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Oral history interview with Sol LeWitt, 1974
July 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sol LeWitt on July 15, 1974. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings as part of the California Oral History Project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where is the accent in your name?

SOL LeWITT: It's the last syllable - LeWITT. [Emphasis on "Witt"]

MR. CUMMINGS: It is? People argue about that all the time.

MR. LeWITT: It's not a very interesting argument

MR. CUMMINGS: Or really accurate. You were born when in Hartford, Connecticut?

MR. LeWITT: September 9, 1928.

MR. CUMMINGS: There are lots of gaps, so I'll ask some very obvious questions. Did you live there a long time? Go to school there?

MR. LeWITT: Until I was six. Then we moved ten miles away from New Britain, Connecticut. I lived there until I went away to school, really, or until I came to New York in '53.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you have brothers and sisters?

MR. LeWITT: No, but I have other relatives in Hartford, and in New Britain.

MR. CUMMINGS: In that whole area. I see. You grew up really in the late '30's then, the Depression years. Do you remember much of that?

MR. LeWITT: Sure, I remember quite well because we lived on certain streets and in certain areas in certain times. I don't remember too much of Hartford because I was six when we left-but some things. But New Britain I remember quite well. I do remember living in the part of town that wasn't really a very good part of town; it wasn't so bad, really, but I remember that people were out of work. My aunt had a grocery store, and she used to give credit to people and had a hard time getting paid.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of schools did you go to?

MR. LeWITT: I went to regular public schools there, and then I went to Syracuse.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was there an interest in art or music or culture at home? Or books around?

MR. LeWITT: Well, my father was a doctor, and he also invented a lot of surgical instruments. I made lots of drawing, humorous drawings. I just liked to do that. I think most of us kids do like to draw.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you draw a lot as a child?

MR. LeWITT: I did as a child.

MR. CUMMINGS: Into grammar school, high school?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah. But not - by the time I got to high school, I didn't do too much, but then I started again toward the end.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you take any art classes? Were there any?

MR. LeWITT: I think I took only one year, I think, in high school.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was there a museum in New Britain?

MR. LeWITT: There's a small museum devoted mostly to American art, and they did have some very good things, late 19th century, early 20th century - Prendergast. They had several very nice things. I used to go there, I mean, once or twice. They never changed.

MR. CUMMINGS: What about sports or other activities?

MR. LeWITT: Oh yeah, I played all kinds of sports - football, softball, the usual. We lived next to a very large park, and it was very easy to go there and get into a game of some sort, once every day.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were there any teachers in high school that you remember, that you feel were influential?

MR. LeWITT: Well, there were certain teachers that I liked a great deal but not influential in any sense pertaining to art. I liked my Latin teacher very much and an English teacher very much.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you come to go to Syracuse University?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I wanted to go to an art school, and my mother wanted me to get a degree, so it was kind of a-

MR. CUMMINGS: Compromise.

MR. LeWITT: Compromise, right. An uncle of mine had gone there, and it was far enough away from home.

MR. CUMMINGS: And that was part of it? To get away from home also?

MR. LeWITT: That was part of it.

MR. CUMMINGS: So how did you like Syracuse? How long were you there?

MR. LeWITT: Four years. At the beginning I didn't, and then after a while I liked it.

MR. CUMMINGS: What didn't you like about it?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I was quite young when I went - about sixteen. It was just after the war, and the veterans were coming back, so I felt slightly out of place, although there were other young students as well. It just took me quite awhile to get adjusted. And then I didn't have much art training. That was very tough on me because it was a very academic school. There was a lot of cast drawing and stuff like that - painting in a very academic way. And I was never very good at that. So that all made it more than usually difficult. But then when I finally got on to things, things were a little more relaxed, and they changed the administration of the art school. It was a little freer, and then I liked it better, and I did better. Except that the head of the school did advise me to go find something else to do. [Laughter]

MR. CUMMINGS: They frequently do that. You were already interested in doing some art activity by the time you got there, so when do you think that became solidified in your mind as an activity? Or was it exploratory, going to Syracuse?

MR. LeWITT: I reached the point in high school where I had to go away to school, and by that time I had gotten to the point where it wasn't so much that I wanted to be an artist, it was just that I couldn't stand the life of the town, of this society. I just couldn't. It was more of an act of rebellion I think than a positive act of wanting to be an artist. In those days I think that, I mean, if I were living in these days, I would go into some sort of political activity, or say, in the 60's, I certainly would be in some political activity. Although I was interested in politics or political activity, there just wasn't any real road that I could see. Being an artist is something that was in a way rebellious, in a way individualistic, and, in a way, it was an act of rebellion against-

MR. CUMMINGS: All the norms.

MR. LeWITT: The bourgeois kind of society I was brought up in.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where do you think you got the idea to rebel rather than to accept?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I think it probably comes naturally to some people. They don't have to look very far.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I was wondering if you read a great deal in school?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I had been reading a great deal. I don't think I was reading anything very deep or profound, but I did get the idea that being an artist was something slightly more special than going to work in a shoe store, or you know-

MR. CUMMINGS: A factory, or whatever general-

MR. LeWITT: Or doing whatever people did.

MR. CUMMINGS: New Britain is a nautical town.

MR. LeWITT: No, it's a manufacturing town.

MR. CUMMINGS: Manufacturing town.

MR. LeWITT: Hardware, locks, ball bearing. It's very highly industrialized.

MR. CUMMINGS: And none of that interested you in any way?

MR. LeWITT: I detested it. I worked in a factory one summer in school. This was later, but before I knew that I had no interest in business or industry. It wasn't even that; I think it was just that I was expected to, you know, I don't know, go out and get married or go out and get a job after school and work my way up, and you know-

MR. CUMMINGS: Follow the pattern.

MR. LeWITT: And you know, for what? Become like all these other people I see? It was just something I couldn't visualize myself doing.

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you do at Syracuse the first year that you were there? Did you have art classes immediately? Did you have liberal arts or other -?

MR. LeWITT: I took some liberal art courses, but I had a pretty full schedule of art classes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were there any instructors there that you remember from -?

MR. LeWITT: They had really old instructors. When I was there - this was '45, '46 - they had instructors that were there since 1900, and they were really getting pretty old.

MR. CUMMINGS: You're talking about William Mary Chase, here.

MR. LeWITT: And, well, really from an academic background. But there were -- a couple of them were really extremely good people, and I liked some of my courses because they tried to be very helpful.

MR. CUMMINGS: Who were they, do you remember?

MR. LeWITT: Well, one I remember the most, his name was Witterson, and I never knew what happened to him. He must be dead by now. He wasn't all that old, I think he was in his fifties or sixties at the time; he wasn't as old as some of them. But as I know he retired.

MR. CUMMINGS: There seem to be decades of transition, and that was the beginning of one. A lot of schools had people who had been there forever, but by the early fifties, they'd all changed and had a whole new central.

MR. LeWITT: Right. Then this whole new group came from the Art Institute of Chicago.

MR. CUMMINGS: When did that happen?

MR. LeWITT: In the late '40's, about '48, '49. They had decided that anyone who was in school before that was totally lost. They really didn't give a shit at all, and we didn't get very much instruction, which was the best thing in the world for me at the time because they just came in with this kind of - well, at the time, it was sort of an academism that came from Iowa, and well, you know, like Guston and all these other people, these print people who were in Iowa at the time. And most of the instructors had gone to school there so they brought in this sort of-

MR. CUMMINGS: Lanansky printmaking ideas.

MR. LeWITT: Exactly. That sort of thing.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it still had a realistic, fundamental-in a way.

MR. LeWITT: Well, at that time, you know, Guston was painting sort of sugared-up representational cubism which was really awful. They used all these terribly pastel colors. That's what they were teaching.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was he there then?

MR. LeWITT: At Iowa?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, I mean at Syracuse.

MR. LeWITT: No, no. He wasn't at Syracuse. Later on these same group of people picked up their tents and moved over to Carnegie Tech where I think they still are. Rice was the head of the school, Norman Rice. I remember several people who-

MR. CUMMINGS: Were in his circle?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, yeah, they went wherever he went. Well, anyway, being left alone was very good for me.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did that become useful to you, just being left alone?

MR. LeWITT: Well, first of all, I didn't feel that I had to do anything in any kind of way. I knew I couldn't do the academic sort of thing very well. Then I got interested in doing lithographs. Mainly because I was sort of turned off from painting.

MR. CUMMINGS: By what?

MR. LeWITT: Well, by the academic-

MR. CUMMINGS: The atmosphere just didn't-

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, because everybody started doing paintings of a different sort, and I just didn't feel like going into that sort of thing, and I didn't feel like doing the other kind of thing, so I, well -

MR. CUMMINGS: How did lithography come into the picture?

MR. LeWITT: Well, they just set up a lithograph press and put on a piece of paper and- how to work it, and the instructor never showed up again.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

MR. LeWITT: And I thought that was really nice. I don't know. It was a way of doing drawings in a very graphic way. I didn't like to do the kind of life drawing and that kind of stuff.

MR. CUMMINGS: Tickling the paper.

MR. LeWITT: In lithographs you could do things much more experimental.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, were there any students there who you found interesting or that you remember?

MR. LeWITT: Well, there were quite a few. Some of them were really very good, but most of them didn't turn out to be artists after all. Some of the best ones never did. One guy became a window designer. There was one guy who did Lord & Taylor ads for awhile. Then he started doing paintings which were not so good. His wife also went at the time. She was a sculptor, and she's still doing sculpture, but not very interesting. Then another one of my classmates is the head of the Art Department at the University of Connecticut. His name is Nathan Knobler. Another one is the head of the Art Department at the University of Georgia; his name is Feldman. There were quite a few. These were all very, very good students. I got a lot out of them.

MR. CUMMINGS: One thing that interests me is that the best students it seems don't become artists. So they go off into the academic world. Why do you think that is? I mean even with the students you had?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I think the reason they were very good students was that they had a great deal of talent; they had a great deal of facility. Having a great deal of facility, there wasn't the sense of struggle or sense of desire to improve that other people who didn't have this facility or natural talent to do things had to struggle a lot more - And merely doing things well in school is not the program of being an artist. It's a good program for being a student.

MR. CUMMINGS: Or an academic. [Laughter]

MR. LeWITT: Because you do get very good grades and you do what's expected of you. To be an artist you probably need a little more rebelliousness.

MR. CUMMINGS: But it fascinates me when I look through a catalog of schools and see who won all the awards and things. They always end up teaching in South Dakota State Teachers College.

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, I know. I think that's one reason and ah, who knows? I don't know. Most of the artists I know, well, some of them never went to art school at all. Most of them weren't the best students.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you like living in Syracuse, in the city?

MR. LeWITT: Well, Syracuse was pretty nice. It was large enough to be a real city, but also off in a very beautiful part of the country, and outside of Syracuse, not too far, were some of the most beautiful mountains and lakes in this part of the country. For people who wanted to go skiing, it was great, or like swimming-

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you do during the summers in college?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I came back to New Britain to work because I didn't have very much money and needed to do something. Usually I tried to work outside. I had an uncle who had some sort of political influence, so he got me a job in the Park Department. That was pretty nice.

MR. CUMMINGS: Those are all strange jobs working for quasi-government-

MR. LeWITT: One summer I worked in a factory, and that was pretty bad. I didn't last too long. Then I got a job in the street department digging a ditch, and endless ditch, laying pipes-

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, block after block after block. [Laughter] In those summers, in those college summers did you draw at home, did you do any work?

MR. LeWITT: Probably not very much. I took it as a vacation. I read a lot, but I don't think I did very much drawing.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you come into New York ever?

MR. LeWITT: Oh yeah, at different times, I used to come see plays.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of books did you read in those days? What were you interested in?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I took extra courses in English. Syracuse had a very good School of Political Science so I took courses in history and political science. And my own reading? I really think at that time I was reading things like *War and Peace* and Dostoyevsky.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, novels, generally?

MR. LeWITT: Well, for pleasure I would read novels. I never read theoretical things, and I still don't.

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you plan to do once you came out of college? Was there a plan?

MR. LeWITT: No, well, I thought that I would probably try to get a teaching job. That's what everyone would think about doing. I had also an idea that I would try to come to New York and just work as an artist and have some sort of other job. I had that plan, too. The idea of teaching really didn't thrill me a great deal, even at that time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Still doesn't, it seems. [Laughter] Well what, you graduated in '49, right?

MR. LeWITT: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you come to New York then? Did you go elsewhere? What happened?

MR. LeWITT: No, I had a little bit of good luck. Well, for one thing I got a graduate assistantship at Illinois. I thought it was good luck at the time. But it was the opposite. Then I sent some of my lithographs to the Tiffany Foundation. One of my fellow students had done it, and said, "Why don't you do it?" So I did, and I won a thousand dollars. I found this out when I was at Illinois.

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you do at Illinois?

MR. LeWITT: This was a teaching assistantship and also a program to get a master's degree. By that time I was just plain fed up with school, and I didn't really do very much. I wasn't very popular with the faculty. And then I had gotten the thousand dollars, and, by the time Christmas came, I was so fed up, I just left school completely. Then I thought, "Well, I really wanted to do some more lithographs," so I went to the Hartford Art School, and I just asked them if I could use their press, and I made some sort of deal with them. I don't know whether I paid them or what. But I did that for a few months. Then I took off and went to Europe.

MR. CUMMINGS: When was that now?

MR. LeWITT: That was the summer of 1950.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was that just to travel and look around?

MR. LeWITT: I had that thousand dollars so I figured, "Well, I didn't expect to get it so I might as well do something I didn't expect to do."

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, in the 1960's you could do a lot with a thousand dollars in Europe.

MR. LeWITT: Right. It lasted pretty much the whole time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where did you go and what kind of activities did you do?

MR. LeWITT: Oh, I went to England and France, Italy, the Scandinavian countries. Oh, I don't know, I wasn't really interested in seeing museums and things like that. I saw some, and I just wanted -

MR. CUMMINGS: To see what the rest of the world was like.

MR. LeWITT: And at that time the Korean War had started so when I returned I knew I was going to be drafted. So I was drafted that January, January '51.

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you go into? The army?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: And for how long?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I was in the army for two years. After Basic training I went to Japan for six months, spent eleven months in Korea.

MR. CUMMINGS: So you got to see all kinds of marvelous endeavors all over the world. [Laughter] How did the Orient affect you, being in Japan and Korea?

MR. LeWITT: I loved it. I really loved it. Japan especially. I thought it was so beautiful. I wanted to go back again. I did, in 1970, I think. But I really liked Japan very much. Korea was very devastated at the time but the countryside was very beautiful. I liked the people that I knew, the Koreans that I knew. They were really very nice. So - I've never been back to Korea.

MR. CUMMINGS: What appealed to you about Japan? What was there about the -

MR. LeWITT: Well, it was really just a beautiful way of life that the people had. They still have quite a bit of the old tradition, dress, manners. There was a very aesthetic sense of life and the aesthetic in terms of everything had a certain rightness to it and there was a simplicity and everything was done with the most high sense of beauty. Which is kind of a relief from our civilization, which is quite the opposite.

MR. CUMMINGS: So did you get to know any Japanese or was that rather difficult given the circumstances?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I can't say that I really did. Not more than seeing a girl for a week or something like that. Not writing to people or those sorts of things.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you travel in the Islands very much?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I was stationed up in the northern part of Honshu, and I used to go to Tokyo, and then I went to Kyoto. On the way back we had to wait a week in Sasebo which was in the very south of Japan. But most of the time was in Sendai. It was just a farming village.

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you do in the Army in Korea? What sort of activity?

MR. LeWITT: Well, Korea, I was in the PX section, and one of my jobs was to be in charge of whiskey and beer from the 40th position. Plus being in charge of the warehouse where all kinds of PX supplies, cooking, radios and stuff were.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you like that?

MR. LeWITT: It was fine. I got to travel around. I got to go to Incheon twice a month and Pusan once a month, and it broke up the monotony, which is the worst part of Army life.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you ever feel that it had an affect on you or an influence? How do you work or think about

things, or do things? Or was it an isolated experience?

MR. LeWITT: I hadn't thought that it did any specific way. But I think that everything we do has some effect if you want to look into it.

MR. CUMMINGS: What did you do when you came out of the Army? What, in '53?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I came to New York and after I spent all the money I saved and went through unemployment, I had to get a job. I also went to a school, and that was kind of a fiasco. It was called The Cartoonists and Illustrators School at one time. Now it's called The School of Visual Arts.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh yeah, right. Why was it a fiasco there?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I really wasn't interested in being an illustrator, but it was the closest school to where I was living, and I just wanted to survive, I guess. I wanted to get the G.I. Bill money, which wasn't very much, but at least I could live on it. It was the same sort of academic bullshit I had in school, so I got tired of that very quickly. I got a job working at a Photostat machine for *Seventeen Magazine*. I enjoyed that too; it was really a lot of fun. But then I was offered a job in the art department and a raise, so I took it, and I was doing paste-ups and stuff like that. Do you want me to go on with this business?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh yeah, I was just very interested in how the chronology fits.

MR. LeWITT: Well, then the-

MR. CUMMINGS: Were you drawing, or painting, or doing anything besides this?

MR. LeWITT: I was sort of painting, but not really very much. But when I was working with the Photostat machine I really had a lot of fun because I used to do things that, well, none of them lasted, but I used to do superimposing of photographs. They ended up looking like Rauschenberg's. The kind of stuff he was doing later on. I would take whatever photographs were around and superimpose them on one another.

MR. CUMMINGS: Sort of montage.

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, then I would sometimes draw on it while it was still in the liquid. So that was the only kind of art I was really doing because I really wasn't too interested in painting. I felt that I should or else there wouldn't be any reason for my existence. Just to work at a Photostat machine seemed like an endless-

MR. CUMMINGS: Were you going to museums or galleries or looking at things?

MR. LeWITT: No, not at all. No, I wasn't at all at that time. But then I got other jobs, like I became interested in typography and layouts and stuff like that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where did you work with that?

MR. LeWITT: Well, after *Seventeen*, I was an art director for one issue of *Fashion and Travel*. They used to hire the staff for one issue and then fire them after and didn't tell them.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, really? What magazine is it?

MR. LeWITT: *Fashion and Travel*. But they had very good people, like Avedon, people like that doing photographs. Perfectly respectable, except the hiring and firing policy. But it was good experience. Then I went to work for I.M. Pei, the architect, and I was doing graphic design.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you find that? Or was it just a job that came up somewhere?

MR. LeWITT: I think I went on unemployment again. In the meantime I must have met someone who said, "Why don't you go," because they're expanding their graphics department. Oh that's right. Anyway, I ended up working there just a year. It was really terribly boring. The first job that they asked me to do was to design a letterhead. So I just designed a very simple letterhead right across the page in small type, and the guy who was the head of the graphics department you have to do something else. There were three or four people working on this, some of the most God-awful things, embossing and, you know, logo type things. After six months they went back to the very first design. That was the one that was accepted. I was so pissed off at that, and it was such a waste of time. The whole thing was like that. Everything was just done, and redone, and overdone. Usually the first solution was the best. So I got sort of tired of that.

MR. CUMMINGS: How many people did you work with there?

MR. LeWITT: In the graphics department there were five of us.

MR. CUMMINGS: And what other kind of graphics did you work on? Was it the kind of signs that were on buildings, hallways, and that kind of thing?

MR. LeWITT: Well, one thing was to do brochures. Another thing was, at that time, they were working on Roosevelt Field Shopping Center. The only thing that I did was to make a directory to be placed throughout the shopping center. You would push a button and the store that you wanted would-

MR. CUMMINGS: It would light up?

MR. LeWITT: You know, like the Paris subways. These were done like a big pinball machine, on a single light. I never went out to Roosevelt Field Shopping Center, but I saw the drawings for it. I hope they did it the way I wanted them to. But I did other things. I did signs which were never used. All kinds of - they had some kind of idea that they would put up symbols in front of each store. Like the shoe store would have a shoe symbol, so we had to work them out as though they were done out of wrought iron, although they were never done. That was really a silly idea.

MR. CUMMINGS: Endless, endless ideas developing.

MR. LeWITT: The head of the department had this kind of idea, and then he just sent everybody to work on it. That kind of tread mill just turned me off: doing stupid things endlessly.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you get interested in typography?

MR. LeWITT: I got very interested in typography. Before that I took a course in that. I'm still interested in it when I do my own announcements or books.

MR. CUMMINGS: I was wondering because when I was doing research, I looked at all the cards and noticed they were all quite different and on a large piece of paper.

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, that was one of the fringe benefits that I had, doing my own announcements.

MR. CUMMINGS: Saving money for your dealer. Right?

MR. LeWITT: That's his fringe benefit.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did things go along through the '50's? You were painting for a while, and then you stopped.

MR. LeWITT: Right. Then when I worked for I.M. Pei; one of the architects there was also a painter. He really was a very good architect. He had studied with Mies van der Rohe.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you remember his name?

MR. LeWITT: His name is Tony Candido. He decided that he was a painter and this was in around '55, '56. So I got really turned on to doing art again. I started painting. And I got really interested in Abstract Expressionism. I did it long enough to discover I couldn't do it. But at least it got me going, and he was interested too much in the architecture part. He would come in, and we would talk about art. And then I got interested in going down to the Cedar Bar with him.

MR. CUMMINGS: Tenth Street was still active in those days.

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, Tenth Street was very active.

MR. CUMMINGS: In the middle and late '50's. Did you go to those exhibitions ever?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, I started going to them and also the ones on 57th Street. I really got interested in what was going on starting about 1955.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what did you do with the ideas of Abstract Expressionism? Were you painting big paintings?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, well, I got married, and I was living in the city. I had been living in the same place for about four or five years, and then I moved. Then the marriage broke up after a while, and I got a loft. Then I started really. I went back on unemployment.

MR. CUMMINGS: The Rockefeller Grant, they used to call it.

MR. LeWITT: I had a loft on West Broadway, which is now very fancy, but at the time it was just a run down area.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where was that?

MR. LeWITT: It was between Houston and Prince. Right across the street from O.K. Harris. Well, I went through a lot of different floundering around that time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were there any artists that you got to know? Besides Candido?

MR. LeWITT: The only artist that I got to know at the Cedar was Earl Kerkam. Do you know who that is?

MR. CUMMINGS: Yes, sure.

MR. LeWITT: He was really an old man. He was really very independent. He hated the Abstract Expressionists for one thing.

MR. CUMMINGS: He was always beating those people over the head.

MR. LeWITT: He would paint - he had a flower in a Coke bottle, and he would be painting that all the time. Very funny. He wasn't much of an artist, but he certainly was a personality. He really helped me a great deal, not in any specific way, but he was very encouraging. He said he liked what I was doing.

MR. CUMMINGS: What about the other people around?

MR. LeWITT: Most of them were so arrogant and loud. Because the Abstract Expressionists had a way of living and a way of talking and a way of arguing and a way of doing everything that was just so completely different from me that I just could never get with it.

MR. CUMMINGS: You mean your own ideas and sensibilities.

MR. LeWITT: They were completely different, and I could never really get in with them, any of those people. It just wasn't my kind of thing.

MR. CUMMINGS: What happened as the Abstract Expressionist style of painting went on? Did you stop it? Did you shift?

MR. LeWITT: One thing - I mean, I was sort of floundering around with that, and I think I decided that I would paint from an object. I had some grapefruit - I had a whole bunch of grapefruit - so I painted a whole bunch of grapefruit. It was sort of abstract. It was abstract enough; it wasn't totally abstract.

MR. CUMMINGS: You weren't rendering every little surface and highlight?

MR. LeWITT: But it had more form, more specific kind of form. Then I started setting up any arrangement. I wasn't interested in arrangement. I was more interested in rendering form. Still in sort of an expressionistic way, using a palette knife. But then that gradually evolved into other things.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were you reading about art or looking at things?

MR. LeWITT: Well, at the time I had been going to galleries quite a lot. I used to go all the time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were there any painters who particularly interested you at that point? Contemporary or not?

MR. LeWITT: Well, at that time I think I really liked Giacometti, and I also liked Morandi. I think that's what sort of got me on to still-life, though I wasn't doing anything like what they were doing. Like some of the ideas of Giacometti of having a table with a few objects on it, using this space.

MR. CUMMINGS: The squares he did. Closets? I forget what he called them. An open intersection. People standing around, moving.

MR. LeWITT: I'm thinking about in the late '50's. I was just turned off by the - oh, I liked Kline and De Kooning and earlier Pollock. I really liked earlier Kline and earlier De Kooning. But there weren't too many second generation Abstract Expressionists who I thought were very good.

MR. CUMMINGS: What about the museums? Did you frequent them?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I think The Modern and somewhat The Metropolitan, but not too much. But later I got a job at the Modern, so I was there every day. It was after the unemployment, when I had to get another job. This job was the best one I got because it was sitting at the desk in the office building part in the evenings after the

offices were closed. I would be there from 5:30 until 10:30. There was nothing to do but read and be there. So I saw every exhibition that they had at the time and saw a great deal of film.

MR. CUMMINGS: Are you interested in film?

MR. LeWITT: Sure, I think, in a purely - not in a serious way, but I watch films on T.V. a lot. I think it's a really great means of expression. That's the other arm of Abstract Art. It's what happened to Representational Art. It became photographs, or film.

MR. CUMMINGS: All the galleries around the country are showing photographs coming up out of everywhere.

MR. LeWITT: I know. One of the biggest influences was when I first came to New York, a friend of mine living in New York for some time had gotten this from an old artist who had died, and he had a first edition Muybridge.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

MR. LeWITT: I borrowed it. I should return it. I hate to return it. I was always turned on to Muybridge. After, the still life paintings evolved into little figures that I took out of Muybridge. I had one figure in each painting. Then it always became the same one of the man somersaulting. I think that Muybridge was really the biggest influence on my art of any older artist.

MR. CUMMINGS: What do you think the appeal was to you in his photographs?

MR. LeWITT: The logic of the serial image was the important thing to me. At first it was the image, but then it became the fact of seeing things from three different angles, as they emerged and changed. It had a beginning and an ending. A kind of philosophical realism.

MR. CUMMINGS: All of the theories were active, reaching, or stepping, or jumping, moving.

MR. LeWITT: He called his work a figure in action, in motion, or animals in motion. Of course they were still photographs.

MR. CUMMINGS: He could line them up. It was just like the old flipbooks.

MR. LeWITT: It was right on the edge of photography and motion pictures.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you ever make photographs like that?

MR. LeWITT: I did a few pieces using photographs. Well, there were two: they were called *Muybridge 1* and *Muybridge 2*. The first one I had, I made a box which was about ten feet long, one foot high and about one foot, ten inches deep. They were made into ten compartments each, into the full room of the box. In each I had a photograph of a model walking towards the viewer. Muybridge always had them going at a perpendicular angle. But this one was walking directly towards the viewer. One, she was walking; the other, she was just sitting in a chair. It was a process of enlargement, using a same type of model. I did a couple others. A figure seen from four sides in a box. These were done about 1964. But those were the only things I did specifically using photographs.

MR. CUMMINGS: What happened, say, between '58 and '64? That's quite a vast time.

MR. LeWITT: You mean in terms of my art? That's when I went through the transition of the Abstract Expressionist to the still lifes to the smaller somersaulting figures. Back around '61, '62, I did things using one figure, the running figure repeated, and then like an arrow pointing that way, and then the word "run." These things could be done on different levels. They were done as three dimensional paintings. I also was very intrigued by Albers, but the thing about Albers that I couldn't grasp was that if he has colors that were receding, they should, I thought, physically recede; and if they advance, they should physically advance.

MR. CUMMINGS: Rather than an illusion, optical.

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, rather than an illusion. This, I think, was partially from the understanding of what Johns was doing, with three dimensional things were three dimensional, and two dimensional things were two dimensional. I thought this was a very good idea. Then I thought, "Well, it should be applied to Albers." In the meantime I had all these Muybridge ideas in my head, so actually it came off much more simple than it seems. They had just too many things going on, too many ideas in them. Then I discarded the figure, and the word, and the symbol, and just started doing three dimensional things.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did that process evolve? Did you just obviously cut things out, or were you looking for something and made this that way? I mean the images and the words.

MR. LeWITT: What do you mean cut them out? You mean how did I stop doing them?

MR. CUMMINGS: How did they work out or work through?

MR. LeWITT: I just had to make decisions and the main decision was that one had to, had to simplify things rather than make things more complicated. One had to figure out what one wanted to do and then simplify it in that direction. I think that I was very friendly at the time with Dan Flavin. He worked at the Modern at the same time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Is that where you met Dan?

MR. LeWITT: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: In fact he was a guard there, wasn't he?

MR. LeWITT: He was a guard there. This was round '60, '61. He, really, would be talking about the scholastic philosophers, Hopkins, Razor, things of that sort. The whole idea of simplicity was in my mind.

MR. CUMMINGS: You spent a lot of time talking to him in those days because association always seems to crop up in interviews and essays and things, about you.

MR. LeWITT: One didn't talk very much with Flavin; one listened.

MR. CUMMINGS: He hasn't changed.

MR. LeWITT: He's gotten worse.

MR. CUMMINGS: But what were the things he talked about that interested you, besides a couple items?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I don't know, he used to talk about baseball. Also he had just gotten married. I knew him before he was married and then he got married. His wife was really, is really one of the nicest people I know. So I used to go over there a lot and have dinner. He was always interested in art, and would talk about it. These weren't always one-sided conversations, but his egotism was not fully developed at the time. He was working on it. He knew artists that I didn't know. And he'd talk about them. So that was, in a way, much more, not that I met the artists, but I started to know-

MR. CUMMINGS: Who they were.

MR. LeWITT: About the work.

MR. CUMMINGS: When did you get interested in the Jasper Johns ideas?

MR. LeWITT: I saw on Tenth Street, when I used to go there, one of his first *Flags* that he exhibited. This was about '57. Of course I didn't understand at all. I didn't know what it was all about. I don't know. I used to see his work around and perhaps it was when he had the show at the Jewish Museum. I was really a big fan of his before then because by that time, when was that, about '61 or '62?

MR. CUMMINGS: Somewhere in there?

MR. LeWITT: I knew his work and was very involved with it before then. I don't know. I must have seen it in some galleries.

MR. CUMMINGS: But were there other artists whose work interested you after having worked through the Abstract Expressionists? Still life paintings and things besides the Albers, Johns?

MR. LeWITT: Well, at that time the Pop artists were beginning to do some interesting work, and I always like Lichtenstein's work, and I still do. I think he's a very accomplished artist. And I like Oldenburg and Warhol, too. Warhol's films were starting to be done at that time. But on the other hand-theoretical sense-I didn't care for the whole idea of what they were doing, but I could see they were very serious people who were doing something really interesting.

MR. CUMMINGS: When did you move into doing three-dimensional objects and away from painting and camera work?

MR. LeWITT: About '63-ish.

MR. CUMMINGS: So that was the time of your thing at the Kaymar?

MR. LeWITT: That was '64.

MR. CUMMINGS: So that was what? Did you have things in group shows much or anything around here?

MR. LeWITT: I had one thing in a group show with this fellow Candido, who I mentioned before, and another friend, Harvey Becker, who unfortunately died of some sort of cancer just about that time. He did very dark sort of expressionistic paintings, but I thought they were very good. Candido's work I never liked much.

MR. CUMMINGS: It was very Abstract Expressionist, wasn't it?

MR. LeWITT: Well, no, he started doing figurative paintings. Mostly self-portraits. Are you aware of his work? Because very few people are.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah. It isn't worth very much.

MR. LeWITT: Have you seen - I haven't seen what he's been doing lately.

MR. CUMMINGS: I did, about two years ago. It still seems to be the same problem that he's working out.

MR. LeWITT: I met him on the street a couple times, but I haven't seen his work.

MR. CUMMINGS: So the Kaymar, which is '64?

MR. LeWITT: That must have been '64, May of '64.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was kind of the beginning of some public-

MR. LeWITT: Yeah. That was Flavin's doing, as you know. It seems he had a show in that gallery. The time after his show there was nothing scheduled so he arranged a group show there with quite a few - well, it had Bob Ryman, Judd, Poons, and Stella and Darby Bannard and Jo Baer. In fact this is a piece from it, the Kaymar Show. I traded Leo Valadore. But it did attract some attention.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

MR. CUMMINGS: This is Side 2. Who operated the Kaymar? How did that whole thing just appear and disappear, it seems?

MR. LeWITT: There was a professor of philosophy at Rutgers named Houston Peterson and his wife ran Kaymar Gallery. I forget her name.

MR. CUMMINGS: I see. I remember seeing some of the exhibitions there.

MR. LeWITT: Did you see that show?

MR. CUMMINGS: The group show I remember seeing.

MR. LeWITT: The Flavin show before that was very, very good, too.

MR. CUMMINGS: I might have seen that because I knew Bob Ryman and Lucy I know, too. They might have told me about it.

MR. LeWITT: Of course. Well, Ryman also worked for the Modern at the same time Lucy did, too.

MR. CUMMINGS: I wonder if the museum is aware it spawned all those things. You taught at their school, too, or something later?

MR. LeWITT: That was when they constructed the new wing. See, I had actually been working for the school. I was at the desk because the school was upstairs. So after the job was finished, they offered me a teaching job. Teaching adults. So, having nothing else to do, I took it. I didn't like it too much, but it was the only thing I could do at the time.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of teaching did you do there?

MR. LeWITT: They were adults. Mostly women. Some of them were very able once they started going, but it was sort of a hopeless thing anyway. It wasn't teaching, really teaching them to be artists, it was teaching art.

MR. CUMMINGS: Which is something else.

MR. LeWITT: They would go back to their suburban homes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Wait until next week.

MR. LeWITT: It really had no meaning, no real meaning at all.

MR. CUMMINGS: You did teach at The Modern for about three years, and then finally it was enough.

MR. LeWITT: Well, I got a job at Cooper.

MR. CUMMINGS: How long did you teacher there?

MR. LeWITT: One year.

MR. CUMMINGS: Just one year. Then you went to N.Y.U. or to Visual Arts after that?

MR. LeWITT: Well, Visual Arts and then I think N.Y.U. That was simultaneous. But first a year at Visual Arts, and then I started N.Y.U. afterwards.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you like teaching at Visual Arts after having been a student in its earlier shape there?

MR. LeWITT: Well, first of all, I talked to Carl Andres because we were both traveling a lot of the time, and we figured if one of us wouldn't be there, the other would be there, or both would be there, or none of use would be there. We didn't take attendance; we didn't give grades; we gave everyone the grades they wanted.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh dear, academic wisdom. Well, what was Cooper like to teach at?

MR. LeWITT: Well, that was much more of a school. I wasn't given any restrictions but you could tell they were looking over your shoulder.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, really? In what way?

MR. LeWITT: I mean they were interested in what you were doing; of course, well, I was teaching second year students. They asked me what I was going to do, which they never asked me at Visual Arts. For me it was an academic program and much more strict than the one we had. That was how we wanted to do it, and they accepted it. I don't think they were very comfortable about it, and when we decided to leave, they didn't put up a great struggle.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where did you meet Andres? Where does he come into it?

MR. LeWITT: I met him at the same time as the Kaymar Show. There was another show arranged by someone else at the old Tibor de Nagy, some space where he had one kind of pile of lumber.

MR. CUMMINGS: I remember those; it was a Styrofoam show.

MR. LeWITT: No, he had the Styrofoam show there afterwards. At first it was some kind of forum and something was arranged by Barbara Rose. But it was similar to the Kaymar Show. I think it was in the fall, the following fall. His first show was about the same, the following spring. I had a show also around that same time. I think they were concurrent. My show was at a gallery called the John Daniels Gallery run by Dan Graham, run into the ground by Dan Graham. It lasted about six months.

MR. CUMMINGS: Why did he run that gallery? How did all those people get together?

MR. LeWITT: He was a partner with David Herbert. Do you know David Herbert?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh yeah.

MR. LeWITT: David used to work at Janis.

MR. CUMMINGS: He's been everywhere. He just left Graham a few months ago.

MR. LeWITT: Anyway, it was sort of a strange combination. At least Dan Graham knew what was going on. I don't think David Herbert did, but David Herbert knew something about how to run a gallery. Evidently not enough.

MR. CUMMINGS: Because that was in Andre Emmerich's old space, wasn't it?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah. 64th Street.

MR. CUMMINGS: Were those exhibitions useful to you in any way? I mean getting things out and looking at them, and getting a response?

MR. LeWITT: Yes, because I've always worked out of terror. I had a show coming up, and I had to do something. It just accelerated what I was doing because I would know what the space was, and I would know that I had to do several pieces. The same thing happened the following year when Dwan asked me if I wanted to have a show. She asked me in February for a show in May, and I didn't have any work. Well, I did have work, but I said to myself that I wanted to do new work, not show any old work in between the other show. The same thing happened with the first show. I just decided that I had about three months, and I worked really very hard, and I did all the work. So it just accelerated the pace of things.

MR. CUMMINGS: You know the shift to the Dwan, that was a couple of years later though, wasn't it? After the Daniels?

MR. LeWITT: It was the next year.

MR. CUMMINGS: Where did you meet Virginia? How did you find each other?

MR. LeWITT: She saw the show at the Daniels Gallery, and she called me up and came up here, and she bought a piece, and then she called up the next week and asked if I wanted to do a show.

MR. CUMMINGS: Very official. How did you like her as a dealer? Because you were with her, you know, socially.

MR. LeWITT: She was very fair, she was very open. She showed stuff mainly of very good people, not always, but she chose. I tried to get her interested in Bob Ryman, but she couldn't see it quite right. I introduced her to Bob Smithson, for instance, and they became very good friends. Carl-I kept talking to her about Flavin because Flavin at that time was with Kornblee. Well, he had his eye on Castelli. He ended up with both galleries. She was really very open-minded and quite intelligent about art. Only some people bamboozled her; she took on some not so great artists. But in the main she had a very good gallery.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did she spend time with you, I mean talking about your work or your ideas?

MR. LeWITT: Well, she probably wanted to, but I've never liked to do that. So I never really did too much.

MR. CUMMINGS: What about the following year? You had an exhibition in Los Angeles. Did you go out to that?

MR. LeWITT: Well I did. The work was done here in a factory and was sent out. That was the first show I had of a completely serial piece.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you get to the point of having things sent out or wanting it done that way?

MR. LeWITT: Well, when I had the first show with Virginia, I got a carpenter to help me, and we worked together and he brought his saw up here and really worked quite a lot. So having a thing done in metal was what I was doing, much better -

MR. CUMMINGS: So the next logical step-

MR. LeWITT: It was better to do it in a metal than in wood. It was more- well- you get a straight edge instead of a wobbly edge.

MR. CUMMINGS: How was Dwan as a dealer for you, in terms of getting the work out and having it shown and seen?

MR. LeWITT: Well, outside of having a show there about every years or so, there weren't too many sales. There were a few but not a great deal. She really was not much of a salesperson. She would be there; she would never try to coerce anyone. If they wanted to buy something, she would sell it to them.

MR. CUMMINGS: Then she started traveling a lot. Didn't she, for a few years? Once she came to New York and settled down, I know she -

MR. LeWITT: Well, she was in Los Angeles for about six, seven years before she came to New York.

MR. CUMMINGS: And then you've been with Weber, right? Since-

MR. LeWITT: And then it just sort of changed into Wever in 1970.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's been that long already?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: Fantastic. I'm curious about the use of the carpenter again. Were you making your own things at one point?

MR. LeWITT: Oh yeah, up until then I was making all my own things. I only used the carpenter because he had the kind of saw that I needed and also he was much better at it than I was.

MR. CUMMINGS: Just making joints and mortars and things. So it was really skill you were employing?

MR. LeWITT: Right.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you think that had any influence on your thinking? The fact that you can go out and hire all these skills and so this kind of metal cutting or this kind of surface finishing?

MR. LeWITT: Well, it just reinforces my idea that I had that that wasn't too important. The skill of doing it is only important as to what was done, not as to be thought out in advance. Just the skill itself wasn't very important.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you think the material had any influence in the fact that you shifted from, say, wood into metal into different kinds of metal?

MR. LeWITT: No, it has no influence at all because I still do things in wood and metal. You can't tell the difference just looking at it if it's small enough. On a large scale you can't do things in wood. But if it's in a small enough scale as in cement.

MR. CUMMINGS: So the materials are really-

MR. LeWITT: To me they are not important.

MR. CUMMINGS: But they are only there to do what you want without having any particular influence in their own part. Do you in the whole business of what's been called Minimal, Primary, you know, all those words they have - how do you find the critical vocabulary? Is it useful or-

MR. LeWITT: I find it dismaying. In fact, the only reason that I did any writing is that (I wrote about what I called Conceptual Art), is really the fact that the critics had not understood things very well. They were writing about Minimal Art, but no one defined it. Still to this day no one has written anything. People refer to me as a minimal artist, but no one has ever defined what it means or put any limits to where it begins or ends, what is and what isn't. It's just a convenient label. It still has no meaning. Now they write about post-minimalism; they're putting another stratum on a thing that has no foundation. No one has bothered to define what post-minimalism is either.

MR. CUMMINGS: How can you until you define the other?

MR. LeWITT: Well exactly. It has no validity. The only reason that I wrote the thing about Conceptual Art was to try and find some kind of description, or limits or *raison d'entre* of the kind of art that I thought I was doing at the time and I thought other people were doing at the time, which was mainly based on ideas rather than on form. Which was what the term "minimal" has to do with: what the form looks like. Like the Judd piece. This was - there's nothing minimal about it except that - well maybe it's not as-

MR. CUMMINGS: Baroque.

MR. LeWITT: Expressionistic. But it's a very complex piece. Then of course the idea that the content of the piece of work was inherent in the form. Well, really the contents were quite separate - like the Judd piece again. In order to understand the piece, you have to understand his reasoning, why he did it.

MR. CUMMINGS: What's the piece called?

MR. LeWITT: It's *Progression*. He was in the same show at Finch College.

MR. CUMMINGS: Right. It's just somewhere written down here. Serial-

MR. LeWITT: I don't know if it was a Serial show; it wasn't a Serial show. It was a show before that. It was one of the "Art in-"

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh "The Art in Process Shows."

MR. LeWITT: And then the next year I think there was the "Serial Shows."

MR. CUMMINGS: One thing I'm trying to get at is what happened in terms of your thinking and ideas from, say, 1964, '95. Because that really seems to be the beginning. Your ideas begin to crystallize, and the works begin to have a continuity. Was that through, besides doing the work, through reading, through being involved with those people, through a combination of things? What was generally going on; how did you make those collections?

MR. LeWITT: I think I was interested in a lot of the things that were done at the time and after having gone through the process of doing these open cube pieces, or modular piece, I wanted to do something that - the way Judd was doing progressions, also Flavin did a very important piece of the Phenomenal Three: one, one two, one two three.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh right, the vertical.

MR. LeWITT: And then from the idea of these kinds of piece I wanted to do something of a whole system, rather than just a series.

MR. CUMMINGS: Now what do you mean a system rather than a series? How do you differentiate?

MR. LeWITT: Something that was more absolute and more complete and had a bigger scope. Something that was not just in one piece but would be many, many pieces which were all controlled by the idea of a system. Then I did this - what I call "A B C D," which was based on a square within a square. In order to do that you have to rule it off into parts, and then there would be two dimensions: the dimension of the outside square and the dimension of the inside square. And then you could make a cube. Then you could make an outside cube and an inside cube.

MR. CUMMINGS: Or lift it up.

MR. LeWITT: And then you can take the inside piece and make it to the height of the outside cube, and then you could take the outside piece and raise it to the height of the inside cube. Then after doing that as open, all open pieces, I discovered that I could do it with closed and opened, opened and closed, and closed and closed. So then it became four systems making one system. One thing appeared after the other, sort of. Once I got on to that.

MR. CUMMINGS: One thing that always intrigued me like the white piece over there. And your descriptions of the one - you always seem to use the edges in the center. You never use any of the other pieces in the same way. I mean, any of the other squares. You know, like you have a grid of nine squares. It's always the outside and the center ones. But you never used the one in the left-hand corner or the other corner, or this corner, or that corner. It seems to keep the rectangular form rather than breaking it.

MR. LeWITT: Well, I don't understand what you mean exactly.

MR. CUMMINGS: The one which is the nine squares and then the cube and then the big outside one and then there's the one with a column which goes all the way. You always seem to use the center square. Does that make sense?

MR. LeWITT: Yes, because there's sort of a - I think it's more logical and symmetrical, less - I think that the best ideas are always the simplest. So to do anything with any of the other squares would require another reason rather than just the center describes itself. The outside describes itself. Any other square within the nine squares would be another idea. You'd have to invent another reason for that. It's quite possible, but it's a complication rather than a -

MR. CUMMINGS: Clarification. It seems that that was a kind of persistent idea that runs through. Even the drawing.

MR. LeWITT: Right. It's when you throw a thing off center. Then you, well you make it into something which is much more dynamic than anything that satisfies me. The things that satisfy me are much more placid.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, that answers the question. The drawings seem to have become a very important part of your work. Had you made many drawings before the Paula Cooper wall?

MR. LeWITT: The wall drawings, you mean? No, those were the first wall drawings I did.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did that actually come about? To do the drawing on the wall and make it that size? That scale?

MR. LeWITT: It goes back to the Jasper Johns thing that made me do three dimensional work. But still I always said in order to do something - all right, here I was doing something three dimensional, but in order to do something two dimensional it had to be done directly on the wall. Because painting was always done as a three

dimensional object. There was always the stretcher, canvas, any kind of thing that made it into another dimension. If you don't think of painting and sculpture, but you think of art as three dimensional or two dimensional or combinations then you don't have to think of it as a painting or as anything else. So this is a way of doing a thing that to me is as two dimension as possible. I had thought of it quite sometime before, and I remember talking to Judd about it once and saying, "Well, you know, what the hell."

MR. CUMMINGS: How many ideas like that, yeah.

MR. LeWITT: But then I had this-this is really how it starts. Seth Siegelaub was doing this book, a Xerox book. He said I could have twenty-five pages. So I said alright. Well then I started thinking, and I was thinking of doing this system, a twenty-four part system which, if you take the idea of four and you do four in all of its possible combinations, you end up with twenty-four. Then twenty-five would be the summary. So I figured out this drawing series which completed itself in twenty-four drawings. Then Doug Christmas from Los Angeles came over, and he said, "Would you like to have a show?" and I said, "Yeah, I want to do some drawings on the wall." I even surprised myself when I first said it. It just sort of came out. Before I went out to do it, in November, Paula asked me for a piece, and I said, "Yes, I want to do some drawings on the wall." So I did. But actually what I did out on the West Coast was another twenty-four series. Not the same one I did for Seth Siegelaub, but the same kind of drawings, a different premise.

MR. CUMMINGS: Had you made drawings before?

MR. LeWITT: No. Just like you said, working drawings that I had to do for three dimensional pieces. Those are the only drawing that I had done before. I really hadn't done drawings as drawings.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you still continue producing a lot of these drawings?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, I do. It's a way of my doing my thing. Otherwise, the three dimensional things I have other people do and even the wall drawings I have other people do. I do them myself and then I have other people do them. I am a compulsive worker for one thing, and I have to do something. So this is what I do.

MR. CUMMINGS: When did you start doing the torn paper and the folder paper drawings?

MR. LeWITT: Well, the first folded paper I did was in '66, '65. Lucy has one. I just sent them out to some friends instead of Christmas cards. Then there was a show I had with Smithson and Leo Valadore at the Park Place Gallery and the announcement was folded like a grid and then the names are just written in the center. I just kept doing them.

MR. CUMMINGS: You're talking about the folded one, right?

MR. LeWITT: These are the folded ones. Then the ripped ones I started doing about 1969, or 1970.

MR. CUMMINGS: I didn't know the folded drawings had such a long history. Obscured, but-

MR. LeWITT: Well, I never really made very much of them. I used to just give them away to friends. I never really wanted to do them as a major kind of work. I wanted them to be another kind of drawing. They do make lines and rips also. But for instance Dorothea Rockburne makes a major statement out of that, and I think they are very good. But what I do, I want to keep this a private kind of thing; that's why I want them to be sold as cheaply as possible.

MR. CUMMINGS: You don't make them very large either, do you?

MR. LeWITT: I did make one set that were about 40 inches square.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh really, I don't remember seeing them.

MR. LeWITT: Oh, they were sent overseas so they're in some private collection.

MR. CUMMINGS: How do you like that because you started showing in Europe in the late '60's in Bischofberger and Friedrich.

MR. LeWITT: Well, mostly at the Konrad Fischer. Konrad Fischer was really the one that started that thing. In fact he was the one who arranged the show with Friedrich and Bischofberger that I had. Then other galleries started popping up.

MR. CUMMINGS: How do you like being shown abroad?

MR. LeWITT: Well, my idea is that I don't care where I'm shown as long as I have the chance to do the work. And

I always accept shows, almost always accept shows, not knowing what I'll be doing but knowing that I'll be doing something. That forces me to do something because I don't want to show the old ideas. I want to show new ideas.

MR. CUMMINGS: When does an idea become old?

MR. LeWITT: After it's done.

MR. CUMMINGS: Once it's built?

MR. LeWITT: I want to do something from this moment on. Not something that I did last week. I want to do something that's not completely new, because everything derives from something else. But I want the process to keep evolving. I have been doing that since '67. It's wearing me out. [Laughter]

MR. CUMMINGS: You mean if somebody walked in here today and said, "I want a show in four months," it would start today and something would appear?

MR. LeWITT: Or sometimes I would have - especially in Europe, they would gang up about three or four shows. In two or three weeks sometimes, and you have to work things for each of them in advance. But I think it worked out for me because it kept me going, and it kept me doing, and it kept pushing my mind. I only can think of one thing at a time, and -

MR. CUMMINGS: You need deadlines. What happens if you don't have a deadline that's close? Do you still work at the same kind of rate? Or do you change a little bit?

MR. LeWITT: I work at a lesser pace. But it seems since the time of my shows has been pretty equally spaced throughout the year and if not in Europe, then in New York, or in California, or in some other place. I've not had a lack of opportunity.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you find that the exhibitions are important to you in terms of developing from one point to another?

MR. LeWITT: Yes. Just as I said. It forces me to get to the next step, whatever it is and then the step after. Mostly to the wall drawings because most of the shows have been wall drawing shows.

MR. CUMMINGS: What happens if someone buys a wall drawing?

MR. LeWITT: Then it's done in their house and if they move, it's done again. Most of them are not based on any particular high skill. Most of them can be done by art students or engineering students or anybody who can hold a pencil. Usually when I have a show and I need people to help me, I usually get art students from local art schools. They are always very good.

MR. CUMMINGS: Have you taken similar ideas and used it in different places? I mean, have the same redrawn by different people?

MR. LeWITT: Theoretically, it can be done. Yeah, there have been-

MR. CUMMINGS: I'm just curious if different groups of people produce different-looking drawings.

MR. LeWITT: Yes, it has a different look. But I always equate it to a musical performance. Every time you hear the same Bach piano or harpsichord thing it's different even with the same person. Even if Wanda Landowski plays it in March and then in April, it would sound different. If Ralph Kirkpatrick plays it, it will be different. Whoever does it will leave their mark on it. In a way it's good that the draftsman has a part in it, and it's not just the artist doing it. It's a collaboration.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you like that idea of somebody else bringing whatever they have to it?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, because as long as they follow the plan and don't try to do a different work of art, then I think it's-

MR. CUMMINGS: Valid.

MR. LeWITT: It's their interpretation.

MR. CUMMINGS: I'm curious about the changes of the drawings like that. Having different people do them in different ways, at different times, but following the same system.

MR. LeWITT: I like the idea it's different.

MR. CUMMINGS: Somewhere you were quoted as saying that conceptual artists are mystics, some years ago. It sounds like one of those lines that haunts you, right?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I was trying to get away from the idea that they were rationalists. All artists I think are mystics to the extent that they do something that's not been done before, and I think of it as a leap. That Kierkegaard kind of thing. An artist goes off into some kind of unknown space. But I think a conceptual artist does it with concepts. He has to reach into some kind of unknown or some irrational. The trouble with most art, conceptual or any other kind of art is that it's so predictable. Most second rate art could be done by anybody. Really good art has a kind of extra leap into the unknown. That's what I was trying to define.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, how do you think that happened in terms of actually doing something and not just having it go on in one path? Do you find that there's a mystic ritual that they employ?

MR. LeWITT: Well, if that helps I think that's fine. [Laughter]

MR. CUMMINGS: There are many painters who say, "Oh, yes, I can never start with a clean canvas. I always have to do something to it before I can-"

MR. LeWITT: Well, sometimes just the idea of the white canvas, the kind of virginal space, would turn somebody on. That they want to deface it. So it can work any way.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's true. One could really think of painting as just defacing all that many-[Laughter]

MR. LeWITT: Well, in many cases that's absolutely the way it is.

MR. CUMMINGS: I wondered if you had any interest in what they call "Public Art." The outdoor things that would relate to city spaces and buildings. You know there's so much of that going on around the country.

MR. LeWITT: I think most of my things are better indoors. But-

MR. CUMMINGS: Why's that?

MR. LeWITT: I can see where I could build a piece that, if it were in relations to architecture on an open space, I think it would work. It would have to - see the problem here is the problem of scale. You can't have a small piece in a public space and have any meaning.

MR. CUMMINGS: And have it work.

MR. LeWITT: Because then it becomes something which I've always tried to work against and that's one thing I once said: large things should be made as small as possible. What I meant is that scale as an impressive device should be avoided. So that's exactly what you have to do for an outside piece.

MR. CUMMINGS: The forty-story building. Somebody once said to me a ten-foot piece of sculpture in front of a forty-foot building is jewelry.

MR. LeWITT: Exactly. That's how things are. It's not a matter of quality. You put it inside, and it would be large. You put it outside, and it's insignificant.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it's really a handling of space.

MR. LeWITT: Well, if you think of architecture as kind of grandiose sculpture in a way, which it is, at least it's a three dimensional expression. Then you're going to put a small thing against it and you can't-

MR. CUMMINGS: Work it.

MR. LeWITT: It can't survive.

MR. CUMMINGS: You know I was thinking of the colors. You have used whites and black in some things, haven't you?

MR. LeWITT: Well, the first few things I did with these open things were black. But then I decided that it was too strong. Also you could never really see the turn in form. With white you can see it very easily, and with black it tends to flatten out. But it was too expressionistic.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you have a black piece at Dwan ever?

MR. LeWITT: No, I didn't have one at Dwan. I did have one at Graham. There was a show at the Graham Gallery. That was the only black piece.

MR. CUMMINGS: I remember seeing one.

MR. LeWITT: Also, oh yeah, I had two black pieces at that show.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I mean no big exhibition in black?

MR. LeWITT: No, no I never had any. That was one of those in-between things. I had the show at the Daniels Gallery, and then I started doing black things. Then Virginia asked me to have a show, and I decided to make them white.

MR. CUMMINGS: Have you ever thought of using other colors?

MR. LeWITT: Well, in three dimensional work, if it's open there would be no point to it. Color. I've done a lot of things with color in terms of drawings and prints, using color in a theoretical way. That's the same thing. There were four parts of the drawing: four lines in four directions. You know, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, both ways. And then you could use four colors: the three primary colors plus black. So I've done things with colors, but you can't add color to these things without making it a little absurd and diminishing.

MR. CUMMINGS: So the color really would make it look decorative. It wouldn't work in any...

MR. LeWITT: It would just do that. That would be all. It would just be adding. White is the least coloring that I can imagine, the least expressive color.

MR. CUMMINGS: In the last couple years, you have made quite a lot of etchings, haven't you?

MR. LeWITT: Well, etchings and silkscreens.

MR. CUMMINGS: Silkscreens. But the etching - I was looking at one last night which was all fine little squiggle lines in different colors, in two or three colors.

MR. LeWITT: Well, this is part of a series. I had done one plate with scribbles all over it, and then it was printed so the vertical was yellow and the horizontal was black, the other way it was red, the other way it was blue. The piece was a system again of using all the possible combinations. It ends up being fifteen.

MR. CUMMINGS: How do you like doing etchings? Or is it just another way of drawing?

MR. LeWITT: No, that's a way of printing. Just as I described. I only did one plate, and fifteen possibilities were done from that. I've done things of that sort, for I used the medium as a fabricator, helper. I do a minimum amount of work and, well, when I was doing the silkscreens, I just did a page of lines close together. I'd give it to the printer. I would mark out in this square if they were going this way, they'd be red; this way, they'd be blue. He would work everything out.

MR. CUMMINGS: So you gave a kind of regiment to follow.

MR. LeWITT: Yeah. Sometimes it would be on the back on an envelope, and I would say four inches by four inches. After awhile he knew exactly what I wanted. It was really great. A lot less work for me.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you think you'll continue doing editions? Or various kinds?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, I probably will because the girl that prints the etchings, Catherine Browne, is really so good that everything she does comes out so well that I keep trying to think up new things to do. She's done really a lot of very good things with Ryman, Flavin, Mel Bochner, Dorothea, Chuck Close. Everything has come out very, very well.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it sounds as if etching as an activity doesn't interest you; it's only a way to get a certain kind of-

MR. LeWITT: Well it does have a certain-

MR. CUMMINGS: Quality, I mean it has some quality.

MR. LeWITT: Quality of its own. Usually it's a process of doing something.

MR. CUMMINGS: I wanted to ask about the small cube that was buried in- where- Holland? How did that evolve?

MR. LeWITT: Well, it evolved this way. Bob Smithson, I think, around '67 decided, oh well, somebody asked him to design this airport that was eventually built between Fort Worth and Dallas. As part of his scheme, he wanted to have an Earth Show. Well, the whole thing fell through. But then he wanted to have the Earth Show at the Dwan Gallery. He wanted to have he, Carl, myself, and Bob Morris. I said, "Well, what I'll do is just bury a cube." So finally next year, around '68, there was supposed to be a show. I was in Holland at the time and the Vissers were friends of mine and collectors, and they were remodeling their house, and they had it all dug up, so I had them build a stainless steel box, and I had them put something in it, and it was welded shut and buried. I took pictures, and the pictures were a little book. It was my part of the Earth Show. By that time, it had about seventy people in it.

MR. CUMMINGS: What's inside of the steel box?

MR. LeWITT: It is something that only I know, and they know, and we're not supposed to tell.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh I see. It's like the Duchamp mysterious object in the- Did you continue writing pieces? Because I know there have been a number of-

MR. LeWITT: No. I only write out of self-defense.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, that's a good reason. What did you do at Sansbeak? You were in that show, weren't you?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, that was-

MR. CUMMINGS: Whatever happened?

MR. LeWITT: I had a piece, and they gave me a spot, and I should have objected because I knew it wouldn't be good there. I put it up there. It didn't have the scale that it needed for an outdoor piece. That piece should have been inside some place.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you find the reaction in Europe quite different from the reaction in this country to your work? Do people say different things about it? Do they look at it in a different way?

MR. LeWITT: It is really hard to tell because when people don't like the work, they don't tell you. Even when they do, sometimes they don't. At least I get invited back to do things, my things in the same places again, so I imagine it didn't bomb out.

MR. CUMMINGS: Something's happening still.

MR. LeWITT: I haven't had as bad a critical response in Europe as I have had here. Especially with *Artforum* taking particular delight in writing nasty things about me.

MR. CUMMINGS: Why is that, do you think?

MR. LeWITT: I have no idea.

MR. CUMMINGS: I was going to ask you. You mention Judd so much and Flavin, of course, and Bob Morris and various people. Do you feel like a part of a particular general group or are you just friends socially, or do you find an aesthetic-

MR. LeWITT: No. But talking about I know them - I'm not particularly close with them. But at that time we were talking about them they were important. I never knew Bob Morris very well at all. Although I'm friends with him and with Judd, I'm not particularly close to any of them. I was close to Smithson, and I was close to Eva Hesse, too. She was one of my very closest friends. And I was at times friendly with Mel Broocher and Carl Andre. Although I don't think I'm very close friends with them, I am friends of theirs, and I respect their work. Mangold has always been a close friend of mine. I haven't seen Bob Ryman in some time, but I feel that he is a friend also.

MR. CUMMINGS: He always seems to just disappear sometimes, and then- he's always somewhere. He's gone and then he's back. I remember there's a photograph of you in a book or catalog somewhere that has a very early Ryman in it. You know, the thickly-painted-on-the-stretched-canvas that he used to go back to.

MR. LeWITT: Oh, I've been in a lot of shows with him.

MR. CUMMINGS: This is a photograph of you in your studio, and there is one on the wall.

MR. LeWITT: Oh, I have a small one.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah, it's a little one.

MR. LeWITT: That's the only one I have of this. Oh no, I have a couple of etchings.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you trade things? Because you have all sorts of pieces around.

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, I traded quite a lot of things.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you like having all these other people's things around?

MR. LeWITT: Well, sometimes I think there are too many. In fact, I've loaned out a lot of them to friends. If somebody asks me I usually say yes. Sometimes I ask people.

MR. CUMMINGS: I keep looking at the record collection over there, which is quite a monolithic edifice. What kind of music do you listen to?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I suppose I like music of Bach, I like Mozart, I like Debussy.

MR. CUMMINGS: How does Debussy fall into that?

MR. LeWITT: Well, recently the new recordings by Pierre Boulez make them very sharp and clear and not mushy and fuzzy.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh really? Is that so?

MR. LeWITT: I just got on to Debussy.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well there must be others. I mean there are how many yards of records over there?

MR. LeWITT: Yeah, I have, well, you know rock music in there. Phil Glass and some of the recent composers.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you listen while you work ever?

MR. LeWITT: Usually I do. When I read I don't. If I'm reading something I have to concentrate because music is disturbing. But when I'm working I generally listen to music or sometimes I even listen to the news. I work on drawing, and the kind of drawings I do are repetitious. Really sort of boring.

MR. CUMMINGS: But you do them anyway.

MR. LeWITT: Well, I told you I was compulsive. Things that are boring after awhile become fascinating if you do them enough.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's true. What kind of reading do you do now? Has it changed over the years?

MR. LeWITT: Well I can tell you what I read just recently.

MR. CUMMINGS: Because the books, you know, spanning all over the place.

MR. LeWITT: Yesterday I finished the book by Mumford, which I'm sure most people have read, *The Brown Decades*, and before that I had read *The City in History* and *Techniques in Civilization*, and I just read George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it goes around to a lot of topics.

MR. LeWITT: What, *Middlemarch*?

MR. CUMMINGS: No, your reading.

MR. LeWITT: No, I became interested in 19th century novels because while traveling, I tend to spend a lot of time in hotel rooms, and it's good to have books. It's nice to have big thick books because you have to carry fewer books that way, and it weighs less. Then you get interested and it's like a grand film to watch. Especially the 19th century writers. I like especially Henry James and Melville, George Eliot and Jane Austen. They are so descriptive, and you get such a sense of character, plot and things. Really very, very good to read.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you find that your traveling changes your work in a way or influences you in a particular way?

MR. LeWITT: I don't think so.

MR. CUMMINGS: Or become gelled?

MR. LeWITT: I don't think so. I hope not. I think that I just go on and do things wherever I am. To me one place is just like another. Even though I know I'm in Italy or Germany, or another place. But the walls are walls. They don't change that much.

MR. CUMMINGS: When you build a piece, how do you decide on its actual dimensions? Is it planned out ahead of time?

MR. LeWITT: Well, at one point I decided that the - what are you talking about? The open-cube pieces?

MR. CUMMINGS: Right.

MR. LeWITT: Well, I decided way back that I had to make a decision as to the proportion between the space and the form. I had built a few and one looked alright to me. In fact this is the one. I measured it and I decided that I would make them all the same. The proportion was eight and half spaces to one of common support. I just kept using that. I had to have it some way and I didn't want to make the decision new each time because there wasn't any point to it. If it was all right once, it would be alright all the time.

MR. CUMMINGS: Was that made optically? Or was it measured? Scaled in some way?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I just decided to - I had made some before that were closer in and I thought I'd make it a little wider. You get the wood, which is in this case a half inch square. So that decides the form.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, that's just-

MR. LeWITT: So you apply eight and a half to how many modulars there are. That's how you find out the size.

MR. CUMMINGS: So you use kind of a standard-

MR. LeWITT: Standard proportions.

MR. CUMMINGS: Let's go back to teaching for a second. Are you going to teach this year? Or are you still teaching?

MR. LeWITT: No, I stopped teaching several years ago. And I stopped doing lectures and don't go on panels either.

MR. CUMMINGS: Because it doesn't interest you? You feel you've done that?

MR. LeWITT: I don't teach because there really isn't anything I can teach, except what I do, which is the last thing that would be helpful to anyone but me. I don't want to be an art personality because my art has nothing to do with that. I don't even like my picture to be used because it has nothing to do with my art. I don't want to be on panels because I don't think quickly enough to be a good panel member. And then again, I don't want to become a personality.

MR. CUMMINGS: Is there anything we could talk about quickly that we haven't touched upon?

MR. LeWITT: Well, I think really that the biggest problem now that an artist faces is the social implication of his art and what happens to it once it leaves his studio.

MR. CUMMINGS: Control.

MR. LeWITT: Because here you have museums that use it in a political sense. It always ends up in the hands of people who you feel don't think the way you do, or they use art as speculation or as a commodity. It becomes very depressing, in that sense. In order to keep doing art, you have to put it up for sale. If you sell it, you have enough money to live, and if you live, you continue to do it. It's a vicious circle. I really believe that art is just not something that's laid down as frosting on a cake in society. I think that esthetics and ethics are really very much the same kind of thing. The reason I do things the way I do them is because I think that for me, it's a necessary way of doing it. I can't paint a picture of a person because to me it wouldn't be ethical. I mean, I can draw a line on a wall because I think it's an ethical act. And it's necessary in terms of how I think or how thinking of a particular art world goes. I don't like art work that is frivolous in this kind of way. But I think it's a very big problem as to how the art is used, of how the artist is used and exploited.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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