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Oral history interview with Joseph A. Helman, 2010 January 4

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Joseph Helman on 2010 January 4. The interview took place in New York, NY, at Helman's home, and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Joseph Helman has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The transcript has been heavily edited. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JAMES McELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Joseph Helman at his home in New York City, on Monday, the fourth of January, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Nice to meet you.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Nice to see you, James. Thanks for coming.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I sometimes begin interviews by asking what was the first time you were aware of being in the presence of a work of art?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, in my case that's kind of an interesting story because after World War II, there was an exhibition in America called The Berlin Masterpieces [Masterpieces from the Berlin Museums]. This was a show that—Hermann Goering had taken paintings and looted them from all over Europe and had stored them in salt mines. After the Allies found them, they decided to repatriate them to the countries of origin, and proper owners, as they could. However, before they did that, they circulated the paintings throughout America. I was born in '37 [in St. Louis], and the show must have been around '47. So I must have been about 10 or 12 years old at the time, which would have put me in about fourth or fifth grade, something like that.

I remember we went to the St. Louis Art Museum and saw these paintings and works of art. Having lived through the war, although as a child, I certainly knew enough to understand that millions and millions of people had died. Somehow the paintings had been saved. This was then—and still remains—a paradox for me. It was very, very impressive for me at the time, that the paintings had somehow survived, whereas the genocide and the horrors of war that had taken place had been done in parallel. So not the monetary value, but the value of a work of art as something great in the culture, that people venerate, was brought home. I didn't really understand why, although I found the works—I can still remember some of them, van Eyck, things like that—were beautiful. The value to be above human life was something that I found perplexing, even as a child. So this is in answer to your question about the first time. This was my first exposure, and it was brought home in this very emphatic way by this exhibition.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's a rather complex idea to be formed by a 10-year-old mind. I'm sure there must have been encouragement at home, conversations around the table about this?

JOSEPH HELMAN: No, not really.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No?

JOSEPH HELMAN: No. However, it was a school trip. My parents had little interest in art, and we didn't have any around the house. I didn't know anybody who owned a painting. It wasn't like that at all. It was just a sort of a lightning bolt and a completely—how can I say—unenhanced opinion that we develop. I think those characteristics, you develop them as child, or you develop them later. My life has been filled with epiphanies. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: I was about to use that word.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, that's just been what it was. Later I had another very big influence, which was a movie, believe it or not. It was Lust for Life with Kirk Douglas, and I forget who played the—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Anthony Quinn.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Anthony Quinn, yes. He played Gauguin. I remember distinctly thinking, Why couldn't anybody help van Gogh? He was obviously great, and he had problems. So the idea of being an art dealer was forming very early in my life as a legitimate idea, without my ever knowing it. I never considered being a dealer, of

course. However, I thought, Why can't you help? I saw that at that time, maybe wrongly, as sort of a noble thing to do, to help artists. We were all raised to try to make a contribution to the betterment of society.

I think the two events, The Berlin Masterpieces and this movie, were both big events in my life: One to teach me the importance of a work of art, which was not anything that you can lecture anybody about; it's something you have to deduce yourself. The other was about some kid in the middle-western St. Louis movie theater thinking, Why won't anybody stand up and help this guy?

My third event, which I didn't refer to before, was when I first started collecting. I was a land developer, and I was working pretty hard. I was in my mid-20s, something like that. I was getting a haircut, and I was at Earl Roach's barbershop in Clayton, Missouri. He had a magazine there, and I picked up the magazine. I'm reading it as I'm getting a haircut, because in those days I could read a magazine and get a haircut at the same time. I can't do that anymore because of my glasses. But in those days I could read a magazine and get a haircut.

I remember turning to Earl, who was a patient of my father's and always cut my hair, and I said, "Look, Earl. It's like the olden days. There's a great artist in our own time." I asked, "I wonder where you get those?" He said, "Well, I think you go down to the other end of the mall. Dick Klein is a framer down there. He gets everything." So after the haircut, I go down to Dick Klein, the frame shop, and sure enough, he has some paintings there. He had Bernard Buffet and things like that. I asked him for this artist, which was Jasper Johns. I said, "Do you have any?" He said, "No, it's a waste of money anyway. You don't want to do that." So I didn't do anything significant with him. I actually bought a print from him, Dubuffet print, and barely got out of the shop.

A couple of weeks later I'm back getting another haircut, as you would go in those days—every few weeks. I said to Earl, "That didn't work." He said, "Well, do you know Jimmy Singer?" I said, "Yes, I know Jimmy Singer." He said, "His wife Nancy's a dealer. Why don't you call her? Maybe she can help you." So, okay, I left there, and I called Nancy Singer. I went by her house. She was a private dealer, and she tried to sell me some things I didn't want, including Paul Jenkins and Karel Appel. Nice things, but—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Not your taste.

JOSEPH HELMAN: No. So I asked her about Jasper Johns. She said, oh, she could get one for me, but if she got one, she might have to buy it, and if I didn't buy it, she'd get stuck with it; after all, they cost two or three thousand dollars. Something like that. And what was she going to do with it?

So I'm back getting a third haircut. This whole thing takes about a month or so. I'm telling Earl the story again, because by now this is something you talk to your barber about. He said, "Well, why don't you call the [St. Louis Art] Museum?" So I said, "What do you do when you call the museum? Who do you ask for?" He said, " You ask for a curator." Up to that point I thought a curator was a kind of guard. So I called the museum, and I asked for the curator. I get Emily Rauh on the phone. I said, "Look, I bought a print, and I'm not so taken with prints. I'm kind of busy. But I'd love to see you, and maybe you can give me some help, and why don't you come out to my house?" Amazingly, she said okay.

She agreed to come out to our home. We make a date. She's supposed to be there at seven o'clock. At six o'clock we're having dinner with a brand-new baby, and the doorbell rings. Nobody comes to the front door of a suburban house. So I go to the front door, and standing there is Miss Rauh, who later became Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer after his wife Lulu died. I'm standing with a napkin in my hand. I've got development clothes on or whatever. I didn't think I had shoes on, just socks. I opened the door. I said, "Well, you're an hour or so early, but come on in." We sat down and had dinner. She gave me a list of galleries in New York. I visited them and bought my first painting, which was a Jasper Johns.

So this is in response to your first question about how do you do this. As I said, my life has been filled with epiphanies and abrupt shifts. Seemingly abrupt. But to me, they always looked consistent. So it was more or less like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So was there always an abiding interest in art when you were in school, like in high school, after the elementary school experience with the Berlin show? Were you then in the habit of going periodically to the museum or galleries?

JOSEPH HELMAN: I would go to the museum. After I got the Johns, it really piqued my interest. I spent a lot of my spare time at the Steinberg Hall Art Library [Washington University]. I read as much postwar art criticism as I could find there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: [In New York,] I went to the Castelli Gallery, and I asked if they had any Jasper Johns. There was a man who worked there named Ivan Karp. He said, "Well, we represent Jasper Johns, but we don't have any." I

said, "Can I see what one looks like." He took us in that little elevator that they had at 77th Street. I don't know if you were ever in that thing. It's about this big. And three of us: Ivan and my wife and I were in the elevator. We're going down to the basement. We open the door. It's a crammed storage space. We enter in there. On one wall is an eagle sort of holding a pillow—it's Rauschenberg's Canyon. On the other wall, facing wall, is—and the walls are about as far apart as this table— Painting With Ruler and "Gray" by Jasper. I said, "Well, these are both wonderful." I said, "I love that. That's the Johns, right?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'd love that. Is that available?" He said, "No. That belongs to Mr. Castelli's ex-wife." I said, "Well, I like the Rauschenberg, too." He said, "That also belongs to her." I said, "I'd like to buy them both. What do paintings like this cost?" He said, "Well, the Johns would be about $10,000." So I said, "Ten thousand dollars!? I thought they were four." He said, "Well, they are four." He said, "However, we don't have any, so they might as well be 10." So I said, "Oh." He said, "Does that painting engage you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I'll ask her if she wants to sell it, and I'll let you know."

So about a month later I get a letter from Ivan, and it says: "Dear Mr. Helman, If you wish to purchase the painting that you saw, the Johns, the price, which has been duly negotiated, is $7,000. It's $1,000 down, and $500 a month for a year. If you want it, send us a thousand dollars, and we'll send you the painting. If you get the money earlier, we would really appreciate that you pay us because we always need money around here." I hadn't mentioned a price. I hadn't really talked about money other than to say I heard they cost about four. I hadn't asked for terms. I sent them a thousand, they sent me the painting. I immediately sent them the six.

A few weeks later I go up to New York. I, of course, go back to Castelli Gallery, because by now I'm really smitten. I have this wonderful picture sitting in my home, and it's really great. Leo comes out. He wants to meet me now. So he says, "Oh, Mr. Helman, you bought such a wonderful picture." I can't do his accent. But it's a wonderful picture, and he's such a great this and that and one thing and another. And we're talking. In those days I was much bigger than I am now. My hair was in a ponytail down to the middle of my back. I had this development company. I was more than 250 pounds, having Volkswagens for breakfast. There I am with Leo. So we're very incongruous; in the middle of this gallery we're speaking.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I get this image of you in the elevator now; it's completely different.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right. So we're there, and we're talking. It's kind of awkward because he's so elegant and I'm so appreciative. We're trying to communicate. We have a lot of immediate interest in one another. But at the same time, there's obviously a cultural chasm between us. Some people have now gathered around, and they're taking delight in our awkwardness. Everything was public in this little gallery he had there.

He says, "You know, Mr. Helman, you bought a wonderful painting. But I have a problem." I said, "What's the problem?" He said, "I have a young artist, and I'm paying him a stipend of $500 a month. We were hoping to get your $500 a month to pay the artist every month. But we didn't get it this month." Frank Stella was the artist. I said, "Well, Mr. Castelli, I paid you the entire amount." He said, "You did?" I said, "Yes."

He said, "Just a moment." He shared an office in those days with his bookkeeper, a lady called Nancy; I forget Nancy's last name. A little lady from Brooklyn. She comes out, and he says, "Nancy, this is Mr. Helman." She says, "Ah! Mr. Helman, you're such a sweetie. You honey bun. You're such a good guy." Leo's going on, and he's saying, "But Mr. Helman says that he—" The two of them are having different conversations. She's fawning over me because I paid her. He's trying to talk to her to tell her that I've said I paid her. They're just not listening to each other. They shared an office, so obviously they didn't listen to each other.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, they'd learned how to ignore each other. [Laughs]

JOSEPH HELMAN: Finally she turned to him, and she yelled, "LEO!! He's the only one that paid you." [Laughs.] The people standing around us in the room are laughing, at me for having paid him, and at Leo for having asked about the money, and Nancy because she was funny.

So I said to him, "That's really not a problem." He said, " What do you mean?" I said, "You know what? I really like your gallery. I've looked around here, and I like so many things that you're doing. I'm going to send you the 500 a month anyway." He said, "But you don't owe me anything." I said, "Well, that's okay; the 500 a month isn't so much to me, and if it'll help you out, I'm happy to do it. I'll continue to send you $500 a month, and you can just keep it as a credit for me. When I buy something, apply that money to what I buy. You can ship it to me, and I'll always pay you promptly, as you can see."

That's what I did until I opened my gallery. When I opened my gallery, we shared a few artists; we shared their stipends. I did that until the '70s, actually.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I want to make a kind of a connection here because I have a question about how you developed a taste for something like Jasper Johns, for an artist like Johns or Rauschenberg, not being in New York, not having access to this engine of culture?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right. There was this predilection to epiphany that we spoke about. I was lucky in that I was a —I'm going to say this, and I know it sounds arrogant, but I don't mean it to be. I just think that by now, after a lifetime of doing this, it's obvious. I was a natural, and Ivan's insights and enthusiasms were illuminating.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, how did you hear about Johns?

JOSEPH HELMAN: I hadn't heard about him.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Johns. Oh, you're in the barbershop.

JOSEPH HELMAN: And I see a picture in a magazine.

JAMES McELHINNEY: In a magazine. That's it, right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I said, Gosh, this is great. I'd never seen a Rauschenberg, never heard of him.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Until you walked into that hallway.

JOSEPH HELMAN: And saw this in the basement, saw this painting. Turns out to be his masterpiece. I think anybody would have been impressed. Or maybe not, I don't know, but I was.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But it was not like when you were in college, you were studying art history or—

JOSEPH HELMAN: I took Art 101.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, a survey.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. From a man named Norris Smith.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is this at Wash U?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, Washington University. He was an interesting teacher. But I don't think that that had anything to do with any more than—I had wonderful teachers. I do remember the awe when I first saw a slide of a Rothko in Smith's class. It was Arthur Holly Compton who was teaching physics. Linus Pauling was teaching chemistry, things like that. I was flunking out of everything anyway, so it didn't make any difference. [They laugh.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you didn't have a mentor, per se, who was sort of taking you by the hand and training your eye.

JOSEPH HELMAN: No.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You just had this immediate connection with it.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I had an immediate connection, and I'm not sure what it is. But it's obvious that I did have that. It's followed me all my life. I still have it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And what was the specific Johns that you bought?

JOSEPH HELMAN: As I said before, it was called Painting With Ruler and "Gray." I know you know the painting. I don't know if I have a Johns book here to show you, but you've seen it. It's got a board and a ruler that spins. It's from 1959 or '60.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Very AbEx, colorful, black-and-white background. A very beautiful painting. About three feet square or something like that. That was my first picture. Sort of a tough Johns, but a very, very beautiful one.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Still own it?

JOSEPH HELMAN: No. I did something stupid. How many times have you been married?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Three.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Three, okay. When you got divorced the first time, I'm sure you did some really stupid things.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And the second time, too. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: So at this point, I was getting divorced, and I thought, Okay, I'm going to be an art dealer, and I was in New York. A deal came my way, and I could sell the Johns for a good price. I could take part of it in trade and part of it in cash. That sort of thing was common in those days. At any rate, I thought it was the right thing to do. I thought, If I'm really a dealer, I'll do this. I didn't have to do it, but I did it. I made the deal, and it meant giving up the Johns, which for me was my amateur standing, in my mind. I thought, Okay, now you're now a pro; you can do this. Then, of course, immediately after I did it, I thought, What a stupid fucking thing that was! [Laughs.] Pardon the language. In the end, I made about $20 million from the original purchase, but I gave up a great painting, which I still miss.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's all in the new Oxford Dictionary, so it's in the English language.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So at any rate, this was how I gave it up. In one way it was the price of my initiation—not that anybody was asking me to do it, and I didn't desperately need the money. But I thought this was liberating for me. I wouldn't be so emotional about my first picture, and I can trade pictures and things like that. Then, of course, afterwards, I realized I probably should have done something else. I could have made the deal anyway, bought the pictures; I had the money. I didn't have to do all that. I would have had it all. But, as I said before, you're getting divorced; you're editing you life anyway.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Also you're challenging yourself to be unsentimental about certain things.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, that's what I was doing, obviously. Yes. That wasn't going to be a problem. So it was a dumb thing to do. It's one of the rites of passage that I had to go through. Everybody doesn't have to.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Has it ever hit the market again, this piece? Have you ever had an opportunity to buy it back?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. I think the dealers that bought it from me were not able to sell it. It came up for auction. Freddy Weisman ended up with it. I could have bought it at auction when it came back up again. But I didn't. It's pretty hard to go back and buy things a second time. Although I have bought pictures, some pictures, more than once. I believe his estate still has the painting. There was recently a show of Jasper's gray pictures [Jasper Johns: Gray, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008]. The picture wasn't in the show; I guess they didn't lend it, but it was very prominently featured in the catalogue as being one of the seminal pictures.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It was a couple of years ago here at the Met. Yes, I remember.

Changing subject, how did you move from being a developer in St. Louis to an art dealer in New York? Can you unfold that transition for us?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, yes. I became a collector. Once I bought this painting and a few others, I started collecting more and more. I got to be around 30ish, something like that, and I changed my life. I'd made a little money, and I got over my kind of anxiety. I thought, Well, I can always go out and make money. I'm not going to worry about it anymore. I thought, Well, I've got enough, which I certainly didn't. [Laughs.] But at any rate, in those days, I thought I did. I opened up a small gallery [Joseph Helman Gallery], which you saw the plan of in the Nauman drawing in the other room.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And that was in St. Louis.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. I just changed my life. One day I was heading a development company. The next day I had a little gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Just for the record, what was the street address of the gallery?

JOSEPH HELMAN: It was Forsythe Boulevard, 70-something, four digits. 70, 7501 or 77, something like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, you'll have the transcript. If you have an opportunity, you can always insert that information.

JOSEPH HELMAN: It's not there anymore.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The building's gone.

JOSEPH HELMAN: The building's gone, yes. It was across from the May Department Store parking lot. My first show was Albers, Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Johns.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What year?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Nineteen sixty-nine. So I'd been collecting for six or seven years, eight years. I don't know how long. This was my first show, and I had a [Ellsworth] Kelly in the back room. My first one-man show was Richard Serra. There used to be a magazine called Avalanche. I don't know if you remember that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Very vaguely.

JOSEPH HELMAN: It was a very hip magazine, Conceptual art, whatever. I took the back cover of it. I don't think it was very expensive. I started advertising nationally from this small gallery in Art in America, Artforum, and other magazines. I don't remember exactly where. Within about two minutes my gallery had an international profile. Even though I was in a little shop in a strip store in St. Louis, all of a sudden everybody was coming. People had been coming during the '60s anyway to visit me because I was collecting. So I was lucky that I had a profile from the beginning. I had this series of epiphanies that kept visiting me. As well as enough resources to do what I wanted. The rest—40 years later, here you are.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you had established yourself as a beacon of avant-garde taste in St. Louis and the Mississippi Valley. And people thought of you as the go-to guy for this aesthetic in that region. Were there other collectors?

JOSEPH HELMAN: There were a few collectors in St. Louis at that time. A few people were interested in the dialogue. I helped build and add to some marvelous collections there. Joe Pulitzer became a patron and Ronnie Greenberg, the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, childhood friend. In fact he bought my gallery. Greenberg Van Doren started out as Joseph Helman Gallery. When I made my first trip to Europe, which was about 1972, I lent paintings to the Venice Biennale. My wife and I had a week in Venice, a week in Florence a week in Rome. Flying back to St. Louis, I said to my wife, "We could be anywhere we want to be in the world, and I can do whatever I want. Why are we living in St. Louis? Why don't we move to Rome?"

So we got home, and we picked up our three little girls and 14 pieces of Barbie luggage. I called Greenberg, and I said, "Hey, Ronnie, you want to be an art dealer?" He said, "Yes, but I don't think this town needs two." I said, "Well, wait in your office." So I went out to see him. I said, "Look, I loved Italy. I loved Europe. I'd like to live there, and you can have the gallery if you want. You can take over the inventory at cost. This is my fall schedule: Tom Holland, Roy Lichtenstein, Ellsworth Kelly, and Don Judd." I said, "You can have that schedule. I'll help you sell the works. But I'd really like to get out of here, and I really want to go on and broaden my horizons."

He said, "Great." And he took over the gallery. I helped arrange four shows for him. I helped him sell them out. That summer I got on a plane with my wife and the kids, and moved to Rome. I was there about—two years, '72 and '73.

In September '73, Irving Blum called me in Rome. He had had a gallery in Los Angeles. His wife, Shirley, was an [art] historian. She was a leading expert in the Northern Renaissance.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Shirley Blum.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Shirley Neilsen Blum. She got a job up at Colgate, so Irving sort of folded his gallery. Went to work for Frank Lloyd at Marlborough [Gallery, New York City]. Was there for a couple of weeks. Hated it. I think people were surprised that I had left St. Louis. I later found out that it was John Coplans, his closest friend, that had suggested to him to try to engage me to open a gallery with him in New York City.

He called me and asked me if I wouldn't consider coming back and opening a gallery with him. That was in September—late September, early October. I said, "Well, I'm coming back for the [Robert] Scull sale at Sotheby's [1973]. So we can talk about it at that time. I came back for the Scull sale. At that point I agreed to go into business with him.

In '74 I came to New York and we opened the Blum Helman Gallery. That got me back into art dealing again. But up until that point, for a couple of years, I'd sort of lived another life.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. You were just in Rome.

JOSEPH HELMAN: In Rome.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Were you still doing a lot of collecting? Were you traveling around a lot in Europe? Were you forging new ties, making new connections, finding other peers?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, but I don't think I was doing anything so purposeful. I was just living my life, which turned out to be purposeful enough. Italy, and Europe, proved to be a deep reservoir of Western culture. I didn't need to set an agenda for myself. But I remember thinking at that time in Rome—I was with a friend one day, in a park with our kids, and he asked me what I was going to do with my life, and I said, "You know, if I want to, I guess I

can move to New York and be an art dealer. I don't think it'd be hard to have a profile and be a private dealer if I decide to do that." And then I did.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, before we leave St. Louis altogether, I have just one or two questions: When you were operating the gallery there, did you establish connections with people at the museum?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Oh, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And how did that—was there some kind of reciprocity?

JOSEPH HELMAN: They knew me before I had the gallery, of course.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] As a collector.

JOSEPH HELMAN: As a collector. I'd made gifts to the museum, and I was, even though I was young, I was a sort of a—people knew me in St. Louis.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you were on boards and—

JOSEPH HELMAN: A little bit. However, I had been trying to get the St. Louis Art Museum to form a contemporary arts group, which they were reluctant to do. They said they would do it; however, they were dragging their feet. There was a museum at Washington University called Steinberg Hall. I agreed to curate a show there called Here and Now, in late '68, early '69. The Serra that we are looking at was done for that show. It was fabricated by Serra, Philip Glass, and me. I think it was Richard's first prop piece. Bob Ryman, Bob Graham, Bruce Nauman, Richard Tuttle, Alan Saret—there were about a dozen artists in the show. I don't remember all the artists at the moment. There's a catalogue somewhere down in the warehouse.

So I did that show. They had a big party, raised a lot of money that paid for the show. At that point, the St. Louis Art Museum agreed to start a contemporary art society. We did a second show. The subject was abstract Color Field painting, from Pollock through other contemporary abstract painters. At that point the museum said, Okay, let's start this contemporary art group.

I had a good relationship with the museum. I had given them important gifts, and I would have people buy things and give them to the museum. Judd, Nauman, Tony Smith, Frank Stella, Serra—all of those works were gifts from me to the museum.

Incidentally, I continued to give gifts to several museums. I will take the opportunity of this interview to do a little research and make a list of the gifts to museums that I can recall.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Were you also interacting with people in Kansas City and—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. Well, in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, yes, Chicago, but in that region, like the Des Moines Art Center?

JOSEPH HELMAN: No, I wasn't. I wouldn't describe myself as regional.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The University of Iowa?

JOSEPH HELMAN: I didn't have contact with them.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I would say that because of my advertisement and exhibition program, I had a higher profile than I would have had otherwise. But nevertheless, I had a profile, which I recognize now.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: I remember people used to come out and see me. This story is from the '60s. One day I get a call. Claes Oldenburg is at the airport, I think. He said, "I'm in St. Louis for a couple of days. Can I come see you?" I said, "Sure, come stay with us." So he came out and stayed with us. That was maybe a Friday or something. And then that Saturday I said, "We always go to the country club for lunch, to the grill, with my family." I said, "Do you want to do that?" He said, "Sure." So we went to the club. We had lunch in the grill. Three little girls and my wife and Claes.

Next week Don Judd calls. Same thing. Comes out. He's flying back and forth across the country. "Maybe I'll come and see you. Can I do that?" "Yeah, sure." So he comes out the next weekend. This, of course, drives Richard Serra crazy because he thinks he's missing out on something. Richard comes out. Again, "We always go on Saturday afternoons to the club for lunch, and do you want to do that?" "Yeah." So we went to the club; we

have lunch.

The manager of the club, a man by the name of Rhodie [ph], comes up to me, and he says, "Mr. Helman, your family's been members here for a long time. But we're getting some complaints from some of the other members. We'd rather that you didn't bring your hippy friends here anymore." [They laugh.] I showed up with what I thought were the three greatest sculptors in the world. I, of course, told him where he could put his stupid comment

One after the other, people who were doing me the honor of coming to see a young guy in St. Louis, to visit with me and stay with me—at a point of very interesting times in their careers—that they would want to come out there and discuss what they're doing with me is still amazing to me. They, of course, saw me as a potential buyer for more of their work; however, I felt they took my interest seriously.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. That's a great story.

JAMES McELHINNEY: [Laughs.] So now—

JOSEPH HELMAN: There was a lot of political unrest in America in those days. This was the time of Kennedy and Vietnam—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, yes, the late '60s was—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. And so people were very polarized.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So there was a lot of sort of hidebound social conservatism in the way people looked and behaved.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, it was very clear which side I was on.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. Whether you had long hair—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, I had all these guys around who were artists, whatever. I showed you that tar paper vase, the Allan Kaprow in the other room. It is an artifact left over from a Happening.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, right, right. The tar paper piece.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So we did a Happening. We had this road, which was two miles long, and I had property on both sides of the road. At one point there was a country club, a golf course that we owned. One of the guys I'd sold a house to comes out; he had his two sons and his doberman. He comes up with a station wagon and parks the car next to the site. Comes over to see me; he's got a shotgun on his arm like this. He said, "Who said these people could go on this country club and do this kind of stuff here?" He was a member of the local John Birch Society. I don't know if you remember them.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I said, "Well, I don't know if you know this or not, but I own this country club. You're a member here. This is our property." He said, "Really?" "I thought we owned it when we took a membership." I said, "No, you're a member. You can quit; you can stay; you can do whatever you want. But this is my property." He left. But that was the cultural-political environment.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So, yes, you should tell that story again about Kaprow and the ballet of the earthworks.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Oh, yes. I met Allan Kaprow in New York and we became friendly. I invited him out to St. Louis to do a Happening, an Earth Mover Ballet. This must have been about '68, something like that, '67. I don't remember the exact year. I know the Vietnam War was on. He came out to St. Louis. He was supposed to come in September, but he had lost a child in an accident and had to postpone the trip. So instead of coming in the fall, he had to come in February. When he came out, the ground was frozen, so we couldn't do this earthworks ballet. I had these earthmovers around, but in the wintertime they're shut down because the ground is frozen.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: It's very difficult to move earth when the ground is frozen anyway.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Dynamite? [Laughs.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. At any rate, Allan came out and we did a Happening. The Happening involved laying tarpaper along this road where I had my development. It was a symbolic road building. I think it was about two miles long altogether, from one end of it to the other. We laid down a roll of tarpaper and put concrete blocks on top of it so it wouldn't blow away. Then went back along it, again with another roll of tarpaper, and laid the concrete blocks on top of that. Then went down and did it with another roll of tarpaper and took the same concrete blocks, picked them up, put them down again so it wouldn't blow away. We then went out the next day and picked up the blocks and rolled up the tarpaper and got rid of all the materials. It was all still usable stuff. It was like it had never happened, but we had a few great parties. People who followed Allan had come from all over the place to work on it. We had some wonderful big parties: the music was everything from the Beatles to Yakety Sax.

JAMES McELHINNEY: [Laughs.] Sounds like a precursor to Burning Man, in the middle of the winter.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Not really. Everybody had their clothes on, of course. [Mr. McElhinney laughs.] Burning Man is probably an outgrowth of Happenings of the '60s. Yes, it was a lot of fun, and we did a Happening. And you saw that end up the roll of tarpaper.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Actually, Allan signed it. He signed it in pencil. It has since, I guess, been absorbed into the tarpaper. I remember he signed it. I guess if somebody went and searched it with X-rays or the right instruments, you'd find it. It was signed "Dad Worpak." He felt like an old-timer, and "Worpak" was "Kaprow" backwards. It's signed along the bottom somewhere. I was looking for the signature, but I've never been able to find it again. But I remember he used a carpenter's pencil to sign it—one of those flat pencils?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Those square pencils, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, cool. So moving ahead in time, 1969, you said that you were—

JOSEPH HELMAN: I had a gallery in St. Louis then, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You had a gallery there. Then you closed it, and you moved to Rome.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, I never closed the gallery. I had the gallery—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. You turned it over to your friend.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, in 1972 I lent Ron Davis paintings to the Venice Biennale. I then went over to Europe for the first time. Came back at the end of June, I guess, beginning of July. I called Greenberg at that time, and by the end of August I was out of there. I placed my affairs in trusts and sold some businesses and just—

JAMES McELHINNEY: -—lived.

JOSEPH HELMAN: —lived, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you came to New York for the Scull sale and met up with Blum.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, he had called me and asked me first.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. As you described earlier.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So I got here, and he again asked me to open a gallery with him. I said, "Well, I thought you just went to work for Lloyd." He said, "I did, but it isn't working out." I said, "What's the problem?" He said, well, he had been out in LA and had a gallery, and he had a lot of material from the '60s. He thought Lloyd was going to make a secondary market in the material that he, Irving, had collected, but Lloyd was only interested in showing the important artists of the '60s. He wanted Irving to be the entrée for it. Irving didn't think he could do that. I don't know whether he didn't want to or he didn't think he could, whatever it was. He said that wasn't working. Lloyd wasn't interested in making a market in those artists. So he was going to leave, and would I please open a gallery with him. So I said, "I'll think about it."

He said, "What are you going to do while you're visiting New York" I said, "Well, I really am coming here because I want to buy a certain piece that Scull owned that had engaged me: It's Jasper Johns's Ale Cans. He said, "Oh, can we buy that together?" So I said, "Well, okay, if you want to." He said, "That can be our first piece if you decide to do it." I said, "I'll let you know." So finally I thought about it and I said okay. "Yes, we can buy that together. We'll see how that goes."

So the night comes of the auction, and Sotheby's has seated us all, sort of down front, the dealers who are active and likely to do the things, in the first row or two, couple of rows of their theater on Madison Avenue. Lloyd is sitting in there, and Irving, then me, and I forget who else was there. Irving said to me before we went in, "Joe, would you do me a really big favor?" I said, "What's that?" He said, "I know you have a lot of things, and you're going to buy a lot more things." He said, "Would you mind backing off of this piece?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Look, Lloyd said he's going to start making a secondary market in '60s art." He said, "It'd be a big personal favor to me if you wouldn't bid on it." So I said, "Well," he said, "please. Please do this." I said "Okay." So we go in the auction, and the auction comes and goes. Lloyd doesn't raise his hand. The piece goes to [Peter] Ludwig, who was a German collector.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, the chocolate guy [manufacturer].

JOSEPH HELMAN: The chocolate guy, yes. So I leave the auction afterwards, and Irving comes running after me. He said, "I'm really sorry; I really apologize. Let's go have dinner. Can we talk about this?" So I went, and I allowed him to talk me into going in partnership. We were both interested in making a secondary market in '50s and '60s art. I agreed that it might be a good idea to work together. I guess that was in early November or late October. During Christmas of that year, I came back to America, and in January I came up to New York and we entered into a partnership agreement, and took a space.

[Telephone rings.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: We're going to pause for a moment.

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You showed me an Oldenburg, a wonderful Oldenburg drawing [Tongue Cloud, over St. Louis, 1975] in the hallway that was created for the Bicentennial [arts festival] in St. Louis?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, it was the Bicentennial.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And it's a wonderful story.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, the story starts a few years earlier". I showed you a small drawing on notepaper of Oldenburg in the bedroom.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. A little tiny drawing.

JOSEPH HELMAN: A little tiny drawing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Of Raisin Bread.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Which showed the Raisin Bread and showed the [Gateway] Arch of St. Louis, and a little tiny dot for the Old Courthouse, which is where the Dred Scott case took place. In 1974, while I was in New York, a group of people approached me and asked me to help them find an artist to do an official Bicentennial poster. I suggested Oldenburg because I thought his drawings were just so great. I thought he would have something to say on the subject. So Oldenburg did this drawing, which you just saw here, which was a reference to the other drawing and a reference to the sculpture in the living room, which is the Raisin Bread. I don't know whether you noticed that or not.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: He made this sculpture—this drawing—for the Bicentennial. It showed a slice of raisin bread in East St. Louis, and the raisins are giant pieces of feces falling on the poor people of East St. Louis. Across the river in powerful St. Louis, it shows not just the Old Courthouse; it shows the boat of Columbus, which was a replica made for the 1964 World's Fair. It was then brought to St. Louis by a Spanish mayor—a mayor of Spanish descent—and Mark Twain's ship and the river steamer Admiral. Unfortunately, the Santa Maria sank because it was built for ocean currents not for river currents, and it couldn't withstand the river currents. So when they parked it there, it just fell apart. The Arch was there. The Arch was—I have to digress a little bit.

I went to something called Cape Ann [MA], which is not far from Gloucester. There's an artistic community there. Paul Manship lived there. There was a sculptor there by the name of Walker Hancock. One day some friends took me to meet Hancock, He and I had an instant rapport. He had been born in St. Louis, went to Europe for the first time, fell in love with Rome, and moved there. Well, his story was like 30 years before mine. Came back to New York and became a sculptor. He did federal buildings and coins and official portraits. He became president emeritus of the American Academy [Rome, sculptor-in-residence, 1956–57]. We just chatted for an hour or two that afternoon. I'm sure everybody was bored with us.

At any rate, all of a sudden he says, "Look, I've got something I've got to show you." He pulls out a brochure, a small brochure from the 1939 World's Fair. In the brochure is the St. Louis Arch, but it was shown in the Italian Pavilion in 1939. So I said, "How is this possible?" He said, "Well, this is a triumphal arch that was designed for this Art Deco city built outside of Rome called EUR [Esposizione Universale di Roma]. It was to commemorate the reawakening of the Italian influence over the Mediterranean by the Italian fascist government. More or less as a triumph over Haile Selassie.

Saarinen must have seen the arch at the 1939 World's Fair. He took the idea, submitted it verbatim, the exact size, material, everything, to a National Park Service competition in the '40s. Won the competition, and they actually built the damned thing. Much to the surprise of everybody. Probably including Saarinen. So now we have this triumphal fascist arch in St. Louis, commemorating the conquest of America over the Indians—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Gateway to the West.

JOSEPH HELMAN: —as the Gateway to the West. [They laugh.] Then the original, of course, was never built in Rome. But it's very, very well documented. And they've had many exhibitions about it. So Oldenburg's drawing contains the arch and also his comments on racism because, in fact, the conquest of the West was also another conquest of European culture over indigenous culture. The second "official drawing" shows a giant tongue descending out of a cloud. It is an indictment of racism in America. The committee, of course, turned it down. I, of course, bought it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: So in its own perverse way, it became appropriate, not for the reasons that they thought. He, Hancock, said, "I'm going to give you this brochure. You have connections. Friends have told me about you; I know about you." He said, "You're from St. Louis. You can decide what to do with this."

So I took it and I had copies made. I thought, Well, I can't do this, because I'm from St. Louis. If I blow the whistle on St. Louis, then people will say I have a problem or sour grapes or something. This isn't the case at all.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So I sent a copy to Charles Buckley, who was the director of the St. Louis Art Museum, and a copy to Joe Pulitzer, who was the head of the local newspaper. I told them the story. I said, "You guys can decide what to do with it. This is the information. It's truth. I think it should be out there. It may cause a moment of embarrassment for the city. But I'm inclined to have it out there." They talked about it; they both said, "Why don't you just forget about it, Joe." They said, "This is not going to do our city any good to bring this out. It's not going to be helpful." But since then, I've thought about it a lot. I think it's complex. But I also think in the end—this is corny—but the truth will set you free. Unless it puts in you in prison. [Laughs.] But the truth is the best way to go with it. Given the opportunity of this interview that we're doing now—we were looking at the drawing—I'm happy you've given me the opportunity to state the story.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I'm happy you shared it.

JOSEPH HELMAN: This is a true story. That's what the arch was designed for. The sentiment was called "Nostro Mare." "Our Sea" was an Italian philosophy of that moment. The arch was designed to commemorate that re-conquest. EUR was to be the new economic, commercial capital of the Mediterranean, as a Roman suburb.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, a lot of the buildings are still standing.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Oh, they're still there. It's a very successful developmental area. It's beautiful. And although it's a little heavy-handed—all the fascist architects were—

JAMES McELHINNEY: There are a lot of right angles in fascist architecture.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, yes, there were also curves to it. But this had a lot of the grandiose squares and things that appealed to Albert Speer and Hitler. But also, a lot of the fascist architects were really Art Deco architects who were not so far removed from the likes of Walker Hancock, or Manship, who certainly not in any way had an inkling towards fascism. So the style itself—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Was of a period, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A lot of the stuff that you see on the Washington Mall or a lot of the government buildings all over the world have that kind of chunky sculpture.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Muscular.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Heavy, weighty neo—quasi-neoclassical feeling.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right. Yes. It would be like Canova on steroids.

JAMES McELHINNEY: [Laughs.] Perfect. Let's talk a little about the gallery, the Blum Helman Gallery.

JOSEPH HELMAN: That was my second gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: In New York, your—

JOSEPH HELMAN: My first one was in St. Louis.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, in St. Louis.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Then I had Blum Helman in New York and, ultimately, Joseph Helman in New York.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The first address?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Of Blum Helman Gallery?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Thirteen East 75th Street. It was a townhouse. We hired Charlie Gwathmey [ph] and Bob Segal [ph] to do the design for us. We had a very stylish and immediately high-profile gallery. Again, my first one-man show was Richard Serra.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Again?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. Richard Serra had also been my first one-man show in St. Louis. We had a lot of wonderful shows in that space. Andy Warhol, Lichtenstien—right now I don't even remember them all. But we were there for six years. The shows were good enough that people kind of beat a path to our door.

At this point I should talk about my relationship with Serra. I first saw his work at Dick Bellamy's in 1967. I went to his studio, and we seemed to have a rapport. We spoke more or less daily until the mid-'80s.

In my mind I put him in the Here and Now show that I was planning for Washington University. Richard began his remarkable New York career at that time. At the time of the opening of the Here and Now show in St. Louis, Castelli, who had come to St. Louis for the event, and I were talking about the current scene. Castelli, at the urging of Nick Wilder and David Whitney, had taken on Bruce Nauman. By that time I had purchased several Naumans. I implored Leo to also take on Serra. He was reluctant. He told me that he thought Richard's work might be too similar to Nauman's. Finally, after I agreed to share a stipend for Richard, Leo agreed to take him on. My closing argument with Leo was that not taking Serra was like, in 1962, not taking on Warhol because you had just taken on Lichtenstein. He immediately saw the logic to that. He asked me, and I agreed, to share Richard's stipend.

I did so until I ended our Gallery's representation of Serra in the '80s. At that point he had been asked to do a show at MoMA. I felt that he had been successfully launched, and I wanted more time for other aspects of my life. He was furious, but I wanted out. I don't know if he ever forgave me, but he did ask me to speak on his behalf in the Tilted Arc hearings. I gave what I thought was an eloquent statement on his behalf. At the end of my statement, the room burst into a very enthusiastic applause. Richard ran up to the lecturn and embraced me. We haven't spoken too much since that time.

When his Tilted Arc problems arose, Marion Javits had asked if I could visit her husband in order to help him formulate a statement on the controversy. The piece was sited in Jacob Javits Plaza. I, of course, was happy to have the opportunity to visit Senator Javits. However, when I looked at my schedule, I realized that the only time I could see him I had allocated to Ellsworth Kelly. I asked if I could bring Kelly with me to Javits's hospital room. They said yes. I went there with Kelly. The three of us had a great afternoon. We talked about many sensitive topics—what it was like to be a Senator, an artist, Jewish, gay, dying, an art dealer, civilization and culture. A profound meeting in a dying statesman's hospital room. In the end Javits came out in support of the Serra remaining in the Jacob Javits Plaza. It was only two hours of my life, but it was deeply moving.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You hired architects to design—

JOSEPH HELMAN: —the townhouse.

JAMES McELHINNEY: —the space inside a townhouse.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What was your staff like? Did you have a registrar? Did you have a receptionist? Did you have a driver? [Laughs.] I wish I could share the expressions that you're—the one that's on your face right now.

JOSEPH HELMAN: [Laughs.] It was a lot of fun.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Okay. [They laugh.] So it was—

JOSEPH HELMAN: But it was indeed a lot of fun. Of course, we had one person working in the front, a receptionist/secretary. Also a beautiful young dealer from Texas had just moved to New York. Although we weren't looking for help, she wanted to work with us. I asked her what she thought she could do for us. She replied, "Throw me out and just reel me in." The problem was that the bait kept eating the fish. You entered the ground floor, and there was a desk and sort of a hallway there, as there are in those townhouses. Then a partners desk and office in the back. What was a kitchen became a kitchen/storage space behind that. On the first floor were two salons with a storage space over the kitchen. So it was two floors, the first two floors of a brownstone that was painted white. It was very lovely.

I had an apartment at 79 East 79th Street. The flat, which I bought when I came back from Rome, was a wonderful, big apartment. The gallery was at 13 East 75th, so that was my life. It was back and forth between 79th and 75th Street every day. Sort of everybody in the world coming in to see us all day. A great time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Who was up above the gallery?

JOSEPH HELMAN: There were different tenants in the building. One was a man named Stan Schuman; another was Herb Meadows. No other galleries.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There was an apartment above.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, two. Stan was a financial guy. Herb Meadows was a psychiatrist. He would always hang out down in the gallery. This is just an aside. So finally one day I asked him, I said, "Herb, what are you doing here all the time? I'm happy to see you, but what are you doing?" He said, "Joe, the truth is you get so many girls here all day." [They laugh.] He said, "Sitting at your desk is the best place in New York to meet girls." At any rate, I didn't notice it because I was actually really working, and I thought I was happily married, and who knew? Sometimes when life is happening to you, you don't know it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. Well, he noticed.

JOSEPH HELMAN: He noticed. He ended up marrying my receptionist and opening skinflick movie houses near college campuses.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But who were some of the other artists that you were exhibiting in the first year or two?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, we showed Serra and Warhol. The first artist we took on exclusively at that time was Bryan Hunt. He proved to be the bridge between Minimalism and Expressionism. For more than 10 years he became enormously popular; he is a wonderful artist. We had lot of really great times. I remember I showed Peter Beard, who's a photographer. And, oh, I don't know, maybe Neil Jenney, Bruce Nauman. I would really have to look in the records, because at this moment I can't recall everybody that I've showed.

But we had a high-enough profile in the gallery with what we showed that it became a go-to place. In New York you have galleries—say, a hundred galleries. I don't know how many there really were. There may have been 500; there may have been 50, whatever. But there were eight or ten that people would go to for this genre: Who are they showing? What are they showing? Who are the people around the gallery? It's like, in New York you probably have 200 museums, and you check the list, and you have four or five that you want to visit.

So we immediately became on the list of places to see and go to, and people showed—I don't remember everybody I showed. I would hesitate to speculate now because I'm going to remember about one out of 20, and I should look at a list.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, just remember as you can. We can always have another conversation.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I think I did a Judd show there. I did maybe Andy Warhol, Ellsworth Kelly, Lichtenstein, Oldenberg, Serra, Neil Jenney. We also did a show on ancient storage jars from Japan. I don't remember. In six years in that location we did probably 40 shows, more or less. Some shows were new work; some were their historic work.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, a lot of artists, you said, came to you originally from your relationship with Leo Castelli early on, as a buyer, as a collector.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. I didn't say that. Castelli was probably the most important gallery, and I certainly felt comfortable there. However, there were a few other very important galleries. That was one source, but I had my own unique experiences. There were several other places where art dialogues were taking place. You could meet artists in galleries, bars, parties, museums, et cetera. Also, the scene was not just artists. There were collectors, writers, auction houses, and people who were interested in art. They were all a part of the scene. They all had a place in the grand parade.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A lot of the artists that he showed, you also showed.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. However, that's a question that requires an extended answer. At that time, for me, the most looked-at art dealers besides Castelli were Dick Bellamy, Sydney Janis, and Andre Emerich. Jim Corcoran recently told me that our interest in art that Leo showed, but we both admired, gave Leo's gallery a reinvigorated presence in the art milieu. It was like an historical continuum, where one generation venerated the previous generation. The artists did the same thing, by aligning themselves with one strain of modern art versus another. Nobody wanted to miss the main stream of art history.

In the mid-'60s probably the most important gallery for launching artists was Dick Bellamy. He had given the first major exposures to Judd, Oldenberg, Serra, Rosenquist, and a host of others. Castelli used Bellamy as a source for his gallery. I, of course, had access to Bellamy as well as Castelli.

Castelli was the highest-profile avant-garde gallery at that time; however, it had become a gallery of acceptance into the culture more than a breeding ground for new artists. He had a tendency to consider any artist he showed as his private stable. The fact is that all the rest of the world considered these artists as representative of our culture. Castelli, who was intelligent, charming, elegant, and diminutive in stature, would invoke sympathy from his constituency by claiming that people took advantage of him. He complained bitterly to me about other dealers, collectors, artists, even his wife. We did have a dialogue, and we did overlap in the artists that we showed; however, I showed artists; I never showed Castelli. As much as I admired Castelli, I had my own vision to fulfill.

I recall two stories about Leo and me that I feel I should relate here, in order to better explain our relationship. Both stories have more to do with his attitude toward me than mine towards him. I think it was in the late '70s, Leo lived at Fifth Avenue and 77th Street, and I lived between Fifth and Madison on 80th Street. My apartment was two apartments put together. Around 6 p.m. one evening I received a phone call from Leo. He asked what I was going to do that evening. I said I was having a few friends over for dinner. He said, "May I join you?" and I said, "Of course." He then asked, "May I bring my toothbrush?" I answered, "Certainly." A few minutes later he appeared at my apartment with a little overnight bag. He came in, set his bag down in the entrance hall, walked past me, and explored one half of the apartment. I remained in the entrance hall with his suitcase. He came back into the entry, walked past me again, and went to the other side of the apartment, quickly examined that, and came back to the entry, where I was still waiting in silence with his suitcase. He looked and me and said that he had just left his wife, and where were all the girls? I was amused and surprised. I think that Leo imagined that I was having wild and crazy parties and that he was missing out. We had the dinner that evening with my friends. The next morning he went back to Toni.

In the '80s, the gallery was now on 57th Street. Leo called and wanted to make an appointment to see me. He wanted a specific hour, to make sure that I would block out the time and that we could speak in private. Normally our meetings were much more casual and almost always at his gallery. But this was something very special and he wanted my full attention. At the appointed hour he arrived at the gallery. My office at that time was a 12-foot cube with books on all four walls from floor to ceiling. In the center of the room was a smallish round table with four chairs. There were two enormous floor-to-ceiling sliding doors, which made the room very quiet. We closed the doors and sat down at the table.

I said to Leo, "How can I help you?" He told me that I had everything, and that he had nothing, and that he felt that Blum Helman's obvious success was placing him on the sidelines. I was very surprised, because I had no intention of placing him anywhere. That was his life; this was my life. He caught me completely off guard. I had no idea what he was thinking. He wanted rapprochement. I considered him a friend and partner, and had no idea that he felt we needed that. We had nearly an hour of intense soul-searching and sometimes tearful conversation. He was like an uncle, and this was a sort of family problem.

JAMES McELHINNEY: First in St. Louis and then here in New York. What about the other artists, people like Neil Jenney, people like Bryan Hunt? How did you find them? How did they find you?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, there's a milieu. The parameters of that milieu are not that big. Two artists are sitting in SoHo thinking where they'd like to show and how they can advance their career, and you're one of those

dealers, one of the guys they're talking about.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Would you rather show with Joe Blow, or would you rather show with John Schmidt, or would you rather show with Bill Jones or something? So people were coming around. And they were—

JAMES McELHINNEY: —leaving slides?

JOSEPH HELMAN: It didn't really work like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Everybody knew everybody. You would go to events and parties, and people would come to the openings, and you would go to studios and be in the art bars.

I remember one night we were at a place called Mickey's, which was an art bar downtown. We used to go there all the time. I'm having dinner with Bryan Hunt, Joel Shapiro, and Richard Serra. The four of us are there. Joel is really irritated by the existence of Bryan. Richard had been the top young sculptor on the scene, and Joel had come along, and then Bryan followed after that. It was sort of like a continuum at that moment. Joel was just ragging on Bryan something terrible. So finally Serra calls him out, and asked, "Joel, what are you really so pissed off about? Just be honest with yourself. What are you really so pissed off about?" And Joel said, "They're made out of bronze."

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, I see. Yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: At that time the rules were Constructivism, which was an outgrowth of Formalism, so you had to have additive, preferably planar sculpture. You couldn't have something carved, or made out of bronze.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: So—nobody called it "bronze." You called it "sculpture."

JAMES McELHINNEY: Lost-wax.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, lost-wax is part of the casting process. But you usually make the things out of clay or plaster or something like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Paper, anything.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The traditional sculptural process.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, that's how it's done.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. So Richard said to Joel, "Well, Joel, your work is made out of bronze." Joel said, "Mine don't look it." At that point we knew something else was on the table. It turned out to be Expressionism.

So we all kind of go quiet, and we realize that something different was happening. Because Bryan was getting a lot of heat. It was Expressionism, because he had these very expressionistic surfaces. He kept the monolithic, minimal forms of these waterfalls. But all of a sudden it had become Expressionist. So out of the kitchen where he was working, and now sitting at the table, was Julian Schnabel. He says, "Yeah." Because he was one of the kids who was around the gallery, and they were all there for Bryan's shows. Bryan was making it big, and he was one of them. There was a whole group of people like that you would be following.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So just intersections. This person; this person knows the other person.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. Exactly.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Now just after you were explaining, as you were sharing that story, I'm having a look over at the piece on the table there, the Bryan Hunt piece that we looked at earlier.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Oh.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And it has that surface that channels the light like Rodin.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Exactly.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's not a clean, smooth, unmodulated planar surface like you would see—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, Rodin's—when you look at them, they're actually—the surfaces are modulated. In Bryan's waterfalls, the surfaces were directional.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: That was actually a huge difference. There are obviously many, many differences. But that was one.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: But he was doing work other than bronzes. He was working in wood, and he was working in paper, and he was working in all sorts of things. He was getting a lot of attention, and we were bringing the '60s tradition forward. A lot of the shows that I did at that time were secondary-market shows. At the beginning, I wasn't so interested in taking on artists. But then I wanted to. It was a way to place your artists in the continuum of art history. I think most other dealers take that same road. It was a way to establish the credibility of your young artist.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, sure. Mixing, yes, the primary market with the secondary market. Having shows with more—yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: To give your younger artists a certain legitimacy.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, it makes a lot of sense. Well, you spoke earlier about going to the Scull sale and initially having agreed to go halves on a purchase of the Ale Cans.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Initially, I wanted to buy it myself.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, you wanted to buy it yourself. Then you were asked to share it; then you were asked to not bid on it.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right. I should have had enough warning by that time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A lot of dealers, it seems, buy things in shares. Somebody will have an opportunity to purchase something and buy it outright, or at times buy it with other dealers.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Was that anything that you—

JOSEPH HELMAN: I usually didn't have to do that, but sometimes it was advantageous. I also understood enough about business at that time that I could raise the necessary money.

JAMES McELHINNEY: If you wanted to buy something.

JOSEPH HELMAN: If I wanted to buy things. So I was under different restrictions than maybe other guys were who were in a similar position involved with the avant-garde. We could go into Citibank or Bank of New York or someplace and get enough of a line of credit so we could operate a business.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But you were probably not acquiring things at the same astonishing volume that a lot of these people, these others, are—or were.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I don't know what you mean by "these people," and I don't know what others acquired. I think I acquired enough for me. Today is 40 years later. One painting today would be—you're looking at anything in this room, it would probably be several year's business then.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Absolutely. So moving forward into the '80s—I guess we're into the '80s now.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, by the '80s, I'm on 57th Street.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You're on—okay. And when did that happen.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Nineteen eighty.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Nineteen eighty.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And again you hired an architectural firm to—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, it was a company called Redroof [Design], and it was—Yann Weymouth and Peter Coan. They did the gallery for us on 57th Street. I stayed in that gallery till around 2000.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What was the first exhibition there?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Our first exhibition was called 3x4, four artists, three painting each. Diebenkorn, Kelly, Lichtenstein, and Stella. Our first one-man show was Richard Serra.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Serra again.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And you kept a lot of the same artists. You had a sort of stable of artists you were showing.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Nauman you were exhibiting?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. I had shown him in St. Louis, and then on 75th Street. You can go around the room in the apartment; these were the artists I was dealing in.

JAMES McELHINNEY: These are the guys you were showing.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, showing and/or dealing. And others along the way. Although this was the core of what I was doing. I did a lot with Ellsworth, who is behind you, and shows of Rauschenberg and Serra, Roy Lichtenstein, and [Ralston] Crawford.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Now Crawford's interesting because he would be seen as more of a historical artist compared to someone like—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, Crawford. One day I was in the office of Ron Greenberg, who I sold my gallery to.

JAMES McELHINNEY: In St. Louis.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. We were childhood friends.

I was in his office, and we were just shooting the breeze and whatever. There was a book there and I picked up the book. It was book called Modern American Painting by somebody named Peyton Boswell. Peyton Boswell was sort of the Hilton Kramer of his day or John Canaday or something like that. He had written this book called Modern American Painting. It was published around 1938 or '39. The cover of it was John Steuart Curry. The big three in American art at that time were John Stewart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood. It was a beautiful book with very beautiful colored plates in it, lots of them.

I'm flipping through the book, and I come across a Hopper. Brilliant. Quantum leap ahead of everything else there. Georgia O'Keeffe—wow! This is more like it. After looking through pages of Peter Heard, John Steuart Curry, things like that, all of a sudden I come across Overseas Highway by Ralston Crawford. I think, Oh, my God! This is amazing. This is a guy who really understood how to put pictures together in a constructivist, formal way. He was a man who had looked at Cézanne, but instead of going through Picasso with Cézanne, he went through Matisse with Cézanne. And I understood that immediately.

So I asked my friend if I could take the book, and he said yes. I took the book, and I called up a friend of mine at the St. Louis Art Museum. I said, "I've found the most amazing artist." I described him to her and gave his name. She said, "You're not going to believe it, Joe. He's my uncle." I said, "Gosh, let's talk about it." So I talked to her about it, and I said, "Do you think—is he still alive?" Yes. "Do you think I could talk to him?" She said, "He'd love to talk to you. Nothing would give him greater pleasure than to become involved with a young dealer again."

So I went to see Crawford. I got seven pictures from him, including, I think, four older ones from the '30s. Did a show, revitalized his career. After I was there the first time, Joe Hirshhorn went into his studio and just really cherry-picked and bought many things.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Wow!

JOSEPH HELMAN: But I had mine, including some that you've seen here. I helped to revitalize Ralston Crawford's career. I finally convinced Barbara Haskell to do a retrospective at the Whitney. He was married to Peggy—I think her name was Adler. Emmy Rauh's mother was an Adler, Harriet Adler. Ralston was married to Peggy

Adler, her sister.

So I did a show with him and helped revitalize his career, and that's how I got involved with Crawford. He had indeed, as I had suspected, taken Cézanne through the eyes of Matisse rather than Picasso, which is the standard way that people did it. One reason that he did that was because he became friends with—which I didn't know when I first saw the work—but he became friends with Albert Barnes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, that explains a lot.

JOSEPH HELMAN: That explains a lot. It tells you about American art, too, when you think about it. There was a group of people who were doing great pictures—Ellsworth and Roy and Stella and those guys—but they were very deliberate pictures. They weren't as off-the-cuff as a Picasso was.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: This was much more in the way that Matisse worked.

JAMES McELHINNEY: More exacting, I guess.

JOSEPH HELMAN: More studied.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Studied, yes. More deliberate, in a way. And you think about Barnes, and you think about how Barnes also collected people like Demuth and—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I don't know if he bought Sheeler. Did he buy—

JOSEPH HELMAN: I don't know if he bought Sheeler.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Because I know Sheeler lived in Doylestown [PA].

JOSEPH HELMAN: He may have bought Sheeler. I don't know.

JAMES McELHINNEY: He may have bought him. But—

JOSEPH HELMAN: But anyway, that might have been while Ralston Crawford was hanging out there. Ralston was working in Coatesville [PA].

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: And Sanford [PA] [inaudible], I think, is somewhere over there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Richard Serra went to Coatesville—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: —which was then taken over by Lukens Steel—to work there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: When he started working in the steel mills there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, wow!

JOSEPH HELMAN: He was coincidently retracing the steps of Crawford.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There was a show last year at Hirschl & Adler of a painter named John Moore, who just did a series of composite landscapes of Coatesville.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Oh, yes?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Very much in the spirit of Ralston Crawford. But very much in the spirit of Ralston Crawford meets Frederic Edwin Church, The Heart of the Andes, where it's not really a real place, but aspects of a place sort of cobbled into a fictional environment.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Arcadian Industrial American—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Rustbelt Arcadia.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, yes, Rustbelt Arcadia.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's real interesting stuff. So were there any other artists that worked out in the same way that Crawford worked out?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Going back, you mean?

JAMES McELHINNEY: For you, as a sort of earlier-generation artist of an earlier epoch who—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, they all did in a way. Roy was already working, and Jasper, when I was showing Bryan Hunt or whatever. So you were bridging it both ways.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. Crawford goes back to the '30s, right?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. Later we took on Baziotes, but that was an estate. I never had the chance to meet Baziotes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's the only artist like that.

JOSEPH HELMAN: It really rang a bell with—look at this little painting over here. It reminds one of Kelly. But, of course, it's—I'll get it for you.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, this one, yes. Right. Wow! Yes. So that goes with Stuart Davis.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, he was a friend of Davis's. This is 1955.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And you know the title?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Second Avenue El, I think it is.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Second Avenue El, Ralston Crawford, 1955.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Elevated With Black and White.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Elevated With Black and White.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I think it's the Second Avenue El.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, really wild.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Beautiful painting, though.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Beautiful painting, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Actually bought that from the Hirschl & Adler.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Hirschl & Adler.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Hirschl & Adler, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, that's a gallery that has had a strong sort of Americanist flavor in all the exhibits, really, right? American art.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, the gallery you just mentioned. It showed John Moore.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So were there any changes with how you ran the gallery? I assume it was a bigger space when you moved down to 57th Street.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, much bigger space.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And your staff, I would imagine also.

JOSEPH HELMAN: At one point we had four galleries. I think maybe one year I did, oh, between 30 and 40 shows in four galleries. We were selling from all of them, having a great—did the advertising, did the whole thing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And what years would this be?

JOSEPH HELMAN: It would have been the '80s. Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was a big time.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, that was a boom for us, and we did very well at that time. We had a lot of artists who were—like Bryan, or Donald Sultan was selling a lot of paintings, José María Sicilia. These artists were selling for 50 or 80 or $100,000. There was a lot of work. It was profitable in those days.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So did the gallery staff, itself, include at this point a registrar?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Oh, sure. Yeah, you had a registrar; you had secretaries; you had this; you had that. I don't know how many people I had, maybe 25 people. Something like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: At all of the galleries.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And each one would have—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Plus you would have photographers and movers and, I don't know, we probably—

JAMES McELHINNEY: But you had contractors and that?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. I think the gallery was probably—I don't have any number to back this up, but I would think at one point we were providing employment—not employment, a living—for maybe a hundred people or more. Because the artists, the studios, and their assistants and one thing and another.

JAMES McELHINNEY: By extension.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. So you had a receptionist; you had a registrar; you had—

JOSEPH HELMAN: You have more than one receptionist. You may have—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, you'd have a couple of people who—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. I don't know how many people worked on 57th Street, in the main place, maybe a dozen. We had a bookkeeper; she had an assistant. You have an accountant; you have—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Did any of the people who worked in your galleries go on to open galleries of their own?

JOSEPH HELMAN: It seemed like almost all of them.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Really?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Every five minutes. [Laugh.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Can you share a name or two?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Sure. Peter Freeman, Bonni BenRubi, Stellan Holm, Christine Wachter, Annie Plumb. I'm forgetting people. But there were a lot of people who went on to work on their own. It was a great place to work—Blum was interesting; I was interesting.

Also I was gone—I would leave every year. The first of June, I'd leave the country. I would come back the middle of September. I'd usually go someplace, some island or something that didn't have a phone. I was gone three and a half months. Then I would go away another month at Christmas time, and I would go away two weeks around Easter. That's how I decided to live my life. So I was gone four and a half or five months every year. It gave the people who worked for me a lot of license. Not that they really sold many paintings for us when I wasn't there. But they could go ahead and do what they did when I wasn't there. I wasn't so particular. I was, as usual, doing my own thing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: The rest of it was background for me, as far as I was concerned.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So when did you start going to Todi?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, I moved to Italy in 1972.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So I must have gone to Todi probably that year. But I had a lot of places in the Mediterranean; amongst them I went to Spain, France, Greece, Italy.

In the late '70s, Francisco Franco died. There was the old story of Picasso not going back to Spain while Franco was alive. We all felt badly about that, that Franco had outlived Picasso. Because Picasso had died a few years earlier—Picasso died in about '70 or '71, something like that [1973]. Yes. And I'd gone to Avignon, actually, to see a show of his late work, and I really loved it. So Picasso was something that we all thought about.

There was an architect named Josep Lluís Sert. I don't know if you know who he was. But he was an architect, and he was famous for many reasons, one of which was that he was a dean of the architecture school at Harvard [Graduate School of Design]. But also he had commissioned the painting Guernica. He'd been responsible for proselytizing Le Corbusier.

So after Franco died, I called up Sert, and I said I felt very badly about Picasso dying before he returned to Spain. I wanted to take American art to Spain and Spanish art to America. He said, "Well, why?" I said, "Well, I think Spain—because what happened with the civil war kept it out of World War II. As a result, they never really got the benefit of the postwar American culture that the rest of Europe had. I'd like to go to Spain and see what I can do about that." He said, "That's a great idea," and he gave me his home on an island in Spain, a beautiful home, and it was filled with works by Picasso, Joan Miró, Corbusier, Calder. He gave me his home for two years. I started going to Spain, and I took American art to Spain and did a show there, young American artists. Took Spanish arts and brought them to America.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And what venue was the exhibition?

JOSEPH HELMAN: In Spain or here?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, in Spain.

JOSEPH HELMAN: In Spain; well, actually, we looked around Spain, around Madrid. They didn't have any museums for contemporary art. So I went to the ministry of culture. I met a woman there named Anna Bernstein [ph]. She was the assistant to the minister of culture responsible for exhibitions. So she said, "Oh, this is great. We'll do anything we can to help you. Whatever you want. Find a space; we'll make it happen. It's all possible. We have the budget for you. Everything will be fine. Please. Thank you. We're so grateful." I said, "That's wonderful. But what does your ministry do here?" She said, "I'm embarrassed to tell you." I said, "Well, tell me, what do you do?" She said, "We do football and propaganda." She said, "Nobody does art exhibits here, modern art exhibits. We repressed that under Franco. So if you could do"—

So I did that. I did this show which was Bryan and Moscowitz and Rothenberg, Schnabel and Salle and Fischl and Basquiat and all those guys at that scene of the late '70s here in New York, and they did this big show in Palacio de Velázquez in Madrid, about a dozen artists. It was called Tendencias.

We asked a Spanish woman, Carmen Gimenez, to act as curator for us. She had been married to a man named John Trawford, and John was a partner of Pincus Green and Marc Rich. At that time she was selling fancy Spanish doors to Arab clients, working for Wayne Anderson.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Carmen wanted to be an impresario like you were talking about before. So she was happy to do this show, and she was my liaison there. We did the show, and in Barcelona, I started working with this—shall we stop it?

JAMES McELHINNEY: No, it's fine.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I started working with a sculptor named Xavier Corberó. Corberó is well known for many reasons, but amongst them is the book Barcelona by Bob Hughes. It is dedicated to him. I said to Corberó, "What can I do for you here to help?" He said, "Why don't you build American sculpture here? Bring the sculptors over to work in Barcelona." Because he was a sculptor. So at that time they were restoring the city of Barcelona. They had a lot of fancy architects. I convinced Claes, Roy, Ellsworth, Bryan Hunt, and Richard Serra to work with these architects and to donate sculptures to the city. They built parks with the sculptures as their focal point. They're there now, and they're great.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's a great achievement.

JOSEPH HELMAN: The show, incidentally, in Madrid, which we did, later helped morph into what's now the Reina Sofia.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was my next question. Because, I guess, that museum was a product of the post-Franco era.

JOSEPH HELMAN: That's right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So this exhibition that you organized helped created the environment for a new modern museum.

JOSEPH HELMAN: It was like their Armory Show.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, it's sort of like the exhibition you did at Wash U that led the St. Louis Museum to organize a circle for contemporary art.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So you see, we keep coming back to epiphanies, and I keep stumbling forward through life.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, yes. There's a pattern here I'm beginning to see.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Nothing you could depend on, but it's something one recognizes by this stage of my life.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's interesting because you don't seem to have a particular—

JOSEPH HELMAN: —agenda?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, you don't seem to have a kind of method that you could explain to anybody. You are just moving through life with a particular level of attention and excitement, and things happen.

JOSEPH HELMAN: They asked me to be recently on CNBC to explain the art market to them. Because obviously I've been okay with the art market even though I never tried. I said, "I can't do it." They said, "Why?" I said to the man who invited me, "I can tell you what to say." He said, "What do you mean you can tell me what to say?" I said, "Yes, all you have to do is tell people to be prescient."

JAMES McELHINNEY: Pay attention and see the future.

JOSEPH HELMAN: [They laugh.] Yes. But I said, "I can't tell you what a good buy in art is, but I know that, for me, finding good art didn't always turn out to be a good investment, but very often did." But that really was never the agenda. It was always getting the great art. You had to have a reason for getting it. You had to see what it was. I wished I'd had more, but I never really—I kept what I kept.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But it seems like what you're also saying is that you should listen. One should heed their own heart, their own taste, what really appeals to them, what really attracts them.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, you're an artist, and artists have a way, very often, especially great artists, of seeing the details of life and being able to perceive from that their own reality, taking a measure of themselves. I think that's true with people who are in many walks of life. There is no information that you can get other than how it relates as a measure to you.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: And you have to understand that. Or like Clint Eastwood said: "A man has got to know his limitations."

JAMES McELHINNEY: Magnum Force.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Hal Holbrook. Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A memorable scene. But it seems to me also that there's a very artistic side to collecting, that a collector is, in this sense that you are a collector, and in the sense that you are a dealer—it's an expressive, thoughtful, not purely commercial activity. I think a lot of what has been hitting the radar in terms of the buzz and the press about the art market since the '80s has been art as an investment, moving the—

JOSEPH HELMAN: I always wanted to pay my bills.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Of course.

JOSEPH HELMAN: But I never really—I wouldn't say never—but I almost never bought a picture that I thought was just—

JAMES McELHINNEY: —just for return.

JOSEPH HELMAN: No. You never sell them that way either, as far as that goes. I can show you pictures and convince you that it's a great deal, and you should hock your wife's jewelry and dowry to go buy it or whatever. Unless you have an aesthetic reaction to it, you're not going to believe my story. The truth about art is that art has no intrinsic value, and yet it's the most valuable thing in the culture. A work of art, as I say, has no intrinsic value; it could be worth a hundred million dollars or it could be worth a loaf of bread. But a loaf of bread could be worth a life. I'm back to my first story again. It's all relative.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. That's a very good point very eloquently stated, I think. I've observed—and maybe you could speak to this in a way, because you know a lot of dealers—you are a dealer; you are a collector: it seems to me that anybody who tries to ask someone in the business, either as a collector or as a dealer, how does the business work, there's no answer to that question. It's like people making it up every day as they go along.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Absolutely. Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There's no system.

JOSEPH HELMAN: How do you tell people how to live your life?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. Well, it's not like there's anybody out there who's a Tony Robbins for the art market, who has all the answers.

JOSEPH HELMAN: No.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But, I think people want this. I think people are very curious about it.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, I think there's a lot of people who know where the commercial market is at any moment. They can tell you what a Warhol cost or what a Kelly cost or what a Rauschenberg cost or whatever, Jim Jones cost or whatever, what the last one traded for and what this one's worth and what that one's worth financially. But very few of them really bother to figure out what the cultural historic relevance to the work is. Without the cultural relevance, I don't think you can make a long-term decision about art. No artist—let me see how to phrase this. Nobody comes from the moon and goes to an art supply store. Artists are working out of a tradition. So you go to the art supply store because you want to be an artist. You know about art, and you know that there's that tradition. You go into your studio and you make art which is a comment on that tradition. Always. Can't help it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How you see yourself in it.

JOSEPH HELMAN: How you see yourself, how you see the work, how you see the tradition. Take that Velázquez; take that Picasso. Your work is a comment on, and dialogue with, that tradition. The comment is uttered in the living room of society at the great cultural meeting of everybody. If you have something interesting to say, fresh to say about your take on things, people are going to listen to you. If it's really persuasive, people are going to honor that for a long time. However, just coming along and doing it better than the guy who already makes that comment, we know is not enough, because we see that all the time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, there's no originality. That's just repackaging.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Without the originality, it is not a kind of definition of the—this gets pretty abstract—of the human parameters of decision. So you don't have any sense of, oh, other than the guy likes so-and-so, and he wants to do another one of it. The guy who actually makes that decision, who extends those parameters, is the guy that we want to celebrate.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, that's one of the conundrums, isn't it, in any kind of market environment. Whereas if you can sell 10 widgets, you want the guy to make 10 more exactly the same because you know you can sell them. But with art, artists are evolving every day. The collectors' tastes are evolving every day.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, the widgets become boring.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, the widgets become boring.

JOSEPH HELMAN: In fact, you don't care if the widget is boring. Hopefully the widget is boring because you don't want to think about a widget. Let the widget guy think about the widgets. But the art is something else. The art, which is truly expressive, gives you an idea about yourself.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: You can take a measure of yourself by looking at the art that engages you, that you like, that you collect, that you don't even have to collect. If you think about it, you'll get a take on yourself and on the world and what your place is in it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So the artist and the collector meet there on common ground.

JOSEPH HELMAN: They illuminate. The artist can be an illuminating force for people of self-awareness, not just for themselves but for people who are right there with them. On the other hand, if you bring a statement to the table which is trite and which has already been done, pretty soon everybody goes to another table.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But by this same token, to agree with you, the taste of a particular collector or a couple, like the Vogels, let's say, creates a context for a bunch of individuals who are exploring all kinds of things and organizes it into a particular aesthetic, or at least a discussion about things in a different way.

JOSEPH HELMAN: You mentioned the Vogels. I showed [inaudible] and Richard Tuttle, Edda Renouf, and Steve Kiester, all of whom were—

JAMES McELHINNEY: —in their collection.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, in their collection. I don't know that the—I don't want to go into the Vogels.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's okay. But I was just using that as an example because they've been recently the subject of a film and other activities—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Quite.

JAMES McELHINNEY: —everybody's aware of. But just any great, well-known collection, whether it was Hirshhorn or whoever.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Not so many of them really were associated with the masterworks of the artists. There were very, very, very few collections like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Really, really few. And it's those works, those few works, which really make—for me, at any rate—make the difference. Simply having the name and having an example of the work and having a lot of them, I'm too far along in the game to be interested in that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's like Albert Barnes. Now we don't have to be worrying about hurting his feelings at this point. But he was an example of an extremely powerful force.

JOSEPH HELMAN: He was omnivorous, yes. He took everything.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. He was—

JOSEPH HELMAN: But he also had such great artists that even if he didn't always get the best example, which he very often did, it was still meaningful because the artists were meaningful in his collection. But if you had somebody like—I don't know who to mention; I don't want to name names—somebody who collected a lot of works by essentially minor artists that didn't do a lot for you. It does give you a perspective on that moment in time, but that perspective takes a long time to be relevant.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, to quote another interviewee, whom I won't identify, he made a comment that in one of the recent issues of ARTnews there was a list of the top 20[0] collectors. He said that all the collections were interchangeable, so how's that collecting? [They laugh.] But where is the taste in that? You can't have 20 different people with exactly the same taste. Then it becomes sort of a—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right. Well, everybody would have their list.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: You walk along with the list of 10 people, and then you have your short list of five people. Then

you have three people must-have pieces. Then you get one of those when the best ones are sold, and you get the best one you can. We see that a lot, that sort of thing.

[END OF helman10_1of1_md_track02.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Let me ask you, from your point of view as a dealer and as a collector, how would you describe how the art world has changed over the last 20 years, with the rise of the Internet and the proliferation of art fairs. And how do you see the art world evolving in the next 10 or 20 years?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, I think what you're saying, by describing whatever "it" is, this group of society as the art world, really says more than you mean to. Because what you're really describing is a clique or small group. The fact is that art has proliferated to such a degree that it no longer is just an elite, small group. There's certainly an elite, as there is in all fields, whether it's architecture or fashion or music or medicine or anything where there's a particular study and activity. That group has grown and expanded significantly as the general audience for it has. But the real story, for me, is the expansion of the interest in art to a greater—much greater—number of people. One of the biggest reasons that it happened was the invention of these high-speed presses that were able to reproduce art so that reproductions of art could reach tens if not hundreds of millions of people. So you don't have to be a part of the art world to know about Andy Warhol.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No.

JOSEPH HELMAN: You don't have to be a part of the art world to know about contemporary art or Jeff Koons or what's going on. And that sort of thing. You can take your position on it if you're living in Yugoslavia or you're living in Kansas. It doesn't make any difference. This is not what you're calling the "art world." The art world itself is a reflection of the greater interest in art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, I was just using the common term that people—the "art world."

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. But the common term of the "art world" isn't really the interest in art, which is a part of art. I'd better get the door.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Okay. We'll hold that thought.

[END OF helman10_1of1_md_track03.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: So the "art world" is not really the real story of art. The real story of art is that instead of having to go to your church and see art on the wall as mosaic or as a fresco or to your temple or something like that and see a Buddha, you can see it on television. But basically it's the reproduction and the advent of the facility of communication of images and ideas that's really changed. Art is one of those avenues that allows that. "'Art," as such, is a very, very, very broad term. I think what you're referring to—you can stop me when I finish this if I'm wrong—

JAMES McELHINNEY: No, I was just—

JOSEPH HELMAN: The art that you're referring to is loosely connected with the traditions of painting and sculpture and of the historical references of the great artists of history that have set up a tradition of architecture and the plastic arts for a long time. It's a much broader definition.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, I see what you mean. I actually meant the sort of world of—

JOSEPH HELMAN: —commerce?

JAMES McELHINNEY: —of professionalism in the arts. Artists who are in some way working at their artwork as a full-time occupation.

JOSEPH HELMAN: There's a man named Mike Ovitz who was a famous agent in California. When I had my gallery on 75th Street, I remember one day he came in. He introduced himself to me. He said, "You don't know me." I said, "No." He said, "I do what you do." He said he was an artists' agent.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Interesting.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So he saw himself—of course, now maybe he's a dealer. I understand he's associated with Pace. But he saw himself as dealing in art. Incidentally, he's Joel Shapiro's cousin.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, interesting.

JOSEPH HELMAN: He saw himself as an agent for art and artists.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I don't think he was necessarily wrong. Even though he wasn't an agent for painting, there's no doubt that he was selling artistic product and services, representing people who were creating it and selling it, whatever that was. So I think the art world, as such, is definitely changing. Now it's so proliferated, so diverse, that it's—a lot of what we call the "art world" and the art market today is another part of cultural consumerism. I don't think that that's good or bad.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's just a changing environment.

JOSEPH HELMAN: It's a changing environment. The difference between the price of a Hermes pocketbook and a painting is not so vast.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But you could now have a look at a painting you might be interested in seeing at a gallery on your phone.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, you've got to—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or your computer.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Anybody who's ever bought a painting knows—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Has to see the real thing.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. There's no question about that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I know. But there seems to be a lot of—

JOSEPH HELMAN: If you know the work—

JAMES McELHINNEY: If you know the work.

JOSEPH HELMAN: —intimately, and somebody says, Well, I've got, like over the fireplace there, I've got a 1962 Andy Warhol, and your answer is, Which one? They show you an image.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And you know it already. Yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: You can say, Oh, I know that one. Then you hire somebody to give you a condition report. The guy comes back and says the painting has never been restored, and it's never been touched, and there's no paint loss, and you know what it is; you buy it. On the other hand, usually the guy will come back and say there's a slight deterioration here, and there's a this there. You have to really look at it, and you're standing, and you say, Well, some bird just ate out her eye. [They laugh.] How in the world did this ever happen in this great picture? But I don't want it. Or, I know it's been restored, but it really looks great. It still has all the presence it should have.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How about the impact of art fairs? I know, starting with the Basel.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. It's an easy way for people to reach galleries, and for galleries to reach people. It's expensive, but it's—

JAMES McELHINNEY: —effective, obviously.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, for proselytizing art and product. It doesn't really make reputations, which are really made by the artist in the studio usually. Back to the original thing we were talking about, that each guy's work is their comment on the tradition.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, but a tradition could be—

JOSEPH HELMAN: You have an artist who's hot at an art fair. You go to Basel one year, and every single booth has a David Salle. Two years later, you can't give away a David Salle. Doesn't really mean much.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So that's the marketplace. That's not what you were speaking about earlier, which is things of cultural importance.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Things that have lasting value.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I don't mean that about David Salle.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No, no.

JOSEPH HELMAN: It's just a name that came into my head. I think David Salle is doing just fine, actually. I really don't know his market.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, every artist, it seems, has good years and lean years. It seems like a—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You were speaking earlier about Frank Stella. He hasn't been exactly on all the covers of all the magazines in the last year or two. So it's a—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, Frank's problems in his work, at a certain point, were the problems of this historical continuum.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Later Frank's problems became the problems of Frank's continuum. In fact, a much smaller part of the art audience were interested in Frank's continuum than interested in the general continuum.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So his work became esoteric to a lot of people.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, he stepped out of the canon that he was established in originally. He started doing his own thing.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, formalism as dominant esthetic was over.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, it was over.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, but Frank Stella always did his own thing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But then you look at a person like Guston, who just completely emerged with this whole new late-career style.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes and no. Well, Guston reinvented himself. At first when he did those works—you're old enough to remember—they looked like second-generation Pop, the way he had done second-generation AbEx.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Then later he was venerated by people like the Neo-expressionists like Rothenberg. He looked like a precursor to Rothenberg and even Moskowitz and those people. then people began to like his work for Guston.

The story on Guston, for me, is a wonderful story, but I don't know that it's really over yet. As wonderful as the art is, I think he has still got a hard road to go when you compare it to the likes of Pollock or [Clyfford] Still or de Kooning, some of the people that the first generation is with. Or the Pop art doesn't hold up against the work of Andy or Roy or Claes. Also, just because an artist is popular and selling isn't the answer. We were talking before about—I told you how great I think Oldenburg is and how important I think he is. I don't think his work sells at astronomical prices. I don't know. So I think that in the end, there is no end.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you can't draw any conclusions about the merit of anyone's work based on the performance of their work in the market from one year to the next or one decade to the next. Completely a different discussion.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I wish I had said that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's like we were saying earlier, that no two dealers do what they do exactly the same way. Yes, you buy art; you sell art; you deal with artists; you deal with collectors. But everybody does it in their own way.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. So I think there are these great figures that come along, that lead, enhance, and extend the tradition. Those guys seem to be the guys that stay with this for a really long period of time. They appear to me to be the keepers of the flame.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Who do you look to now? Who do you think is a—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, now, for me, is my lifetime.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Your lifetime.

JOSEPH HELMAN: You mean "now" meaning 2010?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Artists, who are you looking at now? Is there anybody who has hit the radar, that has excited you in the way that [happened] when you first saw the Johns in the barbershop?

JOSEPH HELMAN: No. I think that, for me, the golden period of American art was probably the period between the two wars, from World War II to Vietnam. I think the artists who came of age during that period changed America and the world's culture. It was probably a unique moment in the world's history. That's just the roll of the dice of time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: So I don't think that an artist today, even though he may be smarter, be more talented, and have more things at his disposal, can't really deliver the Gettysburg Address.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I see what you mean, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: You have to have been there and done that that day. But it doesn't mean that there aren't really terrific artists working today. In fact, part of the problem with today is that there's so many terrific artists that know so much about how to make art that it's hard to find somebody who could lead the culture again.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Also it seems like we're in an increasingly global environment, where there are now contemporary artists coming out of Hong Kong and China, out of India, out of Latin America.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Why not?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Exactly. It's no longer U.S.-Europe axis.

JOSEPH HELMAN: But you're [saying] now about people who are making product good enough to enter into this—we're back and forth between the marketplace and the tradition.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Isn't it possible that in Asia, Latin America, India, Africa, there are artists who are working in the marketplaces and others perhaps we're unaware of?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Is it possible?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes?

JOSEPH HELMAN: I think that the kind of art that we truly venerate is really of the Western tradition. When you see people in other cultures doing the Western tradition, even the best of those artists usually doesn't have the same depth of root.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So it isn't quite the same. I just got thinking about what you said yesterday. I have a sister-in-law who lives in Hamburg. She said they're doing a Pop art show in Hamburg. "Why don't you come over and see it?" So I looked it up on the Internet, and it's at the Hamburger Kunsthalle. We weren't going to go to Hamburg anyway. But the show was organized by the Tate. And it's Pop art. And who's in the show? It's Andy Warhol, "starting with his original work in 1968," which is already strange. His best work was all done before that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Of course.

JOSEPH HELMAN: It's Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. I read further, and it was organized by the Tate, and then went off to Hamburg. So it's Basquiat and Hirst and Jeff Koons and a number of English artists and whatever. Andy Warhol. So it doesn't have anything to do with what you're calling Pop art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or what most people would call Pop art.

JOSEPH HELMAN: No.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's using Pop as a branded term to—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, they're redefining Pop in order to legitimize other people. People have always done that sort of thing. It's like, show me a great Impressionist painter today. [They laugh.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Wasn't that in the 1870s, thank you very much?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Thank you very much, yes. And the Tate. So I was shocked at the definition. So here's the Hamburger Kunsthalle, both very credible museums, doing this show of redefining Pop art. Well, this is—pardon the expression—this is merd de toro.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And where in all of this is Richard Hamilton?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or for that matter, Marcel Duchamp?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Oh, where—yes. So, well, I don't know.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The Tootsie Roll Pop. [Richard Hamilton's Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?]

JOSEPH HELMAN: The Tootsie Pop.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Tootsie Pop, yes.

JOSEPH HELMAN: The barbell thing. But I don't know. Pop art, for me—I might as well put this on this interview since I have a feeling about it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Sure.

JOSEPH HELMAN: One of the great pictures of the 20th century was Jasper's Flag. What the flag did was it was—I have to back up a little bit. If you start with the idea of John Cage organizing sounds as music. Cunningham then doing dance—ordinary movements choreographing. Then you have Kelly putting a panel on the wall so the wall becomes the ground; the painting itself becomes the figure—the space is no longer pictorial space; it's literal space. This is kind of what happened for 25 or 30 years. It's an a priori for an aspect of the avant-garde.

Jasper comes along, and he's the first guy using this idea with iconic American imagery to make iconic American painting. So now we have our world-class artist with American iconography, for the first time in America's history. It changed the world. That led into Roy doing these flat images, and Andy doing photographs, or real-time films. Or Claes—I don't want to go down the road of that. But that's kind of what happened. For that to all come together in that kind of confluence, again to change the course of global culture now, because the stakes are much higher—it's not just Western culture anymore. It's not just American culture.

The traditions of art history that we're talking about—it's like a mountain stream. When you're in the mountains and you see the stream, it's very cold and usually clear and very strong current and moving rapidly. As you get down farther, farther, farther downriver, the river becomes bigger, bigger. Finally the river enters into the sea. By that time, you've got a marsh or a delta. You can't find the current. There's much more water. None of it is very deep. There is no strength to the current anymore. But it's massive amounts of water, and it's still water, and it's been collected from all over and flowing into the ocean. So does it have the clarity and force of the mountain stream? I'm not so sure.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you're saying we should all strap on our boots and hike uphill to find a clear stream. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: No, I don't have any advice. You asked me what I thought today was, and I think we're definitely somewhere in Louisiana. [Laughs.] It is very difficult to identify the mainstream, which in a smaller world was much easier to perceive.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Somewhere between the Atchafalaya and the Mississippi.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, exactly. Yes. We're not at this mountain stream anymore.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or the mouth of the Amazon perhaps.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, exactly. And so there's an enormous amount of water—or art—flowing into the sea at a very, very tepid rate, with no depth, but an enormous amount of water: still water and fish and plant life and microbes and whatever. So it's a rich soup, but it isn't really the strength of that stream. That's like the narrow mainstream of the riverhead.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So when I first asked you the question, after we stopped the tape for a moment, about how things changed in the past two decades and how do you see them evolving into the future, one of the first things you stated was that we really can't talk about the art world in the way that we used to talk about the art world.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And this is what you mean. It's just that we no longer know what the art world is. It's perhaps an elite clique—the word you used—of collectors or dealers or artists. Or perhaps it's an unknown, evolving environment whose parameters we have yet to understand.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right. No, I don't have a definition of it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Wish I did.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Have you any hopes? How do you hope it evolves?

JOSEPH HELMAN: I think there were significant moments when things changed, up to a point. I'll give you the moments. World War II, the end of World War II. The beginning of Formalism—the rise of Formalism came parallel to the rise of technology, so that we had a belief in technology at the same time we had a belief in Formalism, the form of paintings. Everything is very optimistic, and we have a huge belief in the future, from the end of World War II all the way till—for me—when Kennedy gets shot. At that point the dream starts to unravel, and a lot of the optimism leaves the scene. We're going along; we're doing Conceptual art; we're doing this and that and everything. But people are no longer making paintings for the future. It seems too dramatic for me to take these positions; I hardly believe it myself. But a lot of American optimism gained at the end of World War II was lost by the end of Vietnam.

So the great period for me is the period from the end of World War II to the end of Vietnam, and artists who established their syntax during that period, in the literal space. I'm talking about Kelly, about Johns and Conceptual art and all that. There's that group. Then after that, in this drawing in the other room, you saw the Bicentennial, and that was a really big deal when we lost Vietnam in America. Because what happened to us is that we began to look backward for the first time in our history rather than just forward. I am reminded of two presidential speeches that sort of encapsulated this era. The first was Eisenhower's Military Industrial Warning. The second was Carter's Malaise of the Future.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

JOSEPH HELMAN: And that subtle shift was enough to put a lot of pressure on an already embattled tradition in our society. It isn't that we don't know how to make beautiful art and great art and product and all that. But you can't be a virgin twice.

JAMES McELHINNEY: [Laughs.] Well put.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So the look backward, the looking back—because I can remember it happening.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It was at that time that a lot of artwork began to embrace irony and—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, it did anyway. Certainly the Pop artists had irony and humor. But even people like, oh, the Surrealists had irony in their work.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, sure.

JOSEPH HELMAN: So irony was and humor was—

JAMES McELHINNEY: —it was part of it, but it was perhaps less prevalent.

JOSEPH HELMAN: I also think what hasn't happened is that—I'm really going to sound like an old fuddy-duddy when this tape is listened to—but I don't think Pop has been really explored yet. I think that the content of Pop art, of what the paintings mean, it's easy to take them as one-liners. But I don't think people really understand yet, nor have bothered to get into understanding, the content of the work.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is it also that it's an idea that sort of seeks some kind of path connecting high art, low art, that whole high-low discussion?

JOSEPH HELMAN: No, that was an exhibit [High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture] at the Modern.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No, no. But there have been times in history, like in the 19th century, when everybody was working on paper, sort of an etching revival. That whole kind of thing which is—it had a kind of democratic impetus that it was—art was for everybody, could be made by anybody in that case. But I think in another interview we said that the idea that art could be made by anyone posits a liberating kind of thought. I don't know if you want to agree with that or not. But it's just that—

JOSEPH HELMAN: No, I think "anyone" means—there's a great statement by Barney Newman. He said—he was talking about Tony Smith, who had ordered the sculpture Die over the phone. Someone asked him, "What do you think of an artist who can make a piece of sculpture over the telephone?" He said, "Well, if it works. Can you imagine how difficult that is?" Anybody who's ever tried to order a sandwich from a deli in New York knows how tough that is to get it right. [They laugh.] You know what I'm talking about.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPH HELMAN: And if you look at the Lichtensteins there, the painting Aloha is almost like a neoplastic reinvention of Gauguin. And the Warhols—the Warhol is such an outrageous advancement on the idea of portraiture and character study and how to make a painting that I don't see that content as having been fully digested. I think those guys just staked out enormous territory.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That has yet to be explored fully.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes. It doesn't mean that somebody can't look at that and make something that you put it next to it and it looks just as good. After all, nothing looks better than 18th-century Neapolitan painting. But it doesn't mean that it's Leonardo or Michelangelo or something like that. But nobody did it better.

JAMES McELHINNEY: We have about five minutes left. In closing, is there anything you'd like to—

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, I'm still involved in the works of art. I still have a sense of wonderment about it. The aesthetics every day in every way—it's still a part of my life. I think it always was. It always has been. I think that's kind of what keeps me going; it turns me on. I'm not so interested in a lot of things that don't do that. But for those things that do, it's a real—I wouldn't say it's a talent, but it's just really kind of a blessing that you have something that engages you and that still does. And probably will. I'm not so interested in having another Lobster Thermidor. I don't really care if the Knicks win another game anymore. [Laughs.] Some of that comes and goes. But if the art stays as long as it does, that's wonderful.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So it's a renewable process of discovery, and it's always exciting.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes, when it's great, it really is as profound as the human experience; it is the human experience. It's hard to get around that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Who would want to get around it?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Who would want to? Well, it would be great if we could, I guess. But I don't know. It's like—you end up like Hal.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, Hal the computer?

JOSEPH HELMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: [Laughs.] From 2001.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, thank you very much.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Thank you.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's been very illuminating.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Well, I hope so. I don't know. If you get a chance to listen to it again, you'll have to think about that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Thank you again.

JOSEPH HELMAN: Thank you.

[END OF helman10_1of1_md_track04.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]