



Artists Documentation Program

Video Interview Transcript

ROBERT WHITMAN

DECEMBER 10, 2018

Interviewed by:

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Associate Director for Conservation and Research, Whitney Museum of American Art**

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About the Artists Documentation Program

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

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

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

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[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Whitney Museum of American Art, Robert Whitman, Artist, Brad Epley]

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

[00:00:37]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Today is December 10, 2018. We are at Pace Gallery with Bob Whitman and his show (inaudible) *Number 61*. Or just *61*?

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK. And we're very honored to have Bob with us today to talk about this. So basically, we're going to talk about the works that are in the show, the state of them, and issues related to their materiality. This is Brad Epley from the Menil Collection. Brad and I are both co-directors of the Artists Documentation Program and I'm Carol Mancusi-Ungaro. OK, let's start with string untitled. *Untitled* string.

Robert Whitman: (laughter) *Untitled* thread.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: *Untitled* thread, OK. First made, when was that?

Robert Whitman: I think it's around '57.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK.

Robert Whitman: And I usually -- I'm only able to date things if I remember where they were made. And so this was done in an apartment I had in Highland Park, New Jersey, while I was still at Rutgers. And I don't know exactly if I had already graduated or not, but -- and the reason it is, is because Lucas saw it, Lucas Samaras saw it and told Carol Janis about it. And Carol Janis was enthusiastic enough to put it in the show at the Janis Gallery called *String and Rope*, I think. Which was a few years later so that's why it is. Now, as far as the issue of its uniqueness, this probably comes in an edition of a couple thousand because what I do is I buy the necessary length of muslin at my local muslin store and unravel the thread.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Just pull the thread.

Robert Whitman: Yeah. And to be authentic we used scotch tape to hook it to the ceiling.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: (laughter)

Robert Whitman: I mean if you --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it keeps being remade obviously every time.

Robert Whitman: Yes, it does. It will keep being remade, although Pace has a stock of this fabric. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And what about --

Robert Whitman: If I had a bigger stock at home.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What about the length? Is it different depending upon --

Robert Whitman: Yes, it does, correct.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So what determines that?

Robert Whitman: Me.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK.

Robert Whitman: And I just decided this is about right in relationship to the bottom. Snipped it off.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it has much to do with the feel from the bottom?

Robert Whitman: For a higher ceiling it would be longer, but it would still --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Still that height?

Robert Whitman: That height, right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Which is about what?

Robert Whitman: About 18 inches or so.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, this looks about 18.

Brad Epley: And the way it moves, is that something that you set up or is it really just because of the ambient circulation?

Robert Whitman: I like things to move in relation to the ambient air. Sometimes we have to do that a little artificially. You know, if people don't have air conditioning or -- in the space. Or heat. Hot air heat or something.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Put something on it.

Robert Whitman: Put tiny fans. But this is fine. We don't have to have a tiny fan for this one.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's interesting how we stand --

Robert Whitman: A big problem for you guys is how do I sign it?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, how do we? How do we know it's yours? (laughter) And so in the future when this is remade, I'm assuming that's -- how do you feel about that in the future?

Robert Whitman: Listen, you know, it's always been a problem for me and that is, sure, remake it. Anybody can remake it. Anybody can make it if they think it's that great, but nobody ever does.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, maybe that's why you're still here.

Robert Whitman: They want you to be the one who puts the thread or something, but you know, I tend to be confronted with this sometimes that it seems to me to be very easy for the person who's interested, you know, to make one for yourself.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: A lot of decisions in making this thread.

Robert Whitman: You know, I don't think -- oh, maybe there are, to hanging the thread. But you know, I don't think, for example, Duchamp had any objections to people making his stuff over again. In fact, I think my feeling was that -- from the stories that I've heard -- he seemed to be enthusiastic about that idea.

[00:05:00]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you don't think -- since there isn't sort of one original you don't think of these as replicas. You just think of them as living and continuing to be made.

Robert Whitman: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Correct?

Robert Whitman: Yeah. I mean what's original about a piece of muslin?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, it exists, but (laughter). And always white?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, pretty much. Unbleached if I can find it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And is it invariably against a dark wall or that depends?

Robert Whitman: No, that had to do with people being able to see it without walking into it when we were hanging the show. In fact, Susan had a lot to do with that, deciding -- we should comment on the never-ending compliments on the way the show looks here.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK.

Robert Whitman: Which is a tribute to Susan.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's really beautiful.

Robert Whitman: We'll get that all on the record.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm so interested in the presence of the string. I mean from our perspective what we'll talk to you about of course is time because time is so central to your work and it's absolutely central to our work in a different way.

Robert Whitman: By the way, that's why it's called *61*.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Why is it called *61*?

Robert Whitman: Because it's 61 years between the first piece in the show and the last piece in the show.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I searched the catalog and couldn't find that, but maybe I just overlooked it.

Robert Whitman: It wasn't mentioned.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Or it wasn't in there, OK.

Robert Whitman: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Got you. I'm glad it came out. I'm glad to hear. It's great. And partly what's really interesting me, and maybe this is because I'm a conservator or we're conservators, is the distance that we're all standing from it. It seems to almost have a presence. How do you feel?

Robert Whitman: I think you'd find that pretty much with anything. You know, everything determines a space around it pretty much.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the space that we feel comfortable in, we feel ourselves in.

Robert Whitman: You notice how people wait in line at the pharmacy? They --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes, that is true.

Robert Whitman: They have a space.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But then the aggressive New Yorkers have to kind of push their way up, but generally yeah.

Robert Whitman: They don't have enough room to --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We don't have enough room, that's a good point. But not to make a joke of this issue of space. I think it's real. I think it has a lot --

Robert Whitman: I agree completely.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Wonderful. Brad, anything else for this one?

Brad Epley: Just I mean the very simple idea of performance in a very simple object like that. Is this one of the earlier manifestations of your interest in that or?

Robert Whitman: I like to think there's a lot of non-thinking about all this stuff and I would never be consciously thinking about any of that at all. If nature -- I might have mentioned before -- if nature gives you something you say thank you. And so that's what I do. So a lot of these, you know, a lot of my early stuff, I don't know about this in particular, but I left around to age (laughter) and I called it that. So I didn't rush to the place to preserve it. So I have some early drawings that are still around that I left on the floor of the place that I was working in that had oil and residue from being a garage. And so there's what you guys would be shocked at, that's contamination. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They still exist, I'm sure.

Robert Whitman: They do exist. And I have torn things that I like that still exist. And I'll be honest to say that I have another early piece that a couple of years ago I found from this period, it would be a little later maybe, had mildew on it. And contrary to my normal behavior, I said gee, I better stop that mildew. So I did what any good conservator would do. I got out my Lysol and sprayed it. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What happened?

Robert Whitman: Which is -- I spend a long time getting a proper glue to work on some other pieces. I think one of the pieces in there. And I got a list of the proper conservation glues, which I lost. So I just went to my local place and got glue. And I asked a friend of mine who helped me get the list of glues, he said, "What did you do? Did you get those glues? The right ones?" And I said, "Nah, I just went and got some glue." And he said, "I thought you'd do that." (laughter) And that was Jed Bark, by the way.

[00:10:17]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, really?

Robert Whitman: Yes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: He knows about glues.

Robert Whitman: Yes, he does, right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Should we go take a look at some of the works on paper? Or do you want to swing this way?

Robert Whitman: Do you want to do it by sequence?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We could.

Robert Whitman: OK, then this would be the next.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, good, that's right.

Robert Whitman: You know, since you guys know about my other stuff you can hardly imagine me being a kind of minimal person.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, this did come as a surprise.

Robert Whitman: Well, you know, I'm -- I never try to do the same thing. So I made a painting so that's it, I don't have to make any more. And I did this so I don't have to do any more. But this is like that. And this is another piece that I let hang around unprotected in whatever environment it found it -- so you see there's a nick and some watermarks on it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When you say you leave it unprotected, is that more related to the naturalness of just leaving something out as opposed to --

Robert Whitman: I don't know. It might be my own personal feeling about the preciousness of art which I've now learned is -- I used to regard as, what is it? (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, only when we'll know what that is.

Robert Whitman: I learned something today. So anyway, that's one of those pieces. And you know, what happens is I always end up liking the way they turn out. You know, being used.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So there's kind of a history in their physicality?

Robert Whitman: Yes. And you brought up the thing about time and I like the idea of the work, you know, delineating its time in a certain way. They do age.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes, they do.

Robert Whitman: And people bend over backwards to try to stop it.

Brad Epley: Do you feel similarly about things that you've created more recently than the things that were your earlier works?

Robert Whitman: Well, you know, they're different. We'll go on to --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We'll get onto it when we see that.

Robert Whitman: So we can.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We'll follow you.

Robert Whitman: Why don't we go look at the checkerboard in there because following the time-time. OK, these guys -- do I have a date on these somewhere?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, '57, right?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, see '57. OK, I was -- once again these are pieces that aged. Until I put them in these frames.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's interesting, isn't it?

Robert Whitman: Well, I tell you why. They were going to be in this show in Spain and I knew they would be framed and I decided I'd better frame them myself or have somebody frame them so that I could make sure they're OK. And so they're Bark frames. As you know, they're serious.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They're serious and beautifully made. So these were made in New Jersey as well?

Robert Whitman: I think so, yeah. Oh yeah, definitely.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And it's just aluminum foil. You want to talk about this?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, aluminum foil and gold paint.

Brad Epley: Scotch tape.

Robert Whitman: Scotch tape, yeah. You know, the thing is it doesn't have any more stickum but they tend to -- they have their own inertia. They're just going to stay there anyway somehow.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And over time the scotch tape has darkened.

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the aluminum has lost its sheen with --

Robert Whitman: That's right.

Brad Epley: I think maybe even the -- I don't know if that's where the aluminum has fallen off or if it's a corrosion product or something, but yeah, the reflectivity of it --

Robert Whitman: It probably is corrosion. I don't know what you call when an aluminum corrodes. It's something like an aluminum something.

Brad Epley: I think they call it white rust, but it's yeah, aluminum oxide.

Robert Whitman: Yeah, that's what it is.

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

Robert Whitman: It has to be. Like I said before, if nature sends you something you say thank you. But isn't it interesting that the parts that I draw on are not so marked up?

[00:15:06]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So each piece is drawn on actually, right? That's what we're seeing here? Or is that just a crumple of --

Robert Whitman: No, no, that's just a crumple of where the -- just the ones you see very clearly.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Where the X -- where the boxes -- checkerboards.

Robert Whitman: Yeah, checkerboards are. So these are all pretty much the same.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so in places where at one point there was scotch tape would you ever -- are you accepting the state of it or like down here, for example --

Robert Whitman: Oh, for sure I make --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Or you wouldn't want us to age scotch tape and put it back in there?

Robert Whitman: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, that was my understanding of your feeling.

Robert Whitman: No. If somebody actually got this and scotch tape fell off, I wouldn't object if they put it back on because now they can do that pretty good with a -- since they have good pictures of the stuff.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's an important point. It was my next question.

Robert Whitman: You know, after 50 or 60 years I figure that that's OK. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's OK, yeah.

Robert Whitman: I mean who knew I would live that long?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I know. That's the truth, isn't it?

Robert Whitman: I'm not supposed to talk about that stuff.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You can talk about whatever you want--

Robert Whitman: Okey-dokey.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But it's a jump. Just before we just leave here, it's kind of a -- or maybe it isn't a jump from here to the thread.

Robert Whitman: Oh, from the thread to here?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Or thread to here. Because they're about around the same time. And that one you're saying, "We just remake it. We don't preserve the original thread."

Robert Whitman: Right. Unfortunately, or fortunately, these are very much a product of me. The thread is not so much, not visibly anyway, so it's kind of hard to remake them. You know, you do try to get rid of your personality. I mean sometimes. Sometimes that's part of the nature of the piece. You just pick up junk and there it is.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Exactly.

Robert Whitman: Okey-dokey.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK. Brad, anything?

Brad Epley: No, I think that's good.

Robert Whitman: This was in a show at the Reuben probably around '59 or '60 I had there. And once again -- oh, this will appeal to you. So when I went scurrying around to try to get the parts for it I was missing some parts from the package that came from a show.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, after it was first installed, you mean?

Robert Whitman: Oh, yeah, no, no, just recently it was in a show. And so I was missing some stuff and the stuff that was missing from the thing was this chain and this. So what I did is I went to the hardware store and I bought this kind of chain which was now zinc plated. OK, so there I was faced with a problem you guys are faced with all the time. So somebody said, "Well, just soak it in vinegar" which is what I did. And then I soaked it in water and it got nice and rusty.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Amazing.

Robert Whitman: And I went to my local cleaners where I usually got one of my sources for plastic in those days and I got some plastic, you know, clothes bags, and I assembled that. Only to find out when they opened the door part, the original of these was here, was still attached to the door. So I didn't have to do that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But this is the replacement or this is the original?

Robert Whitman: No, this is the original. This is completely the original.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But the plastic was gone?

Robert Whitman: No, that's original too.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It was all there?

Robert Whitman: Yeah. It was all there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But you had your role as a conservator for a while.

Robert Whitman: (laughter) That's right. But once again, one is concerned with the image, not how it's made, excepting obviously how it's made is pretty much close to making the image. You can't really -- other stuff that's more technical you can remake.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does the image encapsulate the time then?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, pretty much. I think so.

[00:20:00]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So based upon from when you first made it to now, does it look about the same?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, pretty much. It looks about the same.

Brad Epley: Has it always been installed like this, suspended or, from the ceiling or do you --

Robert Whitman: Yes, it has been because typically, you know, my idea was and might be if somebody were to ask me again, drill a hole in the floor, a couple of holes in the floor and a couple of holes in the bottom of the door and with pins have it sit on the floor without this. good question. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That is a good question. That would be great. You would prefer that actually if it were possible?

Robert Whitman: Yes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I understand that completely. It looks terrific, really. OK, should we head back into the --

Robert Whitman: Yeah, because I'm trying to figure out what comes next and they do. There's a big jump.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We might need to have the water turned on.

Brad Epley: And also a window, I think.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the window, yeah. Bob, do you want to sit down for a minute while they do that?

Robert Whitman: No, I'm OK so far. I'll let you know when I can't stand up anymore.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Good, me too.

Robert Whitman: Oh, you have trouble too?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hey, not far behind you.

Robert Whitman: Oh, I think you're plenty behind me.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This is another topic and I mean how does it feel to see these all together aged, you know, in a pristine gallery kind of all new? They look the same to me. I mean they look --

Robert Whitman: Pretty much. And you know, God, I hate to say it, but it's kind of boring. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I understand what you're saying. It's maybe where I was going. But that's more a reason of because it's a gallery, do you think?

Robert Whitman: No, no. It's a more a reason I would like to think that I have more stuff to do.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What do you mean?

Robert Whitman: You know, I'd like to think there's work --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Newer works, you mean?

Robert Whitman: Yeah. Maybe nothing like this, but you know. In fact, on the way in I was working on a performance in my head.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You're still working. You're definitely still working.

Robert Whitman: Trying my best. You know, it's hard.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, but you're definitely still working. No question about that.

Robert Whitman: Well, otherwise you'd be looking at the top of a box.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, I'm not going to do that.

Robert Whitman: Neither am I. I don't think.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm not going to do that. OK.

Robert Whitman: You'll be able to fill it later. And I can't quite -- I rationalize. You know, that's one of the things I discovered you do in order to figure out stuff is you rationalize why you're doing it. So the three film pieces in here, it's like what they see, what the shower sees, what the dressing table sees. Something that, it's obviously not true, but it's the way I thought of these things. And then after you do it comes the whole slew of other rationalizations and people get in your head and make you think of things like, I don't know, whatever you would think. Like this is a kind of reverse Susanna and the Elders. It was something -- or a peeping Tom only you're peeping out of the window instead of in.

Brad Epley: But all that comes after you said sort of --

Robert Whitman: People do it, yeah. People do it. I hate that idea.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Why don't we -- should we go over and look at *Shower*?

Robert Whitman: I'm a proponent of no thinking.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Just feeling?

Robert Whitman: Well, you just do it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do it.

Robert Whitman: And I was so happy when my granddaughter, after -- this is a couple of years ago. After playing with *Shy* -- I mentioned doing this -- she turned around and she said, "After I stopped thinking I got it." Because when you're a drummer you can't think. If you have to count you're screwed, you know.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's right.

Robert Whitman: So that goes for a lot of this stuff. Now, there's a --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let's walk a little --

[00:24:57]

Robert Whitman: You do things a lot in reaction to the nature of the event. So in this case, since the camera that I had, you're limited in the length of a shot to the amount you can wind up the camera -- before you get the motor for the camera. Then when you get a little dough you get the motor and you can have longer shots.

But I think these shots are limited by that. And the other thing I would mention that is a function of other people is when I'm looking at these pieces I'm amazed at the kind of courage and generosity it must have taken these ladies to do this. How sweet can that be, you know? In those days, and particularly in performance things, you had people doing performance and you're going how in the world did they imagine to participate in this kind of silliness? Or you know? And they were so great.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, fabulous. Well, trust must have had a lot to do with it. And commitment to what you're all trying to do?

Robert Whitman: I don't know. I can't -- I think it was just the ambience of the time. You have a circle and, you know. So that's part of this.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's an important point, I think. I mean I've heard -- I've seen you say or read you said that time and place had so much to do with each of the pieces.

Robert Whitman: They do.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you captured the time and the place when you were doing these pieces.

Robert Whitman: I'll tell you something hilarious about the *Shower*. I think it's hilarious. Now, when I decided to do the *Shower* I just went got -- I don't know where the hell -- I was living on Fourth Avenue at the time. And this would have to be early mid '60s, like '63 or 4. I don't know what the dates are on these.

Brad Epley: Sixty-four?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, I'd say '64, I remember that. Because when I said '63 somebody called me up and then oh, shit, we're going to have to change the name of the show. I said, "What do you mean?" He's like, "It's dated from '64." "OK, '64, fine with me."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Go for it.

Robert Whitman: I don't care. Now what was I saying? Oh, OK, I just went down the street to a plumbing supply house and bought the shower for like \$25.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Wow.

Robert Whitman: You can't find these things anymore.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No.

Robert Whitman: We did locate three of them. One, the owner didn't like the idea of a bunch of carpenters coming into his house and taking out the stuff and putting it back.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, it was installed?

Robert Whitman: It was installed, yeah. Usually in a basement. I had one of these in the basement of a building on White Street.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let's get closer and take a closer look at this. So that was one of them.

Robert Whitman: Another one was an apartment and they wanted a truckload of money for it. Basically, they wanted a new bathroom built, I think. And this one was owned by an artist named Howard Smith who was willing to part with it. You know, just replumb it and take it out and put it back, that's all. So we got that one.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So there's this one and one other one, is that right?

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Two of them?

Robert Whitman: Yeah. And the funny thing is I tracked my original plumber where I live now in that town was a hoarder. And I knew he was a hoarder so I went down there and he died a few years ago, but his son was there and his son said, "Dad had all this junk and when he died I started getting rid of it and I just got rid of one of those a couple of weeks ago." (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, no.

Robert Whitman: Exactly. So then I went to one of my old scrap places and I went there and asked them. They said nah. I said, "Maybe one of those bungalow colonies in Sullivan county. It's probably what they used in those things. Maybe I should go over there and look." And the guy looked up and said, "Do people shower in Sullivan county?" (laughter) So anyway I did find this one. And the funny thing is I had this fantasy that once I found one, they would mysteriously be 20 or 30 of them on my front lawn coming out of nowhere. That of course didn't happen. But I did read an article that somebody sent me. About these guys who live in a Frank Lloyd Wright house somewhere in the south and there's one of these there and of course they regard this as a historical precious artifact. (laughter)

[00:30:13]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right, untouchable.

Robert Whitman: You know what's great? I called up the manufacturer and they said, "Oh my God, we haven't even heard about those things in decades." They went from doing pressed tin ceilings and when that went out of fashion, they started doing this kind of thing and then when it came back, they went back to the tin ceilings. So the one I spoke to on the phone said, "Maybe some of the old people will remember it." (laughter) So anyway. Yeah, something that doesn't happen anymore. And the other thing too from your perspective, the other one of these, isn't the so-called original one --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is that the one that was owned by Bob Rauschenberg?

Robert Whitman: Yeah. He had a fire.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh.

Robert Whitman: And what happens, when people clean up, they don't look at art as -- they don't see the art of it. They just see a bunch of junk that they've got to throw out. So a lot of it got thrown out. The plumbing and hardware stuff got thrown out.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, wow.

Robert Whitman: So for that piece it's replaced. And the famous gallery that disposed of Bob's collection lost or misplaced or destroyed the plastic that was in the center. It's a -- in those days -- what I did was I went to the plastic place and went to a local sand blasting place and had them sand blast. Because I didn't know about rear screen projection surfaces that you could buy and I certainly wouldn't have the money because they're kind of expensive. So that's how I did it in those days. And this one I went to my local auto body guy and he sand blasted the back of it. He also painted the top of the tables in there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, I'm anxious to talk about the tables. And then this was then converted to a DVD, right? This is a DVD?

Robert Whitman: Either a DVD or a flash drive or something. I mean it's digitized some way. And what happened of course in the early days, you couldn't do a very good job of it. As (inaudible) said -- you know (inaudible), right? He said, (imitates accent) "Zere is no black."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No?

Robert Whitman: Black. But now you get really good black. Now with this piece, now I did something typically -- I gave the original film to whoever bought the piece. And it just happened that with this, since I am a slob, you may have gathered, with this stuff, I just went to where my films are and the second can I picked up, it said, "Shower" and I opened it up and it was totally pristine, in the can for 40 plus years or maybe 50 years, it had never been opened and we took a look at it and it was just as good as the original. So this is the digitized version of that print.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's interesting. You know, given all the efforts that we make to preserve film it's so interesting that yours just sat in the can for 40 years.

Robert Whitman: Well, I spoke to a film guy -- this is years ago -- and film lasts a long time. And he said -- and of course he was going nuts over digital stuff, in anger, and he said, "Look, I just opened a can of film from 1916 and the color was just as fresh as the day it was shot." So I'm going, OK.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Impressive.

Robert Whitman: But on the other hand, when we get to the other room I can -- let's go there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Want to go there? OK. Just before we leave, how about the color here? Color looking really good now because it's --

Robert Whitman: I think it's great. Yeah, it's great. Sure.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's what you remember?

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, let's go.

Robert Whitman: It's terrific.

Brad Epley: Go this way or?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

[00:35:00]

Robert Whitman: No, I'm fine.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Doing OK? All right, I'm like the grandmother -- granddaughter.

Brad Epley: So for a piece like that when you originally showed it the projector would have had to have been quite far back or --

Robert Whitman: Oh, God, it was a nightmare. First it was those early projectors ate film, the continuous projectors. They were terrible. And every year I'd go to the projector guys and say, "You guys got a new projector? Does it work?" "Oh, yeah." Still no good. So what I did was I shortened the length by getting a big mirror that I would stick behind these things that cuts it in half. It's still a lot of space. Now with these things you've got these video projectors you can put right close so it's good. This film is the original film from I guess '64.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: (inaudible) I'm sorry.

Robert Whitman: I said this film is the original film from '64 and I do think it's still limited by the wind in the camera, the shot. And this is a video that we made last year or fall. And the thing -- the big difference as far as I'm concerned and you're concerned is that with video you overshoot.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What do you mean?

Robert Whitman: You have to be economic with film because you only have so much shot length. So you can let the camera run with video because it doesn't cost anything.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I see.

Robert Whitman: I mean the video camera will run forever and the signal -- anyway, but the nice thing about this, one nice thing, is that I had the idea that when I suggested that we do it that I would ask Suzanne to do it again. And I called her up and she said, "Oh, it would be a blast."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Good for her.

Robert Whitman: So that's what I'm saying.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, the generosity.

Robert Whitman: And bravery, yes. So you can see it's the same person just 50 years later.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Are these two works?

Robert Whitman: No. The original film and the new film and together they make one work.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This is a new work, OK.

Robert Whitman: I consider it that, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the single work is at Newark like 1999?

Robert Whitman: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Terrific that Suzanne did this.

Robert Whitman: Isn't that great?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Just amazing and very compelling because again, aside from our concern with just the physicality of time on this, here is time.

Robert Whitman: Well, we could take another jump, maybe go out of sequence a little bit because I honestly don't remember all the dates. We're going in here because --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Wait, we have some more to ask you about this.

Robert Whitman: OK, good.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But don't lose your thought.

Robert Whitman: I'm not, I won't. I don't have many.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: (inaudible)

Robert Whitman: And I remember them.

Brad Epley: Were these originally mirrors and you projected onto the mirror for this one?

Robert Whitman: No.

Brad Epley: It was always a --

Robert Whitman: I just pretended that we would make the screen be the mirror. And I have to say that Bill Scanga, who I don't know what you call it, manifested these versions, did a brilliant job of getting the right format and the right monitor to put them on to be a mirror. The original-original, which I gave the rear project surface because Lynne, being a good curator, objected to my updating it and digitizing and doing all that stuff. So the original was done by a continuous loop eight-millimeter projector which worked better than a 16's. It did work a little bit. So I made a rear screen sort of mirror for that, but it was a big box that had to hang back on the table.

Brad Epley: For something like this would you just kind of generally describe to Suzanne what you wanted her to do or how was the interaction?

Robert Whitman: What we did -- you mean for the second version?

Brad Epley: Either. Whichever one.

Robert Whitman: No, for the first one I just explained the idea that every time she changed color we would change the background or something like that. And then rather -- we kind of made a shot list derived from the first one and tried to follow it kind of on the second one. Which is why the shots are kind of longer in the second one, much longer.

[00:40:15]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's coordinated in a certain way. There is a coordination or is that happenstance?

Robert Whitman: Happenstance, yeah. That's shot in our town.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, is that right, Warwick?

Robert Whitman: Yes, and the funny thing is that as soon as we set up -- you know, I never get permission or anything. You just go and shoot. Well, I did in this case since I know the mayor. I said, "Listen, Michael, is it OK with you if I shoot on this street here?" And he said sure. Michael's the mayor of our town, but he also is kind of hip. He went to L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris so he knows something.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: (inaudible)?

Robert Whitman: Yes. Anyway, the funny thing. So as soon as we set up a police car drives up, blocks off the street, and I just went and I spoke to him and he said, "Forget about it. Don't worry about it." So you see the traffic is all going by?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right.

Robert Whitman: That's because he's blocked off the street because down the next street --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: There is no traffic.

Robert Whitman: There is a parade.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh. (laughter)

Robert Whitman: And I'm not sure if we got any of the parade in the shots, but meanwhile you see all these cars going by? I don't think anybody in any of those cars noticed what was going on when we were doing this.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Doesn't look like it. (inaudible) don't know what they're doing.

Robert Whitman: It was a weekend. The only person who noticed was somebody who I happened to know in town who happened to be walking down the street at the time, so.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So is this it? Can you imagine doing it again?

Robert Whitman: Not really. The other thing I would mention, the person who did the filming here is Jacob Burckhardt. Jacob is the son of Rudy Burckhardt. Teaches film and sound and stuff at Cooper Union. And I said, "Jacob, I happen to know where there's a Bolex with all the lenses and all the stuff. You want to shoot it in 16?" And his reply wasn't, "Are you out of your mind," but it was his thought. (laughter) In other words, that's not happening. Which was kind of too bad. It would have been fun. But it would have been 20 times more work. This we did in one day. It would have taken about a week to do it the old -- no, four days maybe.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then all of the physical stuff you just purchased commercially and just redid it?

Robert Whitman: Right. Do you know about Ricky's?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: R-I-K-K-I, right? Is that the name of the place?

Robert Whitman: No, I don't know. R-I-C-K, I don't know.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, I don't know about it. What's Ricky's?

Robert Whitman: I went looking for makeup places, supplies, and all the places I went to were closed. They were out of business. And Pilar came, my daughter, and she said, "Dad, don't you know about Ricky's?" No. "It's right around the corner." So it was right around the corner from White Street. And Ricky's is the place where people go to get makeup and wigs and whatever else they need to transform themselves. So that's --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's a really good piece and having this, the two together, I don't know, must have brought back thoughts to you or --

Robert Whitman: Well, it was very good. It was Sylvia's suggestion and obviously it's natural to the thing. You're talking about time.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Totally.

Robert Whitman: I guess if you get old enough then you can -- you get that dimension, you can have that dimension.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's a nice dimension. OK, is there anything else you want to say about this?

Robert Whitman: Not really, no.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, let's move on.

[00:44:30]

Robert Whitman: Now we can go here. This is a jump in time. Oh, no, it's a jump back. This is the earliest film piece and it's basically two pieces. The silent version, which is the one I shot originally, is four people sitting around a table and talking, but I didn't have sound so you can't tell. And if you notice, the table top is on the ceiling and when I -- and then when you hear the sound, which is turned off I think, I called up the people who were still alive, in conversation and I cut myself out so there would be some sense of the time between then and when I showed the piece which is a couple of years ago. And there was. So the people in the piece, one is John Vaccaro who some of you may have known, he was in a few of my pieces, and John became the theater director. He was a founder of Ridiculous Theater Company which Charles Ludlam. They had a disagreement so John went on to direct regular plays, or irregular plays, let's put it that way. So that was one. Simone was another one. And Suzanne was another one. And Larry Rudder who died young. And Suzanne was as great as you could imagine in the phone conversation I had with her because she really gave enough information to bridge that gap, you know. So I mentioned cigarettes. I said, "You know this was shot in the '60s because all of the ashtrays are full and everybody is smoking." And she said -- I won't imitate her way of speaking because it's too much -- she said, "Yeah, when I was one of Andy's 13 beautiful women all I could do was smoke a cigarette. Cindy managed a tear. I was so envious." (laughter) She told very telling and moving stories on that phone call. I can't remember too much what Simone's conversation was. But you know, once again you're astounded by people's willingness to participate.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And that's true of this one as well?

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, this is kind of different. This is --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, no, right. This is the one -- is this *NEWS* based on the early *NEWS*?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, that's right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think we can go -- I don't think -- is there sound in there?

Robert Whitman: There should be. Once again, and this is something that I happen to like, you get what the technology lets you have at the time. And I can remember one of the people who worked on one of these things, when we talked about it, was hoping for a better image. I said, "What better can there be? It's what it is." You know, it's what we discussed before. You have to look and see what's there, not what you want it to be, you know? That's part of what these pieces are. And this is a whale. My fantasy of course is to remove myself so this is an incarnation of a series of pieces that I've done over the years, starting out with radio. You guys remember radio?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We do, yeah.

Robert Whitman: And payphones. So I started in Manhattan, people going around and walking between phone booths and I asked them to report on what they saw. And as soon as they made an image, which people by nature tend to be, when they're not self-conscious they can be quite poetic and they'll give you an image. They'll talk about there's a lady dressed with a red coat across the street and she's got a brown paper bag in her hand. Already you're seeing something. It's kind of wonderful. So I did a few of those radio versions, one of which was in Houston, by the way.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I was just going to ask you about the one in Houston. This is the one that Helen Fosdick participated in, right?

Robert Whitman: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Her story was I think you were based in Houston but you sent her to Galveston. She went really far out.

Robert Whitman: Oh, she did?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Or I don't know about Galveston. Maybe the outskirts of Houston toward Galveston.

Robert Whitman: Could be, could be.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And at a certain hour had to call in, is that right?

Robert Whitman: Right. Well, yeah, I had to kind of time it out so that they called -- I can't quite remember. They made one call every five minutes so we ended up with 90 calls in a half an hour. And the cool thing about the one in Houston is somebody called in who wasn't part of the program. (laughter) But he got it and just called in.

[00:50:19]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because this was live on the radio, right? So they heard it all day.

Robert Whitman: Right. Which I think is nice.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Helen said it was an amazing experience to be one of the participants.

Robert Whitman: Well, they all came back to the place and heard the -- what we did.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's what she said.

Robert Whitman: That was the idea is you go back to the home base and have a party. I mean why else? Why else do all this work?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you're getting a slice of America in these different places?

Robert Whitman: Well, yeah. In those days -- it's kind of interesting, it's changed over time. You could probably, if somebody actually took the trouble to look at them, you would get a more regional -- you'd get a more Houston feel for the Houston one, you'd get a more Minneapolis feel for that one, a more New York feel. Now everything has become more and more homogenized. You notice regional accents are disappearing? Kind of?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you went from pay phones to cell phone?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, pay phones. Then we got the cell phone era, to cell phones. The first cell phone actual piece that I did was in Leeds, in England, and that's when I realized I didn't know English. (laughter) Because I asked the guys who were helping, I said, "Listen, do you guys modify your accents because you know

you're talking to an American?" And they said no, no, no. Bullshit. They certainly did. And I used to sit -- because I'm the guy who gets up early and there's nothing to do so you go to the railroad station, buy the newspaper, have a cup of coffee and you hear people coming off the train speaking and you realize England is full of regional accents that you just don't have a clue, that you need subtitles when you're talking to people. So we went -- that was a cell phone piece. And then shortly after that came video phones which is what these are. And you notice that the early -- these phones have a different technology than used today. Today's phones are much more like videos, but these are like phones. And Nokia had a way of adjusting the frame rate and doing other stuff. That was their way to compensate or try to get what they thought was the appropriate image and I think it's terrific. Anyways, you won't be able to do it again unless you can go back and get the 30 phones that Julie has squirreled away somewhere and get them charged up again. They might not even work with today's cell phone towers.

Brad Epley: Did you save materials from that project as a kind of project, like all the phones and all of that or is that --

Robert Whitman: Julie's got all that stuff. She's the --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: She's your archivist.

Robert Whitman: Not mine. She's her own. She collects stuff.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: While we're still on -- or anyway part of this was in Texas. You did other things in Houston as well and there was something sound that you went to homes or something? I didn't exactly understand.

Robert Whitman: I can't remember the name of the performance that I did there, but I did a performance there. I did a couple of pieces at the Houston Contemporary Art Museum that were -- that I had done before.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It sounded like it was something like people's homes. Like address -- no. Never people's homes? OK.

Robert Whitman: No. It would be fun.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, I'm mistaken.

Brad Epley: There was one where we couldn't find a description of the piece, but we found in the archives your list of supplies and things and I think there was a water component and there was a La Belle cassette player or something like that and

your instructions about, you know, “Jiggle this switch every 20 minutes” and things like that. It was --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does this ring any bells?

Brad Epley: But we never had a -- there's no -- nobody really knows exactly what the piece was.

Robert Whitman: I don't either right now. You sure it was me?

Brad Epley: I'll go back and check for you.

Robert Whitman: I'll be darned.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This is an amazing work, it really is. Have you ever gone back to the same place a second time?

Robert Whitman: You mean the towns?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, the local report.

Robert Whitman: Let's see. Let me think. Not really. I don't think I have.

[00:55:05]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Just curious.

Robert Whitman: You know, part of the deal for me is you get a chance to go around a place with somebody who's a fan of that place and knows that place. So in Houston it was Helen Winkler, who you know and what better guide could you --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Incredible.

Robert Whitman: Yeah. So we went to the turning basin, we went to San Jacinto monument at night. “San Jacinna”, see, that's good Houston.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That is. That's real important. We all know about that.

Robert Whitman: Oh, you do?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, we do.

Robert Whitman: Because I would never have pronounced it like that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Isn't that where Sam Houston was --

Brad Epley: Yeah, that was where Texas got its independence.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: See, we lived in Texas. We know this stuff.

Robert Whitman: No, I'm talking about the pronunciation. Normally I would have never -- I would have said San Jacinto. But in Texan it's San "Jasinna."

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you got something right.

Robert Whitman: So then we went to the railroad switching yards at night. I mean all this stuff is kind of ad hoc Helen stuff, poking around being curious and if they find you, they'll chase you away. Another tour of Houston I got which was just for fun was all the parking lots. Only Helen would think of taking you around to parking lots.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: There are a lot of cars there.

Robert Whitman: And I got the Minneapolis/St. Paul area tour by an artist named Joe Breidel. You know who that is?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No.

Robert Whitman: American Indian artist. Kind of a neat guy. I think in Leeds I had to find out for myself. But one of the things that I have done over the years that nobody knows about because very few people have been with me is since I wander around, I'm the guy who's up, I have walking tours of my -- I compose them. You know, if you go from space to space and you try to be sensitive of the evocative nature of those spaces you compose them instinctively. I think people do that. So I did a great one in Leeds.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I need to hear this again, I'm sorry, Bob. I didn't get all that. When you walk from space to space --

Robert Whitman: Yeah, you'll begin to compose those spaces to make a piece out of the walk.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I see.

Robert Whitman: You know, one piece has a certain feeling and another space has a thing and you poke into the -- and when you're up early in the morning you're the guy that gets to look in the curious places. There's nobody around. So I over the years have made a few walks that I consider works, but as I say they're not written down, nobody will know. But you do it. I did a good one with -- I know the people I went on some of them with. I did a good one with Allan Kaprow and Red Grooms when I lived in Alpine. I had a walk along the

stream on the ice over the stream and through different other spaces in the woods and to a place where there was a pond and a monument, you know 20 stories up. Stuff like that. You find this stuff and you compose them. Anyway, that's once again the performance.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: -- still doing this, I'm sure.

Robert Whitman: I can't walk that far anymore.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I know. When we say --

Robert Whitman: It's one of the things that I've lost.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you do it in some other form?

Robert Whitman: My last walk was a mile.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's pretty long.

Robert Whitman: It was the March Against Gun Violence.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What?

Robert Whitman: The March Against Gun Violence.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's worth walking a mile.

Robert Whitman: Well, I did it for two things. Because my granddaughter, she doesn't know it, but she's been an activist. She got all the accolades at the graduation from middle school, including her name on a plaque that will go in the --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Wow.

Robert Whitman: No, no, she led the school down Wall Street in that march against gun violence. She was given credit by the person who gave out the award. I knew she was involved for leading the charge to initiate the gay/straight alliance in the district two schools. Not just her school, the district two schools. So, as I see it, she just thinks she's doing because oh, gee, let's do that, it's a good idea. So far.

[01:00:33]

Robert Whitman: The only thing I can remember, I shot this at George Segal's.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: At George Segal's?

Robert Whitman Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, December 10, 2018

Video: adp2018a_20181210_005va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2018a / TRT: 01:21:00

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Robert Whitman: Farm, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh yeah?

Robert Whitman: He had some woods. So I must not have had woods. Oh, no, I was living in New York at the time.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, so you didn't have woods.

Robert Whitman: I didn't have woods.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No.

Robert Whitman: And I'll be darned if I can say anything more about this really. It's just part of the stuff of a house. You know, like a wall with a window in it. The window, by the way, if you notice is a little on the low side.

Brad Epley: On the low side?

Robert Whitman: Don't you think? Low to the --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, a little on the low side.

Robert Whitman: Windows typically are a little higher.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You're right, it is. But it's been installed many -- I mean of the three or four times it's been installed it's different. The window's different.

Robert Whitman: Pretty much, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So how have you determined --

Robert Whitman: I just went and got a window and my friend Pete put together the wall, a carpenter.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does it always have a wall?

Robert Whitman: Oh, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The window?

Robert Whitman: Oh, yeah. Not only that, that stuff is impossible to find.

Brad Epley: The paneling?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, this is not the original paneling and I found -- by that -- at the house of the guy that I referred to before, the mayor, he had a house and he had -- his basement was covered with this stuff. And I said, "Michael, let me know if you're going to take that stuff out. I need it." Well, he didn't believe me so it went into the dumpster. I mean I would have gotten endless supply of the original where it's Masonite with this kind of -- I don't -- glued on decal stuff. This is good enough.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it was important to get aged material to do this?

Robert Whitman: Not really, you know. I got -- this stuff is kind of new, but it sure looks like the original. And they did a great job of installing it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When you say the original you mean the first time you made it?

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It had walling like this?

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Brad Epley: Because I think I've seen it too where it's just a window and it's almost just in the drywall or?

Robert Whitman: When Lynne did it at Dia --

Brad Epley: For playback or?

Robert Whitman: She violated her own code of the curator when she installed it in a window that looked like their windows in that building on 25th Street or 22nd Street, wherever the hell it was. You know, that's what's so funny about --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: People who install art?

Robert Whitman: They get hoisted by their own curatorial obligations.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I think we probably fall into that occasionally too.

Robert Whitman: So let's see --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So how has this changed? Are there other ways in which this has changed in its different --

Robert Whitman: Yeah. I mean the only thing I can remember is that you can't buy \$25 windows anymore. (laughter) And the other thing that doesn't exist so much

anymore are old-fashioned junk yards. They're gone. I went to a junk yard, I don't know, within the last year or so where I always could find stuff and it was gone.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it's important to find -- why is it important to have used stuff?

Robert Whitman: It's not really, you know. It's probably because I'm -- let's see, why did I look for something? I might have looked for something to replace something that had gotten lost. That would probably be it. Probably I was trying to find another shower.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do you enjoy doing that?

Robert Whitman: Well, the bloom is off that rose a little bit, you know. I mean I'd like to find something else to be curious about.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Anything else you want to say about the window? Anything things, thoughts we had? I've been walking around with my notes, but I've been so engrossed in our conversation that I haven't been paying attention. Is this the same woman who did the shower?

Robert Whitman: Yes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's a wonderful work. Nature in nature, very simple.

Robert Whitman: And she was in a bunch of performances of mine.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Speaking of newer work, do you want to go take one last look out there?

Robert Whitman: Sure, yeah. We didn't cover the *Great Lakes* and we didn't cover the laser.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. And I definitely want to speak about that.

Brad Epley: Oh, yeah, the laser.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Sure. Both of them.

Robert Whitman: It is more the [soundies?]. This was an interesting switch. You can't hear the -- I guess I turned the sound off, but we shot the film of this in the high speed camera and one of the things that happens with a high speed camera, it doesn't -- it not only slows down the way you see the image, but it lowers the sound. So the ice falling into the glass almost sounds like a bell, like the gong of a bell, that tone. And when I did this -- that film at a performance, that's one of

the things that Emilie pointed out to me. She said, "I can't tell what that sound is." So in the performance I had the sound be the sound of ice falling in the glass and slowly moved it, slowed it down so it became the gong so she would understand that.

Brad Epley: Did all of these grow out of that exhibition then or that -- not an exhibition, but that program? These where you have the sound and the image and the --

Robert Whitman: I got the idea from that, yeah. They're kind of neat, you know.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Fabulous. We can't hear it now, but I did hear it at the opening. It was on. You could definitely hear the sound.

Brad Epley: Was the ice in the glass the only one where you actually had to make a modification of the original sounds to make it kind of make sense?

Robert Whitman: For the performance, but not for this.

Brad Epley: Not for this, OK?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is that your own pool?

Robert Whitman: Yes, it is. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I thought so. I thought I recognized those leaves.

Robert Whitman: Listen, nobody would let me shoot their pool in that condition but me.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The sound is gorgeous really.

Robert Whitman: That was not my board.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Not your board?

Robert Whitman: No. That you can get sound off the internet that's all of this and I had a billion sound effect records at one time. And they're ridiculous because now you can get anything off the internet. You don't need any of that stuff.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So how does the installation seem to you here?

Robert Whitman: I think it's terrific. Now, I wanted to do it the way it was done originally, but --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How was it done originally?

Robert Whitman: It was a room about this size, but in those days everybody smoked so the room was full of smoke. So what you saw -- well, the one piece that was a line and what you saw was a plane of red make itself in the space and then unmake itself. In this one it's these wobbles that are continuous and they would be articulated by the smoke. But I think this is just fine, you know, and they did a great job installing it. And this is where things go askew. A couple of times the laser piece has been loaned to people and they put it in a space like this, huge with too much light and you can't see it. And not only that, so when I called up a registrar of the loaning institution and complained, I said, "Look, you can get a stronger laser and I know how to do it or I know the person who does." And they said, "Then it wouldn't be original." And I'm going like this, my mind is going, "Dear, you don't have the original. The original is a fucking tube about this long with all kind of machinery that makes a big racket." You know, please. I didn't say that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I know. (laughter)

Robert Whitman: You know, but oh my goodness gracious. So that's where you get hung on this thing.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You do. Is this the height? And they can go in and shoot this later, but is the height pretty much --

Robert Whitman: Originally it was lower so it went across somebody's chest and the idea -- what happened there was that people imagine all kind of health issues. They're going to get blinded. So when I was discussing doing it that way here I said, "Just put it down and have a guard outside making sure nobody looks into the laser." Anyway, this is still -- the way it came out I was very satisfied with this. So it came out fine. So this would be '66, '64, '65?

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

Robert Whitman: Somewhere in there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Walking around with this stuff, as I told you --

Robert Whitman: '67?

Brad Epley: Do you remember when you -- I mean because lasers are relatively recent, like they were in 1960 or so. Do you remember your first, you know, how you came across them or?

Robert Whitman: At that time I knew some laser people at Bell Labs. And this is an example of a kind of thing where I might say to the guy, "I want a red line that draws

itself around the room and undraws itself' and I'm not going to tell him how to do it because an engineer is the guy that figures that stuff out. That's what they do, you know? So that's what I -- so that's what happened here. And he also figured out about the wibbles, how to do that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That was '67. Wearing my conservator's hat, I have to ask, in the future could you imagine this being translated and migrated to another type?

Robert Whitman: Just so long as --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: (inaudible)?

Robert Whitman: Just so long as the image is clear and it's my image, that's OK. There's one piece that I haven't been able to redo of this group, which was a mercury vapor. And that had a -- the result of that one being scanned around the room was a kind of pulsing blue and white line. It was kind of nice.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But that's --

Robert Whitman: Well, you're still going to be stuck with the same mercury vapor lamp that you had before. Maybe I should -- well, I'm not going to redo it. I mean I have, God willing, I have something else to do. Like nap. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So what about this piece, *Great Lakes*?

Robert Whitman: OK.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Why don't we stand over here?

Robert Whitman: Once again I have no idea why I thought it was good. I put the Great Lakes -- I'll switch up for you -- in a bag.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm sorry, you had no idea?

Robert Whitman: Why I thought it was an OK idea to put great lakes in a bag. I can tell you it was a lot of work. It's papier mâché and when they got them out, they discovered that somehow the nature of whatever it was that caused some tears in it, so a couple of them had to be restored. Which they did. They can match paint now pretty well by computers or whatever they do. So it got matched and I was surprised when I took -- you know, this stuff is tough.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's hollow.

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then this is some sort of?

Robert Whitman: I think probably there is one of these underneath it that supports it and --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What is this material?

Robert Whitman: I don't know what it's called. My friend Pete, he said, "I found the most inert material on the face of the earth." (laughter) And that's what this is.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's it? Is this a drawstring bag? Is it supposed to be drawstring? I was looking at that and wondering.

Robert Whitman: No, it's just a brown paper bag. It might look like that because of having it be defined by the edge of the board underneath. So the guy who painted this was a body shop guy before the body shop guy I used for those. I mean he's a nice guy. We talk. He's a former -- I said, "Patty, there used to be a guy working here and I would hear the sound of a motorcycle." (makes sound) And he said, "That was me." (laughter) He was a motorcycle racer. He said, "Yeah, I know every cop in town."

[01:14:25]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I bet he does, in intimate [phases?].

Robert Whitman: Anyway so -- what the heck did he make for me? So he made something. One of the things he made for me I gave a catalog. So he said, "You've got to get another one for Mike." Mike is the guy who did this.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Does the actual painting.

Robert Whitman: No, Patty did the painting.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, Patty did the painting?

Robert Whitman: But Mike did the painting on these. Because he came up -- he went to Patty and he said, "Patty, where's my catalog?" So then I had to give them both catalogs.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Are they still in business?

Robert Whitman: Patty is. Mike makes guitars.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, wow.

Robert Whitman: Skillfully.

Robert Whitman Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, December 10, 2018

Video: adp2018a_20181210_005va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2018a / TRT: 01:21:00

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Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Wow.

Robert Whitman: Enough so that my friend who's a professional guitar player will play his guitar.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, wow.

Robert Whitman: Yeah. So let's see what -- so this paint, I remember it was -- these things happen, you know. I called up Mike and he said, "Great. My paint guy is coming tomorrow so come on down and we'll talk and we'll figure out the paint." Because this color, I don't know if this is a natural color for cars. I haven't seen it. But --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I've never seen it.

Robert Whitman: It's a pretty nice color.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It kind of looks like water. Kind of works.

Robert Whitman: It kind of works, but I don't know if I've ever seen water like this, but that's OK too. Water does come in a variety of colors.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It does an interesting thing with the reflection of the light on it. It takes on a kind of -- yeah.

Robert Whitman: Anyway, one thing it's -- I shouldn't say that it's kind of weird. Because this stuff only comes in certain sizes Lake Superior is not as superior as it should be.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I wondered how specific you were in relation to each other.

Robert Whitman: I think it's supposed to be set up, but I wasn't here, so.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And it looks pretty much the same as when you --

Robert Whitman: Yeah, it does. It does, so. The other thing to point out since you're talking about time and stuff and that gets left behind because of the gallery situation is that if you look at the gallery -- I mean if you look at the catalog there's a list of 50 performances, different performances that I've done which leaves out the ones that I forgot and ones that I suppressed. So that's the main body of what I do and somehow people tend to forget that. I don't know -- I'm not --

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's a natural thing that we do in remembering or not.

Robert Whitman: They tend to look at this stuff and not what I do. You know, it's like asking a shoemaker about the pants that he makes every now and again.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right.

Robert Whitman: (laughter) So anyway.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, your work, it's really a challenge for us and I think fundamental to what we do and make us think about what we do because time is such a part of every image that you do and of your time, your life, and then what we have to preserve. Fortunately, it's all so well made that we -- I don't know, we feel confident about it. And I really appreciate your talking to us about the early paper works because those are so fragile and that you're very clear in your thinking about them. So people redoing the more image works, migrating as time goes on, inevitable, is that what you're feeling?

Robert Whitman: Pretty much. But you know, the funny thing about that is Pilar has a collage that I bought in the late '50s, probably '57, from Bob and has of course -- it looks like it was made -- but you know he made everything super careful. So that hasn't changed even though it's on newspaper.

[01:19:08]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The way of working.

Robert Whitman: So I'm kind of the opposite. (laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Robert Whitman: No. Let's have a drink.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, I'm up for that. I'm up for that. It must be time.

Robert Whitman: What time is it?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Brad?

Brad Epley: No, I think that's good.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Thanks, Bob.

Brad Epley: But thank you very much.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I mean I've wanted to do this for so many years and this was such a perfect opportunity.

Robert Whitman Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, December 10, 2018

Video: adp2018a_20181210_005va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2018a / TRT: 01:21:00

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Robert Whitman: Good.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So thank you.

Robert Whitman: I did, you know, I was on that panel of conservators that somebody organized.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, I didn't know that. Go on.

Robert Whitman: It was at the Gross Foundation and I was the loose cannon and Mimi was the conventional artist.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We need loose cannons to keep us straight. This was great. Thank you.

Robert Whitman: OK, well, thank you.

[01:20:54]

[END]