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Oral history interview with Barbara
Cusack, 1979 January 12

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Barbara Cusack on 1977 January 12. The interview took place at Cusack's home in Houston, TX, and was conducted by Sandra Curtis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

SANDRA CURTIS: This is Sandra Curtis talking with Barbara Cusack in her home [. . .] in Houston, Texas on January the 12th, 1979.

Barbara, why don't you just start discussing your background in art and what got you interested in the whole art scene in Houston?

BARBARA CUSACK: All right, I was working at the Rice Museum at Rice University in I think 1970 or '71.

SANDRA CURTIS: What were you doing?

BARBARA CUSACK: A multi-faceted job. I don't think with Mrs. de Menil (Dominique) you ever have one particular job that you are doing. I worked in the museum, worked with the art to school program, the print club, and various other things. In working with the print club, I discovered that there were people spending large sums of money on prints. There were large print collectors here in Houston, but there really weren't any contemporary galleries except the Texas Gallery at that time. At that time they were very small. They were over on Morningside. I started thinking that for a city of a million and a half or close to it then, that really wasn't very much being done in the way of art. So I decided to open a gallery. I didn't really have a strong direction when I opened the gallery. I wasn't sure, I had not been educated, or had the opportunity to see a lot of the real contemporary art in this town, just as most people have not today.

SANDRA CURTIS: Right.

BARBARA CUSACK: Well, we did have a Dan Flavin show while I was still at Rice and that was a real eye-opener for me. That kind of did something— Actually, having the opportunity to see the Ad Reinhardt paintings that Mrs. de Menil had, opened something up in me more than anything else. But I did buy a house that I could use. I sold my home, bought this place that I could use for a gallery and a home, with four children. Worked on it for six months while I still worked at the museum, and then opened the gallery here in the fall of '73 with the Sol LeWitt wall show. He did six wall drawings. I had not met Sol. I took a little trip up to New York trying to see things and learn, and out to California, and had never seen any of Sol's work, and was very moved when I did see some at the John Weber Gallery. I came back and I didn't have an opening show. I had made a commitment to one artist that I had met through the de Menis in a show here—Peter Bradley. Of course, his work is very far from the type that I ended up being interested in and really basing the gallery on. I didn't have an opening show, and I had seen Sol LeWitt's work and I called him. I called information in New York and got his number and called him. 'Hi, Sol! This is Barbara Cusack down in Texas. I'm opening a gallery and I was wondering if you'd do the opening show.' He said, 'Oh, why don't I say yes.' And I thought, 'Could I have gotten the wrong Sol LeWitt and some one's just putting me on or joking with me or something? This is too simple.' Then I called him back. 'Oh, I forgot to ask you about price.' Of course he said it would— just the price of his ticket down here. So he came and did six wall drawings. It was a very beautiful show. And he did a book, a little booklet which is in its third printing right now.

SANDRA CURTIS: What was the Houston response to the show?

BARBARA CUSACK: The response to the show was one of bewilderment. Unfortunately, I think the biggest problem with the gallery was that I never had any outside help here in town. The art critics— The critic who came to— I hate that word, critic, actually, but that's

what they call themselves, so I'll use their term. She didn't know how to spell Sol LeWitt. She'd never heard of him. So the response for the three years that I did shows was always very slow. I would say that I had the best response from students, young people.

SANDRA CURTIS: What about other artists, Houston artists?

BARBARA CUSACK: Some, there was some. Of course, there was also resentment from a lot of local artists because I didn't show local artists.

SANDRA CURTIS: Why did you choose not to show local artists?

BARBARA CUSACK: Because as soon as I had the Sol LeWitt show—and I went ahead with my commitment to Peter Bradley because I had set the show up and I felt that was only fair. Actually, there were a couple of California artists that I also had made commitments to show who were painters. After that I knew that I had to go in the direction of the avant-garde, and to show these people who I feel are very important artists. I really tried to show work being done today that is internationally important and it wasn't being done here in Houston. It wasn't being done anywhere outside New York in the States. Claire Copley later opened a gallery in California. But even Claire didn't— We showed some of the same people, but she continued to show other local people that I think were not maybe as strong.

SANDRA CURTIS: Isn't it safe to say, Barbara, that the artists that you had come down did the work specifically for your space? It wasn't just something that was just selected and brought down here. It was done for you.

BARBARA CUSACK: Oh, yes. It opened up another place for the artists to show their work— to make shows, not to show it, but to make new work. Because most of the artists, almost all the artists that I did show did do work on the spot. There wasn't any opportunity for them in the United States, because not many museums have opened up spaces for them. So they were all very excited and felt that possibly this could be the beginning of something. Here are artists who are very well known in the art world, who've received enormous recognition in Europe, who've had major museum shows all over Europe, but who have really not had, not received this recognition at all in the States.

SANDRA CURTIS: Other than Sol LeWitt and Peter Bradley, what artists did you show?

BARBARA CUSACK: I showed Daniel Buren. Made two shows here. The first show, Sol's show, was in the fall of '73. That spring Daniel Buren came and did an installation on all the windows in the front three rooms, and in the office, so all four rooms in the front— The front three rooms were empty except for the transparent strips that were on the windows. Well, that show really upset a lot of people! I mean they walked in and said, 'Well, I must have the wrong place. There's nothing here.' I said, 'Well, there really is. You just have to turn around and look the other way. think Buren is one of the most interesting artists that is working today. It was a very strong show. It was very beautiful.

SANDRA CURTIS: He works mostly out of Paris, doesn't he?

BARBARA CUSACK: He lives in Paris when he's there. He works all over the world. He travels. He and Sol LeWitt are probably the most prolific artists working today. They do an enormous amount of shows. It's amazing to go through and look at the work they've both produced in the last fifteen years or more.

SANDRA CURTIS: Then, after Daniel—

BARBARA CUSACK: I had Lawrence Weiner. He's very difficult work to show. When people have no background— I think the work wasn't for me. I don't know, but then I had some art background, But even people here with an art background didn't help at all.

SANDRA CURTIS: What kind of support did you get from the museums?

BARBARA CUSACK: None.

SANDRA CURTIS: That's easy.

BARBARA CUSACK: The directors the last I had shows here were—Neither Bill Agee or Jim Harithas came to the gallery. They didn't come to see any of the shows. And I showed On Kawara's *One Millionth Year* book which has only been shown I think four places in the world,

and maybe only one other place in the States, and Charlotte Moser, one of our art critics at the time, (*Houston Chronicle*) never had time to come over and see the show, because she said she was too busy writing reviews and things for the Anthony Caro show at the time.

Yes, Carl Andre came down and made a show at the same time that Brice Marden and Paul Mogensen were having a show at Rice. He's good friends with both of them, and respects their work. The newspaper articles said that— talked about the Rothko paintings, of course; talked about the paintings of Brice Marden, an established painter, and then said that the two younger artists showing in town, Paul Mogensen and Carl Andre— Well, this is really a laugh, because Carl Andre is not the young artist and certainly one of the most important and well-known American artists alive. So it was kind of a shock, I think, for Carl to have that kind of response here.

SANDRA CURTIS: Yes, I'll bet. And then after Andre—

BARBARA CUSACK: At any rate, let me say that Carl really did do a beautiful show here. He found the pieces. We travelled around for about four days in incredible rainstorms to all the local iron scrap metal places. He found some beautiful plates that he made floor pieces, interior floor pieces and one of them on the front porch. It really was a very beautiful, very strong show. None of the pieces ever did sell, but that was pretty much the story of the gallery. Hanne Darboven had a show here. Well, Carl Andre, let me go back. Carl Andre's second show I showed his book. We showed the entire book on the wall. Called *Passport*. Carl didn't come down the second year, the second time.

Richard Tuttle made two shows here. Two very beautiful shows and subsequently took the second show that he made here he put in the house next door which was also my house at the time and was for sale and was vacant. He said he wanted to use that space because it was so impersonal. So he liked the idea of it not being in a gallery or in a museum; of being just totally impersonal. He came down on the bus and he said he had never seen the South before, so he sort of decided to jump on a bus at the last minute instead of flying. He took a bus through the South from New York. Someone asked him while he was here, 'What could you see from a bus?' and he said 'It's not what I saw but what I felt as I went through.' He went to describe the kind of feelings he got. He said that Alabama was the softest place he had ever been through in the world. Anyway he arrived at the bus station here with some sort of show in his mind, I think. When he got a cup of coffee when he was waiting for me to pick him up he became interested in the little wooden stirrers for the coffee and made the show from those. He cut the ends, you know where it's rounded on the ends? He cut the ends off and made these tiny little paintings, eight of them, that were then placed in the center of eight different walls in the other house. They were really powerful little pieces. I really loved them. So I was invited to participate that year in the Cologne Art Fair. A lot of galleries in Europe got together in New York and decided to take a space together. It had never been done before, and I don't think it's been done since. So they took this whole space together and allowed each gallery to show three artists. But you had to be coordinated because a lot of the galleries did shows of the same people. So I decided to only show one person and take this Richard Tuttle show which may never have been seen anywhere else although one of the pieces was in Richard's show at the Whitney. I took this piece to Cologne. That took up my space and I remember one of the German dealers was very upset when I announced that I had to have eight walls, eight very small walls, I mean. I'd use the ends of partitions and everything. He said, 'I'm afraid your show is going to overpower mine completely.' I said, 'No, I really don't think so. Wait till I get it up. I don't think you'll be upset by it.' But everyone liked it very much. It was a very strong show. And I didn't have any freight problems. Everyone had lost paintings and all this, and I had my little work in my purse. So Richard did two very beautiful shows here.

Hamish Fulton came the third year, the last year that I actually did shows. The fourth year I just did private dealing. I could no longer afford— It is expensive to put on shows. One doesn't realize, I don't think, all of the expenses that go into a gallery. It seems like it wouldn't cost anything to just open your house and let someone come and put something in it, but it's very expensive. Hamish Fulton came from England and made his first show in the United States. Also, it was the first show that he had ever made on the spot. In other words, all of his work is made on the spot, but he had never made a show on the spot, and what he usually does is go somewhere, make his walk, make his photographs, go back to England, and have the photographs processed and have the pieces made there. Then they are shipped to whoever is doing a show of his. So this was the first time he had done a show in this way. Made his piece in the Big Bend. He was here for two weeks. Almost three weeks,

actually. He was. in Big Bend for a week. He did a five-day walk out there and then made a piece from it. No one came to see the show. No one from the newspapers came to talk to this man. It was very disheartening because he's a terrific artist. I showed Hanne Darboven. Hanne's work is different. She does her work in her studio always. That's the nature of her work. I had two very beautiful shows of hers.

Jan Dibbets came. Of course he does not make his shows here either. But he did come from Holland. Hanne Darboven is German. Jan came from Holland and we had a beautiful show of his.

SANDRA CURTIS: Did the collectors respond, Barbara? You say you didn't get much support from the museums and from the art critics in town. How about individuals who would come and not only would support you morally, but would purchase things?

BARBARA CUSACK: There aren't any collectors in Houston, or, for that matter, in this part of the country, for the type of art that I was showing. Most of the things I sold were in Europe and in New York. The artists were very good to me. They purchased things from me sometimes when I was just about to be sucked under, but I really never did find one collector here.

SANDRA CURTIS: I would imagine they are mostly blue chip.

BARBARA CUSACK: Right. I did sell a few drawings here and there. Things of that nature. I did show one painter, Robert Mangold, and that was the only artist I showed I had some response from the museums. The Museum of Fine Arts bought a painting, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Dallas bought a painting of his. The Museum of Fine Arts here bought a collection of prints of Sol LeWitt which they hung for several years as a major work with other artists' major works, which I didn't think was fair to Sol, although it was beautiful prints. They do now have a work of his that was a gift from Donald Judd, but it's improperly installed and isn't really fair to his work either. Which just shows again that the work is not understood properly. Ian Wilson was here in '74 and gave a discussion. I was surprised and I guess most of it was curiosity, at the turnout. I guess about fifty people came. Had a very lively two-and-a-half-hour discussion. He said he felt it was one of his better discussions. Of course I still own the work from that show. There aren't many Ian Wilson collectors around. But Ian has always been, as all of these artists have been, so morally supportive of me. They just couldn't have been finer.

Robert Barry did a show here. We showed a projector piece, a scroll piece, and drawings. It was kind of a three-part show. It was excellent. Douglas Huebner came and made the show here. He did two Texas pieces at the Texas prison rodeo that year. Very good pieces. He also did five pieces in my yard. He buried some oil cans, some cans of oil, and made maps and drawings and we got some oil leases. He drew up some oil leases for owning your own Texas oil well, it was a good show. Very few people saw it. Again, the museum directors didn't come to see it.

SANDRA CURTIS: In promoting these shows, did you send out press releases yourself, or just contact the people?

BARBARA CUSACK: Both. I had a show of Stephen Antonakos. Neon installation. It was very beautiful. I guess that had a fair response, better than some of the other things because it's a little easier to understand—

SANDRA CURTIS: Flashier.

BARBARA CUSACK: Something to see. It always amazed me—Daniel Buren made a proposal to the Contemporary Arts Museum here to do a show. You know the grids of the ceiling there? He was going to have a stretcher that fit inside of each one of those grids and then the stretcher would be covered with the stripes. So the entire ceiling of the Museum would have been an installation. The response to that was well, we can't have an empty museum. I said, 'Well, if you took all that down off the ceiling and put it on the walls, you'd have a very full show, wouldn't you?' 'Well, yes, but—' Houston's not ready.

SANDRA CURTIS: It surprises me. Because I didn't think that the Contemporary Arts Museum was necessarily interested in showing what Houston was ready for.

BARBARA CUSACK: No, they aren't, but I think in the past they have been more interested in

the shock value of something. It's hard to say what's going on over there because they've had a lot of different directors, and with no direction. That's unfortunate because I think that that space would be such an excellent place to do a Sonderbund-type thing where they would also invite artists and give them the space and let them do—

SANDRA CURTIS: Well, they are doing that now with the Fire show.

BARBARA CUSACK: Where?

SANDRA CURTIS: At the Contemporary Arts. They're getting a group of Texas artists. James Surls is head of it now. They selected a group of I think one hundred Texas artists. They're going to make pieces around the central theme of Fire and install it themselves. So it'll be interesting to see what happens to the space as approached by the artists rather than by the curators or directors or anybody.

BARBARA CUSACK: Dale Eldrege, you know they gave the space to him. I think that's an example of what could be done, I think also that the Museum of Fine Arts should— It's time for them to do a little bit more contemporary things. I don't consider Anthony Caro and Helen Frankenthaler and those people as being—

SANDRA CURTIS: Avant-garde any longer?

BARBARA CUSACK: Or even contemporary. I don't think it's a very fair representation. It's fine to do those, but do something else as well. I think they have the space. They have those wonderful, spaces. Why not give them to people like Carl Andre and Daniel Buren and Sol LeWitt and let them make some beautiful installations there like they have in other museums?

SANDRA CURTIS: I think that Paul Mogensen was the first installation along that line that I've seen this last year. Did you see it?

BARBARA CUSACK: Yes, but Paul's work is so different, really.

SANDRA CURTIS: It's a lot more accessible.

BARBARA CUSACK: But these people really deal with space, each in their own way. Besides they deserve the recognition, they really deserve the recognition.

BARBARA CUSACK: Do you think you will open up another gallery? What are your ideas about it?

SANDRA CURTIS: Well, I don't know, I don't feel at this time that I would be interested in doing it again in Houston.

SANDRA CURTIS: You don't think Houston has advanced any since you closed the gallery?

BARBARA CUSACK: Very little. Probably none. I don't think anything has been shown here that one could call advanced since then. The people don't seem to be any more ready. The museums certainly don't seem to be prepared to give support to this kind of endeavor. I had thought that if I could hang in, say for five or six years, it would happen, and it looks now like it might be closer to ten or more.

SANDRA CURTIS: So essentially what made you stop, close the gallery?

BARBARA CUSACK: Money. Lack of. I could have taken a few trips around the world on what I owed in bills. I sold the house next door to pay off the debts. It didn't take the full amount, but it paid a large portion of it. I went and asked people for help. I tried to get financial backing, because there is lots of money in this town for this type of thing, but every person I talked to the response was always the same. If you would compromise your gallery some and be reasonable, and come down to earth, etc. etc. Show things even if you continue to do what you are doing, show some other things that will sell. I could not compromise. The artists that I showed don't compromise. I felt that after the first few months of the gallery, I made the same kind of commitment to those artists and to myself and to the gallery that they were making. There was no way I could compromise it.

SANDRA CURTIS: I've heard a lot of dealers say 'Well, these are the people I handle to keep the doors open.'

BARBARA CUSACK: Yes.

SANDRA CURTIS: So there's always been that involved down here I think.

BARBARA CUSACK: I thought of opening a taco stand in front. I couldn't compromise the art. Just couldn't. I think it would've made the whole thing pointless.

SANDRA CURTIS: To have gone from what you started as to something else. It would certainly change the whole concept of the gallery as it's seen now.

BARBARA CUSACK: Yes, I think it would have then made it certainly impossible for someone to understand what this other art is all about.

SANDRA CURTIS: Well, it's pretty courageous, Barbara, Because when you travel around and see lots of things, there would always seem to be attractive, beautiful work that would sell quicker than the path you chose which certainly is the hardest one you could have chosen for this particular area.

BARBARA CUSACK: Probably, but certainly the most exciting, the most interesting. And probably the most needed since the others already are here.

SANDRA CURTIS: Most definitely. It was a very sad thing for Houston when the gallery closed. It was needed.

BARBARA CUSACK: Certainly as far as exposure. It was sad for the artists because I think it's unfortunate that they are so well known outside their own country. Buren is French, and Darboven is German, and Hamish is English, and Dibbets is Dutch, but for the American artist—all the other artists I showed were American—for them to not even receive recognition in their own country is in talking to them I found that this does bother them.

SANDRA CURTIS: It must, of course. Do you still keep in contact with them?

BARBARA CUSACK: Most of them, I'm keeping very close contact with some of them. special people. Very They're all very special people.

SANDRA CURTIS: Well, it's nice then there's a lot of satisfaction having worked with that many different artists and still have such good relations with them.

BARBARA CUSACK: Yes. I cannot feel that the gallery was a loss. It was in no way a disappointment. I think I'll always feel very positive when I think about the gallery, sad, yes. A little sad that it couldn't continue, but I think the gallery was a success.

SANDRA CURTIS: I believe that's safe to say for sure. But it seems interesting that when you started out with the whole idea of opening up a gallery that you weren't particularly aiming at the direction you chose.

BARBARA CUSACK: No, because I didn't really know about this work. It was something I had to find out. I had to go out and look for it and find out about it myself. I went the first summer, opened in the fall of '74, in the summer of '75 I went to Europe. I went to France and Belgium, Holland, and Germany, and met other artists, more of the artists, visited galleries, talked to gallery owners, and collectors, also, and museums, and educated myself in that way. The following summer I did a more extensive trip. I travelled for six weeks. I went to the Basel Art Fair. I was not a participant, but I was there for almost a week. Robert Ryman opened a show there at the museum in Basel. Robert Ryman had also planned to do a show with me as well as Richard Long. There were other artists that I was planning on showing. So I met a lot of dealers and museum directors, and just tried to learn as much as I could, and investigate firsthand for myself. I did a real extensive little tour of the Rhine areas. It's amazing because there in cities of a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand, you find museums that are fifty years ahead of what we are doing here.

SANDRA CURTIS: A lot longer history to draw upon, too.

BARBARA CUSACK: That's true. I think the people are more interested in art basically. There are more people who are interested in a more genuine way. Unfortunately, I do feel honestly, that there are a lot of people involved here in art for not the most sincere reasons.

SANDRA CURTIS: I'm sure that's true. I know I spent some time, a couple of months, in Venice just painting myself, and every person in Venice was a collector. No matter how poor, how rich, they all were interested in anything to do with art. It was part of their whole way of thinking, since they had been exposed to it their whole lives.

BARBARA CUSACK: It becomes more of a social involvement, don't you think?

SANDRA CURTIS: It seems to be, now, often it's approached as an investment. A bank will invest in an artist who seems to have a good future, not because people are intrinsically interested in the art itself or the artist even.

BARBARA CUSACK: I spent six weeks just travelling around. Mostly in the Rhine area there, meeting these people, discovering all I could. There's still a lot more. I miss that very much for myself. I miss the personal encounter, because I feel very isolated here now, most of the time.

SANDRA CURTIS: Since we do have to go outside to see that sort of thing.

BARBARA CUSACK: I miss going out and finding these things for myself and I miss very much having the artists coming here. It was nice to know that at least once a month I would have this incredible input. You know, somebody who's—very—

SANDRA CURTIS: Supercharged with new ideas— Can you think of anything else I'm forgetting to ask you, Barbara?

BARBARA CUSACK: Not offhand, I can't, I could talk about it all day. It was my whole life for four years.

SANDRA CURTIS: Were there any particular highlights that you enjoyed more than others? that you won't feel like you're betraying one artist if you tell me? Over another for example?

BARBARA CUSACK: Really and truly, every show was a highlight for me. It really was. There were some shows of course that I felt enormously gratified, but actually almost every one of them, they were all special, real special. I would like to do it again, but I just don't think that Houston is the place. I don't know where I could do it because it would have to be somewhere where it's not being done. Houston seemed a likely spot because we do have two museums here; we have more than two, we have four large museums that have quite a bit of money being put into them. So that would seem a natural—

SANDRA CURTIS: I think they say that Houston has more millionaires per square foot than almost anywhere.

BARBARA CUSACK: That's right. The money is here, and the growth, but—

SANDRA CURTIS: It's the education that's missing. That's right. Houston is still very provincial. It's an enormous cow town now. '

SANDRA CURTIS: You should have sold hunting and fishing scenes.

BARBARA CUSACK: Yes, that's what some of the local dealers do. Some are real well known.

SANDRA CURTIS: It was courageous, Barbara, to open it and continue it as long as you did, so I think in the course of—

BARBARA CUSACK: I tried.

SANDRA CURTIS: —as one looks back over the history of the art world per se in Houston, they'll come to the Cusack Gallery and have to deal with it and its acceptance or rejection, whichever it was, but at least that it was here. It was possible for people to be exposed to those ideas and those people and you can't get past it. It was a first in lots of ways.

BARBARA CUSACK: I spoke to Muni Crosley (art writer, *Houston Post*) not long ago. I just said, 'Mimi, don't you think it's time for someone to write a little article? Hey, here's what it was. No opinions, though, necessarily, but just to say that this gallery did happen. Because certainly people have heard of these artists now. I have had people come up to me and say, 'I saw one of your artists in *Newsweek*. Sol LeWitt in the pages of *Newsweek*. And just to say

it's kind of sad that this gallery did close, because here's what happened there. Let's take a look at it. But she seemed very offended by the suggestion and said, 'I couldn't possibly write anything like that about the gallery.' I don't know what about the suggestion she found so offensive.

SANDRA CURTIS: Hard to say.

BARBARA CUSACK: I thought when Tony Cronin died and there was an article in the paper about all the wonderful things he had done, I thought to myself, 'Well, how sad that Tony had to die to be appreciated.' Why can't someone do it now?

END OF TAPE