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# Oral history interview with Larry Poons, 1965 Mar. 18

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## Transcript

### Interview

**DS:** DOROTHY SECKLER
**LP:** LARRY POONS

**DS:** This is Dorothy Seckler testing the machine in preparation for an interview with Larry Poons whose work has been brought to public attention through exhibitions of optical art. [A RECORDING OF BOB DYLAN MUSIC PLAYED FOR ABOUT THREE MINUTES.]

**DS:** I'll turn this off for a minute because I . . . . First of all I think I ought to just identify the tape. I'm Dorothy Seckler interviewing Larry Poons on March 18, 1965. What we've just been hearing and a kind of introduction to our interview was music by Bob Dylan that was being played as I walked in the room. And it seemed somehow related to interest and background. Would you like to say anything more about that before I get anything about your own work?

**LP:** Well, I don't know. I don't know what you could say about Bob Dylan except he is a . . .

**DS:** Why you're interested in him or how you . . . ?

**LP:** . . . musically-wise and, you know, it seems also, poetically-wise young man. I guess I identify with him a little bit because, I don't know, he's got a lot of success at a very young age.

**DS:** He struck out on a very independent beat of his own.

**LP:** Mmhmm. And it seems as if there's a whole bunch of people I guess you might say from my generation that are coming to the front now as very, very, very strong performers -- artists, dancers and these are all very interesting to me and in about six years . . . . Things are pretty really fantastic as far as, you know, the kids that went to high school in the 1950's sometime. You know, as they mature . . . because I think there's quite a few really what you'd call big big talents that are just emerging.

**DS:** Do you think there's a much more rapid development of talent, I assume that there is, than there used to be?

**LP:** Mmhmm.

**DS:** And that people get recognized and their work gets to be known and to influence other people more quickly?

**LP:** Mmhmm.

**DS:** Does this have any drawbacks? I mean, are there moments when you feel maybe it's too fast?

**LP:** Oh, I think it's . . . it happens at just the right speed. Not too fast and not too slow. I think it doesn't make for me any real problems because you might say the way I look at my painting or the way my painting looks at me if I have, you know, when I have to do it, it's that art and life are very, very far apart. The problems of painting a picture have nothing to do with the problems of everyday living. One thing, for me, is separate from the other. I mean you might call them the formal problems of making a painting. You know, the problem is making a painting; it's not "I walked down the street yesterday and, oh, I felt so bad," you know, that doesn't enter into it.

**DS:** This is opposite in a sense from Bob Dylan.

**LP:** Well, you see, his field demands this of him. I mean, you know, he has to take from his experience walking down New York streets or reading a newspaper account of somebody getting killed in Baltimore. I mean that's firmly entrenched in the tradition of the kind of music he makes.

**DS:** But there, of course, are a number of artists although perhaps not too many young ones who also feel that this is relevant in the art field too. It's true I have to grant immediately they are the older generation who have been brought up on a tradition of representation. But I mean is there any . . . are there no associational ties in your work that relate to any kind of events? For instance, coming down here, I read the headline about the

Russian cosmonaut who got out of the space vehicle and walked in space for the first time.

**LP:** Oh, really? I didn't know that.

**DS:** I have it with me. He got out of this capsule, or whatever it was, and walked right out into space . . . .

**LP:** He really hit the void!

**DS:** Yes, he really hit the void! Well, this is a new venture into space and possibly it's being too clever to say that we're also dealing in your work with a new kind of space, you know, movement as space and so on. But would there ever seem to you to be a sort of sense that you were doing in your work kind of equivalent things? Or a very heightened awareness of things that the pace and speed and active quality of American life as being particularly relevant to your work?

**LP:** Not an immediate conscious awareness of that as being important to the work. There's a dialogue in one of Mondrian's books he wrote between himself and a landscape painter and an art lover. And the landscape painter said, "Well, if you paint these right angles and you just use the primary colors, isn't the human quality or the human element in your painting going to be lost?" You know, I guess meaning it's not going to have any relevancy outside its own existence as right angles, primary colors. And his answer was that the human quality in painting is there whether you thing about it or want it or not. It's ever present. And you don't have to think about it to make a painting. Which I think is a very fine idea.

**DS:** Mmhmm. It has, as a matter of fact, been implied or stated in some writing about your work that your work is an extension of Mondrian's investigations, particularly his late boogiewoogie paintings. Do you yourself feel that it has that kind of continuity from Mondrian directly?

**LP:** Well, in 1959 and 1960 I would go to the Museum of Modern Art really just to look at the Broadway Boogiewoogie. I think it's a fine painting. And I guess it has had its influence on me -- Mondrian has had his influence on me in the Boogiewoogie painting. It was one of the things that I liked. And I didn't like very much at that time.

**DS:** You didn't like very much in painting, you mean? LM: Mmhmm. Mmhmm. I don't think I've ever really been interested in art with a capital A.

**DS:** You came to it from music first? Is that right?

**LP:** Well, when I was in high school I played the guitar and I sang. And one evening I heard some Wagner and I was very moved by it and I decided, you know, that I was going to be a composer. And, during the summer, I also read the book on Van Gogh Lust for Life. And I remember I went out in the back yard and I painted a picture of trees. And when I painted the picture -- it was the first painting I ever did -- I didn't have any doubts about it, about how I was painting or what I was doing. And later on, when I got deeper into music, I began to have serious doubts about being a composer. I began to realize that my ear was not the kind of ear that I thought would be demanded of me if I really wanted to be a good composer or a great composer. It was very rough being a composer. You might write the piece now and if you write it for 300 instruments and 600 voices, you know, you're going to wait 20 years before you hear it, you know, normally; I mean the way things are today. And I guess, you know, I didn't want that kind of thing happening because I didn't have that great an ear. I might have written a piece but I couldn't wait 20 years before I heard exactly what it sounded like. I guess I could have been a composer if I had the kind of setup Handel had where, you know, he had a court orchestra just sitting there all the time and he'd bring in a couple of bars of music and have them play it.

**DS:** Did you in fact compose at all, though? Just for the piano? or just for any one instrument?

**LP:** Oh, I did most of my composing on the piano. I did my clarinet piece and one piano piece.

**DS:** Was that why you were going to the Boston . . . I mean the New England . . . ?

**LP:** Yes. To learn how to be a composer.

**DS:** Is it the New England Conservatory of Music?

**LP:** Yes.

**DS:** And what years was that?

**LP:** That was 1956 and 1957. The last year in the Conservatory I just sort of stopped going to classes. The only class I was interested in finally was the humanities class where we read The Brothers Karamazov. And I was very moved by that thing. It was a fantastic thing. I guess it was even more fantastic because I stayed up two days

and two nights reading it without any sleep. So, by the time I got to all those hallucinatory scenes in the end of the book, like I was right with it. And, you know, like the images, some of the images even and sounds . . . .

**DS:** Christ and all that.

**LP:** Oh, yes! Yes. And the later ones when Ivan was in the jail and the Devil comes and talks to him. It was like a movie.

**DS:** Marvelous.

**LP:** I guess it's a great way to read that book instead of at one's leisure. Just pick it up and take it right through.

**DS:** Did you often do that sort of thing in those days? Or was that a very . . . ?

**LP:** No, it was an assigned thing. I hardly do any reading except once in a while I come by a book and I'm usually very moved by what I read. But I don't read that much. And that last year I was painting, sort of. Instead of going to classes I was painting.

**DS:** How did that happen? How did you get even involved with the materials of painting at that time? How did you know about . . . ? You had painted, you said, a tree in high school and so on.

**LP:** Mmhmm.

**DS:** So there must have been some place where you got to know about brushes and turpentine and so on?

**LP:** No, not really. Because I think what I know is what I've had to know. Instead of, I don't know, anything that I haven't done. Or learned how to do. Let's see, I was at the New England Conservatory the first year. And when I came back to New York in the summer I exhibited some paintings in the Washington Square Art Show. And the fellow next to me started talking and he said, "you know, your paintings . . . ." -- these were all abstract paintings -- he said, "Your paintings are Neo-plastic." I didn't know what he meant. I had never heard of it. I said, "Neo-plastic what?" He said, "Oh. Neo-plasticism. It's a school of art and do you know Mondrian's work?" I said, "I didn't know it," so I got a book on Mondrian. He suggested a book. And I was very taken aback. I really liked the Fox Trot paintings, the white diagonals with the two things.

**DS:** Mmhmm.

**LP:** That was the first time I had ever been hit by anything like painting or art. Up to then, it had always been . . . . The only times I was ever moved by anything artistic I guess was through music.

**DS:** The paintings that you exhibited in Washington Square. What did they look like?

**LP:** Sort of like stained glass windows. One of them was a straight right-angled painting with colors, flat color. When I was in high school, the last year in high school, I was trying to get out . . . .

**DS:** Where was this, by the way?

**LP:** In great Neck High School. And I took a class called "Art for Seniors" for that half credit, you know. And I remember the teacher showed some slides very quickly of art. And I remember at the time being very struck by what must have been a Van Doesburg. And like from then on in the art class I just took large pieces of paper with colored inks and was cross-hatching them off and making the colors.

**DS:** So that later on, when you did this painting after you left music school, you may have remembered a little bit this one experience in high school with the cross-hatching?

**LP:** Only later. Yes. Only later. When I was younger I was very interested in astronomy. But I was very bad at math.

**DS:** I thought you'd be a great mathematician from looking at your paintings.

**LP:** Oh, no.

**DS:** In fact, I was almost afraid to come down because I thought, if we get mathematical, I'm lost.

**LP:** So am I. No. I have a funny story: I was talking with Barnett Newman and he said somebody came up to him and said, "Why, your paintings are real -- you know, they're mathematical." And Newman turned to him and said, "Yes, that's right. Higher mathematics." And laughed. No, the technique that I use might be construed as mathematical. It's a very simple rotation of a point within a square continuously in a series of eight or sixteen

movements.

**DS:** How did you determine that particular. . . . First of all, what determines the variable in the positions of the points? chance? Or . . . ?

**LP:** Well, what determines them in one sense is the system that I employ to find out where they're going to be. Of course, once they're on a two-dimensional surface and once you see them in the scale that they're going to be at, that's the surprise. Even if one makes a small drawing, the change in scale from the drawing to the painting is always something that you have . . . that I have to reckon with. I have to see it.

**DS:** Your small drawings aren't in color then, are they?

**LP:** No, they're not in color.

**DS:** I saw some in green color.

**LP:** Well, maybe one or two have been in color but, as far as the color is concerned, it doesn't . . . it's not the same as the painting in intensity. More important is the scale. You know, how much yellow, in relationship, say, to how much purple? And the size of the purple to the yellow.

**DS:** When you're making the drawing in pencil, do you already know what colors will be involved? Does that affect . . . ?

**LP:** Sometimes only in a very general sense. Whereas I might decide to make a red painting, a red field, or I might decide to make a purple painting, or a white painting, or a black painting. When I first began these paintings, I was only working with two colors so, if I was going to make a red painting, I knew it was going to be a red and green painting, or a red and blue painting. And if I was going to make a yellow painting, I knew it would either be yellow and blue, or yellow and purple, or, you know, just two colors.

**DS:** Complementaries in that case.

**LP:** Yes, just two colors. But now that I'm using a lot more color, it would be almost impossible for me to tell you, you know, how many dots are going to be purple and how many dots are going to be red because I'm not sure -- even if I had the idea to make red dots and purple dots -- once I see them I have to make up my mind whether I want to keep them.

**DS:** Mmhmm. You may make many changes once you're working on a large one? And change the progressions that you had indicated on the . . . ?

**LP:** Well, the progression, of course, once the dots are painted, is there. I can't take them out once they're painted. But I can add to the progression by putting a second progression with the first progression, or using like a double one, you know. Like I can double them and sometimes I can triple them. Like I can clutter up the painting more, you know. And sometimes cluttering up the painting ends up making the painting look clearer or simpler than actually the indeterminate look that some of the paintings have at one stage where you don't know whether there are too many dots or you don't know whether there's too few dots. And, of course, this is determined also . . . I mean you can change these feelings that you have about the painting when you see it also with color. And sometimes, if I've got everything set and still the painting bothers me and I feel I need another color but I don't want to change any of the colors already on the painting, I only have one choice and that's to put in more dots to get this other color into the painting and have it reacting with the other things going on in the painting.

**DS:** I saw a reproduction of one of yours in which there was, as I recall, only one black spot. And I wondered if that was a flaw in the reproduction. Would you ever have just one dot of a color in a painting?

**LP:** Yes, I did do that painting. I figured I'd better do it now and get it over with. You know, sort of that cliche about modern art, you know, like just one polka dot.

**DS:** Yes.

**LP:** Yes, it's sort of a cliche I decided -- this was just before my first show that I figured -- well, now is the time to do it and get it over with.

**DS:** How did you begin in the first place? How did you make the decision to work with points or, I believe, they were circles in the first ones rather than ovals?

**LP:** Well, that comes from sort of really hard core geometric paintings that I did before the first spot pictures which also used a system or progression but I would paint squares and circles and I would have a progression of

eight squares and the progression would be the first square would be cut off one-eighth; the second, two-eighths; and so forth up until you eliminated the square, you know, sort of a one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight divisions in a square. And doing the same thing with the circle. And -- well, I did three of these paintings and then I couldn't get a fourth one done. It seemed that, I don't know, it was divisional painting. I was very, very moved by Barnett Newman's show at the French Company, the second time I'd ever been moved by any art really.

**DS:** What was it that struck you about Barney's work at that point? I mean, I guess that's a good question.

**LP:** It was. Talk about the structure! It hit me, I don't know, it hit me in the solar plexus! I was just very, you know, like just emotionally stirred. I thought they were the most exciting paintings that I'd ever seen.

**DS:** In terms of its feeling of space being very expansive? Was it connected with that?

**LP:** The space. The color. The simplicity or the, I don't know, the aloneness? I don't know, that's corny. They moved me very strongly but it was sort of . . . . [Recording of music starts playing in the background and continues to the end of the tape.]

**DS:** You'll have to speak up because your voice is very . . . .

**LP:** Yes. Right.

**DS:** I'll turn it up.

**LP:** Now we're going to talk about the great artist Vasarely.

**DS:** Yes, let's talk about Vasarely. We were just talking about this reproduction of his painting in a catalogue at the Museum of Modern Art's Op show and it's called Collada and I like it very much. I was interested in what you said because somehow or other I overlooked the painting itself.

**LP:** Well, it's a very, very large painting. I guess it looked about seven feet square. And I like the way it looks there in the reproduction. And the surface takes care of itself. But then, somehow, the painting itself, when all these areas are blown up, just looks like it's filled in. It's like color -- he uses the color more like a technique instead of thinking of color as painting. I mean all these things I feel if I took the color away from here I would still have this shape, meaning the color doesn't relate to the shape and the color in the forms do not become one in the painting. It's a fill-in. It's a fill-in job. Whereas working with other colors and working perhaps in a different technique of paint on canvas, you know, perhaps the oneness of the colored images would be achieved which just somehow doesn't come across when you see the painting. It comes across here but not when I saw the painting.

**DS:** The problem of edges is very much on your mind, I would take it. That whenever you come to a space-ground relationship the edge is a crucial area?

**LP:** Not as crucial as anything -- not more important than anything else.

**DS:** Then it should be all one organic thought?

**LP:** Yes. It's like if this was a Cezanne apple painted the way Cezanne would paint an apple, you wouldn't be able to say to yourself or even really think that you could take the color away from it and still have an apple. And in this painting -- I mean this is crucial, you know, I think to any kind of painting, traditional up to the present day. Noland and Louis are perfect examples of this. You know, you can't lift the color off a Louis, one of those long stripes. I mean, if you lifted the color off, you'd lift the stripe off too, you see. And with Noland, too. If you lifted the color off a Noland, you still wouldn't have a concentric circle there, the shape. The shape becomes the color. The color is the shape, you see. Whereas most of these Europeans, and the majority, 90% of the Op artists that work, they work with color this way.

**DS:** Wouldn't Tadesky be the same thing because he just fills in concentric circles?

**LP:** Tadesky? I don't know who you're talking about.

**DS:** He had a one-man show at Kootz of concentric circles in color and they seemed . . . . In fact, he said he has a device that makes the circles and fills in the colors.

**LP:** Oh yes, I know what you mean. They're a little bit, I think perhaps -- I don't like them -- but they're a little bit closer to painting I think.

**DS:** In what respect, would you say?

**LP:** Inasmuch as the paint is the concentric circle or one of the concentric circles. I guess it's the narrowness of the width of the things which makes them areas of color rather than being a filled-in series of shapes. Like I feel when I look at many Anusziewicz's that I can lift the color out of them and still have . . . still have the shape that the color, you know, and so you know the color is just a filler. The color isn't defining an edge. It's simply there, you know, like colored . . . . I guess that's what we're talking about. Color has to define the edge and not just be snuggled up against it.

**DS:** Mmhmm. That's a very good point. And it probably does serve as a kind of way of dividing the, well, the really good artists from the indifferent ones to some extent, I would imagine. What do you think about the . . . just the black and white -- I mean Op -- well, the people that you like -- like lines radiating into a center of just black and white concentric circles? I'll admit there's a pulsating effect. Is the pulsating effect from your point of view great enough or alive enough to mean that you have a valid expression in terms of art? Or does it remain an optical trick that might possibly be put to service by artists later on?

**LP:** Well, the only painter whose paintings I like that do end up with vibrations or moire rhythms is Bridget Riley whose rhythms that are set up in the paintings are the moire rhythms themselves, which have a steady beat to them, like bum, bum, bum, bum, bum. Whereas, with these other people that do the moire things, it's erratic, it's completely erratic. With the Riley's and also the look of the Riley's is that they're painted. They're not filled in; they're painted.

**DS:** But yet she has said, or been quoted in the press as saying, that she sometimes has her work executed by other people.

**LP:** Oh, that's, you know, that's fine, you know.

**DS:** It wouldn't matter to you if she did?

**LP:** It doesn't matter to me that her paintings are executed by other people. No, not at all.

**DS:** Well, that's a subtle point then. Maybe we could clarify that a little bit. If it does matter that the . . . . I see what you mean by the big beat, the sustained beat in her work. Now if she conceives of a way of patterning dots, let's say, and then makes a rough sketch, it doesn't matter to you that the person doing it is going to draw all the dots and then fill them in with color?

**LP:** No. No.

**DS:** He doesn't have to have a feeling when he touches the paint that it is creating at all?

**LP:** No. No. No.

**DS:** Doesn't that seem like something in contradiction to what you said about Vasarely? I don't know, it seems to me that . . . .

**LP:** Well, the crucial thing lies in the conception of making a painting and what you want to make the painting, you know, what ideas you have about what a painting has to confront in order to be a painting.

**DS:** If Vasarely had had a more profound conception of the relationship of his circles, it wouldn't have mattered if someone else had painted in the colors?

**LP:** Could you repeat that?

**DS:** In this particular painting that we were discussing, if Vasarely -- well, I don't know, it wouldn't be the same painting -- but if his conception had been of a quality to have, let's say, a pulsating rhythm that you considered stronger than what you actually see here, it would not have mattered to you then that he had turned over the painting to someone else, let's say? It isn't the execution that matters? It's the conception of the color?

**LP:** Well, it's the execution too, because there are more problems in that Vasarely painting than simply . . . . I don't object to the shapes of the circles or anything else. I object to the color and the way in . . . when you see the painting the way the color is applied. I mean it seems like the Europeans really know things before they do them. They really know what they're doing. And they have to understand something. Or they feel they have to understand it when they're confronted with it. I'm talking about when Europeans, say, are confronted with American painting. When they first work they don't have intuition for the most part like an American has. An American has intuition. You know, an American sees something -- I'm speaking generally -- and he responds to it in painterly terms. He sees the thing in painterly terms. And he doesn't see it in words. And he doesn't see it in idea. I mean Jasper Johns -- I'm sure he doesn't -- he sees the flag as painting, you see. But then all the people in Europe that are doing flags and stuff like that, they're painting them because they think they understand Johns' painting. And somehow the Europeans don't have an intuitive grasp of what's happened in the last fifteen years

in American art. They feel they have to understand it, you know. Like a European just can't see a Barney Newman and like it. He's got to think: why do I like it? What is there to it? What is he getting at? That sort of thing, you know. And that's something that Pollock, you know, erased. He just wiped out for all time.

**DS:** So that, from your point of view, there is, as I would have thought, a very sustained continuity from Pollock and the abstract expressionists all the way from Pollock to Newman and what you're doing. I mean, there's a reaction against it but there is also a continuation of a basic attitude?

**LP:** Well, I've had three jumps so far in my painting. I've been moved by Mondrian. The next time I was moved by anything it was Newman. And after Newman the next thing I was moved by was Frank Stella. And all these other people, you know, like Pollock . . . . See, I was never an abstract expressionist so I didn't have all that much thinking to do about what I was doing, where they seemed to . . . I guess the way the later abstract expressionists started writing big manifestos and talking about the importance of action and all this sort of nonsense while the best abstract expressionists were making paintings . . . .

**DS:** Well, it was mostly [ERASURES] To get gack to this intuitive thing that you link with Pollock and obviously with Newman and your own work, how about . . . how would that . . . ?

**LP:** In relationship to what a European is not?

**DS:** Yes. And Stella, of course, from your point-of-view, is also . . . . I mean, anything you could say to explain your response to Stella would be of great interest to me.

**LP:** Well, I walked into the Sixteen Americans show at the Museum. I remember walking into a very dark room and thinking of Albers and like I was out of the room and I didn't go back and see the paintings. Then I was in Leo Castelli's maybe sometime after that. And I saw a silver painting with the corners cut out and the two squares cut out from the center of the painting and all of a sudden it just made great sense to me. And I was moved by it as a painting. It was a painting. It was a painting that had space and also had the potential, the potential of Newman's paintings. I'm talking about painting that does have the potential to really break out, you know. A guy like Vasarely, I feel he's not going to do a painting that's really going to break out of what his idea, or that cold European constipated look, you know. Like he's never going to break out and confront what Newman did in painting. He's never going to break out and confront what Pollock did in painting. He probably thinks Pollock . . . .

**DS:** I don't know Stella's work or know him but I do remember a time when he was lecturing over at Pratt and he went into a great deal of . . . spiel about how he was involved with the idea of boredom.

**LP:** Stella?

**DS:** Yes. And how he wanted his things to be boring.

**LP:** Well, the thing is this one has gotten very much heavier but the split is greater.

**DS:** Well and I'll get a new reel. I have to get it all off. So anyway we can just ignore the squealing.

**LP:** Mmhmm. Why not?

**DS:** This doesn't in any case relate anything to what you felt about Stella? It was a spatial intuitive thing?

**LP:** And it had potential. I mean the potential . . . . Newman's paintings are great potential things, you know, like the idea, the potential. I'm not saying he doesn't realize the potential in his own terms -- which he does -- because, when he's painting, he does realize the potential of his paintings. And then, aside from that, there is a potential painterly thing about his paintings which is basic to painting. I mean he's a major painter. He's done, you know, a major thing. And for anyone to just completely say that this is not important and we're going to stick to our old manifestos about art being mechanical, impersonal, and machine-like. You know, as I said, I do like machine things. But it's the kind of machine thing. To give an analogy: a de Soto automobile is a machine and a Ferrari automobile is a machine. The Ferrari is the machine that I like because the Ferrari machine pushes the potential of the automobile itself, I mean the thing is made to be better, to be faster, to corner better than any other machine made. Everything that an automobile does the Ferrari is machined to do the utmost, you see. Whereas the de Soto is just a mechanical thing. Basically it's the same, you know, it's accepting the potential of what painting is all about. And accepting that potential and not accepting a . . . . They don't accept painting as potential. They accept a social idea or a manifesto -- or they accept an idea that they can talk about as to what painting is all about rather than just painting. Because, you know, words are words. And painting is painting.

**DS:** Would there be . . . ? Since we were talking about the differences between the Americans and the Europeans, presumably there are things in the American environment which somehow prepare an American

artist for having this more intuitive grasp of paintings roughly without words and so on.

**LP:** Well, it's democracy I guess. One can say -- I think that at one point . . . . I had a very interesting discussion with Bridget Riley on the point that in Europe artists are competitive. They feel competitive with other artists. There they're competitive. And yet in this country I don't think the American artist is competitive with his fellow American artists. Things just aren't like that in this country. It's like it started with Pollock. Pollock decided, I guess, that he was either going to be the greatest painter in the world or nothing. And, of course, when you have this kind of attitude you're not in competition with anybody. I'm sure Gottlieb thinks he's the greatest painter in the world. I think Newman thinks he's the greatest painter in the world. And it's carried on so there is none of this competitive one-upmanship in the paintings or fights, duels, feuds, you know, in this country as there is in Europe.

**DS:** I was wondering if, aside from the relationship between artists which is a very debatable point, if there might be something in the idea, I mean in the . . . of, let's say, we're the nation in the world which is most . . . whose life is the most keyed to activism, let's say, to things being energetic, changing, active, restless, unstatic, and so on. Does that seem to you to come into this thing that forms the artist very basically? Or do you think that . . . ?

**LP:** Mhmm. Well, I think in art it has to do with the tradition of art in Europe and the way a young student can learn art in Europe. The schools demand that you know about what you're doing and you think about what you're doing in the sense that, while you're doing it, you really have to know what you're doing before you can do it. There's none of this . . . .

**DS:** It's an intellectual, verbal . . . .

**LP:** Yes. There's none of this . . . . Like Frank Stella told me a story that, when he was young and up in Massachusetts, he saw a reproduction of a Kline in Vogue and he went out in the back yard and said, I can do that, and got a great big canvas and made his Kline in the back yard. Now could a European guy do that? [END OF TAPE] TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH LARRY POONS, OP ARTIST MARCH 18, 1965

**LP:** It's like Bill Seitz and, you know, those artists in the show.

**DS:** Yes.

**LP:** They talk continually about the idea of science and art finally getting together and science and art being one. But, you know, there's a crucial thing in that statement which they don't seem to accept or they don't realize or something. It is that there are two different kinds of science. There's almost two different kinds of everything. There's applied science which is known facts. The applied scientist might be working for Goodyear Rubber and he's mixing something in his test tube that a German thirty years ago creatively found and discovered. And this applied scientist at Goodyear Rubber or wherever is simply repeating something. He knows the results of what he's doing. He's not peering at neutrons and protons and things: photographs taken from a cyclotron and trying to figure out what this is all about, you know, pushing the unknown. And it seems that, you know, these people say, well now, we're bringing science and art together. You know, this is dangerous because they're bringing applied science and art together. But in the true sense of the word, science is open, science is creative, science is the unknown. It's trying to understand the unknown to make some sense of it so we can understand it, you know. And this is something nobody seems to bring out, you know. And, you know, most people are thinking that science and art are coming together and isn't that marvelous! That's a great idea! People have been talking about it for a hundred years and now it's happened. But these people are making objects. They're making things that do something that they already know is going to happen. They're painting a known object. They're painting a known thing.

**DS:** Would you be speaking now of someone like Oster who was working in a laboratory in a scientific vein and then got the idea of making these paintings?

**LP:** It's not anyone specifically, I think. I'm talking about all of them in general.

**DS:** But, as far as you're concerned, this is not a valid concept? Because the kind of . . . ?

**LP:** Anything is a valid concept, I believe. It's just that, you know, like everybody . . . like that show brings out the fact that, well, you know, this is a great thing and that it becomes very easy to make art. And I don't think art should be hard to make but I also don't think it should be made easy to make. You know, it doesn't have to be hard and it doesn't have to be easy, I think. But with this acceptance of science and art and not drawing the distinction between real science -- Newton, you know -- guys that are thinking about things and discovering new things, things that they didn't know about before. Not making this distinction is, you know, throwing a lot of people . . . . It's a bad thing. It's dangerous. I guess it really isn't -- it really isn't. I mean what we're talking -- you know, like in a hundred years bad artists can be bad I hope and the good art is going to look good.

**DS:** It's just that for the time being it's confusing.

**LP:** Yes, for the time being. And that distinction should be brought out. The distinction between the known thing and execution of the known thing and, you know, the pushing forward. It has to do, I guess, with accepting limitations instead of recognizing them -- I don't know if that's true. Yes, it has to do with . . . I don't know.

**DS:** Well, to give you a moment to think about this, some people like Canaday also said they admired the work in toto because of its great craftsmanship. I thought that . . . .

**LP:** Well, this is my great thing about this is that to me a work of art has to be commensurate with its means inasmuch as that is the effort and the work put into making the work of art commensurate with the work of art as a work of art itself, you know. And there's an imbalance in those pieces. I mean, the craftsmanship and the workmanship, you know. Like it's fantastic. But the thing itself is not fantastic. I mean, if one of those people could make something that was commensurate with the effort involved in making it, you know, then we're talking about something else.

**DS:** Well, I mean . . . . Yes, that's a very interesting point to me. I distrusted that whole response to the show in general without any qualifications as great craftsmanship. I mean you might just as well single out a group of people who were doing marvelous work on the car that you mentioned before. You know, I mean, a great automobile, and so on.

**LP:** The automobile that accepts the potential of the automobile instead of accepting a known thing. Like de Soto, they make a car . . . . I picked de Soto because it's really an ugly car. You know, like the de Soto is made . . . . It's made with a known factor. The factor is that they know that they're just going to make a car that's going to run 50,000 miles and it will go 90 miles an hour maybe top speed. And that's all, you know. It's a cheap car. And then Ferrari -- he'll make a car accepting no limitation except the limitation of the best minds, the best minds that think and create automobiles, their limitations, meaning the artist's limitations -- the man who designs his engines and everything else. He's an artist because he's always looking for that extra 2000 r.p.m. which is going to make the car go twenty miles an hour faster. He's always looking for the new, the better suspension that's going to make the car make a certain corner at a certain racetrack, is going to be able to do it 9/10ths of a second faster than another car. And, after 300 miles, one corner 9/10ths of a second faster ends up to be two miles difference between a first and second-place car.

**DS:** To come back to your idea of the quality in Op painting which is valuable; which could, let's say, affect the whole future of painting, which could open up whole new concepts in painting, which . . . . Could you describe any of the possibilities? I assume that, since in your own work we have . . . you've been singled out, it isn't a discovery of mine, as one who has made the space, movement, plasticity, structure in a single . . . .

**LP:** The thing is to, you know, like make free the space, free the relationships, you know, and get rid of the static nature of the relationships in my paintings. That's the problem in painting them. The problem in painting them is not to have anything more important than anything else. Nothing visually more important. I mean, you know, you could take one of my paintings and in sort of an Op sense of the word from the drawing to the painting, one could simply decide that it's going to be a red painting, we're going to paint that red and we're going to make all those dots black and that's the painting, you know. And you look at it. I've seen my paintings at certain stages that were just that and, you know, like they're terrible. They're not paintings. They're not justifying themselves. The painting isn't justifying itself as a painting. And a painting first justifies itself as a painting and then justifies itself as an idea. There's no idea without the fact to back it up, you know. Whereas a guy like Vasarely, he's got the idea and the facts before he's got the painting. And so, therefore, the painting never takes on the significance of painting that it should, that a painting demands.

**DS:** You first realized this in doing geometric paintings after Mondrian and to some extent with Van Doesburg also in mind?

**LP:** Yes, Van Doesburg very much.

**DS:** I saw one of them, of course, reproduced in Arts and I thought it was very interesting the way those tiny little squares . . . .

**LP:** Yes, well, that ended up in, you know, the square progressively becoming, from a large square, being progressively in a series moved down to just 1/64th of the entire square.

**DS:** Yes. Well, that idea of progression, it seemed to me, was a very original thing at that point.

**LP:** Well, it started me going, you see. It was something that would allow me to paint a picture, you see. It was a means in order to make a form so that I could paint. And it also had, you know, something to do with movement and music, you know; sort of interrelationships with forms changing in a sequence and then an overlapping in

some of those paintings which are fugue-like, which I call . . . .

**DS:** Yes, they are. I saw that in the drawings.

**LP:** But, of course, they never ended up -- well, I won't say they never ended up. They ended up with what they were. But, you know, that way of painting is a dead end. Especially if you're thinking of Noland and you're thinking of Pollock, you know. You're never going to . . . . Your paintings are never going to have the potential, as I was talking about before, of these guys like that because, you know, it has to do with scale. And, you know, what's the sense if it's going to be an eight-inch square, you know, like I wanted to do big paintings but I couldn't do big paintings because it was just a mechanical blowup. So instead of making the square eight inches, I'm going to make it twenty inches and have a gigantic painting? You know, the means didn't justify anything getting larger, you know, or even smaller. And when I did the first dot painting, which was simply the idea of the same kind of progression except just a point instead of a square changing a progression . . . .

**DS:** When did you first do that?

**LP:** I'd say about 1961 I did the first one. When I saw the first one that I did, this idea of potential was there. I could make a larger painting. I could do a painting on a much grander scale, heroic scale. And the means would justify the painting being whatever size I determined the painting will be.

**DS:** And the fugue-like thing carried over directly from what you'd been doing just before? But had they been in color? What kind of color? I saw it only in black and white.

**LP:** In complementary colors, orange and blue, yellow and purple. I always worked with those colors. When I did the first dot painting, it was red and green and, you know, the after-images were as much a surprise to me as to anyone.

**DS:** They were?

**LP:** Oh, yes.

**DS:** You didn't know about their theory?

**LP:** No, no, and I'm still not interested in after-images.

**DS:** You're not?

**LP:** No. No.

**DS:** Well, what would make the sense of pulsating if there weren't this . . . . Why are you then drawn to purple, yellow; orange and blue? Isn't it for that reason?

**LP:** Well, not any more. Not any more. I'm trying to get away from that because that's something I know. I could very easily sit down and make thirty red and green paintings, you know. But I'm not learning anything from it. And I feel there's no justification, you know, for me to do something like that. It's not a justification of the idea because the idea of red and green can justify a painting that's red and green but it's not going to justify thirty paintings red and green.

**DS:** In one of the ones that I liked very much at the Green Gallery, a dark red painting, it seemed to me the complementary thing wasn't overwhelmingly important. I mean if you move away from that though, what will . . . ? I don't understand what means there will be for creating the sense of -- you do like the sense of the spark, of the snapping, popping, and so on, in a fugue-like way. Isn't that important?

**LP:** The important thing is the interrelationship between all the colors. And whatever that relationship might end up being, you know, is the way the painting is going to look. I mean, I have no idea what the next painting is going to look like and, you know, I hardly ever have. You know, I don't know if I can paint another painting. It's that sort of thing. I'm not a series painter; I don't paint a series of pictures. I guess I don't like being bored.

**DS:** Well, yes. That's fascinating because, of course, a great many people who have been impressed by your painting have assumed that, if it weren't for the laws of simultaneous contrast, you wouldn't exist, and so on.

**DS:** It's not one of the problems. In my painting, it's not one of the problems that I'm concerned with, the after-image, so to speak. I'm trying to paint in the after-image, you know, rather than have it happen, I'd say, right now at this moment.

**DS:** I don't quite understand that. I'm pretty stupid. How do you mean paint in the after-image?

**LP:** Well, I don't know. It's sort of . . . . It would be like -- instead of having an after-image -- like a blue on a red is going to produce an after-image of a certain color, having all the colors interact with each other and, of course, having one or two colors which are very, very close to being -- or very very close to not being there at all, and yet still are there and function in the relationship of the whole. It's hard to explain. You know, there's nothing interesting really in after-images or moire patterns or what one might call "effect." I mean, they're never going to justify just that thing alone.

**DS:** It reassures me to hear you say it. I can't tell you how much. I'll sleep better tonight. I became fascinated with that fugue-like progression of colors once when I started doing analysis of Peruvian textiles. Have you ever noticed the progressions in those?

**LP:** No. Well, I've seen . . . . No, not specifically, but I know what you're talking about.

**DS:** There may be sixty little circles, each one with, let's say, a fish and a fish reversed. And in each one there's a different split of colors, you know, and if you plot them you have a curious, almost fascinating mathematical but irregular, completely irregular, rhythm. I can undertand your being engaged in that problem and I gather that it's difficult. It's not an easy thing to bring these off. Well, it's been a slow process, I gather, from reading at least what Sidney said about it. Would you now be in a more accelerated phase of your work, do you think? Are you going to be? I suppose you can't tell.

**LP:** No.

**DS:** Would you expect that in the next few years your work will become more and more recognized and individualized so that it will be less important to be included in shows of Op art and will gain a kind of importance aside from that?

**LP:** Well, I sort of doubt it simply because of, you know, what I've seen, what I saw happen to "The Responsive Eye," to begin with. And, you know, why include . . . ? You know, Ken Noland was included in that show. And if the pull is that wide, you know, I doubt . . . . Ken Noland is a lot closer to being a mature artist and he's not an Op artist in any sense of the word.

**DS:** You think he should not have been included?

**LP:** And he was included in that show so, you know, I guess I probably will be included in the future, too. But it's all so silly because, you know, the thing has really come down to finally it being a question of -- and I guess it's Greenberg's idea -- I read it in Newsweek -- a question of quality and not of a movement.

**DS:** Well, that's partly what I had in mind and one would hope that it would happen that after people get over this idea of categorizing, which is always kind of a bore but everybody starts out with it in the beginning.

**LP:** That's why this science and art categorizing which has happened, it's a form of categorizing, of justifying categorizing a way of doing things which . . . .

**DS:** Well, I'm glad that I started to do some writing about it, which I didn't finish, but my feeling is that there were many more continuities between abstract painting and Op art than . . . . Well, for instance, Canaday was using the Op art to beat the abstract expressionists with, which is his favorite game. But it seemed to me that the continuities were certainly there and I was interested in what you said about the . . . well, actually even the idea of pulsating color. I was thinking more of Rothko than Newman. But Newman is very interesting in this . . . .

**LP:** Yes, and look at the way that the Ellsworth Kelly came off in "The Responsive Eye" exhibition. It's a beautiful painting.

**DS:** That's a great one, isn't it?

**LP:** Yes.

**DS:** That was one that I remembered.

**LP:** I mean those are red and greens and the red and blues that, you know, anybody else in that show, when they used . . . . I mean you could just see the difference between the painter, the concern with the painter with the painting and also accepting these colors, you know, just like diving in and painting. I mean, you know, the difference between the Kelly red and blue technically is no different than, you know, many of the other inferior works that had red and blue in that show.

**DS:** Yes. Except that they had such a light.

**LP:** Yes, except that . . . . The Kelly is a really marvelous painting.

**DS:** And the curious thing is that he was one of the people that was sort of a father figure for several of the Pop artists. I remember when I was talking . . .

**LP:** Who, Kelly?

**DS:** Yes. . . . a few years ago to Indiana and Rosenquist that they mentioned the name Kelly, you know.

**LP:** Well, Kelly is interested in painting.

**DS:** Just for the record, what . . . ? You were working through all this during the years when Pop art was having great, you know, publicity and attention. What was your feeling about them?

**LP:** Well, I thought Rosenquist was a good painter.

**DS:** Good. I liked his work.

**LP:** I liked Warhol. I liked the first Warhol I saw. It was so flat and two-dimentional and, you know, like the problem is: Okay, you're going to make a painting that's flat and two-dimensional. What are you going to put on the painting? Why not "Fragile" labels? And I like that painting. I like Warhol's work.

**DS:** Did you like the repeated image ones? Did you like the last show?

**LP:** His boxes?

**DS:** No, the last one was some kind of big flowers.

**LP:** Oh, yes, I liked the flowers.

**DS:** boy. I don't know.

**LP:** I thought they were sort of very wild, crazy things, in a sense almost wildly beautiful.

**DS:** I missed the show. I did see them reproduced. Maybe I'll have to go and . . . . I guess I liked his work up to a certain point and then I didn't understand what the hell they were except maybe there was a kind of wit in it. But it seemed like it should be more than that. But, you know, it's interesting to me how . . . . I mean, actually, I think there were certain things that the Pop artists took over from abstract expressionism. They wouldn't have been in the scale they were if it hadn't been for certain of the paintings of Rothko, Barney Newman, and so on. And in the same way, you know, for instance, Jim Rosenquist said he wanted to bring something so close that he could see through it. I think that was a very interesting statement to me, in a sense, you know. You know, a lot of things that could be right about the new direction, it has some of that same quality.

**LP:** Except my feeling about Rosenquist now is like he's a better painter than what he's trying to paint. He has ideas about painting about . . . you know, a certain group of paintings that he wants to do. And I don't see why he doesn't do it. I think he's a better painter than what he chooses to paint, the objects or the things.

**DS:** You think he gets hung up on the subject stuff?

**LP:** He gets hung up, I think, on the subjects, thinking about them, and liking what he things about them rather than . . . .

**DS:** The scenarios are fascinating.

**LP:** Yes! Yes! Well, it's like, you know, I was looking at a Rubens the other day. You know, that big Rubens in the Met that has the fox hunt? The Fox Hunt?

**DS:** You know, that's sort of like a Rosenquist in the sense that there's so much going on in that picture. But then, of course, the way everything is worked out -- even where he obviously had to pad the painting because he's got this deep space and he has to put a rider and a horse in this deep space, the way he frames the deep space with the left side of the figure and the left side of another figure, you know, and he frames that space . . . . Even the padding is worked out so that even the padding . . . . You know, things he had to do, to make the painting turn out even to be the best painting, is a painting itself, you see. And that's something that I feel about Jim's work is that where he does have to pad the painting instead of just leaving it like it is. You know, he has to work out these -- the potential is fantastic to get one of those -- I'm talking about something I saw the other day. You know, if he got everything going in that painting, you know, it would really be fantastic. I mean you could put it up with the Rubens and there would be no argument about it.

**DS:** Do you think it may be partly because he works so much out in the little sketches instead of being right in

touch with it on the . . . . Well, of course, he later does get to the big painting -- but maybe the fact that he's done so much in advance kind of slows it down. Anyway, of course, we don't want to . . . . I mean we'll have to have a separate tape for Jim. We've got about another ten minutes here and I really would like very much to maybe go on with your ideas of defining as closely as we can, while we're on it, the kind of problems that arise in your work.

**LP:** To me? Or . . . ?

**DS:** In your own work. Not the problems of understanding it but the problems of doing it and the problems of working out -- sort of when you're making changes, which I understand you make a great many changes, once you're on . . . .

**LP:** The changes have been made to destroy relationships. That's the main thing. I mean, you know, like in just black and white you've got a dot here and you've got a dot there, you know, and you've got four other dots somewhere else and they set up a relationship, sometimes, you know, they set up an obvious relationship to each other. What I'm trying to do is to destroy any relationship between anything in the paintings so that everything has a chance instead of just one thing or two things coming to the front. Like everything has an equal chance.

**DS:** I was interested in what you said before about democracy. It's a very democratic kind of painting.

**LP:** Yes. Sometimes the moral issue arises in the painting.

**DS:** That's a very fascinating idea. Of course, you came at it not through ideology but through painting.

**LP:** Through the progression I've always . . . . You know, the idea of the progression is something that's there that you can put there. And I always work within the progression. Even when it comes to putting on the color. The color is put on in the progression. It's abstracted later. You know, like I might make every other one in the entire painting one color and then all the others that are left another color. And then when the third color is added, it's added in the same sort of thing . . . in relationship to the progression itself, the original progression. You know, I do that so I'll know when I've painted all the blue dots because, if I didn't have a progression, how would I know when I'd painted all the blue ones and I haven't finished all the red ones? You see what I mean? It starts you off and lets you know when you're finished. In just the sense of, you know, changing or putting in 32 blue dots, you know, there's going to be 32 more. And then, if there are too many blues, you take every other one out and you end up with 16 purple dots and 16 blue dots, you see. And it's worked and sometimes they get very abstracted from the original thing. And my paintings -- I can't figure them out, I mean, after I've done them, because, after a while, even working within the progression, I've probably got eight colors on the painting and, say, none of them are working. I don't have to think about the progression any more. I can just change the first eight, change the second eight, the third eight and the fourth eight. If I have red, yellow, blue, and green in the painting and I figure I don't want to have any more color in the painting, I'm going to make this painting with those -- with just four different colors, you see. Then I can work directly with the eye. Then I always change them all.

**DS:** It's just a matter of intuition in moving back and forth in just the sense that you have of how they are relating to each other. You're not referring back any more to the sketch?

**LP:** Most of the time a painting is finished when I see it and I've never seen it before. I try to destroy what I can see. Of course, when that happens, everything is the painting, like the wole expanse becomes one thing.

**DS:** Would there be a likelihood, do you think, that as time goes on that the entire . . . that there would be less sense than there is now of there being a nucleus of spots and then an open space, but an all-over, complete dotting of the surface? Would that be a possibility?

**LP:** Yes, it is. I don't know . . . . I know where it's going. I think I'd like to do sparser paintings.

**DS:** You would?

**LP:** Yes.

**DS:** Carrying the movement across the painting?

**LP:** Mmhmm.

**DS:** Not with complementaries any more? Or with less reliance on complementaries?

**LP:** You know, there never was a reliance on complementaries because I wouldn't allow myself that luxury to paint as I did 33 paintings, 30 red and green paintings. I mean, hell, it's the only thing that's going to work with

blue dots. I'm going to paint the blue, you know, because if it is truly the only thing that works, it's going to work differently and it's going to be highly different from another painting that has blue and red, you see.

**DS:** The first time that you looked at the dots and there was this snapping sensation, wasn't that a kind of revelation or a feeling that made you think, well now, there's a kind of life in this, kind of . . . ?

**LP:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

**DS:** When did that actually happen? Was that one of the first that you did?

**LP:** It was actually the second one. I did the first one with a blue field with orange dots.

**DS:** Are there some on which you're working now in which there's almost no snapping or . . . no snapping sensation at all?

**LP:** I'd like to do sort of like I looked at . . . . I have a red in the studio and I've looked at paintings red and green everything done in shades of red.

**DS:** You did?

**LP:** Yes. It's more . . . the whole thing is in the relationship between the things, you know. I mean you change the whole relationship of the painting when you add another series of dots in different colors because they in turn react to the other colors around it. They react to the field color; the color the field is eventually going to look like is nothing like it looks like when there's nothing on it, you know, just red. You know, it can end up looking orange; it can end up looking very dull. And this is all everything is the same as everything else. There's no one thing

**DS:** Some people writing about Pop art have suggested that most Pop art tends to prevent the viewer . . . the eye and nervous system of the viewer from completing a harmony or taking in a single comprehensive image sensation of the work of art. And I wondered if this was in any way related to the distinctions that you had made earlier in our comparison -- or statement about the differences in outlook between European artists and American artists?

**LP:** I don't think I agree with that. I don't understand that question. It seems to me that whatever you see is what you're supposed to be seeing and that there is no . . . . You know, there's no distinction between . . . . The question speaks about completed harmonies. But what is a completed harmony? Who completes harmonies?

**DS:** Well, Vasarely. I would maybe have guessed that you thought -- I don't know. This is not your objection?

**LP:** No, it's not my objection to any of that. No. You can only see what's there.

**DS:** Well, if the eye is, let's say, being irritated by impulses coming in waves from lines and dots, that may be a way of . . . . Perhaps this is what the person had in mind. I guess it was Bill Sietz -- I'm not sure -- as far as this sort of frustrated sense of the totality of a completed and harmonious totality, so that in a sense . . . .

**LP:** Well, I think that's what's wrong with all that stuff. It does exactly that.

**DS:** All the . . . . You mean the European stuff?

**LP:** Yes. And the American-European stuff, too. There are a lot of Americans doing bad Vasarelys. [INTERRUPTION FOR TELEPHONE CALL FROM IRATE NEIGHBOR COMPLAINING ABOUT THE FOLK SINGER RECORDS BEING PLAYED.]

**DS:** Before our interruption, the last remark had been that there were a number of Americans, as Larry said, doing sort of imitation Vasarelys.

**LP:** No, not imitations; just -- I don't know -- it's the same idea, the same idea about knowing everything and painting it. Knowing what the painting . . . . I don't know, I think I said it before but . . . .

**DS:** Is it a very strong feeling of yours that the painting must emerge in the making of the painting and not be, let's say, an enlargement from the idea? Or something like that?

**LP:** No, I don't say that the painting has to emerge at a certain point. It's just, you know, it doesn't matter how it's made as long as, you know, if it's a painting.

**DS:** If the concept is really an alive one. It's so hard ever to pin those things down. But that was a very . . . . What you said about the difference between the Americans and the Europeans doing this -- really, in spite of the

fact that I like Vasarely, and I realize I liked him for the wrong reasons, probably out of my Victorian outlook. But I can see what you mean, that there is nothing in the painting to give a sense of extension and things moving through, beyond, and so on, in a way that isn't pre-conceived or pre-planned. However, I would have thought . . . .

**LP:** I have nothing against pre-conceiving or pre-planning. It's the nonacceptance of the potential of painting that makes his paintings look like they are. I mean, you know, obviously as a painter he doesn't accept . . . hasn't accepted what's happened in painting, you know. As I said before, in the last fifteen years, the implications of the space, the implications of scale, the implications of paint and color, the implications of color -- color being painting, color not being a technique. The color is painting. And the space. And without, you know, without understanding these things, I guess the paintings can't look any different than they do. Which, of course, is true anyway.

**DS:** Would all of that affirmatively apply, for instance, to the work of Stella from your point of view that the color is the space?

**LP:** Oh, yes. Without the color you don't have the stripe. And without the stripe you don't have that little piece of canvas, you know, the raw piece of canvas. The stripe defines that area. If you take . . . . You can't take the color away from the stripe. You can't take the stripe away and still have the canvas area showing.

**DS:** Even where it's metallic, you would feel the same way?

**LP:** Oh, yes.

**DS:** The gold and silver paintings would fall in the same category. From your point of view then, Pollock . . . . Would you think of Pollock, or perhaps more likely of Barnett Newman as representing the point at which color became space? In the sense that you feel it's most important and should . . . ?

**LP:** Mmhmm. And also not, you know . . . the break not owing anybody anything. And not owing the Europeans a damn thing finally, you know. And as an idea that's a hard thing to take because it's so hostile. But then the paintings . . . .

**DS:** Hostile to what?

**LP:** To the Europeans, you know. Just that idea. Maybe that's what's . . , I don't know. The paintings themselves are beyond being hostile to anyone. They stand alone as paintings. And it doesn't seem to me that the people who were in a position to learn something from those paintings say they ever did.

**DS:** What about a fellow like Kitjai?

**LP:** I don't know his work.

**DS:** He was just showing at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery very eclectic kind of things, very literary. I was just curious. But you use the word "hostile" of course there referring . . . ?

**LP:** It was just the idea of the American, you know, saying European art -- you know it's always been Europe; the ideas have always come from Europe. You know this has been said many times. And then, of course, Pollock comes along and there's nothing . . . it's just a brand new thing. It didn't owe anything to any of those people. The thing itself didn't.

**DS:** Perhaps Pollock and some of the painters owed something in their ability to do that, to kick off Europe -- they may have gotten some help from primitive art. Did any kind of primitive art ever enter into your feeling in an important way?

**LP:** No.

**DS:** I generally find that the younger painters -- there. We are the primitives in a sense, we don't have to look at primitive art because we're as primitive as anybody. I don't know whether you'd go along with that, but I have found that several younger painters felt that way. But it's a kind of a big, raw country where anything can happen and, as you mentioned, the word "democracy" is very imperfect maybe but a kind of sense of each thing having its own importance. It would seem that all of that is maybe somewhat tangential to what you've done. If you could talk about it any more in terms of how you felt growing up in this county, it would be interesting in your last three minutes.

**LP:** I think somehow in this country we're not that interested in ideas. When it comes down to painting, we're more interested in painting than we are in ideas about painting or justification of painting. What a painting means. I mean Pollock I think showed once and for all that a painting doesn't mean anything. It's just a painting.

**DS:** He certainly refused to verbalize about it. He acted it. That's . . . . The link between Pollock and your feeling is certainly a very revealing and important one. I mean not in that it informs your painting but your feeling about it. [END OF SIDE ONE] [SIDE TWO]

**LP:** . . . was giving way, you know, to that more organic -- I don't know if "organic" is the right word -- the paintings were becoming, oh, I don't know, the elimination of black. That's the main thing. That's the crucial thing in that last change is that the black is being eliminated in the New York City paintings where the lines are yellow and blue and red. But that's the main thing, you know. He was so open . . . .

**DS:** You use, of course, blacks in your own work, however.

**LP:** Yes. Mondrian was so open. He was an open person and he was always growing, it seems. And black is fine for Europe. But when he got to this country, somehow black was not a part of the scenery; it just wasn't here. I don't know if it's here now. But the black paintings, the classic Mondrians do have that European sense of finality that black has. And of course in this country -- especially I guess during that war with boogiewoogie music and everything else -- there was an uplift in his spirit and he just decided not to recognize black any more.

**DS:** I always thought of the blacks not as being lines but like they were the crevices between great huge slabs of things .. of sourness.

**LP:** But that's trying to make more of a painting that what the painting is, sort of.

**DS:** Well, maybe. But had he used black and white in close juxtaposition . . . . Apparently the young fellows in the Op show, I mean outside of yourself, seem to feel that black is part of the scene in terms of vibrancy -- black, you know. Black and white, in other words.

**LP:** Well, when I talked about the scene, I was talking about what happens unconsciously. You know, I don't know what Mondrian thought. I don't know what he thought about not using black any more. I'm just theorizing that, as a painter, he didn't feel the need for it any more. And as a painter he didn't feel the neeed for any more. And as a painter he didn't have to think about it any more than that actually.

**DS:** He was dancing. He was very gay. So was listening to jazz. And it certainly seems logical anyway that he felt this burst of -- well, it was kind of like, would you say, liberating energy, wouldn't you think, using the reds, yellows and blues in this mosaic, you know, arrangement across the space. Well, of course, there was always energy and tension across the other ones with the bands too. But it's as if the energy was released, not so much held in boundaries, elastic boundaries.

**LP:** Primarily he was always a painter. I mean you see that's the subtle distinction between the painter and the theorist painter. You know, people called Mondrian a theorist painter. He wasn't. Because the theories came after the paintings. I mean it was like that all his life. It's obvious that he didn't accept his theories as dogma as he felt the need of the painting itself. No, he moved on. Or he changed. That's something a guy like Vasarely would never do, you know, because he's a theorist. And then he paints the paintings. I mean everything Mondrian . . . I think everything Mondrian knew he found out from the paintings or painting; or he found out from painting what he knew and wrote about. Which is easy to confuse and which is confused nowadays. Just as we were saying before, the idea of science and art and not realizing that we're talking about applied science. We're not talking about science and art in a real sense.

**DS:** Does painting ever seem like a kind of graph of living, in the sense of what kind of relationships that you explore and project, or the way you feel, that life and your nervous system . . . . In some way there's a kind of rough correspondence that you don't think about before, but a rough correspondence -- well, in the way things are or the way things relate to each other in the world. Would you say it's not that?

**LP:** No, I think it comes out of the last great period of art that we all went through -- not us -- we were dead -- but romantic art. And the idea of life and the art being intermingled and dependent on each other.

**DS:** You feel they're not?

**LP:** No, they're not. No. It's there whether you want to think about it or not. You know what Mondrian said, "the human element is there no matter what you do." So it's not worth thinking about or worrying about. The problem at hand is painting. The problem at hand is art and it's not life.

**DS:** Our generation, or this generation, will never make the mistake of assuming, as some artists did before, let's say in the first World War, that if you have great art, somehow you couldn't have war or that life couldn't become impossible, and so on.

**LP:** No, art doesn't change anything, I'm afraid. Nothing changes whether there's art around or there isn't. It's

unnecessary.

**DS:** It's an unnecessary pleasure?

**LP:** I don't call it a pleasure but it's certainly not necessary to keep life going. The trees are still going to grow whether there are paintings around or not.

**DS:** Well, what would you imagine as . . . ? It isn't really anything that you have to have a theory about, but if you have one about what purpose it serves to people as well as to the artist, do you have any ideas?

**LP:** Well, I guess there is a distinction or there is a correspondence between . . . on a plane of awareness . . . . You walk around in the woods and, depending on how aware you are and how trained you are to see things, you see marvelous things. And it doesn't have to be the woods -- in the city you see relationships, things there because you're aware of these things. And then, when you look at a good piece of art or something, you see those same kinds of things, you know, those miraculous things that you see in the world. But they're gone. They're transitory. They're not there all the time. They're just, you might say, a marvelous thing. You might see a marvelous formation of taxicabs or something but that's gone. I guess when it comes to art, you have the same thing except it's a hundred percent. It's this intense . . . . It's sort of like a distillation of that kind of perception but it's permanent. It doesn't change. It's always there. And because of that, I mean, that's why you can keep going back and back and back looking at what you call good art. Because you always see that other thing. There's always something else to be seen or learned from it just as this marvelous situation that might occur in the woods or just walking around or just living. When it happens in life it's over in an instant and all you can do is remember it. But in art it's permanent.

**DS:** Yes. I thought it was so beautiful what you said before about the Rubens. It's interesting that, not having been saturated with the history of art when you were a youngster, and becoming first an artist and then finding perhaps what is the equivalent to what you're doing -- not equivalent in the same kind of form but in other kinds of forms in museums -- probably the first generation . . . . Unlike Europe, we have started as masters and then become artists. You started being an artist and then looked at the masters. Well, I'm very glad that I turned the tape over and we have had a last comment.

**LP:** Good.

**DS:** And we can go downstairs and still finish up Beethoven's Fourth.

**LP:** Yes. [END OF INTERVIEW]