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Oral history interview with Louise Nevelson, 1972 Jan. 30

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Transcript

Interview

AG: ARNALD GLIMCHER
LN: LOUISE NEVELSON

AG: You've stated that you consider your work to be of a distinctly feminine sensibility, yet the scale of your works in the media of wood assemblage has often prompted critics to use masculine metaphors in describing your works. Can you explain how this feminine sensibility manifests itself in your work as an extension of your life really? How does the work reveal its femininity?

LN: Well, let's begin first to say that in birth a male has his not only sensibility but a male has what constitutes a male. A female has what constitutes a female. So let's accept that and from that premise state that a female cannot work like a male, and a male does not work like a female. But that does not reduce the preconceived idea that we are in a society and have been for thousands of years where there is male dominance and consequently that is just a cliche that the world has superimposed that a female cannot produce or have visions of grandeur and greatness, that nature never meant that anyone who has a brain in their head that they should be reduced because of the sex.

AG: Yes. But at the time you began working there were options. There were many people that were welding metal. But you didn't select that as your medium.

LN: Don't forget that during the Second World War all the metals were difficult to get and consequently, particularly in America, men and women artists, male and female, began to use torches. First they also went into the factories to produce for war and then they began to use torches. That offended me because the whole performance of the torch, and the word "torch" and the performance of the torch just went against my feeling. No one was using wood at the time in sculpture. But that did not have any influence on me because it was as natural for me to go to wood then as it was for me to take a glass of water and drink it.

AG: Well, wood has historical associations.

LN: Yes, but that may have been through past performances, or I might have inherited it, or, for a better word, which I don't particularly like, is "instinctively" I went to it.

AG: Because your father was in the lumber business and in construction?

LN: Yes, and his father in Russia was in the lumber business.

AG: Can you explain how few women artists there have been in history?

LN: Yes, I certainly can. You see, through the ages as we have already conceded that the whole of society was male-oriented. It would have been like a freak to be an artist. It was too independent a spirit and it's not difficult to look back and see that even when Rosa Bonheur did her horses -- I'm not going into her psychology and the symbolism of the horse and things -- but she had to wear pants and get on a ladder and of course she was considered a freak. It's very evident why. The thing is that doesn't mean that through ages the female did not have creative ability but that society did not recognize it.

AG: What role did your being a woman play in the logistical development of your career? By that I mean was it more difficult to get a gallery? Were you discriminated against by your male peers? Were museums more suspicious or skeptical about the quality of your work because you were a woman? What are some of the difficulties and influences that that's played?

LN: Yes. Well I think all of it, all of that. But basically we have to go back to the fact that in America at that time years ago artists wore berets, they wore old clothes; that was their symbol. Just like a soldier wears his uniform; that was their uniform. And I always had a flair for clothes and liked them because I have a whole feeling about appearance. Because I think you very carefully can identify a person by their appearance. It's important. It's not skin deep. It's much deeper. And consequently in youth I had this kind of flamboyance and wore good clothes and wore attractive things. So I think it was taken for granted that a woman of that sort couldn't be totally dedicated. So I think that because of their, not mine, their preconceived ideas that an artist had to look -- that the older and the uglier they looked, the more they were convinced that there was a dedication. Well, that again is preconceived cliches. That's what I've been trying to break down all my life. And I still am.

AG: There were several groups that you were conspicuously absent from. One was The Club of New York artists during the late forties and fifties. Your work was not represented by the Museum of Modern Art until nineteen fifty-nine. This came conspicuously late to you.

LN: Yes.

AG: Can you relate some of your experiences with museum people? I mean were they absolutely unaware of your existence? Didn't museum directors, collectors, writers, come to your studio? I know that there's a history of a very good press, right from early reviews by Howard DeVree of The Times in the forties, and going on to Emily Genauer, early reviews of Hilton Kramer, Dore Ashton, more recently John Canaday, Very positive criticism has always existed on your work. But what were some of the situations that you can remember involving museum directors?

LN: As I see it in retrospect, I feel -- you see, I took wood from the streets, boxes, old wood with nails and all sorts of things. Now when you think of monied people, they will invest in gold and they will invest in materials that are expensive. And actually the majority of people don't have homes; they have show places, you see. Consequently they are not going to take old wood and give it is true meaning. So I recognized that. But I felt without any hesitation -- there wasn't a moment in my life that I hesitated to change that. I had my convictions and I didn't want to wait but I wouldn't have done anything less than I did. And I think that is it. And, of course, if you want to go into the history of art even to this day, how many collectors buy because they know or identify or want the work? It's status and it's fashionable and you can talk about it. And it's a whole lot of things. But, if you want to go deeper, how many people on earth face themselves anyway? How many dare to look in the mirror and say they have lived according to their own being? They have lived for the outside world. Well, truly at this stage in my life I need people. I love people. But they are a mirror and a reflection of me. But they are not taking me out of where I am. And so, in other words, what I mean is that I like people and I need them but I need them for myself, not that I go out to them. But I must say that that's an important thing that I'm telling you because the homes you go into that have been decorated by interior decorators are not homes; they're showcases. So people are not living at all in their environment. They're living in the decorator's environment or somebody else's. And so they never face themselves. I don't think one person in -- I don't know the number -- that really face themselves. And even when they're collecting furniture or dishes or whatever, it's all display. I went to dinner last night. The dishes were gorgeous, the home was lovely. I didn't see the host and hostess in it. It was a French setting that was as removed from the host and hostess as the man in the moon.

AG: In the early forties, you had a show called "The Circus, The Clown is the Center of the World" and in it you showed rather startling wood assemblages with raw wood, nails, bits of broken glass, bits of broken mirrors, electric lights, some moving pieces that could be pulled like children's toys. That exhibition took place at the Nordness Gallery. It was a guest exhibition. After the exhibition was over, after there were extraordinary reviews, you took the exhibition back to your loft on Tenth Street; you cannibalized the pieces that you would use again. The entire exhibition was then destroyed. Didn't that make you feel terribly bitter? And did that exhibition invite museum people to come to your house? What I'm really getting at is I'd like to know some incidents of who were the first museum people, or not if who they were, what were those dialogues?

LN: Museum people did come to the exhibition. And it was like a psychic operation to take these things apart and I banged my head physically against the wall and lay down on the floor and decided never to get up until something came, some revelation to myself. Well, it was one day and two days. Finally I did get up and started again. So that tells you the story of the joy I had from that exhibition.

AG: At one time Colette Roberts, who was your dealer after Nierendorf, came to your studio with a director, I believe, of the Guggenheim Museum at the time. Could you tell us about that visit?

LN: Yes. The director was brought to my studio -- it was a house -- it wasn't a studio; let's say it was a brownstone -- four floors. And it was filled with work. And I had a garden. The director took a look and made no comment. By that time we went into the garden -- it must have been, say, like summer or fall -- I turned to the director and I said, "You see from this place" -- (this brownstone house that I'm talking about was on Thirtieth Street East so that you could see the Empire State and you could also see Grand Central) -- so I looked at the director very coldbloodedly and I said, "Do you see Empire State? That goes to Pennsylvania Station and you see -- that's Grand Central goes to Grand Central to other outskirts of the world." I said, "Here I am big as life but never seen." And I said, "Good day." And that was the end of that.

AG: And another time a museum director came to your studio to see the works that would be included in the Grand Central show, and he was late. Do you remember that? He apologized for being ten minutes late.

LN: Oh, yes, I see. Well, it was a little different than that but, nevertheless, let's start from there. Yes, a museum director of note came and he said that he felt he was a little late for my work. He said he thought he was probably five years late for my work; he didn't quite get it five years ago. And I patted him gently on his shoulder

and said, "I think you're thirty years late for my work."

AG: But you did hold very fast to your independence, I think, gleaned strength from it and, as you told me before, had the satisfaction of controlling time. What do you mean by that? How have you manipulated or frozen time to your advantage?

LN: Yes. Well, you see, in my inner being I suppose that with all the great minds through the ages they still have not got too close to what life is all about or what life is. I mean men like Einstein and others. as an example, have given us great things. Nevertheless, think that in all the history of humanity we still find daily that life in its essence is a mystery. And psychiatry and psychology and all the other fancy things are not getting closer. They are giving us another facet like in a mirror there's a reflection but they're not getting closer to the essence of what life is. But anyway, I bring that out because within my being I have not been influenced so much by all these outside things. First, I don't suppose I would even understand them, and second, they don't interest me. But I am interested in my life and my awareness and my consciousness. And for that I have worked so desperately as to get a little more aware, a little more consciousness of what my life is about. Because what my life is about is what everybody's life is about. Only the other people get, or have been cowed down to make a living they'll say, or to eat -- which embarrasses the hell out of me, or they have children as an obligation, or they have a concept of truth which boxes them in like a prison, or they have a concept of lies which boxes them in like a prison. All these things in one's own consciousness are to be used as we understand them.

AG: You talk about being offended by the concept of working to eat. You had a very difficult time. I'm well aware of your history and how hard it was in the late thirties and forties and early fifties even, mid-fifties even, and you never at any point digressed from your work. You never got, so to speak, got a job to support yourself. And I'm well aware that there were times when there was very little food, there was very little money to buy food for yourself or even for your child. Explain this very marvelously stubborn attitude.

LN: I'll be glad to. First, I think, you see, that a person like myself . . . . May I say that I think that a person like myself -- I will concede that I was dedicated and that art and creation was not art and creation but it was a place to live in, and breathe in. I can't quite put it in words but there was no question about it; so I had no choice. Either you would stay there or cut your throat. So if you wanted to not cut your throat you stayed there. But -- and I've also thought that anyone who is dedicated -- we use that word "dedication" -- as I was, and am, has a blind spot. You see, nature is very strange. It blinds you to a great many other things. That's what I'm talking about -- the blind spot. And so I saw no other world. But it gave me also very acute insights and I realized that, to fulfill my life as I saw it, meant that I couldn't have departments in my head; I had to have totality night and day. Because very often, at night when I went to sleep, my figures would move as if they were real people. Even if they were abstract, they would move. Well, now under those circumstances, let us say, had I not lived alone at that time or had I even had a mate at that time, there would have been other intrusions, maybe delightful, but they would have been intrusions nevertheless. Whereas this way, good or not, it was a totality. And I recognized it and I knew that, to fulfill what I wanted, I needed it. So, for example -- my great treat of course with so much affluence I would walk, say, up Fifth Avenue. At that time their windows really had something that I don't think they have any more. It was the time that Dali was supposed to have broken a window at Bonwit Teller's. Then across the street almost -- it was I think when Bergdorf-Goodman moved in on Fifty-Eighth or Fifty-Ninth Street there. We'll start with Bergdorf-Goodman and then go to Bonwit's. Now Bergdorf-Goodman had figures that were made out of sheet music all over and then whatever clothes they had which were unrealistic as we understand it, and then it looked like either water or a mirror that reflected it. Well, that certainly was Daliesque. But still, to see it right out in the open was quite a revelation. And so from there I walked to Bonwit's. And they at that time -- I never liked fashion -- but fortunately at that time their windows had clothes that I felt I could enjoy. I looked in those windows and looked at the clothes. And I was certainly feeling very unhappy about myself and tears would have been like candy compared to my feeling. I said, now I don't feel awfully good, do I? And I was talking to myself. And I said, now suppose the president of this store came right out and recognized me and said, "Mrs. Nevelson, I will give you half a million dollars this year if you give me your lunchtime from twelve to two, would you take it? And I said, "No," to myself. Well, of course, that corrected my feeling. I went back to my studio and started working again.

AG: You know, I find it particularly apt that there was a fascination or a fascination with looking in the windows because the space of those three-dimensional objects in a tightly delineated frontal position is not unlike the evolution of your art. I mean there must have been a rapport. That kind of three-dimensionality, the illusion of three-dimensionality already fascinated you.

LN: Also don't forget that the glass, the transparency, and the mirrors played and do play such an important part in my thinking because it's through the looking glass, dear, always through the looking glass because I do not give the so-called material world its concept of reality. It's through the looking glass that is the reality.

AG: You've told me several times that you always knew you were an artist . . .

LN: You're goddamned right!

AG: . . . from the minute you were born. Do you believe in predestination? I mean, tell me how, give me some clues as to how you felt, how you knew you were an artist. You were living in Rockland, Maine. You didn't grow up in Manhattan. You weren't in the middle of art museums. And yet this concept of being an artist was yours.

LN: Well, predestination is something we will forget; or at least may I forget it. When we are born . . . . You can walk on this street this minute and you will see a hundred cats and those cats all have different markings. Now you might use the word "predestination" but let us say I take it from the surface. These cats have different forms, they have different legs, they have different color eyes, and they are different. Consequently, when we are born we are born with a totality that belongs to us. Now I have repeated and think as a good example that, say, Caruso was a singer. Well, I am sure there have been voices as good as Caruso's. Probably that wasn't the greatest voice in the world. But the sum total of Caruso made the difference. I have been told that when he reached certain notes that the vibrations were that powerful that they would smash a glass. Now I believe that. And under the circumstances I believe that each individual has their markings. And of course I knew because I was born knowing that I had it. Because it was as evident as looking in the mirror. When you're three or four or five years old, if you have dark eyes you know you have dark eyes and, if you have blue eyes, you know you have blue eyes. And it was no problem to recognize this. Then of course you start to school and they recognize it. Now, for instance, when I was quite young, in the early beginnings, I recall that the art teacher had made every week, every day they came they would bring a readymade thing for you to copy through the week that they did. And this particular time it was a sunflower. Now the sunflower had a round brown center, then it had yellow petals. Well I can't tell you why I did it but as I was doing it I made the inside center, which was brown, enormous and made the petals very, very small yellow. Because already I must have felt that the brown and the yellow -- without thinking much -- I was feeling it out. And when the teacher came the next week she picked it up and she said to the class, "This is original, this is the most unique." She may have used different language but she implied this is unique because this is different. And she loved it. Now when I was going to school, of course, I knew, and the teachers knew -- we had different teachers at different times -- and they knew that it's old-fashioned to say that you're gifted; but they knew it. I was always a little cold-blooded. Now I was born and raised in a cold country and still don't like cold weather. I was cold in every room of that school. But later through selection I went to the art class and was always warm. And it wasn't until many years later that I recognized that it had nothing to do with the temperature of the room; that it had something to do with my generating heat.

AG: Do you remember the first time that you verbalized or became aware that you wanted to be a sculptor rather than a painter?

LN: Well -- I was going to say that for me the distinctions are not that important. Nevertheless, there was one instance when I went to the library with another little girl in my class. And I recall that the librarian, who was quite a culivated lady, said to the little girl -- as they always ask -- "What are you going to do when you grow up?" I think the little girl said that she was going to be a stenographer or a bookkeeper. And I don't know, but I had time while she was asking her questions and I looked around. And in this library that Carnegie had given to the city was this great big Joan of Arc, a sitting figure made out of white plaster and it had a little patina. I looked at that and instinctively -- if I can use that word -- I knew right away what it meant. When the librarian asked me what I was going to do I said, "I'm going to be an artist." And before I finished I said, "No, I'm going to be a sculptor. I don't want color to help me." And I think that is the key to my life. That has been the key. Why I chose the hard way I don't know. But that is really as important for me to tell you that as if I really expounded on philosophy from now to Doomsday.

AG: That's very interesting, especially in view of the fact that the objects which you use, the forms which you use in your work are "found" objects, many of which have had a previous existence, come to you with different patinas, colors, and age; and you eradicate all of that with one cleansing color.

LN: Well now, let me explain. I think that's a wonderful thing you asked me. I was doing these things. And I painted them, as you know, one color. For me black isn't black anyway, and color isn't color as such. Color is a rainbow and is just as fleeting as anything on earth, you see, if you want to analyze it. And every minute it's changing through light. So it's a mirage. So let's get there right away. Now the important thing is that someone, an artist, came to the house. They want to be nice to me and they said, "Why don't you see, say, a little India red here and why don't you use a little white here and it'll make something, you know, and this and that. And I said, "I'm not making anything and I don't want to do that because my whole life has been centered -- you can use the word "self-centered" if you wish -- I think it's a great word." Who am I going to center myself on if not on my inner self? We were talking about color and that I may be self-centered. I said about the color that I didn't want to use it because of that. Yes. I feel that -- well, we'll digress a little and come right back where we started.

AG: Okay.

LN: When people say that I'm a strong woman, it offends me no end because I don't want to be a strong woman. All I want is to reveal what I understand about the world to myself. That is my whole search and my whole -- not only search because I'm not searching -- but I want it to be revealed to me. And for that I work. And for that I will work more. Because that's all I want. Now when we were saying, for instance, about the color, a little white here and so on, I have not done things for the outside. I have done things because I want to see clearer. But I mean that can sound stupid if people don't understand what I'm talking about. But in every human being there is the potential of greatness. For instance, if I say that in religion -- now I'm not talking about religion as such, but I am talking about the wise people who have given us books that have great wisdom. And when, for example, they say that we are "created in the image and likeness of God" -- now if you don't live up to your greatest potential, then you are cheating God. So who are you cheating? You are cheating the God within yourself. And I want a total being of myself. I feel rich enough in myself that I can pay that price. And that is why I work. And I hope as long as I'm here that that's the way I will work.

AG: It's interesting because, knowing you as well as I do and for as long as I have, I've come to realize that the works of art that you've made are not the total work of art, that the life is the total work of art and these are tangible manifestations of that totality. And I see it in everything you do. I see the collage aesthetic or this kind of building to reveal images in the way you dress, in the predilections of what you want to do. Have you been aware throughout your whole life of that kind of totality, of specifically how easily it's seen in your clothing?

LN: I am totally aware of it, yes. Because, you see, again what probably has given me my vision is that I have not been caught in cliches. When I was growing up, it was fashionable if you were pretty to say, "Well, beauty is skin deep." Well, beauty is not skin deep. Beauty is beauty. In other words, I would like to say that the whole thing that we're talking about has one note in my life, as you can see. And that is the important thing to me. Now, another thing. Let us take Beethoven, just because everyone knows Beethoven. And we're talking about his time and in the Occidental world. Now in music we have octaves and there are eight notes and then some half notes. And out of eight notes he built a world of sound. All the things that he created are really out of eight notes. Now those eight notes go higher, an octave higher, an octave lower. But there are only eight notes in an octave. Now I need only one note. And that is my note of consciousness. And that is what I want more of: my own consciousness.

AG: How do you think that relates to -- or for you how does it relate to your awareness of the previous history of art? We don't any of us grow up in a vacuum and there are influences and specific accomplishments in art produce new territory for experimentation just as the discovery of scientific truths or answers give rise to new questions over the earth. It's apparent to me that you read images in terms of light and shadow in a kind of frontal viewing just as you viewed the shop windows at Bonwit Teller's frontally in a kind of illusionistic space. Bearing this in mind, can you tell me what eras in art history, or what artists have had a particular influence on your work?

LN: Now, you see, a person can from the beginning have an ear that is the perfect pitch; or they can have an eye that is twenty-twenty or whatever. In other words, we are born with certain things. And my strength was that if I looked, as we have already talked about, at African things the first time that I had encountered a whole exhibition in Paris in 1931, immediately as if I came from another world and knew these things, I didn't have to study them. That wasn't necessary. I don't study -- when I go to a museum I don't sit and study the things. I get a feeling as if I know these things and I don't have to study them. It's not at all like that. So when I saw them I saw exactly what they meant to me. And they were as living no matter when they were made as if they're living today. So, in other words, I am not a historian and I'm not interested in time as such. And I'm not a scholar as such. Now, leaving that there, we'll say -- now, for example, at that same time I returned to America and New York and I'd got into the subways. The columns in the subways are black iron. And for me personally they certainly had as much meaning and inform as well as many of the things that are in museums. I didn't make that distinction. For me they still have that power and they still are grand and glorious.

AG: You did collect African pieces in the twenties and thirties and I think into the forties also, and you also amassed a great collection of American Indian pottery in the thirties and forties. How did American Indian pottery speak to you? What was that recognition?

LN: Well, I want to tell you that, as a little girl in Maine, we did have maybe one family, a few Indians there. And again it was just like I was talking about the African sculpture or the columns in the subway. I somehow felt I knew these people as If they were as close, as close can be, and as if I recognized them. Now I know there are philosophies that might say something about reincarnation or collective memory or something. I don't know enough about that. I only know that when I look at them they're related to me; they're not apart; they are in me. The fist Indian pot that I began collecting was: I went to Texas and I went to get a few souvenirs and on the shelf was an Indian pot. It said "not for sale." But I had to have that pot because it had every thing that I understood: I mean the geometry, the design, the terra cotta, the whole thing. So anyway I spoke to them and finally they decided I could have it. The asked, "Where shall I ship it?" I said, "I don't want it shipped. I'll take it." Well, I was going to California from there. I had to find a basket and I put it in the basket and got a carton around it and

then carried it from one city to the other until I brought it home to New York. Because I didn't trust that it might get broken or that it might get lost. So I identified very closely. Now another time, I went to New Mexico and saw the Indians and their clothes and how they dress and so forth. And I just feel very closely related. There's something that probably crosses. I might never on this earth met them before but somewhere in our consciousness there is an interrelationship. And of course, if I had to choose a reincarnation, I probably would say I'd like to be American Indian. I like the tone of their faces. I like the bone structure. I like what they stand for. Historically I can't tell you more. That would be for a scholar. I only tell you how I feel.

AG: It's interesting because their art also is involved with distinct frontality, balance of positive and negative having equal weight and equal power, so it certainly does make sense that there's a strong sympathy. I'd like to ask you one more thing. And I think it's one of the most interesting aspects of your behavior. It has to do with the year 1966 which was a time at which you had already achieved international prominence as an artist. There was a strong market for your work that had been established and gave every indication of being permanent. You were sixty-six years old. Success was yours. And, in an astounding gesture, you divested yourself of nearly all your possessions. Your collections of American Indian pottery, early American tools, African sculpture, pre-Columbian sculpture were all sold. All of your furniture was either sold or given away to friends. And you refurnished your house with gray steel filing cabinets and gray steel lockers for your clothing. And, from an opulent interior full of -- that was really a visual feast, you now live in a very monastic, simple, open space. Can you explain what motivated this action?

LN: Very simply. You see, we started saying that most people don't live in homes anyway; they live in showcases. And they don't even look at their pictures. I am sure that there are people who own Rembrandts and all sorts of things who never see them. They just have them there. Or they looked at them once and that is it. And I felt that the time had come that I did not want -- being who I am and what I am -- that I didn't want one thing to impose itself on me. I wanted a white blank so that what I did would be its own totality. And I was right. And I still feel that way.
[END OF INTERVIEW]