or – I don't know whether it was the sense that it was – that it had a thickness. To exaggerate that. Or what. I really don't know.

E. Lunning: That's one thing that always strikes me about these old stretchers...

Jasper Johns: Yes?

E. Lunning: ...forty years old, is that they are very elegant and refined, compared to the stretchers that we see often now...

Jasper Johns: Yes.

E. Lunning: ...where paintings do project much more.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: Yeah.

E. Lunning: And, to me, it always adds a great sense of the age of a picture. These very delicate, thin stretchers. Which I'm sure, from Carol's point of view, aren't very good for the painting.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: No, but I invariably will keep them on because, especially with pictures like this that are not intended to be in deep, beveled, ornate frames – I mean, the edge is important. I think that the stretcher depth is critical. So I tend to try to keep it as minimal, or try to match it as closely as I can to the original stretcher depth. And in some instances, pictures have come in here – not your work – where they've been treated by – they've been restored, and they've been put on deeper stretchers...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and I take them off and put them back on the stretchers of the same depth. I mean, you could have a better stretcher made, you know, a stronger stretcher made; but the thin profile of the original stretcher.

Jasper Johns: Well, [James] Lebron makes most of my stretchers now. I ordered a stretcher recently for a large painting, and he wanted to make it much thicker because he said it was such a big painting. But I got my way...

CM-U: Good.

Jasper Johns: ...and got it thin because it was a companion to another painting which already had the other thickness.

CM-U: Right. And it can be done. It just means they reinforce it in different ways, but it can be done in a narrower profile.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. Why, I think he was just – I think it was a form of flattery.

(laughter)

Jasper Johns: That's what I suspect.

[00:31:53]

CM-U: *Star* [1954, The Menil Collection, Houston] brings up other issues. Let's take a look at that. Again, this came through Rachel Rosen – I'm blanking on her name – Rosenberg?

Jasper Johns: Rosenthal.

CM-U: Rosenthal. Thank you. And we, indeed, as I was showing you earlier, have pictures of it here in her loft on Pearl Street.

Jasper Johns: Right.

CM-U: This was made for her? This piece?

Jasper Johns: Yes. It was a commission.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Jasper Johns: I had made a painting, which was a cross, which was made of – I don't know whether it was a Kraft cheese box. It was a little box that cheese had come in, about that tall and about that wide. And I think I bought two dime-store frames and put on either side of it for the – then it became a cross, and it was treated more or less in this way. And she liked it, and said, "If that were a Star of David, I would buy it."

(laughter)

Jasper Johns: So...

CM-U: So?

Jasper Johns: She asked me to make her a Star of David.

CM-U: I'm going to – I want to take it down so we can handle it and look carefully, look a little bit more carefully at its construction. (removes *Star* from wall and places it on table) With the wooden structure, and then canvas on the back – stapled to the back of three sides.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And then this being a single piece...

Jasper Johns: And that's just stapled to the front, isn't it?

CM-U: ...attached – stapled to the front.

Jasper Johns: Right.

CM-U: I don't know.

Jasper Johns: Probably. Or glued or stapled. Probably stapled.

CM-U: With some paper coming over. Coming over there.

Jasper Johns: In spots, yeah.

CM-U: Yeah. And then glass nailed in. Nails holding it level on the bottom, and then on the top.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: When I was looking at it, I noticed what seemed to be a collection of dirt along this edge.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And I wondered if it had ever been without the glass. I couldn't understand...

Jasper Johns: No.

CM-U: Or maybe it's just the reflection? I don't...

Jasper Johns: Oh, I think, if you know New York, dirt gets everywhere.

(laughter)

CM-U: Glass or not, right?

Jasper Johns: Absolutely.

CM-U: Right.

Jasper Johns: Yeah. I'm sure it's very dirty under there.

CM-U: Yeah. Does it bother you?

Jasper Johns: No, no.

CM-U: Do you think it should be cleaned?

Jasper Johns: I – well, I think it would look different if it were cleaned, but I don't know. I don't care.

CM-U: I've thought about cleaning it a bit, but not – not so much. I mean, I like – I think it's important that a work have a certain sense of its age. And it will never be evenly cleaned, and so I think if it's cleaned at all, it should be just really to maybe eliminate whatever seems very much like dirt.

Jasper Johns: Right.

- CM-U: But otherwise not. What's your thought about that?
- Jasper Johns: Well, I'm happy either way. In terms of the idea, that it be cleaned or that it not be cleaned, or that it be cleaned lightly. The thing is that once you begin it, often you get – you're surprised.
- CM-U: Well, I think that's true. I think it's to avoid that surprise is the balance.
- Jasper Johns: Yes.
- CM-U: I mean, it's not something that you would start, you know, in one area and work your way across. It's something that you do constantly balancing out. Whether I do it at all....
- Jasper Johns: This is considerably darker than it was originally.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Jasper Johns: That's my feeling. But I certainly don't mind.
- [00:35:46]**
- CM-U: This has also been requested for your upcoming exhibition.
- Jasper Johns: Yes.
- CM-U: And it is ex – oh, my, look; you can see the papers right through it again (looks closely at painting). Hmm. It is exceedingly fragile in a certain way, and we will probably also mount it on a backing board that will protect it, and then have something maybe over the front.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: But if we do that, it may not be necessary then to do any other filling in of the back.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: But if it does become necessary that – if we find it necessary to fill something in, what is your thought? Probably not.

- Jasper Johns: Well, I think it's okay if you think it actually serves any purpose. I don't – I question whether it would.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Jasper Johns: I mean, if you – obviously you want to protect it from anything coming at it from behind and denting it or cutting it. But I don't think – that seems to me the only problem...
- CM-U: Yeah.
- Jasper Johns: ...that you can deal with.
- CM-U: Yeah. I think you're right. I mean, it's also – I mean, one thing, even though if we put something in that's removable, which it would be, there is still – it still has something solid behind it in the sense of – I mean, I know it's on a wall, but there's still a sense of lightness about it that would be interfered with. I'm a little concerned about the glass...
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...but I think that's the work. I don't know. There isn't much we could do.
- Jasper Johns: What are you concerned about it?
- CM-U: I'm a little concerned about it vibrating in travel. But I think what we'll do is, it will probably be a hand carry or some very careful carry to New York. I think it's only going to New York.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: Because we are concerned about breakage of the glass. And I don't want to do anything to secure it.
- Jasper Johns: I don't think this has ever been shown in New York.
- CM-U: I don't think it has.
- Jasper Johns: I don't think so.
- CM-U: I really think it came rather direct to us.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: We're delighted to have it. It's an extr – and I don't think anyone has ever touched it, either. I don't think it has been restored in any way, or touched in any way.

Jasper Johns: Right.

CM-U: Which just makes the responsibility even greater, I feel. But it also makes it so wonderful.

[00:38:05]

CM-U: Generally, what is your thought about sort of the way works of art age? Have you – I mean, are you – do you find that you are inclined to feel that things should be cleaned up, or – I mean, not specifically *Star*, but others, too? Or is it, you sort of as you have seen the encaustic age, it's just sort of something you accept?

Jasper Johns: Well, I've cleaned a few paintings myself. A friend of mine had a painting, which was all white, and she smokes a great deal. And I looked at the painting. I said, "This painting is really quite dirty, and I think I would like to see it cleaned. And I'll be happy to do it." So I took it over to my place, and I did a section of it, which scared the daylights out of me because it was so white, and the other thing was so brown.

CM-U: Right. Nicotine is so incredibly bad [sounds like]...

Jasper Johns: But I thought I had ruined it, because I had only done this little section. But I – this was Sally. So I did the whole thing, and it looked very nice.

CM-U: As a restorer, we understand that feeling completely.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: When you begin the cleaning of something, it is...

Jasper Johns: Yes. You think you've...

CM-U: ...it's daunting.

- Jasper Johns: ...made a misjudgment.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- Jasper Johns: But...
- CM-U: But that was another white – predominantly white painting – that you were cleaning? I mean, have you found other colors, other pictures, that you thought were necessary to clean?
- Jasper Johns: A lot of encaustic paintings, whenever they've been shown, I have – in the past, I have cleaned them because they often are dusty and dirty, and the surface is irregular. And I've sponged them...
- CM-U: With a little moisture? A little water?
- Jasper Johns: Yeah.
- CM-U: And is there a sheen that comes up when you clean them?
- Jasper Johns: Well, I think only if the dirt is hiding a sheen. That's _____ [word inaudible]...
- CM-U: Because sometimes – yeah, that's one thing that concerns me sometimes. Removing the dust. We've gotten so used to this kind of quiet surface, that sometimes removing the dust...
- Jasper Johns: Yes, I understand. Yeah.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- Jasper Johns: I don't think I have felt that I did anything that was – that really changed things.
- CM-U: Um-hum. I mean, you're right. The sheen is there. It's just that the dust has changed our mind. Which I think also refers to the *Star* because, even though this surface might be able to be cleaned, I don't think I would get into – I'd have to undo it to get into this.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And so I wouldn't want to do that. And then there is a danger of creating an imbalance here...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...with the cleaning. So I'm not so sure that we'll do much at all, rather than just maybe securing some of the cracks. But, as you say, I don't think it has ever been cleaned. I just think it went from her possession right over into here.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. I'm sure that's true.

[00:41:03]

CM-U: In the course of exhibitions of your work, and travel, and so on, have there been damages that you felt were very compromising to the work itself? Or restorations that were?

Jasper Johns: Offhand, I can't think of anything. I had a painting [*Painting with Two Balls*, 1960, Collection of the artist] shown in Venice once, and – it's a painting with two balls in it, and the balls were stolen from the painting. And I think Alan Solomon just had someone in Venice make two more.

(laughter)

Jasper Johns: They didn't look like the original ones to me, but I adjusted to the way they looked.

CM-U: And they are still the ones on the painting?

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: Well, that certainly leads into our next painting that we are going to talk about.

Jasper Johns: Yes.

[00:42:11]

CM-U: *Voice* [1964-1967], which had a more direct route to us. John and Dominique de Menil bought it directly from Leo Castelli.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And at some point, maybe this was the visit that you referred to earlier. You came to Houston, and you provided the de Menils with a photograph of what was your first state of the picture. And this...

Jasper Johns: It wasn't on that visit. When I came to Houston before, it was after the opening of the Museum in Corpus Christi.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Jasper Johns: There was a Dan Flavin exhibition opening at Rice, and I came by here for that and went back.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: I think maybe I gave this – I don't know when I gave it to Dominique. Was it when she did a show called *Gray is the Color* [An Exhibition of Grisaille Painting XIIIth-XXth Centuries," Institute for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, October 19, 1963-January 19, 1974]?

CM-U: Oh, yes, that's correct. It was...

Jasper Johns: Would that have been it?

CM-U: ...the correspondence was related to – around the time of *Gray is the Color*.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. That's when I think it was.

[00:43:21]

CM-U: Well, in terms of materials, are there any – I mean, here is the painting. Is there any comment about mixture of materials? Or is it pretty much straight oil?

Jasper Johns: It's straight oil, as far as I know.

CM-U: Straight oil?

Jasper Johns: It looks like it has a little charcoal in it.

- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Jasper Johns: And those things attached to the surface.
- CM-U: I noticed on the back – I mean, it’s on the two stretchers, and it’s on the expansion bolt Lebron type stretchers.
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum.
- CM-U: It looks like there are two canvases on each section.
- Jasper Johns: What do you mean, two canvases?
- CM-U: Well, we’re going to move this because we want to look at the back. Maybe I can just point it... (walks behind painting with Johns)
- Jasper Johns: _____ [word inaudible].
- CM-U: We’re just going to disappear from you for a minute. If you look under – let me get my glasses – there’s another little – it looks like there’s another canvas stretched under there. And this looks very clean...
- Jasper Johns: That to me, too.
- CM-U: ...the back. Yeah. Maybe we should turn this around.
- Jasper Johns: I noticed that earlier. I wondered what it was. Do you think we could remove a staple and look a little better?
- CM-U: Sure. If you...
- Jasper Johns: I think that would be good...
- CM-U: We’re going to turn this around.
- Jasper Johns: ...to figure it out.
- CM-U: And then we’ll remove a staple and turn it around. Thank you, Liz. Would you help [sounds like]...
- Jasper Johns: Well, I hope we don’t discover something horrible.

(laughter)

(Mancusi-Ungaro and Lunning rotate *Voice* so that its verso side is visible to the camera.)

Jasper Johns: But how did you come to notice that, even?

CM-U: Because I looked at the back, and I thought to myself, “Why is there no oil stain on the back?”

E. Lunning: Why is it so clean.

CM-U: “Why is it so clean?” And I thought, “That’s so bizarre.” And that’s what made me peek under – Let me get something to get the staple out. Let’s take – No, let’s go over here...

Jasper Johns: Right over there is where you were looking at it.

CM-U: ...yeah, here’s where I was peeking at.

(Mancusi-Ungaro removes staples from the canvas and stretcher.)

[00:46:19]

Jasper Johns: What is it?

CM-U: There’s another canvas under there. I think this canvas that we see under here is this one. See, the color’s the same, and the weave.

Jasper Johns: Yes, it looks...

CM-U: And this is what you painted on. And so someone – I don’t think it’s attached, though. Feel. I think it’s – I don’t think it’s attached.

Jasper Johns: It’s just a backing.

CM-U: It’s just a backing. Somebody...

Jasper Johns: Cosmetic.

CM-U: ...someone did that.

- Jasper Johns: It seems.
- CM-U: Cosmetic, yeah.
- Jasper Johns: But why? And who?
- CM-U: That I can't answer. Because it came directly from Leo Castelli to us. You finished this in '67. We bought it in '68. And there is nothing in our records. Maybe the framer? Framing? What about – would this have been your stretcher?
- Jasper Johns: That I – I didn't remember that being the stretcher, but I don't know.
- CM-U: See, that's what I question. I question that, too.
- Jasper Johns: You know what? When I was looking at this, I was wondering about my memory. I'll tell you what my memory of this painting is. I believe I painted it in Edisto Beach, South Carolina; and when I – that would have been this version, I think [referring to photo of painting's earlier state]. When I was leaving to go to New York, I took the two canvases. They were not – you know, they were not attached here the way they are now, so they are more separate.
- CM-U: Oh right – uh-huh.
- Jasper Johns: I took the two canvases, put them face-to-face, and tacked a bit of stripping along points to keep them from touching.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Jasper Johns: And asked a local man to crate them and send them to me in New York. And what he did is, he took two pieces of plywood and nailed them through the stretcher so that nails went almost all the way around. There were nail holes almost all the way around the two canvasses. That's my memory. I'm not sure I'm right.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Jasper Johns: And then I – when it got to New York, I was furious, of course, and I realized this man – he was innocent. He had no idea what he was doing. And I filled the holes with paint. And whether at that time I made the changes – I don't

think so. What I don't remember is when I decided to make, to change where the word *Voice* was.

[The screen shows two states of *Voice*; in the earlier state, the word "Voice" is at the bottom of the painting. In the later (current) state, the word "Voice" is nearer to the center of the painting.]

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: I don't know whether it was exhibited before. Obviously it was photographed. I don't know.

CM-U: No, I don't have any information on that either, as to whether it was exhibited before in the first state, which would have been between '64 and '67.

Jasper Johns: And I wonder if sometime in between these, this thing was done. Put on new stretchers, perhaps? But why the backing would be – would have been put on, I don't know.

CM-U: Well.

Jasper Johns: Complete mystery to me.

CM-U: Maybe it would be interesting to x-ray and to see if there is something written on the back. Maybe you – no, but that doesn't – I was going to say maybe you dated it, but then you would have just changed it to '67. Right. You would have needed new stretchers probably after what came from – to New York.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum. And I don't think they were...

CM-U: So – and you may have. But you probably wouldn't have done that.

Jasper Johns: These are Lebron's stretchers, and I don't think that what I was working on down there would have been Lebron stretchers. But I could be wrong. I haven't the foggiest idea. The only thing I can think – obviously you can take it all apart and find out, but that – you may not find out anything of any interest.

CM-U: Right. Well...

Jasper Johns: It may just be that that's covering up dirt. But I don't – who would have made that decision? I don't know.

CM-U: We have seen other pictures that have come. There was a picture that came from Lowy's in New York, that had been restored; and they did the same thing. They stretched a plain canvas on the back. But that was after they had done a relining of the picture. And so my thought was they just wanted to, for some reason, disguise that there was an impregnation on the original canvas...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and so they put a clean canvas on the back to suggest that it was just the back of the original.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: But I don't have a sense from the surface of this picture that it's had a treatment. I just have the feeling that it's been stretched over this.

Jasper Johns: No, I don't either.

CM-U: I mean, the original canvas is so fresh looking. Well, I've also never had it unframed; and so perhaps if I did, and looked at the edges, that might help answer the question. I didn't think it was something you had done, but I did want to ask you.

[00:51:13]

Jasper Johns: Now when it went to Sidney [Janis Gallery], it went from the de Menils?

CM-U: Uh...

Jasper Johns: Not from me. Because the letter was from Janis [Gallery]...

CM-U: Right.

Jasper Johns: ...to, to you all, or to someone.

CM-U: That's right. Right. So when it – that's right. It was in the "String and Rope" show [Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, January 7-31, 1970]. And then they had bought it just before, I think.

- Jasper Johns: But why does it [the letter] say this? *First Version*?
- CM-U: I don't know. And, look, 1964. But it couldn't be. The letter is dated 1970. Had you already done *Voice*? You'd already done *Voice 2*. So maybe they were referring to that?
- Jasper Johns: No, I think that this [the painting's different states] is what they are referring to. *First Version. Second Version.*
- CM-U: But they couldn't have lent *First Version* in 1970.
- Jasper Johns: No, exactly. But I wondered why that was on the back of that. There's no date on this photograph.
- CM-U: And you do ask a good question. Who took the photograph?
- Jasper Johns: Rudy Burckhardt took this one.
- CM-U: This is while you still owned it.
- Jasper Johns: Eric Pollitzer took this one. Yes, you see, I don't know why it would have been photographed and then changed. I don't know what – I'm trying to think what I can do to find out anything. And I don't know anything I can do. Sixty-four. Sixty-seven. This must have been '64.
- CM-U: Well, it was...
- Jasper Johns: Or it could have been '65 or '66.
- CM-U: It could have – yeah, because it was actually reworked in '67. It wasn't during that – I mean, it wasn't that you worked on it through those years, is that right?
- Jasper Johns: I don't know.
- CM-U: You don't know?
- Jasper Johns: I do not know.
- CM-U: I remember reading somewhere that, you know, that you had actually just begun to rework it in '67. So I don't know if that's so or not, but it would be

interesting to see if it may have been exhibited in between. But then you wouldn't know that.

Jasper Johns: And when did they acquire it? Do you know that?

CM-U: Yes. In 1968. Directly from Leo Castelli. Now whether someone owned it in between and went back to the dealer – that I don't know.

Jasper Johns: I don't think so.

CM-U: No.

Jasper Johns: What I think we should do is ask Castelli if they have any records at all, and then I should see if I have any, anything that would explain any of that.

CM-U: Well, I think there is actually a letter from you...

[Break in video]

[00:54:11]

Jasper Johns: It's a very strong change.

CM-U: (Pulls letter from folder and hands it to Johns)

Jasper Johns: Aha.

E. Lunning: _____ [phrase inaudible] is changed to be _____ [phrase inaudible]. I'm not sure that's the same screen.

CM-U: _____ [phrase inaudible] your sketchbook _____ [word inaudible].

[inaudible voices; cannot identify the speakers or hear their words]

CM-U: Liz, let's turn this around.

E. Lunning: Okay.

Jasper Johns: Well, that [referring to correspondence] doesn't help us.

CM-U: Okay, we're going to have to pull it out from your side.

[inaudible voices; cannot identify the speakers or hear their words]

Jasper Johns: You know who else we should ask about this is David Whitney...

CM-U: Oh, really?

Jasper Johns: ...to see if he has any memory. I don't know who – when was – who was working for me then? I don't know.

Roberta B.: David.

Jasper Johns: David was?

Roberta B.: Yes, because that's when I met you, in 1970.

[inaudible voices; cannot identify the speakers or hear their words]

Jasper Johns: I think it would be nice if he thinks he knows anything...

[Break in video]

CM-U: Oh, I would never want to separate them at this point. I mean, the paint really (runs hand in air along border between *Voice's* canvases)...

Jasper Johns: Is put in there to – connecting them, I think. Yeah.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Jasper Johns: Well, I think it may remain a mystery unless David knows something.

CM-U: But, you know, I skimmed over something in the file because I didn't think it was relevant. About Lebron – see – something about Dominique thinking she needed to have it folded to – it used to hang in the hall in the 73rd Street, East 73rd Street house. The front hall. And she needed to have it removed, and she thought Lebron had to come to fold it. And then he came to remove it and of course didn't have to do that. And then I don't know what the follow up was. You know, if that went to storage, or he looked at it and said, "Oh, but it needs another stretcher." You know, I should see if maybe something – maybe it did happen under our time. I don't think so though.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: I don't think so.

[00:56:24]

CM-U: I find it very strange when pictures have a second fabric put on for just appearance sake. Sometimes...

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...we stretch a blind lining for a good reason. In fact, in some of the cases of pictures that have come in here where the stretcher is really weak, but it's an old stretcher, and I think it's important to the sense of the work, and I really don't want to remove it, I'll stretch a fabric. I use a monofilament fabric that is very strong, and I'll stretch that on the old stretcher so it almost becomes like a drum. It's like a support, then, for the original.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: So that there are reasons to stretch another fabric back. But that, not like that. Not the way that barely comes around. That's not even providing any tension. That's just hiding, really, the back of the original.

CM-U: Let's just review about the fork and the spoon, and what I know about the different ones we have.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: The story that is in our files is that it went to – the picture went to the “String and Rope” show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1970. And just before the close of that exhibition, someone took the fork and spoon.

Jasper Johns: Um-hum.

CM-U: And the gallery informed Mrs. de Menil. And then, several months thereafter, said that you had come up with another, or that you had provided one. And your recollection is that it was the original set.

Jasper Johns: Well, I don't know whether I provided one in the interim or not. That's what I...

- CM-U: Oh, I see.
- Jasper Johns: In looking at that other extra one, it doesn't look like something I would have made, the way the wire is done. But I may have. But I don't think I did. So I don't know who got someone to make a substitute.
- CM-U: The other set? But the one that's on the picture, you feel you – it was either the original, or you made it. You feel comfortable with the one that's on the picture?
- Jasper Johns: No, the one that's on the picture now, I believe is the original...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Jasper Johns: ...because Bill Katz found the people who had it, and had them return it. So I think this is it.
- CM-U: Right.
- Jasper Johns: But whether I made this one or not [referring to the replacement fork/spoon on the nearby table], I don't know.
- CM-U: Well, we know you didn't make this one.
- Jasper Johns: Right.
- CM-U: Whether you made that one...
- Jasper Johns: Now why did he – who made that?
- CM-U: This one was made by an artist here in Houston. So this one was made just in case something – maybe even she was thinking – I don't know why.
- Jasper Johns: But the painting wasn't in Houston, was it, at that time?
- CM-U: Well, he may have made it – no, not at the time. No, this is subsequent to the entire episode.
- Jasper Johns: Yeah. Maybe it was done to – when it went out on the show or something? On loan?

- CM-U: Not since I've been here.
- Jasper Johns: No?
- CM-U: We wouldn't replace it. But that may have been the idea. But now the question is whether this one is one that you think you may have made.
- Jasper Johns: Well, I may have. I just – I...
- CM-U: Yeah.
- Jasper Johns: ...I just don't think I would have bent the wire like that.
- CM-U: Right.
- Jasper Johns: But maybe.
- CM-U: David is...
- Jasper Johns: But at any rate, what – I think this is the original (points to fork and spoon on *Voice*).
- CM-U: What we've done, for purposes of exhibition, again, it's never covered. And so we've put a wire here. It's – we think it's minimal, but there is a secure – there is something here to prevent someone doing that (gestures as if she were removing object from painting).
- Jasper Johns: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- CM-U: The other thing we've done is, over the years, this (points at wire stretched diagonally across painting) – you know, wire fatigues in a certain way...
- Jasper Johns: Yes.
- CM-U: ...so we were concerned to maintain the same angle...
- Jasper Johns: Right.
- CM-U: ...that you had on this. And so if you look here, we felt that the screw eye would continue to slip down on this little "L." And so we would try to secure

it with wood, little toothpicks and so on, until finally it just didn't seem to be – so what we did was fill it with Plex. Can you see that little bit of...

Jasper Johns: Uh-huh. I can see it.

CM-U: Is that all right?

Jasper Johns: Yeah, certainly. Yeah.

CM-U: I mean, that was all...

Jasper Johns: That was always a problem, to keep the proper tension there.

[01:00:17]

[David Whitney arrives at the Menil Conservation Studio.]

Jasper Johns: Hi, David.

David Whitney: Hi.

Jasper Johns: Come look at these photographs. I mean, do you remember this painting in New York?

David Whitney: Not really.

Jasper Johns: Well, then you're a great help.

(laughter)

David Whitney: Yeah, I...

Jasper Johns: There are these two photographs. This – I think I made this painting in Edisto Beach, and I think it came back to New York in this state. At some point I...

David Whitney: Not to Riverside Drive, though.

Jasper Johns: No, to, to Houston Street. It's where I think it was. What is the date?

CM-U: Sixty-four.

David Whitney: No, you didn't live in Houston Street 'til much later.

Jasper Johns: (laughs)

David Whitney: I mean, it wasn't when I was working for you. So it might have been Riverside Drive before that. Anyway, what's the question?

Jasper Johns: When did I decide to do this? And why? And then...

David Whitney: You mean change the "Voice"?

Jasper Johns: Yes. Move "Voice" up there.

David Whitney: Yeah.

CM-U: Sixty-seven.

Jasper Johns: And then look at the back of this painting. It appears to have been covered with a...

David Whitney: _____ [word inaudible].

Jasper Johns: ...a canvas that isn't the canvas it's painted on.

David Whitney: Yeah.

Jasper Johns: And we can't figure out why.

David Whitney: Who owned it? Where did you get this painting?

CM-U: It was purchased directly from Leo Castelli in 1968.

Jasper Johns: And what's the date? Maybe I didn't make this.

(laughter)

CM-U: The voice from behind the canvas. Sixty-four to '67.

David Whitney: It's been lined. It's been lined, right?

- CM-U: Well, I don't think so, David. I think it's just a loose – it's just a cosmetic lining. I don't think it's actually attached.
- David Whitney: Leo wouldn't have done that.
- CM-U: I know. And it came directly to us. And we have no record of it ever having been treated here. Unless the framer did it when it – no – but they'd have to take – change – someone would have had to change the stretcher. It's a Lebron...
- David Whitney: It's a [Robert] Kulicke frame.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Jasper Johns: It's what?
- David Whitney: It's a Kulicke frame, so it was done in New York.
- CM-U: Were you using these expansion bolt stretchers at the time, do you think? So now we are talking about '67.
- David Whitney: I don't think so.
- CM-U: Huh.
- Jasper Johns: Well, that's what I thought. I didn't think that this painting was painted on this kind of stretcher.
- David Whitney: Hm. You...
- CM-U: So someone did this in changing the stretcher to make it stronger, or whatever? That's when it must have happened.
- David Whitney: Your predecessor?
- CM-U: No. You know what? There hasn't been a predecessor.
- David Whitney: _____ [phrase inaudible].

- CM-U: Mrs. Dominique. The works of art were being restored in New York. But she – we have no records. We would have records. The de Menils kept wonderful records.
- David Whitney: Yes.
- CM-U: There is nothing on file.
- Jasper Johns: I think we should see if Castelli has anything on the painting.
- CM-U: All right.
- Jasper Johns: That would be one thing to do. And to see if I have anything. Because I am completely confused now if, if this was at Riverside Drive, I don't remember it in Riverside Drive. It seems too tall.
- David Whitney: It's too tall. It wouldn't have gone in the room.
- Jasper Johns: And what is the last date?
- CM-U: 1967.
- David Whitney: '64-'67.
- CM-U: So it would have had to be then. If it came.
- David Whitney: Well, if...
- Jasper Johns: Hmm.
- Roberta B.: Unless it came to a warehouse.
- CM-U: Roberta was just saying that...
- David Whitney: You didn't finish it in Edisto, because Edisto burned down by then.
- Roberta B.: By '66.
- David Whitney: Where did you live before Riverside Drive?
- Jasper Johns: On Front Street.

David Whitney: Hm.

Jasper Johns: Well, it's a mystery.

CM-U: Well, what about the angle [of the wire]? I mean, we've tried to maintain this as closely to the photographs that we have.

Jasper Johns: I just tried to have it be more or less straight without dipping down. That was the only thing I tried to avoid.

[Break in video]

[01:04:54]

Jasper Johns: But the other odd thing on this painting is, that on the label on the back, for the Sidney Janis – the Sidney Janis label, it says “(First Version),” for some reason.

CM-U: That's very odd.

Jasper Johns: And I don't know why it says that.

David Whitney: Well, why? It's very peculiar because you wouldn't know it's the first version.

Jasper Johns: If there weren't a second version!

(laughter)

David Whitney: _____ [word inaudible].

Jasper Johns: Right. Well, someone told me that Dominique thought there were two versions of this painting, and that – I think it was...

CM-U: Yes. We did think that. Paul [Winkler, Director, The Menil Collection] thought that. But she did say that. Yeah. That she thought there was a second version of this painting.

Jasper Johns: And it must be because of that.

CM-U: That explains that.

Jasper Johns: And the two photographs and everything.

CM-U: Right. That explains that. You're right.

[Break in video]

[01:05:45]

CM-U: In the event there is someday, what is your thought about a replacement?

Jasper Johns: Well, I think it would be nice to have an extra. I don't know – I could – I don't know whether I still have any of these. I doubt it. Anyway, I don't really – anything is a reasonable replacement.

CM-U: Facsimile. Um-hum. Okay. Well, we're going...

David Whitney: You know, it wouldn't hurt you to buy something similar.

Jasper Johns: Well, we have two, David. We have a lot of them.

(laughter)

David Whitney: Because those things go out of style before you know it.

CM-U: This is a real issue, actually, David. It is.

Jasper Johns: Yeah.

CM-U: It is. And these are fairly close.

Jasper Johns: Hmm. Well, they're of the same period...

CM-U: Yeah, they are.

Jasper Johns: ...I would say. Yeah.

[Break in video.]

[01:06:44]

Roberta B.: That one says 1967 annual. It says 1967.

- Jasper Johns: At the bottom. Doesn't it say '67 to February '68?
- Roberta B.: Right. So maybe that's when you redid it, for the Whitney.
- David Whitney: No, it would just have been a painting that he had just finished, that he would then send...
- Roberta B.: That's what I mean...
- Jasper Johns: Well, one other question is, did this painting ever belong to anyone else?
- Roberta B.: When it was the first one...
- CM-U: See, according – when it was the first version. That, that's the question.
- Jasper Johns: Yeah.
- CM-U: It may have belonged to someone else when it was version – First Version.
- Roberta B.: And then you decided you wanted to change it.
- Jasper Johns: I don't – I don't know. And what does that label say, up there?
- David Whitney: Jesus.
- Roberta B.: Leo Castelli.
- Jasper Johns: I can't see it.
- David Whitney: I can't see it, either [sounds like].
- CM-U: Which one? Way at the top?
- Jasper Johns: The Leo Castelli label. Yeah.
- David Whitney: Oh, my God.
- CM-U: Oh. Collection. And it's been crossed out.
- Roberta B.: Oh. We better get up there [sounds like].

CM-U: You know what? Let's get a ladder. I'm going to...

(laughter)

David Whitney: Just call Castelli and ask them to read the card.

(print on screen: "Leo Castelli Gallery card: - Artist 11/28/64 Consignment \$18,000 / - To Ferus Gallery on Consign. 4/28/65 / - In Gallery 2/24/66 / - To JJ 3/10/66 / - In Gallery 9/1/67 / - To Whitney Museum Annual 11/17/67 / - Rtd to Gallery 2/6/68 / - Sold to Mr. and Mrs. John de Menil 3/25/68 / - Delivered 3/29/68")

[inaudible background voices]

CM-U: All right.

David Whitney: It'll have everything on it.

CM-U: 'Cause obviously what we have is just not complete.

Roberta B.: The museum _____ [phrase inaudible].

David Whitney: I have a suspicion somebody else owned it.

CM-U: Owned this painting. Let me get my ladder.

Jasper Johns: But when did I change it?

David Whitney: When they said, "We don't like this painting."

(laughter)

Roberta B.: Oh, you know there was speculation _____ [phrase inaudible].

CM-U: What?

Roberta B.: He was talking about the spoon and fork, and he said that...

CM-U: No, he was talking about...

Roberta B.: After [Frank] O'Hara died, he reworked this painting.

- Jasper Johns: Yeah. Well, that's just fantasy.
- CM-U: How can he read without glasses?
- Jasper Johns: [Reading Leo Castelli label] "Collection the artist."
(laughter)
- Jasper Johns: Sixty-four. Sixty-seven. And "196" is apparently the Leo Castelli number.
- David Whitney: What's that?
- CM-U: That looks like...
- Jasper Johns: Los Angeles.
- CM-U: That was – that was – oh, first show for the Temporary Contemporary in Los Angeles. ["The First Show: Painting and Sculpture from Eight Collections 1940-1980," The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, November 1983-February 19, 1984]
- David Whitney: Oh. After you owned it?
- CM-U: After we owned it.
- David Whitney: Yep.
- CM-U: But this was before we owned it.
- David Whitney: Just tell them the Castelli number, and they can tell you...
- CM-U: Yeah. Now what's that one – what's this label over here say?
- Roberta B.: Oh, that's the Whitney...
- Jasper Johns: That's the Whitney, '67, '68.
- CM-U: Okay. Oh. So it must have gone right on exhibition.
- David Whitney: Yes.

- CM-U: Before it even went to Dominique's house?
- David Whitney: Yes.
- Jasper Johns: Before what?
- CM-U: Before it even went to their house. The de Menils' house. It must have gone right on exhibition.
- Jasper Johns: Unless they bought it from the Whitney.
- CM-U: No, they bought it from Leo Castelli.
- Jasper Johns: Well, I mean, they bought it from Leo.
- CM-U: They bought it, and then lent it – right. Oh, I see. Seen at the – you know, possibly.
- Roberta B.: And I was just thinking, maybe when you thought about exhibiting it at the Whitney, you thought, "I want to change it."
- CM-U: But why? They wouldn't do that.
- Roberta B.: No. Jasper said...
- CM-U: Oh, Jasper.
- Roberta B.: That's why he decided to rework it.
- David Whitney: Maybe the Whitney changed it!
- (laughter)
- CM-U: Right.
- Jasper Johns: Well, Carol, do you mind calling Castelli...
- CM-U: Not at all.
- Jasper Johns: ...and ask him. It's their number 196. It appears to be their registry number.

CM-U: Okay.

Jasper Johns: And see if they find out anything.

CM-U: I will.

Jasper Johns: If they know anything, maybe they can solve it. I can't figure it out.

Roberta B.: Is this the only time that a work has been shown and then changed, repainted? That you've let it out as a work of yours?

Jasper Johns: We don't know that it was let out.

David Whitney: I think Paul described to me and...

Roberta B.: You think it might have just been photographed for documentation...

Jasper Johns: I don't know.

[inaudible background voices]

[Break in video.]

CM-U: I'm sorry. I don't know what he's referring to.

Roberta B.: Oh, gee, isn't that amazing? I never – I was just looking, and I didn't see the...

CM-U: I can't imagine what he was thinking of.

[inaudible background voices]

CM-U: Are we being taped?

Jasper Johns: Shall we go?

David Whitney: Yeah. Do you want some lunch?

Jasper Johns: Yes.

David Whitney: Good.

Roberta B.: But now the word *Voice* on the bottom all of a sudden pops out.

CM-U: Right. You see it?

David Whitney: Oh, sure.

Roberta B.: Yeah.

CM-U: Oh, you sure do.

Roberta B.: I just, look [sounds like].

CM-U: And this was a major – that was an addition. That one.

Roberta B.: Hm.

CM-U: Well, I'm never taking it apart, that's for sure.

(laughter)

CM-U: It's gonna stay on what it's on. But that's the irony of it. I mean, if they did that – if they stretched those canvases after you painted it, it doesn't look like it's been separated.

Jasper Johns: No, I know. It certainly doesn't.

CM-U: So did they do that?

Jasper Johns: I don't know.

Roberta B.: This is where the break is, too, but it doesn't look like a crack.

CM-U: Yeah.

Jasper Johns: I think only if Castelli has something, or if I have something...

CM-U: Well, the way I like to say it is, all the answers are here. We're just not asking the right questions. Pictures have all the answers. We just – well, anyway. Well, thank you...

Jasper Johns: Thank you.

CM-U: ...very, very much.

Jasper Johns: Thank you.

[END RECORDING]