



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

**MEL CHIN
FEBRURY 21, 2014**

**Interviewed by:
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**Video: Andrew Larimer | Total Run Time: 01:18:18
Location: New Orleans Museum of Art**

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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.

The Artists Documentation Program has been generously supported by
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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): Mel Chin, Artist; Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Whitney Museum of American Art]

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

[00:00:41]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK. What is today? The 21st? I want to say the 21st. Yeah. Today is February 21st, 2014. I'm with Mel Chin. Mel and I did an interview together 23 years ago.

Mel Chin: Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We discussed the materiality of his work then. And we will be revisiting some of those ideas, but we'll also be looking at his newer work, and kind of trying to put that into perspective. So, let's talk about this piece. I don't know about this.

Mel Chin: OK, OK, now talk about materiality. This piece is owned by a collector in Philadelphia -- "Kippy" Stroud. And I wanted it in the show because it was a piece of corn that was collected from *Revival Field*. And I needed to have this variety of corn that I preserved. And I put it into this wire mesh. I was build-- I built this in New York City. Well, not this. I'll have to explain. I built something like this in New York City, and I entrapped that corn. I just presented it to her after our show at the Fabric Workshop back in '93, '92. So, I called her about this piece, and she said -- many years ago, and she said, "Mel, there's a problem. The corn is gone."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Disintegrated. Dried up.

Mel Chin: It's gone. Whatever. It was -- the cage was totally empty. I said, "Oh, my goodness. I've got to have that corn in the show." Because of all of the pieces -- sometimes you look at it is, like, these markers, intellectually, or just... Or something that is about such a conceptual kind of leap at that time. You want to have some kind of marker that also conveys your personality. And to cage this corn and to hold something precious -- it was a special variety of corn that Dr. Chaney and I had orchestrated and -- to be what would be an indicator of cadmium absorption in *Revival Field*. OK?

So, the corn is gone. So, this took three years to make. I started getting this special variety from the seed laboratories.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You got the same variety that you had?

Mel Chin: Yeah, well, the closest that we could have.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That you could get, right.

Mel Chin: And grew it in our yards in North Carolina.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: In North Carolina.

Mel Chin: In North Carolina. And the whole intent was to grow corn big enough and OK enough to re-sculpt into the configuration -- the best configuration that we could, or I could, to remake the piece. Even the tag is a facsimile, because I couldn't find the rubber stamp. This is all handmade. I made the hand--based on photo documentation, I said it has to look almost as if it was that. But, yeah, and the measurements were derived from the photography.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So this is like 20 years later?

Mel Chin: Yeah. And the corn had to be shaped -- like, we had, like, five ears of corn all in a row, where I would come wet, and tweak, and wire it, and glue it, and con-- reconstruct a facsimile (laughs) of *Caged Corn*. And I'm going to give it to the collector when I'm done. I said, "Here's your caged corn. It got entrapped again. It's there."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, what about the preservation of what you have there?

Mel Chin: Well, here, what I soaked it with, was with shellac and lacquer, after it was carefully dried. And it was like this whole process of saying -- I'd walk into the studio, and they'd say, "We're working on this and this." And I said, "Well, how's the corn doing?" That was on my mind because it's something - - the fragility of it, the nature of that, it could just disappear any minute. And I think that's a lesson about materiality.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, it's so associated, isn't it, with the fragility of the project?

Mel Chin: Absolutely, absolutely. Dr. Chaney was there last night.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, he was?

Mel Chin: And he's -- I think he's going to come. Because he had prepared a whole -- he didn't get up and speak. Because he had prepared -- the impact of *Revival Field*, on the scientific community. I wish he would have gotten the --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, that would have been so interesting to hear.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah, but he -- I don't know. He got shy, or whatever. Because, you know, he's not an art-- you know, involved in the arts as much. And I wish I -- I didn't even see him. But one of the fellow scientists -- Dr. Howard Mielke, who's a friend of his that -- actually, here -- from here -- Tulane/Xavier -- Tulane's, you know, pharmacology and toxicology. He was the one who gave me the first lead lab maps that were talking about the impact of lead in this society right here, where 30 or 50 percent of the childhood population were poisoned with lead before the storm.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We will definitely get to that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Mel Chin: Yeah, so, anyway, it's a --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, here you really -- you know, here, you really had to come to terms with preservation.

Mel Chin: Exactly, and materiality, and how ephemera --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And time.

Mel Chin: And then, the mystery of how could you build this corn, and what does she mean, "It's gone."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: (laughs) Yeah, what did that mean?

Mel Chin: Yeah, what --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When you did it to begin with, you didn't think of that?

Mel Chin: No, I just -- it's in with acts of impulse and belief. I said, I'm going to put this corn in this cage. Done.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does that -- you know, that moment of doing something ephemeral and saying, you know, "This is my statement now." And now, this is completely different impetus.

Mel Chin: Yes, of course.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, how does that sit in your (inaudible)?

Mel Chin: Well, I'm just happy that there's a... You know, I'm not a believer in any kind of religious principle, but there is the concept of resurrection that I will now adopt for certain things. (laughs) It's worthy because it is like a marker for me to continue within my own mind that there's a physical relationship with your ideas. And having a marker for it is important.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's very interesting, Mel, because you've done it with other things in the show, as we go through. We'll see that you've then gone back in to make objects out of ideas that you were working with.

Mel Chin: Right, right, absolutely.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is that right? OK.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We'll get to that.

Mel Chin: All right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hold that thought, as they say.

Mel Chin: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let's go into *Operation of the Sun*.

Mel Chin: OK.

[00:06:30]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This looks really (inaudible).

Mel Chin: Oh, yeah. It's great to see it again, eh? All right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: All right.

Mel Chin: (laughs) So, here we are again.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Here we are again. Let's -- should we stand kind of over here, or...?

Mel Chin: Sure, wherever you'd like. It's -- it lasted.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It la-- years ago, when you and I first talked about this, I asked you about every detail of how things were made, and how important everything was, and I was concerned about it deteriorating.

Mel Chin: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And looking at it now, it looks pretty good.

Mel Chin: I think it -- that shows you'd better find someone who knows how to store things.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Have you seen -- because it's been in storage since then?

Mel Chin: I think -- well, you know Miss D -- Dominique and I discussed it. And it was just one of remarks -- I saw that these houses were being built, back then. And the idea was, maybe there could be a room that would just preserve this weird kind of investigation.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You mean one of the gray houses around the Menil?

Mel Chin: Or, yeah, just like (inaudible). So, that's why I left it with him.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I didn't know that. So, it's been at the Menil since...?

Mel Chin: At Menil. They took it to a storage facility. And they've held onto it all those years. Who knows? Maybe it will happen someday, but I wasn't banking on it. I just thought that -- I said, OK, Miss D, you know, we'll just leave it at the... I think it was at the Rice -- it was at the Richmond Building for a while, in storage. And then I think it went to this commercial facility. And I visited it -- this piece is about -- four years ago, after Miranda Lash, my curator, decided that we were going to look at some work and see what conditions there were in. So, I was happy. It was all in boxes -- cardboard boxes. (laughs) These -- it was all dissembled. And this had to be re-welded, or --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What did you have to redo?

Mel Chin: I had to -- this is a rare-earth magnet, you know? It -- the first incarnation of this, on the inside was a heavy magnet. And, as a result, when people would pull on it, it would fall, and it would damage from the fall. It was all dented. So, I had to split it open and put in the lighter-weight but very strong magnets. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, it's held up there with a magnet?

Mel Chin: Yeah, you pull it, and it'll come off. But it's better now than it's ever been.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you have to work on any of the other pieces?

Mel Chin: Of this group?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: No, but I had to remember things, because it was --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm sorry? You...?

Mel Chin: I had to remember how things were.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, you know, I wanted to ask you this, because 22 years ago, or 20-x years ago, you were very adamant, at that time, that any kind of repair or any kind of treatment that had to be done to this, you had to do. It had to be your hand.

Mel Chin: Yes, that's right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do you still feel that way?

Mel Chin: Well, probably not as much. But, in a way, you -- the things that are visually there, I do feel that way. But things are -- I realize, even in *Pluto*, in transport, some of the coal had been -- had fallen out. So -- but it's in a place where you don't really see. So, now I have to trust -- so Barron and I discussed it, and he -- you know, we got materials that are similar to what it was built from, and in the spirit of it. Had to restack something that is not there -- you know, not in your face. So, that was important.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That makes sense to me.

Mel Chin: Yeah, so it was -- like, why am I so careful about this? And -- well, one thing was, I did have to use my hand and mind to remember something. All of this was being put back together, and the final piece was to put in *Saturn*, right, which is this rock. And, you know, I said, oh, OK. So, I was here with the crew, and we were -- late at night, we're going to... So, you just put it in. He said, "It doesn't fit."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What didn't fit?

Mel Chin: Well, the rock is locked in. You know, I said, what's going on? It doesn't fit. I couldn't believe it. You know, I said, how are we going to get this installed? You know, you had all the points about the salt. We even have the bag of salt that I used to dress the wounds of this piece. So, I didn't know. And then, you have to look. And I looked in. I had created a clamping system. It's an actual jaw that closes on this rock and clamps it together. It's hidden underneath, so you had to... And I remember looking at it and saying, wow...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: "How did I do that?" (laughs)

Mel Chin: Yeah, or how did -- why would I forget something that was so essential? Because the intensity of the piece was about Saturn devouring his children, the hides representing... And then -- and so -- because I have to remember things conceptually.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, you know, this brings me to an interesting question, when I asked you about do you feel you have to do the restoration now. Since this piece, you have gone in so many different directions -- your mind, your hand, everything. That it's kind of hard to go back into early work, isn't it?

Mel Chin: Well, it can be torture and a joy, you know, because it re-- it teaches you again how to return to the hand or the craft, in order to convey the personality of the stroke or the gluing. And now, with my bad vision, you know, it's multiplying. The levels of difficulty are -- when you lose peripheral vision, now I have to --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, yeah, no, I understand.

Mel Chin: That has made me reconsider a lot of things. Or, say, whatever I did quickly will now take three times as long. But there is a thing where it's -- like, how it's glued or how it's affected -- I think, still, is something that I'd like to impart. But you can't do it all.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, then there's the kind of thing where you can direct someone who has the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Mel Chin: It's true. I mean, but, you know, when we were doing this, (laughs) they said, "Oh..." We had everybody around it -- all the -- you know, Barron, every-- no one could remember. (laughs) I looked at it, and they were trying to -- there was bolt -- it's a bolt system of a jaw. It closes down, right? It clinches around the rock. And they're trying to -- they're tapping it. They're fixing it. And I said, is it -- are the bolts loose? And I said -- so I said, you've got to go -- you know, all the tools were there. Had to be careful. I said, "Give me two pieces of wood." And I just squeezed it like reverse chop stick, and opened the mouth up again. You know, it's like --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And that --

Mel Chin: Yeah, that's what you've got to do -- use a lever, and... And so, I said, "Oh, that's the way now..." And they did photograph it. I said, "That's how you open the mouth," you know? So, I --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It came to you that way?

Mel Chin: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's that same intuition that went into how would one do this?

Mel Chin: Well, how -- it reminds me, if I built this, I'd know -- it's got to be -- I can't destroy the piece that put the rock in. I have to remember how to open it up. So, that's what the other... So -- and, luckily, very little was at -- now, the wood has dried even more. The splitting, the checking. Oh, I love the organic nature of this. So, I said, let it go.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let it go. It looks terrific really.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah. Shim it and use the magic of the piece. But you have to record it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK.

[00:13:43]

Mel Chin: And do you know this piece?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I don't know about this piece.

Mel Chin: Yeah, this is --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You want to talk about this piece?

Mel Chin: Well, I should, because it's important.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Sure, OK, let's do it.

Mel Chin: This is called *Circumfessional Hymenal Sea for Jackie D.* -- for Jacques Derrida." I met Jacques Derrida at a dinner party at Stanford. I was teaching there, in a Humanities thing. And we sat next to each other and had dinner together. And we had, actually, a good time. It was just very impressive to sit next to the father, or, you know -- this -- a mind of deconstruction, and everything that he was about. Most impressive about his feelings about "the other," and his passion for either taking the role psychologically and philosophically of women, or outsiders, and Algerians, and so...

But we just had a good time and laughed about the impossibility of being in two places at one time, and possib-- I started -- I was just moved and honored to be... And this was just a casual... I gave him a (inaudible) catalog, and he liked the pipe bomb, you know, of course, you know? And he also left with the t-shirts I designed for him. It was cool.

Years later, you know, he died. And there was a film called *Derrida* in 2003. And he's going through his library, and Derrida says... They said, "Oh, Jacques, did you read all these books?" And he says, "Only four. But four, very well." Right, something like that? I said -- and everybody laughs... And it's always referred to like, "Oh, he's such a card," you know? I woke up from a dream and Helen -- I was -- I told Helen, "I've got it. I know what Jacques -- Jackie was saying. It is only four books. But it's every four books." And, you know, it was a dream of -- if you stand above here and -- this footstool -- I have to make the footstools. You'll see.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Should we go over here?

Mel Chin: Yeah. And just -- you'll see what I mean.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh.

Mel Chin: (laughs) It is -- like, the dream was of this.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This is what (inaudible).

Mel Chin: Yeah. It's four books, but all their meaning exuding out like an ocean of ideas, interacting. And this is like a compass that you can walk around with, because every spine is a silver-pointed version. Yeah...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You should point as you talk.

Mel Chin: Yeah, so, you'll see -- so, every spine -- or, the pages flowing out and interacting in opposition to each other. So, and it's real key -- you know, you know, Duchamp's famous poster from 1968? It was -- that he did, with the cigar smoke, and it has a vaginal form to it? Yeah, labia, whatever form. And it's typical of Duchamp, right? It's here. It's in the middle section. It emerges from a book by André Gide that was Derrida's first book, and in opposition -- the Bible versus Marx, (inaudible). You know, you have these all... So, then, the search was to find photo-documentation of his entire library. So, I found -- Andrew Bush was this photographer who had photographed Derrida's bookshelves. And I had to negotiate and, you know, purchase rights -- and never to use his photographs, but to be the documentation to resize each book according to the actual size of each book, and its width. And then, buy used books and compare them and, you know... And then, paint them out, and then use silver point -- had a -- I mean, it was -- this is, again, about the hand. It was like, I had someone who was very good with silver point, to slowly copy the image. And I would draw some. I mean, you know, again, this one is like... Oh, I want to do something. So, if you -- they're faint -- it's almost like the trace -- a trace of him. And --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, is this -- how is it -- is this all one unit -- the big thing?

Mel Chin: This is like -- yeah, this is glued into one unit. And all the pages have been cut. And then, they merge and slid in, and -- to create each pattern that I would draw according -- using Duchamp's original smoke as the centering device -- the hymenal situation. And then, to have these -- this interaction with it, with all these pages and colors of book paper.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, I mean, one is struck by the whiteness of it. And it's -- but, over time, there's a certain yellowing that we can predict.

Mel Chin: Oh, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How do you feel about that?

Mel Chin: Well, I kind of put in the yellowing, because it's supposed to be like ivory.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, I see it here on the wood, but I don't see it in the books.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah, that was so -- yeah, the books, because there is a separation between what holds it and what it's about. You know, when Derrida was to be given his doctorate from Cambridge -- you know, from Oxford University, this is King's College cathedral architecture. There was a protest from the leadership. They didn't want to give it to him. They said he's a -- you know, he's not important, or he's --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Not worthy of it.

Mel Chin: He isn't worthy. And I said, who are they to say? You know, but, basically, there was a protest. He got it. And so, I used this labyrinthian version of the Ivory Tower that -- (laugh) to navigate that, you go try. And it's a cathedral (inaudible). And then, to have his books on the shelf, because this is what I always -- and the shortest definition of this -- an Ivory Tower to leap to and from. Because it's back to the books. His library -- I think the height of it -- I estimated how tall he was. It's my portrait -- it's a portrait of Jacques Derrida. And it's of his mind, that I --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, as the paper ages, as well as --

Mel Chin: Yes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's all intentional, and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Mel Chin: Yeah, it's going to -- it's going to happen. And I understood that. But it was -- sometimes you don't think about the materiality or aging. You want to use good materials, but at the same time, it was more about inventing the brushes that would convey the lines that are in the grain of ivory. It's like creating technique to impart this ivory-yellow look.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I mean, given the specificity of the paper and the silver point -- and everything you've done is so exact and beautiful -- I can't imagine even if this is -- if one is... Well, let me ask you. Can you imagine if one is damaged -- if there's water damage or something, that -- would we just live with it? I can't imagine us remaking it. Or would you want someone to remake it?

Mel Chin: Well, I don't think about remaking. I do think about -- what would happen was -- I'm speaking specifically about materials. We used this neoprene glue that's used to create bindings, you know, on, like, clippings -- you know, it's neoprene contact cement, to bind a lot of these things together. Well, one

effect of it is that, within the years since I made it, it turns brown. And on these pages, on these books, you would see the handprint when we were just making the piece. And we had to restore it. And I had someone -- and --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How did you restore it?

Mel Chin: Well, you know, at first we thought we were just going to paint it over with Kilz -- you know, the (inaudible).

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, yeah. I do.

Mel Chin: And then I just touched it with my fingernail, and it popped off. And I said, oh, we don't repaint it. We have to go through the entire book collection here, and just, gently, with something like a fingernail, as opposed to any tool, and pop off every (inaudible).

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You know, in so many of the works we'll talk about -- and we have talked about in the past -- the choice of material is so associated with the connotation of the material, not just the physical.

Mel Chin: Absolutely.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's the connotation. And your labels reveal that. How important is that to you, that the labels explain that? And then, in some works, it's not as important.

Mel Chin: Right. I think, yes and no. (laughs) I think you have to build something with enough impact that at least there is the desire to know what it's made of.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, the visual impact?

Mel Chin: Visual impact. And that there's got to be something about this, or why is it this way? We'll talk about this piece here.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let's go.

[00:22:28]

Mel Chin: Yeah, and then -- this is a good question. It's called *The Shape of a Lie*. If you look at it, it is a portrait of my tongue. Maybe as close as I could at the time. It changes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let's see. Yeah, I get it.

Mel Chin: Uh-huh, there are some -- there are marks on my tongue. But I know, since the second state, my tongue has changed as well. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hey, you know...

Mel Chin: Yeah, so, anyway... But it's carved out of catlinite -- Native American pipestone. It had to be Native American pipestone.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because...?

Mel Chin: Because it's the shape of a lie. And let me explain it. So, we walk around -- so, you capture this. And it's a -- my portrait, like... And if you think, "Oh, Mel Chin, Asian dude. Yes, I saw in the Louvre -- you know, the shaman preacher, or the British Museum, the shaman cult figure from ancient Han dynasty with the big tongue. You know, that's what he's referring to." But it's not. It's America, you know? So, this -- you walk around, and see the other parts. And it's all bronze. This is the darker version, I call it. The more aggressive green-bronze, but it has -- the model of the bronze coloration is based on, like, Henry Moore, Rodin, the things you see of the black -- the Poseidon from the ocean, right? So, why bronze? Because it is the look and feel of real -- about "art" -- in quotation. (laughs) It's art.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, a very traditional art material.

Mel Chin: Absolutely. And it had to be that, because it's --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And permanent.

Mel Chin: And permanent -- that goes against another material. Only two materials. And then I'll tell you about the physical structure. Because this is a portrait of my toe -- the tippy-toe of -- where does a lie come from? It comes from maybe a little bit of reality. So, this little toe --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: A tiny bit of reality.

Mel Chin: A tiny --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: A toe in reality, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Mel Chin: Yeah, and this is a male lie. There's a female lie, and there's a male lie. And so, this has this -- the gonad. The engineering. The sexuality -- Freudian -- so, philosophical, reality, fact, sexual, you know, impetus, repression, only (inaudible) and testosterone. And so, here they're racing up together. One, a little slower. One just shooting up together. You know, and then, Michael Gershon, the physician from Columbia University, talks about the enteric system. It's the second mind -- the gut ring -- and how, you know, when you say, "Oh, I have butterflies" when you're almost ready to tell a lie or speak or whatever. You have this kind of agitation. It is this primitive brain. And it controls, usually our involuntary systems like squeezing the stomach -- all the things that happen in our body. Well, here it is clenching that reaction of, you know, reality, sexuality, or desire, racing up... And it says, "Wait, I'm not sure." So, this is the guts. And it spills out and fills up, but it doesn't hold it. And the lie balloons into the monstrous proportion, ready to blow out as... Then you have the splinter of reason. (laughs) And the splinter -- so I said, what is the splinter of reason? It has to be some... This is the -- I had to create -- I looked to Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons*, and number nine and number ten -- I used it to construct the physical architecture -- 3D versions of the pieces of his amazing mind and imagination -- his irrational mind. And I stretched and put this prophylactic bond to stop it and trap it. And this will be this architecture that is in the mind, that is the reason that stops the irrational, impossible things. And this is trying to stab the balloon and kill it before it is, so... But it doesn't work, because you walk around, mouth is open, it's at you. It's taunting you.

At the same time, you know, the materiality again. What does it mean? You have every treaty that the Americans made with Native Americans -- every single one, they were betrayed. The Native Americans were betrayed. The whole history of the American experiment is predicated on lies. We never honored a single one. I mean, here, I'm an immigrant. And, you know, my family -- my *familia*, you met, were from China. But we have to assimilate into a culture that has all these concepts of democracy, of truth, and all these things. And yet, if you really know your stuff,...no. You'd better rethink what all that is about. You know, and Jim, the other night, was talking about the millions we have to kill. What are we doing? You know, so, these are investigations into that nature.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let's go to *HOME y Sew*.

[00:27:50]

Mel Chin: Oh, yeah, OK.

Mel Chin Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, New Orleans Museum of Art, February 21, 2014

Video: adp2014a_20140221_002va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2014a / TRT: 01:18:18

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then we'll come back here.

Mel Chin: Sure. Oh, yeah, you -- we were going to talk about (laughter) -- another version.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I do want to talk about that.

Mel Chin: And something's missing out of this. I have to rebuild this one, because it's missing the crescent. I think the Whitney has the crescent. Now, this one is missing the little crescent badge.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, no, I don't know about that. OK, first of all, how many of these did you make?

Mel Chin: Only two.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Only two? This one --

Mel Chin: This is my version, and the one --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Your version, and the one that Whitney --

Mel Chin: And the one that the Whitney has.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And this one is -- this one, you made first?

Mel Chin: Did them almost simultaneously. Yeah, because it was -- because I bought two Glock nine-millimeter handguns. And there -- and I remember I was in "Black Male," and I was talking with them.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, was that the piece -- was that the piece in "Black Male"?

Mel Chin: Yes, well, there was three pieces. It was *Night Rap*, *Black Male*, and another sneaker piece -- a (inaudible) -- three -- well, it's not black M-E-L, it's (laughter) black M-A-L-E, right? So, I said -- I talked with them. I said, "Well, I'll do the accessories to the black male." And these are the accessories -- the sneakers, you know, the microphone -- the wireless microphone, and the Glock. "I'm strapped on your block with my Glock ready to let loose at any imitator that I spot." "Pump Pump" -- that's Snoop Dogg's, and there's a Lil Malik, you know -- doing those lines -- a 16-year-old. I says, "Glock"? And, you know, I started doing my research on the streets of New York. I said, well, what kind of -- you know, what kind of gat

-- what kind of, you know, gat, nine, you know -- which one would you get? It would be the Glock, made out of Smyrna, Georgia, designed and used... It was from Austria. I think it's the official sidearm of NATO, you know? And the Glock is also the -- one of the guns used to pump 47 bullets into an innocent man there in Giuliani's... How many bullets do you need to... And he was -- he was holding up his wallet. He thought he was going to be arrested, but they filled him with bullets from the Glock. So, here he is. I said, wow... So, the aura that Benjamin talks about -- the aura of the gun is so powerful in our culture, there's very little that you can do to change it. You make a gun art -- it's going to be the gun. So, instead, I inverted. I said -- you know, I listened to that. Do nothing to the exterior. Some modification to sign it with the cross or crescent -- optional crescent -- Red Cross is -- the crescent's not here. But in the inside, convert the entire thing. So, I went to a machine shop, and everything in the inside has been eradicated and milled out. Every bit has been removed.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Where did you get the gun?

Mel Chin: Somebody else bought it for me.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Someone got it for you.

Mel Chin: And then, took it in, and milled it all out, and then, everything thing that you see on the right is on the left, inside. You just can't see it. I'm exposing the Ace bandage; oxycodone hydrochloride; there used to be saline -- maybe it's dried up in there -- in that bag; medical equipment with --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Where was it -- where was it (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

Mel Chin: Inside the magazine is a little saline bag. There's a battery and wireless transmitter. When you start disassembling -- kind of, like, pulling out the magazine and the -- it will rip out the activation, and it will start. And you have the Ace bandage for a wound. It's tightly wound. And that's an EpiPen, for a bee sting. Also, it's for when your blood pressure is dropping after you've been shot. You stab that to pump it up, you know, because your survival is at stake now. And the most important thing is a 14-gauge angiocatheter for a pneumothorax shock. One of the leading reasons why people die is their lungs are filling with blood. Stab it right under here -- the second -- under the second rib to release the pressure. It's a well-known -- so, it is based on the entire gunshot trauma emergency medical... And then, so, that's what's in the gun. And so, people can look at it, and say, "Oh, it's about drugs," whatever, (inaudible). No, it's about our transformations

sometimes have to be covert. When Snoop Dogg's talking about it, it's the posing, the reality of the gun, and all that. Is -- can prevent you from the violence that you see in the streets, that I experienced here in the city of New Orleans in the Eighth Ward, where people are pumping nine-millimeters into crowds, OK? I was there. I witnessed this -- part of it. And it's incomprehensible. But sometimes, though, the transformation is so predominant with gun culture, then what you have to change is yourself. And you have to do it quietly, because your group may not be into this change. So, it's this individual, discreet transformation that's [important].

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When it was shown in "Black Male" at the Whitney, is this the configuration? Just like this?

Mel Chin: It was shown -- I don't -- I don't -- this was designed for when it was traveling with a traveling show I had.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes, it did.

Mel Chin: And this is something I designed to --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: For the travel show?

Mel Chin: Yeah, and I liked to recreate -- I mean, it's an efficient means of showing it, because the Whitney has the exact same thing. I don't think you have a box, right? And a plinth. That should be made. We'll make it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so, in "Black Male," it was just laid in a case?

Mel Chin: Yeah, I think it's just laid --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Just laid in a case?

Mel Chin: Like, the parts, and maybe with museum wax holding everything together. You can do it that way, too. But this is one way of making sure that the parts are...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the other two works were shown with it, or...?

Mel Chin: Oh, yeah. Yeah, *Night Rap*, which is the active microphone, is -- was shown sometimes just on the wall, as opposed to on the mike stand. I put this on the mike stand so it could be active, and you could talk to it, and interact with it.

[00:33:45]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'd love to spend a little time talking about *Cluster*, and then go to -- are you doing OK?

Mel Chin: Oh, I'm fine. I'm fine.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do, we have time, on your end?

Andrew Larimer: Yeah.

Mel Chin: OK. So, *Cluster*, in our age of the Kardashians and Academy Awards and the bling of Harry Winston... "Oh, how much is that necklace worth?" All this gl-- bling, glitz, whatever. "The object of desire." It comes out. Some of them -- 10 percent, maybe 30 percent, come out of the blood of Africa -- the diamonds. The trade that is the traffic in... Like, the World Trade Center attack of Al-Qaeda was sponsored by diamonds that were smuggled out -- probably went through a house in Belgium. How do you pay for this? So, this is an important kind of... So, I said, OK, then we'll look at the history in another way. So, all of these shapes and configuration is based on forensic evidence of wounds caused by different weapons, whether the first conoidal bullet from the Civil War -- you can look up the exact -- the first painting of a war wound is the entry and exit wound of a new military technology, of a bullet that had a shape like that -- a cone-like shape. So, this was -- so this is out of -- and I tried to use the type of golds that would be available in the Civil War -- Hamilton gold is this term -- but to get the coloration and stuff correct. So, that's one thing. And you have -- then you have different things like this piece here, which would hang and fall, collapse. The shape is actually of this chem-- I always remember the name. We'll look it up. It was used in World War II -- sulfobromophthalein. But it was -- that's the chemical construction of that. And each selection is based on jewels that were -- (inaudible) on the color of each of that form of oxygen and hydrogen, you know? And so, you have that. And this is silver. That's based on an M16 entry wound -- another bullet. And, of course, you have this cluster. So, these are wounds recreated as jewelry, right?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. You know, what I think struck me so much about this work, that I hadn't seen before, is it most obviously points to the beauty and exactitude and restraint in your work.

Mel Chin: Mm-hmm. Restraint is...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, even though the ideas are very far-reaching and very deep, the actual physicality is very restrained. And, in this case, with jewelry, very beautiful. Do you see that as a problem, in terms of materiality?

Mel Chin: No, I think it's important to... Like, if you were -- this is meant to wear, and it's based on the cut -- all these parts -- these fragments are broken. I made balls, and these balls are then busted apart. It is based on the cluster bomblet that we drop -- our version that we drop, that explodes and just tears people apart. And it's coming from a central origin, and it's spreading outward from a body that has been destroyed. So, you're wearing... (laughs) And the little key is a miniature version of the -- you know, that's BLU-82 -- daisy cutter. We have designations -- Bomb Live Unit 82, Bomb Live Unit 26. (laughs) You know, this is the military specification. And so, that's this miniature version done in gold and silver, and you wear that, and you walk around, like, and you just look great, you know? It's odd, but... Am I worried? No, I'm not worried. I think you make something -- you make someone wear this. You do wonder, well, what is it? What is it, you know? And I think that's the first thing. It's not so important that -- all that I'm telling you, because, you know, you're here and asking me. I could tell you more, but the point about it is that you have that -- we have that opportunity. I don't mind telling you, and who -- you really want to know whether you're, you know, understanding that painting or any of that stuff. I could do it. But I think the obligation of the artist is to do something worthy of remembering.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Worthy of...?

Mel Chin: Remembering or questioning.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes.

Mel Chin: If you could start that process, and then -- you're almost there. You start with yourself. You just have to question yourself first. Why jewelry? What is the critical dynamic, you know, relationship between something that's in our culture and what I'm thinking?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, you start with the concept? Something that always --

Mel Chin: Always. Everything, and --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Mel Chin: You know, this is -- this project -- Miranda says I'm a conceptual artist, and people would say you have to get rid of the older term of conceptual artist. (laughs) Which is amazing. The minimalist, you know, idea, the conceptual art -- it continues from the, you know, Duchampian sense, and it distilled into minimalism, and almost the end of art, (laughs) you know? I say no, we're not done yet. If its concept -- it's just simply concept-based. No choice should be made -- like, no harm should be done, no choice can be made without some thought behind it, and some kind of a referential nature, so you can reconnect to the very first thought. And your choices of materials and things can be important keys to unlock its meaning. That's what...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, in your process, though, you have the concept. And then it's like, what materials convey that?

Mel Chin: Exactly.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What caused that? And then, you go right to the direct material.

Mel Chin: Yeah, well, you start.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You start.

Mel Chin: And you just see what it can do. And --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But then, the visualization part is always so visually engaging.

Mel Chin: It comes from -- well, it comes from the research of looking at bodies. And this one is bodies that -- the effects or the aftermath of a cluster bomb, or a --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes, but it -- there's a unity and a beauty and an exactitude to it --

Mel Chin: Yes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- that we see throughout all your work.

Mel Chin: Yeah, well, and this -- I hope -- well, maybe the ones here are the --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The ones in the show.

Mel Chin: The ones -- yeah, (laughs) Because these, you know -- there's all these things that will have no materiality -- then some. But in this case, doing the grid structure, saying OK, if this is mapped then you could say -- rethink this and

think about, if it all comes back together into a bomb live unit, it would be right in the center of this grid -- this mapping, you see? It's just blowing outward now. You're wearing the results. (laughs) So, ready to wear, right?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, no, it's very -- well, it's engaging. It's seductive. And then, once you're in there, then you realize what you're looking at.

Mel Chin: Well, you see -- well, I don't know, maybe, you know -- I think the only thing we did here is, we put in the AK-47 bullet. Because this is not just based on the chemical formula. It's based on a liver that has been torn apart from this -- by this weapon. And it's almost why a necklace is almost like -- when you get shot by it, there's the study of ballistics. They shoot through Jell-O and different things. The bullet goes, and it blows it apart, and then it collapses back in. Those (inaudible). So, I said, what does that? A necklace. You could lay out the whole chemical formula that's used to diagnose liver damage. If you're wounded, you can't see it. You put the injection, and it's a dye marker that allows you to understand in order to save a life, you know? But this is the AK-47, and that bullet does the -- a very jagged, broken, body part, you know?

[00:41:39]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, right.

Mel Chin: So, yeah, I mean, the beauty idea like -- I love this painting, but it's -- what is it? You know, Jim introduced me to Mark Lombardi, right, and Paul Schimmel, when he was... And I knew Mark through those days, and Mark, unfortunately left. But it's a graph. It was very much -- but a different -- my way. (laughs) Instead of the names --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Definitely your way.

Mel Chin: -- I studied all the transactions of money of Al-Qaeda, (laughs) and the network, and the grape-leaf clusters of the gold is the monies -- the size of the transaction, right? So, you have all of that, and this is -- this is, like, really, a shamefully loose Kufic text from the 44th Sura, that talks about the virgins -- the beautiful virgins that you'll meet -- the 72 virgins in Paradise, emerging out of this muddy, dark square. It's Osama bin Laden and all his connections, and American reactions, in this bloody kind of form of money, based on intelligence mapping. Why grapes? See -- and you talk about concept. Because Christoph Luxenberg was a scholar that was res-- looking -- a philologist looking into the origins of the Koran, and said, this word they keep

saying is *virgins*, may come, actually, from the term *grapes*. And it may be what they're describing, "entering Paradise" -- the Paradise -- this -- is a garden full of everything you could have, and these luscious foods, and... Maybe that's what it's about. It's a misinterpretation. And when he brought it up, I read that, you know, one of his students -- disciples, was thrown out of a window. You know, like, "How dare you insult the Koran?" So, I'm starting thinking about (inaudible) images of all these transactions as a vine, and I call it the *Geometry of Wrath*, instead of *Grapes of Wrath*, obviously. So...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Now, what about the black -- the material?

Mel Chin: The black? Well, it's -- I looked at four or five hot-rolled steel plates, because I love the color of them, and it's preserved with linseed oil, wax, or anything. It's held -- all the banding --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And all the process -- the marks of the process.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah, and I said -- because it's -- oil and steel are the things of war, right? It's about oil. So, you can have something that burns in that... I had to look through that, and try to save that. And it may rust some day, and it may degrade.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And that's OK with you?

Mel Chin: Well, no, it's not OK. I just had to preserve it the best I can.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, so, you put a coating on it, or something?

Mel Chin: Oh, definitely. I used what blacksmiths use. I heated the plate in the hot sun, and then lay down beeswax, linseed oil, a mixture that --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because it has that waxy feel. I was wondering if it was to protect it?

Mel Chin: You have to, yeah, to protect it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, that was preservation in mind?

Mel Chin: Right, which may -- yes, absolutely. See, I've learned. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Teach me -- you can teach me, too.

Mel Chin: I know, you can -- yeah, you could just do the piece, and it would rust, and this piece is gone. Here, I wanted to have a surface. The other thing, you set up problems, because I don't know how well the oil paint will always stick to that. So, it's -- the fragility of this message is very, very ever-present.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And you did the gold leafing yourself?

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah. I did it many ways, and then I finally laid them down and I scratched through it, you know? The right kind of size and everything, just...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right through (inaudible)?

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah. And you cut through it, and picked leaves from our grapevine, and sorted them according to size, (laughs) just to look and say, OK, this is going to be, you know, that \$100 million or whatever. And connected -- of course, it's not like a Lombardi mapping of all the things. It's about a stream of money, and who was it going to.

[00:45:45]

Mel Chin: All right. This is called *Our Strange Flower of Democracy*.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK. OK, I've never seen this one. Tell me about it.

Mel Chin: You haven't?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Mel Chin: This was built around 2005, 2006. It's from bamboo and reed -- you know, cane from our local neighborhood in North Carolina. And the bamboo has to be picked for its age, its strength, and then we've started the process. (inaudible) and Barron and Keith and myself begin the whole process of cleaning, slicing, shaving it to the correct levels. The tie wire is coir -- you know, coconut fiber. It was (inaudible) traditional kind of rope that we use in the islands. And had to get it from the hop growers from Oregon. It's the one place where they continue to use coir to tie up hops. It rots over the seasons and falls apart.

So, what is it about? When I was very young, I heard there was a film. In 1962, '63, there was a film called *Mondo Cane* -- or *Mondo Cane* -- you can pronounce it *Mondo Cane*, whatever. It's by those Italian exploitation documentarians, and we heard there was nudity in it. And I was like 11 or 12.

I said we've got to see this film, you know? Just curious. So, it would only make it to the drive-in. I think it was the Tidwell Drive-In. My father and his aunt -- my uncle, sometimes would throw all the kids in the car -- in the station wagon -- and just go. They would park it back to the film, you know. And this whole business (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). They wouldn't even watch the film. So, I was so grateful that it was just, like, great. We're going to see it, finally. And I remember none of that, which is the most famous sequences that killed -- I say that the film that killed Yves Klein, right? Because he saw that at a Cannes Film Festival -- all that art history, you know, has now (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). I remember none of it except the cargo cult. And you know about the cargo cult?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No.

Mel Chin: The cargo cult is a John Frum cult -- F-R-U-M. And the cargo cult are these amazing beliefs that come out of the Vanuatu islanders and the Melanesian group, that they make effigies of airplanes and cargo landing strips based on the planes that used to stop there in World War II. It was during World War II, the American planes would drop -- land there, transfer their cargo. And they'd watch. So, it became like all these people -- you know, they're making, like, decoys, so some day the American planes will come back with the cargo, you know? I started looking into their belief system and found that, wow, it's not that simple. They believe that the cargo that they say will come is from their own gods. They want this cargo to come because then they can have it to give away. Because the island, like many desperate cultures -- you know, or difficult cultures. I won't say "desperate" -- was based on -- their survival is also based on generosity. Your belief is to give and you become a better person, or the bigger person by just, "Here, I have this."

So, that's inspirational, because you think about so-called "primitive" or "native," or what people, you know, think of as a derogatory term. In fact, it is the opposite. They can teach us so much about the way we really should be. So, I started thinking about this piece because we say our most precious component is democracy. And this is what we have to give. I don't have the leaflet, but I should bring you the leaflet. . You can look it up under PSYOPS operations -- military PSYOPS operations -- is the leaflet that was dropped in Iraq and Afghanistan. Basically, it's an image of this thing -- the shape. It's BLU- 82. BLU -- B-L-U -- means Bomb Live Unit, 82. It is the "daisy cutter" that was dropped in Vietnam, and then -- that flattened jungles. It burns -- it's the closest we get to a thermonuclear device. It's a mixture of -- a huge gasoline-and-fertilizer-mixture bomb, and it's a horrific weapon. It's there to flatten whole jungles so that helicopters could land. And it

contributed to so many deaths, because how can you count something that is evaporated by the heat and the pressure of these bombs?

Well, when they were dropping them in Iraq and Afghanistan, there's no jungle. So why are they doing that? It's for psychological terror -- PSYOPS. Because the impact was so crushing. People go deaf -- children, whatever. It's a horrific weapon. So, it's the daisy cutter. And they would drop these leaflets. Instead of saying, "Here, here's our contribution to your society -- this belief about democracy." And that, we say, is defending democracy -- why we do what we do. But instead, you drop a leaflet that essentially says, "Run, flee, and you'll live. Stay, and you'll die." That's what we do.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then we drop that.

Mel Chin: Yeah, and it floats down like a parachute. And then, when it detonates, it impacts immediately. So, why did I think this is an important event, to show it here? If you -- it got built in 2005. We showed it at The Station.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And was it always suspended?

Mel Chin: It was always suspended, but never to its full height. And never to its, you know, to... Because this is the detonator. And I had to put it here because you look around at this *Beaux-Arts* -- is it *Beaux-Arts*?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, *Beaux-Arts*.

Mel Chin: And it is based on -- you look at all the ionic, kind of, columns -- fluted columns. And you're talking about Greek-inspired motifs. This is like the atrium. So, imagine this place with the *Death of Socrates*. Here's Socrates, that goes against Athenian democracy, and he goes (inaudible). And then you have that. And he's given the hemlock. Those plant flower heads are not based on anything other than the flower head of hemlock.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, the -- what's on the end are the --

Mel Chin: I mean, I split with bottle caps -- like, beer bottle caps -- the things we export, too, as our pro-- (audio drops out). And the scale of this piece, and all the handles, and everything (audio drops out) specifications of the daisy cutter.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, this is the size of it?

Mel Chin: This is the exact size.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Exactly the size of it.

Mel Chin: I went and got archival (inaudible) military weapons, double-checked. So then we can weave and tie this together in the shape of a daisy cutter. So, the extension is variable and all that. And then, we -- the only thing, instead of a parachute is the flowers of hemlock.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How tall is it?

Mel Chin: It's about fifteen, eight, or something, in full extension. I mean, the --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, even though you made -- did you make it before you knew that the exhibition would be here? Or did you make it specifically with --

Mel Chin: I made it at The Station Museum, when Jim Harithas and I -- asked me -- when Ann and Jim Harithas asked me to show at The Station. I said, you know, Jim's whole -- our whole conversation for 30 years has been politics, political oppression, and what it means, and where does art fit in that? And the nature of art is to critique and question these very things. You know, his passion is very well-directed toward this. So, to make this piece, it was a tribute to what he -- I felt Jim will understand and have no problem. We installed it -- they had about 18-foot ceilings, so we had to compress it. So, when we came here, I said -- I looked at this atrium...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, it seems ideal, I mean, given the Greek -- the Greek allusion.

Mel Chin: Well, I -- it was -- it was -- I knew I had to bring the piece for it, because of -- not just because of scale, how we look about hanging art, but what this place means in terms of what it was inspired from. So, to have this piece here is more (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's perfect.

Mel Chin: It's perfect. Yeah, it is a perfect kind of situation. It's very rare to have a place where the museum -- the common -- the context for installation... It is almost a site-specific presentation of (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes, yes, as you were speaking, that's what I was thinking.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But we will be sure to get a full panoramic view of this.

Mel Chin: Oh, good. You have to.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because I can -- it's almost -- and this, way, it's almost a part of the piece.

Mel Chin: It is. It is. Yeah, yeah. It -- so, I had to talk about this, because I had to negotiate and navigate that kind of terrain with the museum, in order to make sure it made it here, you know? It was a (inaudible). It has never -- it will never be better, because you're not going to find this kind of format -- this form of construction. And I imagine in David's painting of Socrates with all of his -- sitting right here. You can project this other kind of, you know, history. And so, all of that -- layers of what needs to be said is done in this. And inside the bag is a -- inside the piece is a burlap inner lining that is also like this hollow thing. So, basically, it is the point that -- so, here we go. The islanders that we make fun of in exploitation films in the '60s give you the true gift -- generous, be generous. And we consistently betray our knowledge and our capacity by dropping leaflets that basically say, "You will die if you stay in where you live and believe in what you believe." And this is it.

[00:56:12]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, so, when we first started talking about your work, so long ago, it was always about the object, the importance of the material, significance of the materials, and how you get there. And that has been, clearly, a driving force throughout. But your materials have dramatically changed.

Mel Chin: Yeah, the concepts... (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They've come from physical materials to film, video, to other kinds of things, to all -- ephemeral. How has your relationship to those materials changed?

Mel Chin: I don't think -- not at all. Sometimes it's con-- it's still concept-based. To do the film *9-11/9-11*, when you go into the documentation of how we orchestrated that 9/11, back in '73, which... I saw that film sitting next to *Dominique* in '83 --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Interesting.

Mel Chin: -- by -- the film that -- they guy who was tr-- what's his name? -- was traveling around. *On Company Business*, was the -- because they reject-- they showed it once on PBS, and they said, "Either, you've got -- we won't show it

again.” -- lost all funding. Allan Francovich. -- and he was traveling around with film in hand, like many filmmakers back then, trying to show it, to make a living, and to spread this incredible document of overt to covert military takeover of a whole place. These agents willing to discuss what they did. And you’re -- it was shocking. And then, back then, you start saying well, this -- again, the American experiment is not exactly what you think it is. And this treachery was incredible. But there’s be no admission to this, ever, except the release of highly redacted kind of documentation of CIA manuals and communications, and one from Kissinger, that speak about the American AG - - the government hand must be well-hidden. I said, OK, then the *Chileno* hand will be shown. So, it was not just my hand there, or the (inaudible). But it was -- I had to go to Santiago and hire -- and create the animation stuff.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What was that like, when you’re having to -- I mean, to work with other hands, producing what you want?

Mel Chin: Well, to do a film of that scope, and the way I wanted it -- and I wanted it -- more inspired, not from Disney, because these are like Disney-trained animators in Chile. I wanted it to -- the side inspiration to be Goya. So, I gave them copies of *The Disasters of War*. I said, make it -- we have to have this configuration. You have to educate people, and you also -- not just tell people, “This is what I want to do.” You almost have to have -- be passionate about, this is what it is about. They said, you know, “We’ve always wanted to speak about our 9/11. I think this is the way to do it.” So, the -- or if they didn’t believe in the project, then you’re not going to get a good result. And so, how does it feel? It was like -- if it takes 250,000 drawings and the message is urgent, then you’d better work up a team.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, again -- which is another consistent strain -- so much of the work, the materials, is about education and awareness. I mean, it really is.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah, it can be. But, you know, like, this room is the -- is an homage to the departed.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: An homage to...?

Mel Chin: The departed -- my parents. I was cleaning up their house. And to friends. It’s like, you know, William did collages. As I started thinking about people... And Ann Harithas, who had sponsored me for certain projects. And she made collages. I had never made a collage. And one -- and back to the whole source of that -- Max Ernst -- a little miniature biplane with body parts. I said, well, I’ve forgotten... Well, maybe this is another way of conveying

messaging. And I did it because we were cleaning out the house, and only a single volume -- the second volume of Funk & Wag-- the Funk & Wagnalls *Universal Standard Encyclopedia* was there. That's the only tools I had -- was glue stick, knife, scissors, in my par-- father's drawer.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, I mean, that's about as traditional, in terms of materiality, as one can get.

Mel Chin: Yeah, yeah. But then, it becomes like you can't stop. You start -- you realize that messages that are connected -- with the image is connected to the wording and the caption of these encyclopedias. So, I said, well, that's why they're being tossed and discarded. It no longer applies. What happens, then -- is that what we do to the images that we've created? (laughs) We toss them out? I said, no, they have another life. Through art, they can be reborn and reedited. So, it got to the -- it took about a year, and it was a very traditional -- careful cutting. Every image was excised from the Funk & Wag encyclopedias, shuffled like a deck by -- per volume. And big --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Per volume? So, all these images were in Volume One, shuffled?

Mel Chin: Yeah, or --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Or Volume whatever?

Mel Chin: Yeah, in a volume-specific kind of... And I -- they would be put on a table, and I had to think about what I was going to do with them, (laughs) every day. Sometimes it would take three weeks to do one volume. Sometimes I could execute like, you know, 10 of them in 30 minutes. It happened fast and it happened slow.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And how did you decide about the sizing of the paper?

Mel Chin: I started experimenting from that first one I did, which was the second volume.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you do it chronologically? Did you start at Volume One?

Mel Chin: No, I still shuffled --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Mel Chin: And I didn't want to know. I just wanted -- I wanted to use it as a way of freeing my imagination, conveying my psychology in a more natural, and not-so-structured way. So, if you just start assembling, you are talking. And it is a challenge, as I say, to mutate once again, to discover yourself. Because we -- well, I do. Maybe you don't, but I -- you fall prey to the world, and you develop delusions about yourself and where you're standing, and think you're an artist. And you say, well, what does that mean? So, you have to shake it up. And you can do it privately, and you don't have to go, you know, tell everybody. You just quietly build a piece that you could -- these never -- these didn't have to be shown. They were, like, these private enterprises, to have some joy and discovery, some humor, and also some -- convey some of the darker sides of what I've been about, as a memorial, you know, to the departed. (laughs) So, it becomes -- because these images now live again. You know, it's the resurrection of images that will now be discarded and removed. So, that's what it's about.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is this the first they've been installed?

Mel Chin: This was shown, partially -- I remember, we had an exhibition at The State--the Nave Museum, in 2011. And it was a third of -- two-thirds filled. And it looked like a lot, but I realized -- I realized -- I said there are some images back home. And I -- then I realized one assistant had shuffled the volumes. And so, those were false volumes. So, maybe three may have escaped. So, I went and did a study of every image, and bought a whole new set. And to say, it can't stand. I've got to redo maybe 300 pieces. And I said, while I'm at it, I'll use every image I can. So what -- the other -- and started again, building on the ones that were cool. This -- and it ended up the maximum I could get is about 17. You know, and what this size -- you mentioned size, because the book is only a certain sizes. I wanted to have these independent, every one named, narratives. (laughs) So, this economy of the size -- and when you say size, I wanted a sort of size so I could, you know, efficiently lay it out and exercise the creative messaging with each piece, as they would come along. And it was -- it would sit unglued for sometimes a week. Even after I -- "Ah, got it." I would wait and look at them every day, and then, rearrange them and... Once you take one from one, you've shuffled again entirely. It was an ordeal. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Wow. So you'd layout, really one volume as you were doing it.

Mel Chin: Yeah, had -- I had three going simultaneously, but, you know, some would sit, like I say, for months, because I would lay it all out, or go from each volume and lay some out, think about them. And then, of course, you have to look at

every image first, so all the images -- this is the actual volumes I worked from. So, if you go through those pages, (laughs) every one must have been -- all the images, you can see that. And I kept all of the scrap. You know, I didn't want to be known as a book destroyer. I said, well, if you unglue all this stuff, you can have your own Funk & Wagnalls, and re-glue it. (laughs) The volume would be complete. You know, in my mind, I'm thinking, oh, I won't destroy this. I save everything, so if someone wandered by that said, "We hate it, that you cut this up." And... You can do it, man. Go ahead. You know, it's OK. But the -- it showed me, also, about the mind and your vocabulary. As you use more and more, you are releasing them or you have to find new ones, you know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And it slows you down? The process of collage and exact-- again, back to exactitude, you know?

Mel Chin: Right. And when -- you know, this -- I think it was a reaction, not only as a piece of memory but a resistance to my vision being compromised. Well, with this double vision, I see -- I don't have the homomorphics of a horizon-- I have a distortion that is very extreme. And so, you block one eye. And you have to get your eye on things, and you lose peripheral vision. But I started doing these things as a, you know, defiant move against the obvious process as it's happening. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Interesting.

Mel Chin: And you just say no, this one -- this is going to be challenge. And a lot of these were cut by me, but it got to such an extreme degree I had to hire local people. These women -- usually women. It seemed like they were better, to be my gluer and cutters. Some are better cutters, and some are better gluers. I learned this. Some people can't do it all. And you meet somebody and say, "Well, what did you do?" The interview process was so fun, because I would ask people who have never made art before. I said, "Well, what else have you done, when you were a kid?" And when one woman said stamp collecting, I said, "You're hired, because you know paper and glue." (laughs) I mean, with "Revival Field," I remember when Tam Miller was in "Revival Field," she had her degree in transrational poetry from Columbia, in Russian poetry -- Khlebnikov, Zaum, star-language thing. Her credentials were through major universities. I don't have a master's. And she comes to me to my artist's assistant. And I'm looking at her, and I said -- and she was so nervous, because she didn't know. She needed a job. And I said, "Well, obviously, you can type fast and you can read. Here's two abstracts -- 'Degrees of Paradise: The State of Heaven' and 'Revival Field.' Do you understand what

I'm saying?" She said, "Of course." And I said, "But, more importantly, have you ever sewn before?" And she said, "Well, I've made my clothes, and..." "Good. Have you ever planted a plant and had it grow into fruition?" "My father had an organic garden. Yes." I said, "You're hired."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, "You're it. You've got it."

Mel Chin: "You're in." These are the things that are essential. So, the choice of people, and the choice of relationships is also conceptual and material-based in terms of that physical interaction.

[01:09:02]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, where do you go from here?

Mel Chin: Where do I go from here? There's a piece that is a torn piece there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, I saw that.

Mel Chin: That's the Western Sahara. It's a bridge. That's not a normal tear. That tear was a template I made of the line of sand that is in the Western Sahara, that is 2,700 kilometers -- 1,600 miles long. There's a berm that's 50-feet high. And on one side of it, you call it the Liberated Territories of the Western Sahara. And there's more landmines than anyplace on the planet. I visited the refugee camps in October of 2011, because they heard about the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project*, and there was a human rights act-- art group that -- from Seville, from Spain, that go there. And some Americans -- Kirby Gookin and Robin Kahn - - said, "Mel, they want you to come. They just looked at the film of Spike Lee, and they -- my husband Kirby had just lectured about Ai Weiwei. And we just threw in your *Fundred* project." (laughs) And she said, "Bring us the guy with the money." I have no money.

So, I go there, and they have no currency. They have no capital. They live in these camps for 38 years, and they beg for food every year, from the UN. I go -- you go to a desert culture, and you see that if it's the last drop of water or whatever, they'll give it to you to have tea or whatever, under the stars of the desert, right? One of the most hostile places on Earth, because there's no water. The Algerians -- they escaped there because the Moroccans had bombed them in 1975, from napalm and white phosphorus -- illegal weapons - - and chased them to the desert, where the men and women are equal. Because of desert cultures -- and men and women must be equal, because the man could die. You have to negotiate or there's no preservation. I learned

about equality from an Islamic based North African desert people. And the women are proud and strong to say, "Yes."

And so, we started to design their first money -- (laughs) \$5 bill by kids, and then, as you get older -- and there's two \$50 bills, and one designed by the women's team. And I have, like, 5,000 drawings, and we're going to judge and send them back, so they can choose what will be their first currency. OK, but then, what is it based on? We're going to start the first Bank of the Sun. They will. I've met with the ambassador and the delegate of the Western Sahara, and postulated where would be the best place to create an advanced, expandable, modular solar-generation plant with photovoltaics, in the desert? And then, where's the best place to transmit it? The cheapest way to transmit it? And where's the best place to sell it? They have that. It's in -- they'll sell it to the neighboring country Mauritania, which has an iron-ore plant. And they -- the Mauritanian ambassador said, "You make the electricity, we'll buy it." This trickle of money will be the first Bank of the Sun, OK? And get this: Why it's -- when I call it *The Potential Project*, it's in-play already, right? It's because when I was boarding the plane to go there, there was an ad on the jetway -- you've seen these. You fly a lot, so... It says, "0.3 percent of the Western Saharan sun can supply the world's energy. Think of the potential. We do. HSBC Bank." Right? (laughs) I wake up in this desert, you know, climate. There's no bank. There's zero bank. And I say, OK, that's one step. But then I meet the young people who have grown up, that are really -- they're really anxious to be free. Every year, their voice for self-determination is denied by the UN. It was declared that the takeover from Morocco was illegal, according to the international courts at the time. Well, Morocco is on the Security Council, so they table -- every year, no matter who protests, "We'll hold it. Yes, we'll get to that. We're busy with business."

I said, look, we're in an age of climate change. (laughs) What if you created a whole economy not based on oil or gold but the sun? And then showing it can, electronically, work with another country. Your voice will be amplified. You just gave the key to Western powers how you can reasonably transact this power, translate it as not dependent on oil or gold. And then they will listen, and you will have the first money you have ever had, to buy your food and water. Thirty-eight years is how long they've been there, and 38 years ago, the postulation of climate change was -- the first of global warming was by -- I think it was Bromfield -- Bloomfield -- I've got to remember -- you could look up the source. He mentioned there's something about CO₂, and that we're going to have global warming. So, "38 years -- it's time for you, now, to be the first. And you give --"

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so, going back to the cut...?

Mel Chin: That is the cut of the line of sand -- and there's a bridge -- the bridge is back to their ocean that they've been denied, and they're -- the water one was when they were separated. They get back. They get justice.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It sounds like we're being drowned. (laughs)

Mel Chin: OK.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This is really remarkable. And it kind of embodies so much that you've done up to now. I see it, you know? The hand, the concept, the exactitude, the beauty, and the challenge.

Mel Chin: You've got this is the personal challenge. You have out there, there's not -- I only have one drawing, and that's that. There's a half a million of drawings of individuals that believe and have the hope that they'll be relieved of the threat of lead that endangers their mind and their education and their -- everything you know. The neurotoxin element that occurs in all cities in America, that I've discovered here. So, the *Fundred/Operation Paydirt* is another... What's next? The next is, sometimes not just thinking about me, but it is selfishly thinking that maybe if I do something, I will not be threatened as I walk down the Eighth Ward here. Will not -- someone will not just come up and just shoot me, because their mind is so compromised by neurotoxin that they don't even understand why they did it. They just did it because they're angry. And I said, it's selfishly preserving my life by doing something about what affects other people's lives. That's why I do -- (laughs) you know, that makes total sense to me.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, from my perspective, it's been a real education to talk to you about materials that you use to express yourself, because I realized that they're not physical.

Mel Chin: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And physical manifestation is part of it, but it's so much beyond that. And so, I'm -- I feel really proud and honored that you discussed it with me.

Mel Chin: Hey, we're friends. I mean, it's good -- it's great to sit around with somebody you know and love and just talk about stuff.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's been a long time.

Mel Chin: Yeah. It's been --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, I'm very happy to talk to you at this midpoint, and we'll do it again --

Mel Chin: Yeah, why not? (laughter) Maybe not so long --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- when the time comes.

Mel Chin: -- yeah, afterwards. But, you know, thank you, Carol.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Thank you.

[END]