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Oral history interview with Jack Flam, 2017, June 1-7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jack Flam on June 1 and 7, 2017. The interview took place at the Dedalus Foundation offices in NY, and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Jack Flam and James McElhinney have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Jack Flam, also known in France as Jacques Flam, on Thursday, June the 1st, 2017. Good afternoon.

JACK FLAM: Hello.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well normally when I start one of these oral history interviews I ask a leading question, like, "What's the first time you were in the presence of a work of art," or something like that; "When's the first time you were mindful of being in the presence of a work of art." But I think today I'll ask you what are you working on now?

JACK FLAM: Right now, I just finished writing an essay about Matisse. And I'm kind of between projects. In recent years, I've been the President of the Dedalus Foundation and so a lot of what I'm working on right now is running the Dedalus Foundation, which tends to be very time consuming. We have a lot of educational programs that we've developed, especially in the last few years. So that's been a real preoccupation of mine. I have a couple of book projects that I'm kind of playing around with in the back of my mind, taking notes for [things –JF] that I want to go ahead with. For several years I've wanted to write a book on the larger 19th Century, which is tentative titled *From Courbet to Cubism*. And so that's one of the things I want to get back to now. So, I think that it would be fair to say that I'm kind of between projects. We just finished a big book about Motherwell I did with two of my colleagues here last year. And actually, it's a year and a half ago now. And then recently my wife and I bought a house in the country, in Dutchess County.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, good.

JACK FLAM: And I set up a studio. In the—above the garage is a fairly large attic space and I had it converted into a studio. And so, for the first time in many years I've been doing some painting and a fair amount of drawing. So I started out studying both art history and painting at the same time. And in fact, when I first started teaching I taught drawing, I taught print making. And I was pretty seriously painting for several years. And then I sort of stopped painting. I've always drawn, and at times very intensely when I was working on my *Matisse: The Man and his Art* book in the early 1980s, for example, I was spending the summers actually in Connecticut, in the country. And while I was working on the book I did a great deal of landscape drawing. Which I found was very useful for me writing the book about when Matisse was doing a lot of landscape painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where were you living in Connecticut?

JACK FLAM: We were actually staying at Motherwell's house in Connecticut.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which was?

JACK FLAM: In Greenwich.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In Greenwich?

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay. Okay.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Motherwell and I met in 1970—I believe it was the beginning of '79. We had a lot of mutual interests. Looking back at it I think that one of the reasons he wanted to meet me is he was ready to pass the Documents of the 20th Century on to someone, and he liked my *Matisse on Art* book a great deal. But in fact, our meeting was set up by Clifford Ross, who's an artist, who is Helen Frankenthaler's nephew. So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I knew him, he was at Yale.

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As an undergraduate the same time I was there, or the first year I was there, along with George Negroponte and Frank Moore were in his class. And we were all at Skowhegan together in '73. And actually, I just saw a big installation of Cliff's up there. Wonderful.

JACK FLAM: At MASS MoCA, yes. In fact, I wrote an essay for one of the books that accompanied that. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think I saw that. Yeah. So, it's so nice to see he's—

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Clifford had said, you know, I know he's had a great of admiration for Motherwell. And Clifford said, "You know, I think Bob would really enjoy meeting you." And I said "Well, I'd love to meet him." But I really hesitated to make the call, it's not something I do easily. And so, Clifford kind of arranged for me to go and see Bob. And we hit it off right away, we became quite good friends. And actually just a few months after we got to know each other he asked me if I would take over the Documents series, which I did, and am still editing it. At the beginning we were co-editing it, but I mean I was basically doing all the practical work on the series. And then actually we were supposed to get together and meet about the document series, about one of the titles. And I said to him that I couldn't come because my wife and I were house hunting, looking for a place to spend the summer. And he said, "Well why don't you spend the summer here?" And it was a little awkward at first but he said well, you know — he had a guest house on the property, a cottage. And so we went and we spent the summer at the cottage, and then we did for 10 years in a row.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he wasn't actually in the town of Greenwich, he was out.

JACK FLAM: He was out in the country, almost at the New York State border. And in summers he would go to Provincetown. And so, he liked the idea that there would be someone living in the house to keep burglars away, et cetera. And we loved it. And of course, it's very close to the City. My wife at the time was—at the time she was the Director of IFAR.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh. Wonderful organization.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We wish more art dealers consulted them.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: And then she became the President of the World Monuments Fund during that period. But in any case, so she was—I was teaching so I was off summers. And she was working pretty much all during the week so it was a really easy commute, either to drive or to take the train up to Greenwich, it's about a 40-minute trip. So, my daughter would usually stay with me in the country. And then she started going to day camp. So, it was nice because I had a chance to write, I did a lot of writing there. I wrote a few books. There was calm being away from things, before the Internet, before cell phones. I was in a fair amount of isolation there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it was the age of galvanized trash cans.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And there were other kinds of noises and vexations in the City.

JACK FLAM: Exactly. And of course, Bob had a wonderful library. And I had keys to the house and his studio. And so, I, you know, reading from his private library. Those were beautiful summers, I really enjoyed them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm curious, what were the contents of his library? Was it mostly art books or was literature or—

JACK FLAM: In his studio he had art books, everything from pre-historic art to very recent art. In his house, he had lots of poetry—actually in the studio he had a lot of poetry also. In his house, he had a lot of fiction, philosophy books, essays of various kinds. So, I mean it really was a wonderful library.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was he a collector of rare books or anything?

JACK FLAM: No, not particularly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just—

JACK FLAM: Just a reader. The other thing that was wonderful about using his library is that he marked up books a lot, in ink. Which is something I could never bring myself to do. If I occasionally would mark a book I would just put a line in pencil in the margin. But he used to markup books in ink and write in them. So, it was, reading certain books, it's as if he were in the room and we're, you know, sort of reading over his shoulder—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

JACK FLAM: —so to speak, or he's reading over your shoulder.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so, the Devil's in the marginalia.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's wonderful. And you did that for 10 years.

JACK FLAM: Yes. We were there for 10 summers. Until just—we were there every summer until the year he died.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you said this is the house that you purchased in Dutchess County.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, that was only two years ago. This is with my current wife and I just purchased that house on New Year's Day—well actually on December 30th, 2014.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: So this is our third year there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So are you near Millbrook or—

JACK FLAM: Yes. We're about 10 miles south of Millbrook, 10 miles east of Poughkeepsie, and 10 miles west of Pawling.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know, it's a great location.

JACK FLAM: We're five minutes off the Taconic. It takes about an hour and 20 minutes to get there driving.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's terrific. That's terrific. And you're enjoying it?

JACK FLAM: Very much.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: Something much more than I expected. I mean it was my wife, who loves to garden, who really needs to be in the country. I'm more of a city kid.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: And so I felt—I did it basically because of her, but I find that I like being there at least as much as she does.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well I think that there is a sort of a saturation point with, I think, the stimulation of this environment that, you know, one needs relief from.

JACK FLAM: Yes, very much so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so you're painting and drawing.

JACK FLAM: So I'm painting and drawing. And I'm also writing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: May I ask what you're working on in terms of drawing, painting?

JACK FLAM: I'm doing a lot of landscape drawing and painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: This winter I did some skyscapes, treetops and cloud formations.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, the rhythms of nature.

JACK FLAM: The rhythms of nature. And I also wanted to engage with the tension between painting something

that is recognizable to the viewer, and that to some degree is a record of your own visual experience of the thing, along with the sense of a painting being separate from what it is of. And so, I thought the skyscapes I got into in part because of that, because I wanted a fairly amorphous motif where I could allow myself a certain amount of freedom in paint application but still keep the subject going.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: Although it turned out very different from what I expected because I was including trees without leaves on them, it was the winter. And so, I began to realize that when you start to render the "Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang," as Shakespeare says. You get involved per force in a whole different kind of representational register. And so I found myself being forced to be more constrained than I had set out to be.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In you're talking I'm having this imagine of Mondrian and some of his drawings of trees.

JACK FLAM: Actually that's so interesting that you say that because several times along the way I've thought of those, whatever they are, 1910, '11, right before he became really abstract drawings. Those wonderful kind of trees that seemed to be held together almost like a net, there's a network of branches. I thought about those a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ultimately, he reduces them to tic marks in space, his crosses that sort of connect the dots.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then it evolves from there. But, yeah, the Mondrian drawings, the trees, employ some of those body-based curves that we were talking about earlier—

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —before we started this interview. And how, you know, he's acknowledging the presence of his own physicality in the tree that way.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And yet measuring it, seeming to be very diligent and careful in his observation, but very insistent on the drawing not being a tree.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But being something else.

JACK FLAM: And something else about Mondrian that struck me for the first time really vividly when I went to The Hague, where they have at the [Gemeente –JF] museum, they have all those wonderful early Mondrians. The sense of the paint quality. That's something that you don't have, obviously, a strong sense of, in most of the mature paintings, mainly in the '30s, let's say. But there's this love of the paint itself. And it also makes you realize what an extraordinary amount of self-discipline he had to keep that restrained later on when he was doing the rectilinear paintings. And not only the restraint of the colors to, you know, red, yellow, and blue, but also the restraint of the paint application.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well and then if one really takes a look at those carefully you see all the pentimenti and all the revisions and all of the—

JACK FLAM: Like some of the later ones that are not finished, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Changes that are, you know, where he was really working from observation the whole time except he was just looking at different things.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. He was looking at ultimate reality as he would say, rather than at a manifestation of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] What a great, great artist he was, still inspiring.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I'm seeing much more today, a lot of artists who were known for doing one thing, doing many things. And a lot of, you know, people who were known as critics or historians, actually letting it be known that they were also painters and poets. And I think about some of the—well I think about somebody like Brian

O'Doherty, who, you know, was always doing everything. Or then Barbara Novak, who was, you know, quietly painting away and not—

JACK FLAM: Linda Nochlin.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Linda Nochlin.

JACK FLAM: John Elderfield.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: John Elderfield. So, it's actually, it's almost like it was not the thing to be was sort of diversified. The thing to be half a century ago was specialized. And now we seem to be polymaths. Everybody has to be a polymath.

JACK FLAM: Well I don't know that I would frame it quite that way, I would say I think that usually if I'm reading somebody writing about painting, you can usually tell whether that person has painted. And you surely can tell if that person has never, or almost never, held a brush or a pencil. There really is a difference in the way people write about art, having to do with whether they've had the experience of creating, you know, making images.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How would you characterize that? How would you characterize that difference?

JACK FLAM: I think for one thing, people who have done painting and drawing tend to be less, what's the word? To be more concrete in the way they approach works of art. I think there are a lot of theoretical pitfalls that they avoid. I mean naturally avoid, they don't avoid them by wanting to step around them, but naturally. If you've experienced something, the way you might theorize it or generalize it or conceptualize it is going to be different if you're conceptualizing a conceptualization. [. . . –JF] I used to say to my students, especially my graduate students, "In order to have a theory, you have to have [an] experience." You don't start with a theory, you start with an experience or set of experiences and then you try to synthesize those experiences, if it seems appropriate to do so, into some kind of theoretical construct, and in any case a conceptual construct.

But you start, it seems to me, with the experience. And I think that a lot of the people that I'm thinking of, whether it's Brian O'Doherty or Barbara Novak or Linda, who's written a great deal of theoretical work about feminism, but she's always grounded in the specificity of works of art. And I think it's that grounding in the specificity, which for a while had a bad name, was called formalism, as if form suddenly had no, you know, no relevance or meaning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well—

JACK FLAM: Because there was a, I must say I'm old enough to remember when there was a kind of mindless formalism where people would just describe things or describe certain kinds of interactions as if detached from any kind of meaning, any kind of, I mean, deeper meaning, any kind of social context.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Philip Pavia, who I heard speak several times, memorable with his sort of Godfather accent and colorful way of expressing himself.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. I knew him very slightly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This sort of, you know, Mulberry Street, breathless mobster accent.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know, he was saying that, you know, that you had to be able to engage a work of art within a certain amount of time. I think he said 15 seconds, that was the amount of time that he allotted to, you know, whether or not you're going to be convinced that what you're looking at is a real—

JACK FLAM: Right. Whether you want to look at it further.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Whether you want to investigate it further. But then he also said that one of the problems that he found, because he went back to figuration later in his life. Was that people would be walking around openings and saying "Well last week I invented a new space."

JACK FLAM: Mm.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And he said "That guy, [Larry] Poons, you know, he's over. I got a better space than Poons."

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And he would tell—you know, as a young artist at the time, a student really, and it struck

me, this whole idea that the space could be subject somehow, it didn't have to do with anything else. But, you know, we're talking about Mondrian and it all basically, I don't know if it's safe to say this, but for me at least, I think landscape has a lot to do with abstraction.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Because actually when I decided to start picking up brushes and painting again, and I had a lot of paint left from the old days which was still in pretty good shape. So, I had a lot of brushes, et cetera. So I had a certain amount of momentum, I wasn't starting from zero. And I actually wanted to do portraits because there was a moment where I'd done a great deal of portraiture, both drawings and paintings. You know, when I say portraiture, not salon portraiture, but where I was painting people. But it was very hard to find models. And my wife, jokingly, or only half-jokingly, said to me "I'll sit for you when, you know, when you get your hand back and you know what you're doing."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh okay. [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: And so I felt like, you know, what I'd like to do—because I wanted to kind of deal with the tension between the abstract pictorial space, as you so nicely put it, that's what I was really talking about earlier without naming it as such. The pictorial space and the motif. And it seemed to me that with landscape I would have the most freedom at this moment. Although I've been doing some drawings, you know, portrait drawings and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's great. I mean just whatever you find before you that sort of compels your attention in some way.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean and, you know, drawing—the late Andrew Forge, who came to Yale the last year I was there, said that in order to understand something visually, one must draw it.

JACK FLAM: Yes. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In order to actually consume it, to sort of eat it with your eye to digest it with your mind. And to own that experience. And so, when you're talking about writers, art historians, critics, who are also painters, who were also practitioners, that for them the theory comes out of an experience and then what probably comes out of the writing is another experience.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And I think, I know from my own experience, when you're engaged actively in painting or drawing, when you go to a museum you see everything differently. For one thing your hand itches at you look at certain things.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And it's like I go to the—I was just at The Met last week to see that wonderful Seurat *Parade* show, a really wonderful show. And then I was wandering around in the 19th Century galleries, I was standing in front of Cézanne's "*Portrait of Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory.*" And when I'm standing in front of that painting and my hand is literally itching. It's moving around, it wants a brush in it, it wants to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's like a pianist doing this with the keyboard.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hunting for keys to strike.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—That's why I think one might carry a sketch book.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And of course if it's small enough the guards won't bother you. But of course, if you come in with a giant drawing pad and a stool they're going to wonder where your permit is.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But if you don't—

JACK FLAM: And it's not so hard to get a permit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

JACK FLAM: I remember years, many, many years ago, I did that, did some copying at The Met.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But I like the idea that it's kind of spy craft and—

JACK FLAM: Well, yes, it's nice to just walk around and make little notations of, you know, little details of pictures that you see.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And people are frequently, I hear many people objecting to visitors at museums using, viewing their work through their mobile phone.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Holding up the mobile phone. But you know about the Claude glass, right, you know about black mirrors.

JACK FLAM: Yes. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this is—they were doing this anyway in the 18th Century. They'd go out into some pastoral wonderful place like the Lake District in England, and they'd find a good view, and they'd turn their back to it and hold up this mirror and look at it.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or these rosy-colored glasses to hold up to your eye like a monocle to look at the motif.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There actually is precedent for it.

JACK FLAM: Yes. I think that's being perhaps a little too kind to the people who take selfies in these days.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not selfies, not selfies.

JACK FLAM: Well, yes, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But I mean I think one could just as easily hold up one's phone, without turning it on. There's your black mirror. Right?

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Very much so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So anyway, let's leap way back in time, and I'll pose the question that I almost posed at the beginning, which was when were you first mindful of being in the presence of art?

JACK FLAM: Curiously enough, I was [more or –JF] less mindful of being in the presence of art when I was a small child and we had a next-door neighbor who was an artist. We had next door neighbors who had a son who was an artist, who died very young. And he did lots of pastels, in particular. And as a result, I think—not as a result, but in following up with that, when I was a child I used to like to draw quite a lot. And I was often the kid who like by the time we got to seventh grade and you had to draw the Pilgrims meeting the Indians and having the first Thanksgiving, I was one of the maybe two or three kids in the class who would go up there and render this thing in chalk on the blackboard. That being said, I did not ever think that being an artist was a career. The man I'm speaking of, who died very young, his name was Joey Sottile [ph]. And his parents were Sicilian immigrants and they were our next-door neighbors.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where did you grow up?

JACK FLAM: I grew up—I was born in Paterson, New Jersey, but we lived in Passaic, New Jersey. And we lived in Passaic until I was 13 and then we moved to Clifton. So, in a curious way, later on in life when I became interested in the work of Robert Smithson, there was this very interesting coincidence that he had lived in the same towns that I had. He and I had gone to the same high school.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: Although we did not know each other, he was a couple years ahead of me. And Nancy Holt, his wife, who I became quite friendly with, Nancy and I apparently went to high school together also. But I think she was a year ahead of me, and we never met each other. We knew—when she was ill, she had acute leukemia. And when she was in the hospital in Sloan Kettering for several months, I would go to see her, usually two or three

times a week in the evenings. And we'd sit and we'd hold hands and we'd talk. And we talked about people we knew when we were in high school. We talked about neighborhoods we knew. It was a curious thing because in our adult lives, since we'd known each other, that part of our childhood had been detached. In other words, we were in the present, we were in the 1990s and the early 2000s. And here in those final months of her life she was understandably very prone to want to reminisce about things.

We talked about a lot of things like that. Which I'd pretty much forgotten about, even people that we both knew, even though we had not known each other. So anyway, so I grew up in Passaic. My parents were first generation Americans, all four of my grandparents came from some version of what was Belarus, Russia. All of them Jewish. My mother's family were very religious, very Orthodox, my father's family were completely secular. I think that my mother's family rather disapproved of her marrying my father because they saw him as a kind of a pagan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: An apostate.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And the Sottiles, our next-door neighbors when I was a child, whom my mother was very fond of. They had two sons and no daughter. So, my mother was like their surrogate daughter. And we were very close. And Joey Sottile, who was not that much younger than my mother, my mother at that point would have been 20—just trying to think, five, she would have been 30ish. And Joey was 20, I think he was 21 when he died. And he had a crush on my mother. And the Sottiles were convinced that as long as my mother was nearby, Joey would stay alive. And that summer, which would have been the summer of '44 or '45. I think it was '44, no, '45, because my brother was already born. She had two small children, there was a polio epidemic, and what you did was you got out of the city.

So she told Mrs. Sottile that she was going, we were going to go to the country for the summer. And Mrs. Sottile was upset, and she said "No, if you go to the country Joey's going to die." And my mother said "No, the two things are not related, but I have to protect my young children." And we went to the country, and Joey died.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sad.

JACK FLAM: And so the Sottiles no longer spoke to us. So, there they were, in an apartment house, our next-door neighbors—and they never spoke to us.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Blamed your mother for their son's death.

JACK FLAM: To some degree. Down the hall lived the Pattis, and Mrs. Patti was Mrs. Sottile's sister. So, we were also friendly with the Pattis. And Mr. Patti was a great opera buff and he, in fact, named their daughter—they had one child, daughter, whose name is Adelina after the singer. And Adeline, as we called her. And curiously enough, the Pattis we were still friendly with. But Mrs. Patti could not speak to us if Mrs. Sottile was present. Later on in life, much later on in life, after we moved away, years later, my mother ran into Nicky Sottile, who was Joey's younger brother. And they had kind of a cordial relationship. The parents at that point were already dead. So, it was a very funny thing. So, I grew up, you know, in this household where my mother had grown up in an Orthodox Jewish household in Brooklyn.

And the smells of my childhood were eggplant parmesan. Mrs. Sottile always had some kind of a sauce cooking. And I literally spent, I probably spent more time at the Sottiles until I was five years old, than I did at home. Because my mother, while my father was at work, would spend her time at the Sottiles because Mrs. Sottile was her surrogate mother, in the same way that she was the surrogate daughter. So, I'm telling you this because I think in a curious way it had a real effect on my life. For one thing, I've always found Italians very sympathetic. My first wife was Italian. And I realize that when I was a small child if I wanted a glass of water I would say "acqua." And curiously enough, and so I must have spoken some Italian. So unfortunately, my parents were dead before this occurred to me. But I must have spoken some Italian, in the same way that my own daughter grew up with a Spanish-speaking nanny, and spoke Spanish until she was around six years old, and then stopped completely. But when I went to Italy for the first time, I found that I actually, after a few days, I could actually have conversations with people. Not in grammatical Italian, but I understood what they were saying and I could speak simple sentences, never having ever studied Italian formally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

JACK FLAM: Later on, when I became fluent in French that helped a bit because some of the vocabulary was parallel. But I know that even early on before I had good French, I had this Italian in the back of my mind.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well once one masters any of those languages one can do a lot of cognate surfing with the correct accent tonique.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And in fact, even between Italian and English there are enough cognates that you could almost —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, sure.

JACK FLAM: You can surely make yourself, your simple wishes felt.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're a lot less judgmental than the French.

JACK FLAM: Oh, the Italians. The other thing that's wonderful about Italy is Italians love the idea that you're speaking Italian, no matter how poorly you speak it, they encourage you.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Whereas, as you know, the French tend to operate somewhat the other way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well everyone's a bit of a schoolmarm—

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —when it comes to your efforts to speak French.

JACK FLAM: And even after, I mean obviously you never lose an accent. And so, I speak pretty damned good French, but with a very strong American accent I'm told by my French friends. I don't hear it of course.

[They laugh.]

JACK FLAM: But my closest French friends cannot at times hold back from correcting my pronunciation, especially on hard to say, you know, hard sounds like, you know, like *grenouille*. Those kinds of sounds.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Frog.

JACK FLAM: Right. But those kinds of, you know, the*andouille,* those kinds of things where you never quite get it right. In the same way that many French people have a great deal of trouble with th.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: It comes out either as tuh or, for people who speak English pretty well, th [voiced].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: There's more tongue in it than, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right. And, you know, the Parisians certainly do that*Erre Moscia* becomes this very abrasive gravely kind of, really thick. Trying to remember the name of the singer, you know, not Yves Montand.

JACK FLAM: Jacques Brel.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, the one who did "Maintenant"—the—anyway, it'll come to me in a minute. [Song by Gilbert Bécaud]

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, yeah, I speak French very badly, like Tarzan. But I remember going and seeing Darthea Speyer. Remember Darthea?

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure you knew her.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But she spoke French perfectly, grammatically, with a thick Pittsburg accent.

JACK FLAM: Right. Right. But I remember as a student, as a graduate student, having like professors like Rudolf Wittkower, who spoke perfect English but always, or Otto Brendl, but with a thick German accent. And at that time I was still young enough, I would say "How could you be in the United States for 20 years and still have such a thick accent?" But of course, you come to realize that accent is something you almost never lose unless you really work at it. That is to say, you know, you could get an elocution teacher to rid you of the accent.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: But otherwise in the normal course of learning a language, you're going to have your accent, and that's it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well there's certain words that just foreigners cannot pronounce. Like in Dutch, I'm told, the name, you know the town Scheveningen?

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No one but a Dutch person can say it properly.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it was a popular password in World War II to try to trick Germans into revealing themselves.

JACK FLAM: Yes. I remember as a child being told to there were American passwords like that too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Yeah. Yeah. Interesting. So, you left Clifton to go to college.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At this point in time you were in high school. Were you active with like, you know, the yearbook or the literary journal or the—

JACK FLAM: I wrote for the literary—I took a creative writing course. I was much more interested in writing than in art. I actually—I wrote poetry, I wrote short stories, I didn't really see art. I mean I liked to draw. [But –JF] I didn't see making pictures as an activity that you would dedicate your life to.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. At least not your life?

JACK FLAM: Not my life.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And at the time that I was in high school there was no art history at all, whatsoever. So, the idea that there was such a thing as the history of art, I had no clue about until I got to college. And I went to Rutgers. And my second year there I wanted to take a music appreciation course. You had to take either art or music. And the music course I wanted to take, the sections were all closed that were convenient. And the head of the art department was there, and he said, "Why don't you take the Introduction to Art History class?" So, I took the Introduction to Art History class as a total fluke. And I remember the first couple of class meetings we looked at slides. And I guess he was a very good teacher, he later became kind of a mentor of mine. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And who was that?

JACK FLAM: His name was George Weber. George W. Weber, Junior. And he, interestingly, he had gone to Temple, had an MFA from Temple, and then he eventually got a Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts in Asian Art. He wrote a dissertation on Chinese bronzes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: So he was fairly, saw himself as a fairly serious painter, as well as a scholar. And anyway, he was a terrific lecturer and he was one of these people that really could just look at pictures and open them up. And I became really curious about, in particular about Abstract art. And I remember, still remember a little Paul Klee, there's a Paul Klee painting called, one of those little squares called *Blooming*. And I remember saying to him toward the end of the course, I said "Why is something like this? Through you I've become to understand to some degree, or appreciate would be a better word, Cézanne, Picasso—but I don't understand this." He said, "Well you know what, what you should do is just keep looking at it, and at some point, it'll come to you. Or it won't."

And that was a really interesting thing to say, for a teacher to say, "Just keep looking at it." It's like, you know, you say "Well here's a poem, I don't quite understand it." You know, "Here's a John Ashbery poem, and I can't quite follow," or a Wallace Stevens poem, where, you know, the actual content is not necessarily very clear at first. And instead of doing an exegesis, the response was "Just keep reading it over and over again and see what comes up." And that actually became an important part of the way I operated in the world in relation to experience and in relation to my experience of art, and to my teaching to a large degree also. To, you know, the experience of the thing itself. Start with the experience of the thing itself and work from there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Arthur Miller said once, probably he didn't say anything once. [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: Right. Nobody ever says anything once. I'll tell you about that in a minute.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—yeah. He said that, "Art was a structure for an experience," was a—

JACK FLAM: Yeah. I don't know that quote, but that's a very—it's a beautiful—right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. It was expressing all sorts of things, but above all it's a structure for an experience.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I guess implicitly that the artist can have their experience of structuring the delivery system in experiencing whatever happens during that process, but other people are going to encounter it and they're going to discover other things that perhaps the artist hadn't considered.

JACK FLAM: Oh, I think that a really, really good work of art has to convey things that the artist had no idea what they are. I think that's the difference between a middling work and a really great work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: If it's a slave to the intent of a human being then it's not, it's an illustration.

JACK FLAM: And it's limited to the limitations of intent.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Without the resonance of everything else, the subconscious, the complexity of what you actually are, and can finally express. And that's of course, as you know, is the hardest thing in any medium for an artist to get beyond simply intentionality. Which is why, I mean it's one of the reasons that an artist like Gérôme, who's extraordinarily accomplished—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —is finally so boring. Because everything is right there, clear, you could almost write out what's happening in the picture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's called a virtuosity, and self-conscious historiography and —

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And doesn't go beyond—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: —the known intent. There's no mystery, there's nothing, there's nothing unspoken, there's nothing, there's no resonance and no overtones and there are no undertones. There's just the main line.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well the experience for which art is a structure is a process too.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so one finds an artist like Giacometti or Cézanne, what they did was, at least for me when I look at their work, I think that to a large degree they trusted themselves to sort of inhabit a kind of activity that created—

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —things that were beyond their ability to intend.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And that's a hard thing to do. Because that's a big trust fall.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because most artists are mindful of the fact that they need to survive in some way, they need to have an audience, they need to—I mean how do you get beyond thinking about all of those things that keep leading you back to the stated purpose. Like why did you wake up in the morning and start doing this thing.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how do you do that? How do you fool yourself into not falling into that trap or how do you trick yourself, or how do you elevate yourself out of that?

JACK FLAM: That's a very good question. I don't know that I do it consciously. I think that, I think that when I start to do something I become, not monomaniacal at all, but I become very focused on "the thing" that I'm doing. So, if I'm working on a book or I'm working on an article or if I'm working on a drawing, it's as if that's the only thing in the world for that moment.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And the illusion, perhaps you could call it that, that that is the only thing in the world. Although for me it's not really an illusion when I'm doing it, it really is the only thing in the world. It is what keeps me engaged with it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of artists will do like 10 paintings at once. They sort of work from one to the other to forget that they're working on just one thing, or to try to use a process that's bigger than one painting. To make each painting work somehow. I guess everybody has their own architecture intellectually in creating.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. On a given day, if I'm writing, for example, which is my main activity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: If I'm writing I'm really focused on it. And then at the end, say in the afternoon, because I'll tend to write in the morning and then go to the studio in the afternoon when I'm in the country. And in the afternoon what I get myself engaged with what I'm going to be doing in the studio, I also sort of will focus on that, as if the morning didn't exist. It's not always easy, by the way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, that is never easy. But I'm thinking now as you're talking, I'm thinking, I'm remember Louis Aragon's Matisse, *Henri Matisse*, a novel—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —where he's talking about his version of the Camera Lucida idea. Which isn't a Camera Lucida in fact, but is this kind of prismatic process where he would do drawings from the models and then drawings from the drawings and then hang them up on the wall—

JACK FLAM: Yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and—so that's one kind of tactic that an artist could use to get away from the factual.

JACK FLAM: Motherwell, for example, his studio was full of his own work. And yet there would always be one corner—I don't remember ever having seeing a work by another artist in his studio. However, there was always one part of the studio where there's a kind of a bulletin board surface and that he would have reproductions of things pinned up.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah?

JACK FLAM: A Matisse, Mondrian, Goya. But in his studio, he had his own work and I think the idea was, the procedure was, that the works would speak to each other, speak to him, and therefore they would speak about what the next work was going to be, if you can put it that way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So trying to create an environment where the paintings could paint themselves.

JACK FLAM: Yes. Where in fact that language, or in his case the languages, his repertory of languages, pictorial languages that he used, would constantly be speaking to him in terms of what the possibilities are for the next thing. And frequently, when he speaks about this at one point, sees the corner of the picture, and then get an idea for a rather different looking picture but part of a continuum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And meanwhile in the corner he's got a bulletin board full of postcards, just, you know, to remind him that there's this thing called the history of art.

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wonderful. Let's take a quick break.

JACK FLAM: Sure.

[end of Jack Flam_James McElhinney_1]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're resuming with Jack Flam. And you were talking about your first art history course.

JACK FLAM: Right. I really—it opened a whole new world to me. And at the very beginning, I mean I haven't thought about this in decades. At the very beginning I thought that it was feeding my perception of the world in a way that was going to make me a better writer. So, I was still focused on writing. And I really never thought—I was an English major at this time.

I started out in college as a science major, because my father thought that that was the only honorable profession. So that I should either be, you know, a doctor or a lawyer or an Indian chief. Or for him, even better, I would be a physicist or a, you know, biologist, but working, you know, in the highest levels of research. That was his ambition for me. So that something that wasn't science wasn't really a legitimate branch of knowledge. So, I started out as a science major. And then I switched to being an English major, and then in my sophomore year I discovered art history. And then I started taking more art courses, and then I ended up graduating with a double major in English and—well actually that's not true. My major was Art. Art and Art History Departments were combined. So, my major was art and I had a minor in English. But I'd actually done all the course requirements for an English major, but I had not taken a senior pro seminar, which majors were required to take. And then when I—I was supposed to go to Yale to get an MFA. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At the Art School?

JACK FLAM: At the Art School, yeah. I put together a pretty solid portfolio, I was very pleased with that. And then two things happened. And it's hard to reconstruct this now, but two things happened at once. My father, because he didn't think of this as a legitimate professional endeavor, he was not going to pay for my tuition. And he actually stopped paying for my tuition when I was in college. I worked part time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What did he do for a living?

JACK FLAM: He was in the clothing business, had a clothing factory. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In New Jersey?

JACK FLAM: In New Jersey. First in Passaic and then in Newark. And then actually he went out of business. He had some business problems and he went out business and he was working for someone else. And so anyway, he was not going to come up with the tuition. And this is pre-government loan days.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And so two things happened. There was a new computer system, maybe the first one that they'd installed, for registering at Rutgers, and they registered two extra courses of the Introductory to Art course, two extra sections. And so, I was asked—it was last minute that summer. I was still going to Yale, as of, say, late June, early July. Still wondering how the hell I was going to pay the tuition. And the chairman of the department at Rutgers, Weber, said to me "Would you like to teach here next year? Because we have these extra sections, you know, you've taken the course, you know what it's about." I was a good student. I said "Yeah, but I plan to go to graduate school." And although it seems odd looking back at it now, at the time I thought that maybe it would be better to go ahead in art history because it would give me a kind of body of knowledge that would be useful for painting. And so, he called Rudolph Wittkower at Columbia, and I went over to see Wittkower, to an interview. And, yeah, this is another world. And I was accepted on the spot. And I never even applied, I was just accepted, like in July or I think it was late July probably, or early August, I don't remember exactly when, into the Graduate Program at Columbia for an M.A. So, I didn't go to Yale. And of course, that changed the course of my life, it has been completely different. Especially since that particular class at Yale with people like Richard Serra.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Bob Mangold.

JACK FLAM: Mangold, I'm blanking on the names.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Brice Marden.

JACK FLAM: Yes. Brice, I think was there at the same time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Rackstraw Downes, Janet Fish, that general era.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. That whole generation that was the same—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —cohort.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Tworkov was there, Albers had left.

JACK FLAM: And that was the other thing. I'm glad you brought that up because I originally wanted to go to Yale to work with Albers. But Albers had left the year before and Tworkov was there. And I knew Tworkov's work, vaguely, but I really thought "Well I really wanted to go to Yale to study with Albers." So, my father's not going to pay for it and I don't have the money to pay for it, and now they just offered me a job for a year. So, I'll take the job for a year or two and get my M.A., and then I'll decide what I'm going to do. And by then I began to shift, and everything went, you know, and here I am today.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The writing took over.

JACK FLAM: The writing took over. I still kept painting at a fairly regular way until I was in my mid 20s actually.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just as a personal kind of discipline.

JACK FLAM: Personal thing, yeah. I'd taught at Rutgers for a few years and then I was offered a Visiting Assistant Professorship at the University of Florida.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In Tallahassee?

JACK FLAM: No, in Gainesville.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I'm sorry. Gainesville, yeah.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And, you know, this is 1965 and there was a shortage of people.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah.

JACK FLAM: So I mean I was offered jobs all over the country. I decided to go to Florida because they paid me the most money, frankly. They paid me—I was getting—they paid me more than the chairman of the department at Rutgers was getting, which pissed him off actually.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the cost of living was much lower.

JACK FLAM: And the cost of living was lower. And in fact, as a result of that I was able to save money and eventually go to live in France for five years. So, I taught in Florida, I went there for a one-year gig and I really liked it there. I really liked it there. It was my first time away from the metropolitan area.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it must have been a real eye opener, a real shock in a way.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And, you know it was—the weather was nice, the campus was full of beautiful women.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: You know, it was 1965.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Scantily clad beautiful women.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, it was 1965.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Also the height of the civil rights.

JACK FLAM: It was the height of the civil rights. And actually—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's the South. People forget that—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Florida is definitely the South.

JACK FLAM: Well, northern Florida, absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: North Florida.

JACK FLAM: And in fact in 1969—I stayed in Florida until 1970. And in 1969, as part of an NEH Fellowship, I gave

an all-day seminar at the Bethune-Cookman College, an historical black college, on African art. For the students, but mostly for their facility. And at the end of the day the chairman of the department, an African American guy, said to me "Would you like to have a drink?" And I said, "I'd love to." So, he said "Okay, why don't you follow me in your car." I thought we were right in the middle of the town of Daytona. And I thought well, you know, we could just walk someplace, but he wanted me to follow him, so he got in his car, I got in my car.

And we drove and drove and drove and drove. And eventually we got to I-95 and we went to a Holiday Inn or something like that. One of the chains, it was a motel and a restaurant. And we went into the bar and we had a drink. And the bar was, you know, dimly lit and was a very nice place, I mean what was considered a kind of fancy place in the provinces, if I can put it that way. And we have a drink. And then he says to me "So I suppose you wonder why we're here." And I said "Well, yeah, actually."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: He said "Well, if we went out in the neighborhood where the college is and we walked into a bar there, it's a black neighborhood, and they would beat the shit out of both of us because I was with you. And then if we went to the white part of town and they would not serve me." This is 1969. He said, "So we're here on an Interstate Highway, which is Federal property, and by law they have to serve me. That's why we're here." Boy, that really—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. People forget that these attitudes were still very strong—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —at that point in time. Of course, today it's different, but then it was, you know, the height of the Vietnam War—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that was the summer of Woodstock, 1969, it was the year after the —

JACK FLAM: The year after the riots.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. The ruckus in Chicago and riots everywhere.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there was still a lot of racial tension. It's interesting to read your bio and to see that you did some serious work on African art.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yeah, that was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You wrote a book on it, and I'm just curious how you, you know, how you came to that, how you discovered that trajectory.

JACK FLAM: I came to that, again—I mean one thing looking back at this in this context of our conversation, I'm looking back at it, and I've been thinking about some things, knowing we were going to be talking. And I mean I have to say I've had some very unusual, I mean luck, circumstances, that have determined the trajectories of my life. And one of them was when I got to Columbia I took, because I had studied some Chinese art with my mentor at Rutgers, George Weber.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: George Weber.

JACK FLAM: I took a course, I signed up for a course in Late Chou Bronzes, or maybe it was just Chinese bronzes, early Chinese bronzes. And the guy who taught the course was an Englishman who was so boring. And I really—after the first class meeting I thought, "I really don't want to do this." And I thought "You know, I really would like to do is take a course in something I have no idea of." And I didn't know anything about African art, zero. I'd not been conscious of seeing works of African art, per se. This is 1961. And so, it was an African Art course being taught by Douglas Fraser, who was a young professor, and I took it. And I loved it. I ended up doing a very interesting paper which actually formed the basis of one of my earlier publications on the Bamana sculpture. And then I took a course with Paul Wingert, who [was] a kind of reigning doyen at the time, in African art in the Congo. And as it turned out, I also chose an interesting subject and I ended up publishing an article based on my term paper in that course—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —on Luba Stools. And then I took another couple courses with Fraser, who had a real influence on

me. It was a very interesting relationship because he was only a few years older than I was, I wasn't aware of that because he was a Columbia guy all the way through from B.A. through Ph.D. And he was a relatively recent, you know, graduate of a Ph.D. percipient. He tried to keep a certain distance from all the graduate students because he was so close to us in age. And so, he was very aloof, much more than Wingert, who was 70 years old or so at the time. But I really liked Fraser, I liked the energy. And we became, I wouldn't say friends, but we became kind of close in a weird way. Even though I was not majoring in African. In fact, I spoke to him about it and he said that he wanted me to major in Primitive Art, as it was called then.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: But he said you realize if you do Primitive, you've got to do field work. In those days, you had to. And I didn't want to go Africa or to, you know, New Guinea, that was my other interest for two years, which was de rigeur then. So, I thought I would not stay with that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Years later when I went to Florida, I started teaching a course in African art and then I did a few exhibitions at the University Gallery where [for] one of them I wrote the essay, and the others I had my students, my undergraduate students, write about individual pieces in the show. So, it was a nice experience for me and for them. And then I invited Fraser to come and give a talk. And from then on, we actually became quite good friends. And we were quite close friends until he died. He died quite young, he was 56 or so. He died of Legionnaire's Disease, or of consequences of Legionnaire's Disease. You may remember that sometime in the early '80s there was an incident of Legionnaire's Disease in the faculty cafeteria, faculty restaurant at Columbia.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I remember hearing about that, yeah.

JACK FLAM: And he was one of the unfortunate people who got Legionnaire's Disease. He was a vigorous, physically vigorous, tall, stood straight, kind of guy. And last time I saw him was at the opening of a Rockefeller Wing at The Met, which was a big triumph for everybody who was interested in Primitive Art, especially for people like him who were pioneers. The Met was going to have a whole wing dedicated to art of, you know, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. And he was in a wheelchair, and very feeble.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good Lord.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well I remember the first, I remember when the outbreak happened at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia, first the Legionnaire's Convention, in I think 1976.

JACK FLAM: Right, I believe '70s, mid '70s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was the—a friend of mine was the son of the manager of the hotel.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it was a real mess. But I gather that—I mean it's still a problem that people can still contract it.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, from air conditioning systems.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The air conditioning systems that are not cleaned properly, and bacteria that can form.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. So Doug had the misfortune of being one of the people who got it and —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Terrible.

JACK FLAM: But he had—I learned a great deal from him. I'd say Weber and Fraser, and curiously enough, one of my English professors when I was an undergraduate, a man named Louis Zocca. He published a bit on Renaissance poetry, and I took several courses with him, including a course that had a great influence on me, it was called *Poetry and Prose of the Continental Renaissance in Translation*. And so, we read everybody from, you know, from Dante to Boccacio,—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: — Rabelais.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Aretino.

JACK FLAM: Aretino Yes. And we also read Tasso. And that was an extraordinary course. And he was a wonderful teacher. And Petrarch, of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, Petrarch.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. With Lou it's funny, we got, again he became kind of a mentor. He wanted me to go to Brown where he had gone to school, to graduate school in English. But I was determined to go to Yale and get an M.F.A. at that time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So just curious, what—as a student, as a young person, what kind of writing did you imagine yourself doing? I mean I'm thinking you're from Clifton, New Jersey, I'm thinking Philip Roth is from Newark, right? So, there's this whole—

JACK FLAM: Oh, yeah, I wrote poetry and I wrote fiction. I published some stuff in a college magazine.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So poetry and fiction. But art history and history is non-fiction.

JACK FLAM: Right. But, you know, this reminds me—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Creative non-fiction.

JACK FLAM: I'll tell you this reminds me of the time that I was at the voir-dire for jury duty downtown. And the lawyer said to me, she said "So, sir, what do you do?" I said, "I'm a professor and I'm a writer." And she said, "What do you write?" And I said, "I write art history and I also write fiction." Because I've actually published two novels. And she said "Well, can you tell the difference between the two?" And I said, "Not always."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: And got off jury, was not on that jury.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good, right answer. Brian O'Doherty, you know, also is a novelist, or has been a novelist over the—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But again, sort of astride specialties so— but it's sort of interesting to contemplate a person who is interested in poetry and interested in being a poet, being a fiction writer, finding themselves migrating into the history of art.

JACK FLAM: Well you know why? I realize as you were saying it, it's because it was non-verbal. My whole education had been verbal. And I came out of a strong verbal tradition. If my mother's father had lived, he died about three months before I was born. And if he'd lived to the time I was 20 years old I would have been a Rabbi. And no doubt about that. I was his oldest, I was his first grandchild—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was it.

JACK FLAM: —and that was what his first grandchild was going to be. But I came from a very verbal culture. [. . . Particularly verbal, not a visual culture. –JF] And of course, in those days even the United States, in fact I would say English speaking cultures generally are primarily verbal rather than visual—anyway, both in England and in the United States. So, for me when I first started studying art in a serious way, looking at art in a serious analytical way, there was so much that could be conveyed non-verbally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: I found so exciting and so new and so fresh. So that was the initial draw. And as I said a little earlier, there was the idea, I thought, this will feed me as a writer because there will be kinds of experience that you would not have otherwise. It also gave me an enormous, not enormous, it gave me a very different angle on certain kinds of poetry, like Auden's *Fall of Icarus* poem. You know, the old masters are never wrong about suffering or the old masters knew about suffering. You know, the whole idea of a tableau being translatable into something, some numinous group of words. So that was my initial interest in art history or in studying art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well art also is largely fiction too.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The best art is an invention, is a transformation of—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —of experience into another kind of experience that's perhaps more focused. One might say that art exists to transform the mayhem and terror of human existence into something—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAM ES MCELHINNEY: —that one can celebrate and one can benefit from.

JACK FLAM: And curiously enough, when I started teaching I did not at first teach Modern art because I had done my M.A. in basically Medieval. I did my Master's thesis on Irish manuscript illumination. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Read the *Book of Kells*.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, *Kells, Durrow*. Read about the Trumpet Spiral and the manuscripts and its legacy from early Celtic Pagan art. That was my thesis. But when I was teaching I taught mostly courses in earlier art. And then when they hired me in Florida it was a very different experience. At Rutgers, I was teaching four days a week, and I think I was teaching four courses a semester. In Florida, I was teaching two courses a semester because they hired me as a senior person, so to speak.

And they hired me to teach Medieval. And the sequence was Greek art, Roman and Early Christian art, and Medieval art. And I had a fairly good background in all of those because parenthetically, in those days almost anybody who taught Art History or had degrees in Art History, you could teach almost anything on the history of art. And you were often required to do so because that's the way things were set up. They didn't have—most departments didn't have 12 different professors to teach 12 different areas, they had maybe two or three art historians that covered the whole history of art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And a lot of the departments relied, I know, that the survey classes were very popular.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And of course in the economy of higher ed., you know, you need these classes in order to help float the ones that are sort of the pet classes of the professors—

JACK FLAM: Yeah, absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the advanced classes. So what textbook were you using?

JACK FLAM: I've never been a big user of textbooks. So, for—I loved to teach Greek art, I knew it pretty well and I loved to teach it. And I actually had started to write a bunch of articles about compositional motifs in Greek art that I never published, I never finished. For Greek art, I had them on reserve at the library.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just—

JACK FLAM: I put Gisela Richter's book and then there was eventually I think it was John Boardman did a little book, I think it was Thames and Hudson paperback series. For Roman and Early Christian art, I had them reading —I can't remember now. Once again, it was books in the library. I was always loathe to assign textbooks, per se. But I would give them chapters to read in a half dozen books that were not textbooks, but that were like, you know, for Medieval art, *Morey's Medieval Art.*

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It makes sense because it would be a way to get the students to use the library.

JACK FLAM: Right. And also, not to get—I wouldn't say the textbooks are watered down, but there's a kind of master narrative that they all follow.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. There was a kind of progression of ideas through the history of art that, well, frankly from where I sit when I was a student, it was almost like watching the ascent of man or something. It was a Darwinistic kind of evolution.

JACK FLAM: Yes, it was very evolutionary.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so like Gardner and Janson and those books were sort of canned courses that a teacher —

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —could—could just sort of cherry pick all of the lectures out of the book, they wouldn't

really have to do any heavy lifting themselves.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you didn't take that approach? You would—

JACK FLAM: No. Actually, I gave myself, I mean I'd had courses but I also gave myself my own education, and I actually, you know, it's curious given my background, I mean, you know, religious roots.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: That I actually—I then knew more about Christian theology than almost any of my friends, my Christian friends I mean.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And I still know a fair amount. Because when you teach Early Christian—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —art, you've really got to know what was happening at the time and why certain stories were being, you know, why certain narratives were current and others were not. Why the crucifixion, for example, interesting phenomena, the crucifixion is not a particularly popular theme in the early years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Especially from among the people who suffered it.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] But, no, in the early art—

JACK FLAM: You know, you have things like Jonah and the fish.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And the resurrection, Daniel in the lion's den. Those are all images of resurrection.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Yes, Byzantine.

JACK FLAM: Not suffering.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not suffering.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not suffering. Yeah. The Byzantine, that's very interesting. You have the images of crucifixion don't really become popular until much later.

JACK FLAM: Yes. I mean there's—I believe it's in the British Museum there's an Ivory of the crucifixion, it's very beautiful, small. But, you know, Christ is very tranquil. It's not an image of suffering—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

JACK FLAM: —it's almost kind of an emblematic image. Although as I remember it Longinus is also represented with the spear. And I believe, I don't know, it's been a long time since I've looked at it, but I believe it's I think St. John and Longinus are both in it, flanking him. But it's a very serene image. It's not an image of suffering.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well there was that whole conversation about that, you know, Christ on the cross couldn't be shown to be suffering like a mortal, and yet he couldn't be shown to be, you know, too much at peace. I think it was John Ruskin or someone talking about the Tintoretto, and the Sala del'Albergo at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. You know, that crazy painting there. I call it *The Boss on the Cross*.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it's kind of a muscular, like levitating figure.

JACK FLAM: Right. And then there is that extraordinary crowd around him also.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, hundreds of people—

JACK FLAM: Yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —milling around. And huge picture. But that's very interesting.

JACK FLAM: Well, you know, though, it's something though that's really at the very root of Christianity and you see it from Augustine on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: As an ongoing dialogue, the degree to which Jesus is human and the degree to which he is divine. And although there are moments, there are arguments for him being completely divine and completely human, the heart of Christianity is that paradoxically he is both divine and human at the same time. And that really is the mystery. And so, to represent that physically—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —is no mean trick, just generally speaking. And then you have things like Leo Steinberg's wonderful book on the sexuality of Christ.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And, you know, it's interesting, Leo and I became quite good friends and I remember that—we were quite good friends at the time that that book came out. And I remember he told me that actually he got lots of hate mail, kind of, about the book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can imagine.

JACK FLAM: But he also got a good deal of mail from theologians, from priests, the Catholic priests, saying how much they liked the book and what an affirmation of faith it was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Because of course people who really know Christian theology understand that Christ must be human though not entirely so, at the same time that he is divine and not entirely only so. Not only so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Quite an object lesson to prove that love is stronger than nature or death.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—but how that message has been coopted and twisted and rationalized into all sorts of barbarities and abuses over the years.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, yeah, the representation, the problem of how do you, you know, how do you create images to inspire faith, especially when you know that a lot of them were intended to be consumed by people who were illiterate.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, yes. Primarily, in fact.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know, well even, you know, members of the equestrian class up until fairly recently, up until the modern period, early modern period, were most illiterate.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The ruling class. And only, you know, the priests and lawyers could read.

JACK FLAM: Right. Priests and clerks and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Clerks. [Laughs.] The sort of necessary middle management types.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, yeah, I think about that and I think about Giotto, like the Capella Scrovegni how, well the crucifixion there is not central to the narrative, it's just one episode.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, but it's actually quite—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Pretty amazing.

JACK FLAM: —extraordinary quite amazing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The real star of that show is *The Last Judgment*—

JACK FLAM: Mm.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —of course. That big wall.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. You know it's very hard to get in there alone anymore?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I know. I was there, first time I went there, like you, I'm sure, people are walking in and out with bottles of water and smoking cigarettes and—

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And also the front doors were open—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —to let light in. And you just walked in the front door, the big doors under *The Last Judgment*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now you have to make an appointment, you have to go to a room.

JACK FLAM: You sit there and they give you a little film.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Suck all the moisture off of you.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then you get to walk around for 10 minutes.

JACK FLAM: And then you're out.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Kick you out, yeah. That's the last time I was there was about five years ago.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, me too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's been that way since about 2001.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. It was disappointing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. Yeah. Well, still a great monument of Western art.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I've never been to Ravenna, and that's an omission.

JACK FLAM: Oh, Ravenna is extraordinary.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's on my list. So, you have this family tradition of Judaic scholarship obviously.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think that must be a very powerful force not only I think in one's life, but I think in fact in a way in our culture. Because Barbara Rose, when I interviewed her about six years ago, posed a question which was "How do you think Rothko and Gottlieb and Barnett Newman and all these guys got to spend so much time painting at home? It was because their wives were school teachers and librarians—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and that they were doing God's work in the studio."

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—and for me at least that explained the argumentative culture of art school too.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The particular kind of argumentative culture that existed in art schools post-war I think was

indirectly influenced by that.

JACK FLAM: Very possibly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Especially at Yale, you know, the fiery pit crits, and the strongly held position, strongly argued, you know, to the death if need be. But I'm not sure that that same kind of culture existed before in that way. I don't think it existed.

JACK FLAM: Very likely it didn't. I haven't thought about it, I think you're right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't think it exists any more as much. So, you're working with African art, this leads to a book.

JACK FLAM: It leads to a few catalogues.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A few catalogues?

JACK FLAM: Yeah, I did exhibition catalogues. I did two or three catalogues when I was in Florida, for the University of Florida, for the gallery. One of which, as I said, I did with my students, where they wrote about individual works. And I did a bunch of articles that were published, one was published in African Arts on the Luba Stools, and the other, another was published actually in France when I was in Paris, by the Société des Africainistes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: Which was associated with what was called the Musée de l'Homme still. And that was the article on Bamana art. And then I also did one for I think it was The American Journal of African Studies on Dogon granaries. I became interested in symbolism, Dogon granary. So, it was a preoccupation of mine, and I was teaching African art. And I think that something not to leave out of this dialogue, teaching. The person who learns the most from teaching is the teacher.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you.

JACK FLAM: I think.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

JACK FLAM: And so teaching, I got a lot of my education from teaching. And you refine your ideas, you're challenged when you have good students, and I had the good luck of having good students. They ask you questions that really bring you up short. They make observations about things that you never saw in pictures that you were familiar with. They make connections between things that you hadn't thought of yourself. So, in the course of teaching, I was teaching African art and learning more about African art through teaching it, looking at it carefully. And as you know from teaching, you're standing in front of a room full of say 20 people, who are reasonably well informed, smart, most of them quite interested. And, you know, you really have to know what you're talking about, but you also have to be open enough to let the art bring you past what you came to the lecture thinking about. So I found that, you know, I'm often, after I gave a lecture, I would then, I'd make notes afterwards so I wouldn't forget the insights that I got on the spot. It's like when you're painting or writing, it's the same thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: In the heat of the moment you generate things that you just couldn't if you sat and calculatedly said "Now I'm going to do something original, or daring, or—"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like you said, the theory comes out of the experience—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the same way that the ideas come out of the process of working.

JACK FLAM: Yes. Very much so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The ideas come out of the process of working, they don't precede it, they don't, it's not like "I have an idea, let me go do it."

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's sort of "Let me go do something and—"

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Right. With the general idea of me, that's kind of what I want to get at.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. That's a very important thing I think for people to understand because, you know, a lot of teaching, as we were talking earlier about, you know, people working out of textbooks, is that they're just delivering someone else's content. So, you're talking about a more discursive way of teaching.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where you're involving the students and challenging them to be —

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And then for undergraduate courses, for example, at a certain point I would give them an option of instead of doing a term paper, of making pictures. And this came out of one of these observations, somebody taking a Modern art undergraduate course with me. He said "Well, you know, I could do that," looking at a van Gogh. And "That looks like a child could do it, I could do that."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: So, I said "Well if you can do it, why don't you go ahead and do it." And everybody laughed. And I said "Well I'll tell you what. Why don't [you do that for –JF] the next assignment for next week." It was an interior, I think it was an interior of his bedroom. I said, "Go home and render your bedroom, your actual bedroom, as if you were van Gogh." And they came back very humbled. And so, after that I would give them the option frequently of, in an undergraduate course, of doing a term paper or they could do a series of maybe four or five pictures over the course of the semester. And because a lot of these people in those classes were not art majors, I didn't want there to be a big technical thing. So, I would often have them do it with Crayola Crayons, so they could do it on paper maybe that big. And so, in a Modern art course they would do a van Gogh, a Cubist picture, you know, a Surrealist picture. But it was always—it had to be based on a single picture. Because I didn't want them to get into that sort of generic over generalizations.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: So they would chose a picture, let's say a still life by van Gogh. And then they would set up their own still life. So, the idea was it couldn't just be a copy, they had to try to work in the style of that picture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So they have to try to recreate van Gogh in his studio or in his bedroom, painting the bedroom, drawing the bedroom, doing a still life.

JACK FLAM: Exactly. And they had to, and then it wasn't just doing it, then the last day of class, or if it was a mid-term thing, the day after the mid-term exam, let's say, or I think we'd do it after. Everybody who had done a picture and bring it in. We'd put them in the front of the room and after a while I systematized that a little more so I'd have them all do the same picture. And they would put them in the front of the room, tack them up. And then I would say to somebody "Okay, rate them from best to worst, or most successful to least successful." And the thing that they also learned, was that there a more successful or less successful version of that.

And they came to understand, and we would discuss it, why. Why does that work? Why is that inside the language that that painter was using, and that less so. And there were great conversations that the kids would have. Then every once in a while, you'd have something really bizarre happen. Like I can remember one year in Brooklyn College I had a fairly broad ethnic spectrum. And in one class I had an Israeli girl and a Palestinian guy. And so, they, you know, everybody put the pictures up and then I said okay, I would pick and choose the people. I'd say, you know, so and so go up and arrange them. Okay, so and so, you rearrange anything you should be different from most successful to least. And I said, "Is there anybody now that wants to move anything?" And the Palestinian guy gets up and he takes the Israeli girl's, which was right at the top, and he puts it at the bottom. He doesn't move his own, which was, you know, up there also. And I say, "Does anybody else want to?" And she gets up and she takes his and she puts it on the bottom of the wall.

[They laugh.]

JACK FLAM: And it was like this, this amazing moment of, okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We were talking about drawing here, not, you know, but that's amazing.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that's provocative. And it's very creative teaching too.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, I loved teaching. And I thought when I stopped teaching, I retired, I stopped teaching basically

around 2007. I would teach on partial pay and I would teach one course a year or something.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You were at the Graduate Center, right?

JACK FLAM: No, I stopped teaching at the Graduate Center in 2002. I was only at Brooklyn, which was where my central love [ph], my main love was at Brooklyn. And as you know from Kathy, one of the odd things about the CUNY System is that if you're based at one of the colleges and you're also teaching at the Graduate Center, you're basically doing two jobs for one salary.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Right down to the fact that I was on the Executive Committee almost the whole time I was at the Graduate Center and I was also on the P and B Committee at Brooklyn. And I'm not saying—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's a lot of service.

JACK FLAM: It was a lot of service. And when I say two jobs for one salary, it's not my phrase. Actually, one year somebody in the administration at the Graduate Center appointed me to be the representative of the Art History Department at the meeting of the middle states' evaluation, et cetera. And they had a whole bunch of people, professors from other schools.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Who were giving a critique. And one of them I remember asking —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The accreditation process, right?

JACK FLAM: Yes. And one of them asked us, the group, said "Well, you know, several of you are at two institutions and it seems like you're doing work at both of them" and blah, blah, blah. And I felt that, you know, I felt that I should defend the institution. So, I said "Well, you know, it's true, but at the same time most of the people feel that it's an opportunity to teach on a very high level and it reflects, you know, your own best research" blah, blah, blah, blah. And then this person, from wherever he was from, you know, probably one of the Ivy League Schools, said "Yeah, but you do realize you're doing two jobs for one salary." And that, I thought, "Wow, yeah, he's right."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: But, I mean that's not why I eventually—I stopped teaching at the Graduate Center for a few reasons, some of them were kind of political. I felt that some of the better students were not being well treated because time constraints for their dissertations were being too rigidly enforced. And I felt that—I'm not going to but I could name at least three students that were some of the best students I taught there, who I don't think ever got their degrees because they didn't come in under the five-year, or whatever it was, limit. And there'd always been a certain amount of flexibility. And these were people, one of them for example was a vice president in Sotheby's.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm.

JACK FLAM: These are people who had serious jobs.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Which is part of why they were going slowly with their dissertations. And I just felt there were too many things like that happening. And I thought maybe what I'll do now, since I had to cut back on my teaching as I became more involved here after I came back from my last sabbatical, I think I only taught one more time at the Graduate Center. That would have been around 2003 or '04.

I still went for oral exams and sat in on dissertation exams, and I still had some dissertation students that I was the advisor to. But I basically stopped teaching, and I believe I then withdrew from the Executive Committee also. So, I thought that when I stopped teaching—so I started to teach less and less. And then the last two years I was on the faculty I didn't teach at all. So, I was on the faculty but without pay, and I was on a, you know, leave of absence. And then after the second year of the complete leave of absence, as opposed to going half time, they said to me "Well you can't have a third year. You have to come back for at least a year." And that was in 2010, and we were working on the catalogue raisonné, the Motherwell catalogue raisonné. We were involved with the Knoedler fakes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah.

JACK FLAM: That whole controversy that I was at the center of. And so, I decided that I would have to retire. So, I retired. And I thought that I would be devastated because I couldn't teach. Because even though I hadn't taught for the last couple of years, I was looking forward to going back to teaching.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm.

JACK FLAM: But as it turned out, oddly enough, I don't miss it. It's a curious thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There are many ways to teach.

JACK FLAM: I guess. And I mean one thing, I have a fairly young staff here. And I have a really good interaction, they're smart, they're hardworking. And I really like them a lot as people. And they work very well as a team. And somehow, I feel that, you know, I'm making a contribution there and I've helped some of them over the years, some of them are still here, and some of whom have moved on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well you're a mentor to them.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. I've certainly been a mentor to them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: All right. I think that one could talk about teaching as a point of view vis-a-vis communication, you know. That you're in a way, like you said, you were learning more from your lectures than the students were. I think that any time we engage in a conversation, you know, you're sharing with another person ideas and information about a common topic or a laundry list of topics, and in a way, I mean a good conversation is two people teaching each other.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. One of the things that I do, and same thing when I've taught, I kind of taught through dialectic. I mean the way I kind of, the way I run the Foundation and even though I'm the CEO, et cetera, we do, we make decisions together. We basically, you know, there are other senior people on the staff. And even we have staff meetings, you know, and people give their opinions on how they think we should deal with certain situations. I listen carefully, we discuss it. And I'm not averse to changing my mind if I think that, you know, there's a better way of doing it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, your philosophy of leadership seems to be about responsibility more than authority?

JACK FLAM: Well absolutely, absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: That's very well put. Much more responsibility than authority.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think that's sort of leading from the front, leading by example, being encouraging of an inclusive management practice.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And I think also over the years I've noticed that people who are authoritarian, if you want to put it that way, it's not effective in the long run, for the most part.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well things, and we—this gets back to the whole idea of the theory coming out of the experience and the idea coming out of the effort in the work.

JACK FLAM: Yes. Very good point. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is that when you're working with a group of people, the person who has to take responsibility for all of them, you know, is very wise to utilize all of them in making decisions.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. The decision comes out of the common experience—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Rather than the shared experience.

JACK FLAM: —rather than over the dicta.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's not someone who has a mission or a polemic or a cause that one must obey and—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —not obedience based, but participatory. And that's really like an artistic approach too. But you know, a lot of visual artists are not used to working collaboratively, you know.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Nor are a lot of writers. I mean some are, printmakers, sculptures, you know, because they have to work—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But painters—

JACK FLAM: The painters are not.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —they're very not. It's a challenge I think, and it's one I wish more would rise to meet.

JACK FLAM: Well you know it's interesting, when you're teaching, as a professor, it's not so much so if you're teaching in the public school system—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —you know, lower grades and in high school. But if you're a professor, it's as if you're your own boss. I mean unless you're really [. . . —JF] responsible to no one except, I mean you are responsible to yourself and to your students, but I mean in terms of a chain of command.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: The chairman of the department doesn't come into your classroom and mold what you're doing. And the chairman of the department, as you know, the main power the chairperson has is scheduling.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And making people miserable or happy by the way they schedule.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And having to go meet with people on the dark side, like deans and provosts.

JACK FLAM: Exactly. So, there is that curious thing about when you're a professor, it's as if you're self-employed. And I guess maybe I get some of that from my father, who was self-employed most of his life. I always wanted to be self-employed. So, when I came to the Foundation, I've been on the Foundation's Board since Motherwell was alive and the Foundation didn't really become active until he died. But when I took over as President—and I always was an active Board member, maybe "the" most active Board member. And in part because of all the members of the Board I was probably the closest to Motherwell personally.

When I took over as President in 2002 I learned a lot about running an organization. I mean I had no background in running an organization. I learned a lot from my predecessor, Richard Rubin, who was a businessman. It was his background, he was an investment guy and a businessman. He taught me a lot about financial responsibilities and how to—not that I became a Stock Market expert in any way, but I learned how to choose financial [advisors –JF], you know. I learned who to go to or how to figure out who to go to for certain things. And similarly, I learned how to collaborate. Because now rather than being alone in my classroom and my collegiality being simply being on the Executive Committee of the Graduate Center or the P and B [Personnel and Budget] Committee of Brooklyn, or some other committee like that, which usually meets once a month, maybe once every two months—here I was in a situation where every day we were working collaboratively. And so, I realized I loved it. I really thrived on the interaction and the interchange. So, it turned out to be, I mean it turned out to be a real change in career for me. Because I jokingly say to people, "So here I am at my age and it's the first time I ever had a 9:00 to 5:00 job."

They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think this is probably a good time to pause.

JACK FLAM: Sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We've been speaking for about two hours.

JACK FLAM: Okay. Great.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We'll resume next Tuesday.

JACK FLAM: Okay. Perfect. It's been a pleasure. It's been a pleasure talking to you too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Likewise, likewise.

JACK FLAM: Just about what you're doing and your take on things.

[end of Jack Flam_James McElhinney_2]

[END OF SESSION]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Jack Flam on Wednesday, June the 7th, 2017, at the offices of the Dedalus Foundation at 25 East 21st Street, New York. Good afternoon.

JACK FLAM: Good afternoon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So last time we had a sort of sprawling conversation about many things. And often these interviews unfold in this way. That the first conversation is sort of the chance to collect those esprit de l'escalier moments—

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that you need to address in, you know, the follow up.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I guess that's what we're going to do today. And I was curious how, you know, you were speaking about the work that you did in African art, and I was just curious how you found your way from African art to Matisse.

JACK FLAM: Well I found my way to Matisse, curiously—

[adjusts microphone]

JACK FLAM: Okay. So, I found my way to Matisse through my experiences painting. At the time that I started working on Matisse, which was in the early 1960s, '63 if I remember correctly, you know, '64. Matisse was not highly reputed except among artists. And in fact, even in 1970 when there was a big exhibition in Paris, which was a kind of turning point in the critical reception of Matisse, I remember a review by Denys Sutton, who at that time was a pretty highly regarded critic. Saying that Matisse was superficial, decorative, and I remember the precise words "and in no way profound." And I felt that Matisse was indeed a very profound artist. And he often was, at the time, compared to Picasso, who is obviously "profound" in quotation marks, because Picasso addressed the political subjects, social subjects, in a way that Matisse never did. So as a result, I found people were very discouraging. They said "Why do you want to work on Matisse? You know, everything's been done. It's all in Alfred Barr's book, and besides it's not very interesting anyway." Around that time, I ended up writing my dissertation on Matisse. And around that time I became interested in Matisse's writings and I realized there was no collection of his writings. So, I knew Bernard Karpel at the Museum of Modern Art, who was a very available person. He not only gave, if you were a serious scholar and you seemed like a decent enough person, he would give you stack privileges at the Museum, which was a great treat and privilege. And I got to know him a bit and so I asked him, I said "You know, do you know if anyone's working on a collection of Matisse's writings?" And he said "Well, you know, Alfred Barr was going to do a collection but he never really went ahead with it, so I don't think anyone's doing it." And so, in 1969 I think it was, I went to London and I signed a contract with Phaidon to do a book of Matisse's writings, which I then did in the next year and a half. I finished the book in 1971, early '71, the spring of '71. But at the time Phaidon was waiting for a manuscript from Lawrence Gowing which was going to be an interpretive book about Matisse. And in fact, Gowing did eventually publish this book about Matisse, but I believe it was with Thames and Hudson. And Lawrence was notoriously slow in getting things done, generally. And [with –JF] this book, he was taking his time. So Phaidon kept delaying the publication of the book, so it didn't come out until 1973. And in fact, it might not have come out for years except a French edition, very differently organized, of Matisse's writings was published in '72. And I later actually became a very close friend of the man who edited that, Dominique Fourcade, who's a poet. But I put the fire under Phaidon to get the English edition out quickly before somebody tried to do a translation of the French edition. But Dominique organized his book thematically, whereas I organized mine chronologically, and I also did extensive annotations. It's actually one of the most satisfying things I've ever done, largely because it's a book much beloved by artists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It is.

JACK FLAM: And I'm constantly getting, I still to this day will still get notes from artists saying, you know, "I just read your book for the 300th time," or something. Just recently I actually got an email from some artist I didn't know, saying that this book has pulled me through in moments of doubt, extreme anxiety, et cetera. And so, in an odd way there's a kind of symmetry to this. I did it for my concerns, my interest in Matisse as an artist, and it turned out to be a book that's dear to artists, which makes me very happy. In terms of my own work on Matisse, one of the things that I found as I was beginning to work on Matisse, both in my dissertation and especially later when I started writing articles and exhibition catalogue essays, et cetera, is that Matisse is very elusive in that there's no apparent subject matter, there's no narrative subject matter hardly ever, rarely is there an allegorical or overtly symbolic subject matter. So, it really is an art that's based on a kind of pictorial fabric of how the image is put together. And it's, I mean in contrast with what Denys Sutton wrote, in fact I think it's very profound

art, I think he's one of the most profound artists, period. I think that he's up there with someone like Cézanne among modern artists, just in terms of the profundity and the pictorial richness of his work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The book *Matisse on Art—*

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I believe I purchased a copy in 1974.

JACK FLAM: That's just when—I think when I think the first American edition came out, in '74, it was a paperback done by Praeger.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right. And it was—there was a bookstore that was open all night across the street from the Yale School of Art. I'm pretty sure that's where I bought it. And I spent a lot of money I didn't have during those years buying books I didn't have room for, and still don't.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That I remember.

JACK FLAM: A story I know well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] We all do. The thing I remember very, very clearly was how quickly teachers, including, well, the people who taught at Yale and elsewhere, would quote the letter to Henry Clifford.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Bernie Chaet had two documents of art that were central to what he taught, and one was the *Statement* by Hokusai, signed Old Man Mad about Drawing.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the other one was Henry Clifford's, the letter from Matisse to Henry Clifford.

JACK FLAM: From Matisse in 1948 or '49.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right. About the education of an artist.

JACK FLAM: Right. And the effort that lies behind the apparent ease.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And it was the apparent ease that often made people think of Matisse as superficial.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, and the armchair comment.

JACK FLAM: And the armchair comment, yes. I mean it's interesting that you bring that up because you're absolutely right. The armchair comment was very damaging. In the last decade, 20 years or so however, the armchair comment has become backgrounded in a curious way. But it used to be, first, you say Henri Matisse, and people would say, I can actually remember specific people saying to me "Ah, the good armchair." And of course, it's a misrepresentation because he didn't say that art should be soothing and comforting like a good armchair as its end all, but rather that it should offer a refuge.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well I recall that the late Andrew Forge waggishly commented that all representational painting was illustrative and all abstraction was decorative. And it's a kind of way of moving the conversation beyond, you know, the polemics that were like raging in art schools in the '70s.

JACK FLAM: Right. I think that's interesting also given what Andrew's work looks like.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. Exactly. [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: He was a very interesting man, I liked him enormously.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of people, yeah, don't know that he wrote a book, a very nice slim tome on Monet's home in Giverny.

JACK FLAM: Giverny, yes. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Another early purchase of mine—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that I couldn't afford and had no room for.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And Andrew was also a very graceful writer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Indeed.

JACK FLAM: And a graceful conversationalist too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it must be very gratifying to see that Matisse has now ascended into the firmament as like one of the Gods of the 20th Century.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And I feel a certain sense of pride, actually. I feel that I've played a role in this happening.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: First by making the writings available in English and also making the writings available in the way that I did. In fact, in a recent conversation with Dominique Fourcade, who's a very close friend of mine., he was saying that looking back at it he regrets that he did it by theme. Because of course the themes eventually, over time one sees the thematic possibilities, you know, the possibilities for thematic organization differently. Whereas when you look at an artist's work you think you're moving across time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And when an artist writes or gives interviews you'd like to be able to see it in relation to, you know, what he's doing at that time in his career. So, I think making the writings available in the way that I did was important. But also writing about Matisse's anxiety. And it's something that Hilary Spurling picked up in her biography, which is a wonderful biography. You know, picking up on this idea that Matisse's art is not a good armchair, it's an art that's like the art of Cézanne, it's based on a certain kind of metaphysical anxiety. And an engagement with that and an articulation of a mode of being in the world and perceiving the world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's very experiential and it's very much about, for me at least, always having looked at his work, it was always about, you know, what was happening around him in his life. He had the rigor of hiring a model every so often.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then he had his daily routine and challenges with wife and kids or whatever. But the work always seemed to, for him it seemed to be a refuge from all of that.

JACK FLAM: Very much so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And Matisse also—and Cézanne also the work comes out of a process of not so much interrogating, you know, the Provençal landscape as being becoming a part of it and extracting from it something.

JACK FLAM: One of the things that I learned from my work on Matisse is that you can never take the literature on an artist for granted. An irony that I think of sometimes is one of my first publications on Matisse was of a paper that I gave at the International Congress of the History of Art in 1969. It was called *Matisse in 1911 at the Crossroads of Modern Painting*. I bring this up simply because of the paintings that I discussed by Matisse that were supposedly done in 1911. Later when I started doing research for *Matisse: The Man and his Art,* which was published in 1986, I would say that half of those paintings were actually not done in 1911. And that one of the things that I found really interesting is that once you begin to dig below, beneath the surface in research on an artist, you realize that there is a whole history that remains to be written. And in fact, at the time that I started writing *Matisse: The Man and his Art*, which I spent seven years working on, I had in mind writing a kind of revisionist book to some degree because it was supposed to be in two volumes. And the second volume was going to be after 1917, a [body of –JF] work that I felt was very much under appreciated. But when I started working on the first volume it was like going down into the rabbit hole.

Because I sort of realized that paintings that were supposed to be surely done in the summer of 1905, the great

Fauve summer, were probably done in 1906, and vice versa, that the most austere paintings between 1909 and 1917, many of them were misdated by one, two, three years. And so, I spent an enormous amount of time going back to original documents, did an enormous amount of research in Paris for the book. So, one of the things that also developed over that period of time while I was working on the book, is that I love to do research. And I mean really deep research, and really look at all the supposed facts to see if they're true or not. At the same time, one needs a certain respite from that. And by coincidence in 1984 as—while I was still working on the Matisse book, I was just finishing it actually, I was asked by the Wall Street Journal to write art criticism for them. And I did a couple of pieces, they liked them, and I became the art critic for the Wall Street Journal. And that in itself was an interesting experience because I saw a completely different side of the art world.

I came to this so naively that I remember the first time I went to an opening at a museum, a preview, you know, press preview. I was given the press packet, and I opened it up. The first time I'd ever seen a press release in my life. And I looked at the press release and I realized something that is so self-evident to me now, that was a real revelation. I realized that when I would read, for example, a good critic, a good writer like John Russell in the *Times*, one of the things that I would always be amazed by was how could he know so much about so many different subjects in such detail. And when I got this first press release, I thought "Ah ha" here's how you know so much, in so much detail.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: And one of the things that I would do when I was writing for the Journal, which I did for almost 10 years, and that included writing not only in the New York area, but I would go out into the West Coast and Southwest. And I went to—it's a national newspaper and it's also an international newspaper. So, I would cover the Venice Biennale, Documenta and occasionally, if I was going to be in Paris where I was spending a lot of time at that period in my life, I would review shows that were in France or in Italy. And one of the things, as a matter of principle was never to read anyone else's review before I finished writing mine. And not to look at the press release.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good for you.

JACK FLAM: Because I figured if you look at the press release you're going to get distracted by all the filler. And what I wanted to try to do, which is what I try to do in my writing, my teaching, is keep my eye on the ball. And the ball in this case being the art that was being shown.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So just ignore the press release and look at the work, see any of the material other than the press release that's available in the gallery.

JACK FLAM: Exactly. And then what I would do before I published, I would then take a look at the press release and see if I, you know, there were factual things that I should know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative. So, you use that as a kind of a post facto—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —fact-checking reference. That's interesting because, you know, today, famously, art schools are teaching students to write these impenetrable tracts about their work. And the best advice I ever heard as to how to approach an artist's statement is to write something that the gallery can just plagiarize into a press release.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That it should be that clear. Of course, that's not what is being taught and—

JACK FLAM: No. Actually, you know, one of my most rewarding teaching experiences was at Brooklyn College where in the last decade or so when I taught only M.F.A.s, well M.A. and M.F.A. graduate students. And we had a really good M.F.A. program with the painting and sculpture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And there was a course called Connoisseurship that had always been taught by a painter. In fact, I later discovered that I think it was Ad Reinhardt had taught the course, some version of that course. The person who taught it just before me was Allan D'Arcangelo, the painter. And so I'd heard of this course and everybody taught it differently. And it was mostly a looking at art course. And I thought well, you know, I'd like to make it into a kind of connoisseurship course in a more proper way. But real connoisseurship would mean going to look at actual works. And getting a bunch of graduate students, there'd usually be 10 people or so in the class, getting a bunch of graduate students to all be able to go to a museum during open hours where you could go to

the back room of the museum and have, you know, stuff shown to you close up, wasn't really possible.

So, as I began to teach the course, which was mostly we explored ways of looking and ways in which ways of looking had been theorized, and then we sort of evaluated and critiqued ways of theorizing looking as well as looking. We'd start off with something simple like Panofsky's criteria, and then, you know, we'd go on chronologically from there. But one of the things that I started to do, wanting to have original works in the class, not just slides, is I asked them to bring in their own work at the beginning. And then this became a very important part of the course where the M.F.A. students, they were almost all M.F.A. students, would bring in their own work. M.A. students would bring in a work that they owned of some kind, an object that they owned. But from the M.F.A. students I would ask them to discuss their work as if it had not been done by them. And that is really hard to do. And I think they learned a lot from that because the idea was to see not what they thought was in the work, not what their intention was, but what is actually there to be seen. And we—and I loved that class. We had wonderful discussions and they wrote a couple of short essays over the course of the semester. But they were graded to some degree by their first presentation, which I asked them to discuss their work as if they had not done it. And it was almost impossible for them not to say "I, well what I wanted to do here." And I would say "Now remember, you didn't do it." At the very end of the class we would have a couple of sessions where they would discuss their recent work, done for that semester again, but with the same proviso, that they would discuss it as if they had not done it. And they got such insight into their work by having learned to do so. So, I don't think that helped them with the pre-press release, but I think, I mean I know several of them over the years said to me that it really gave them an insight into their own working process to be able to be forced to stand back and look at what was there rather than what they hoped was there or wished was there or thought was there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well I think it was part of the critique culture of the time too, is certainly as I experienced it at Tyler, Skowhegan and Yale and other places later as member of faculty or whatever, is that there was a kind of gladiatorial combat between the jury and, you know, the student/victim, who—

JACK FLAM: Right. Defend their work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —would have to defend their position. Of course, this made it easy for people to invoke polemics and, you know, to divide the jury like that. But actually learning how to read a work of art is really a truly important skill. We were talking about this last time, you know, your own work as a painter, how really you know you're on the right track when the painting begins to paint itself and you're there—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're there sort of helping it along, it's not you that did it, it's not you who gets to take total credit for this. And I actually had—just had lunch the other day with William Bailey and he was talking about, you know, the polemicism of the '70s and so forth, and how a lot of artists would see each other. And I think he with his own success was seen by some former friends as having stolen their thunder, their laurels, whatever. And, you know, we were just commenting that whenever that kind of a claim comes to a person, it's not just because of what they did, it's because of everyone they knew, their parents, their teachers, their friends, their opportunities, random events, you know, things. But you have to be there to sort of make the work realize itself.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Otherwise it's in the service of ego or the service of an idea or versus something else that has a sell-by date.

JACK FLAM: Well I think also teaching people or helping people to read pictures is, especially artists to read pictures by others, is a really valuable experience because one begins to get a much richer sense of what implications are, what overtones are. And, you know, I think it frees people to get away from what we've been talking about in our last conversation, from over determining what they're painting. You don't have to paint the obvious, that it's possible to suggest things. And in the same way that when you're reading a picture, a really very rich picture, you become aware of all sorts of overtones and implications.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: That you understand that, yes, that can be done, you can put yourself in a state of mind when you're painting a picture, that you're allowing things to happen. You're open to allowing things to happen.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, you want to be ambushed and, you know, you want to be surprised—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and you want to have that kind of anxiety, what Arthur Miller called the "Divine discontent."

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know, that sort of keeps you going. And you can't ever be completely sure, completely satisfied. And you have to cultivate that uncertainty.

JACK FLAM: And one thing that was nice for me at that particular time, because I was doing a lot of very meticulous, sometimes nitpicky research. [That –JF] was, writing for the Wall Street Journal forced me to write in a way that was not full of jargon, you know, in other words in a direct way to write real prose, not a very—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Academic.

JACK FLAM: —academic type self-referential taking lots of stuff for granted. Because often, as you know, both in life and when you write, often what's taken for granted actually is not really known, it's kind of just glossed over. And partly I think because of what I was writing for the Journal, Robert Silvers, of the New York Review of Books, got in touch with me and then for several years I was writing a few articles a year for them. And that was a wonderful writing experience because he was, as has come out recently on the occasion of his death, and people, you know, writing memoirs and memorial statements about him, he was a fantastic editor. And he really made you write very, very rigorously, very precisely. And so those experiences for me were great because I realized I wanted to be able to communicate with a larger audience as well as writing things that, you know, to some degree, for example, if I'm re-dating even major Matisse paintings, maybe there are10 people in the world who really care about that. And I think in the long run it's valuable because the history of the artist is seen differently over the long run. But, you know, at the moment that you're publishing something like that there may [only –JF] be a handful of people who even realize that this is new.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: So it was nice, you know, writing for an audience, you know, a general audience where you're writing in the kind of the common parlance of the culture around you.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it also builds confidence in knowing that here's a person who is trying to get the facts straight and not just write in a clear and lucid and accessible way, but—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —actually, you know, to get beyond, you know, the mythology or, you know, the verbal hearsay that this painting was painted in one year or another, but actually nail it and say this painting was painted in this month and this year and here's why.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because that makes the narrative clearer.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: If anybody wants, you know, to look at it in terms of cause and effect and the concatenation of events that adds up to some conclusion, you know, if you have the facts out of order it won't make sense, it won't stand up it just becomes factual.

JACK FLAM: Right. And one of the really interesting things, just a nitpicky Matisse thing, is around 2005 there was an exhibition of Matisse and Derain at Collioure where there was the famous Fauve summer, it was the 100th anniversary. And [there –JF] was an exhibition catalogue—it was never published in English, was only in French. And actually, a lot of stuff I've written has only been published in French because I spent a lot of time in France and I wrote a lot for French museums, et cetera. And I wrote an essay in which I literally—I mean it wasn't just the essay, we reproduced every single painting Matisse did in 1905, 1906. And I gave reasons for dating them. And one of the things that was really interesting is that frequently people thought that Matisse was doing somewhat naturalistic landscapes and then eventually he started doing those landscapes, you know, with a very bright color base, especially on a red/green polarity. But when I started doing the detailed research I realized it was exactly the opposite. That in fact in the summer of 1905 he was doing Neoimpressionist paintings, rather stiff, using primary colors for the most part. And then he made a leap into what's now are known as the Fauve paintings.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: The next summer, 1906, he was painting in a much more naturalistic way. So, he went—actually if

you want to use that kind of polarity—from Abstraction to greater resemblance, not the other way around. So, it actually also had a big effect on how people thought about Matisse's development at that time. And it wasn't a gradual process of abstraction, it was an explosion of abstract landscapes and then a kind of wanting to solidify it, partly because of his admiration for Cézanne, and then in the summer of 1906 was a much more sober palette. And there was a certain amount of resistance to that when I first published that. People said "No, no, no, it can't be." You know, The Met, for example, in the Lehman collection there's a beautiful little landscape that they'd always dated in 1905. But among other things I was able to find this out by going through Duret galleries, you know, their acquisition books. And so, when the paintings came to the gallery and you realize, you know, I was able to date things fairly precisely. As a result, based on documents and evidence, it wasn't just stylistic. And after finding a mass of documentary evidence I suddenly began to realize that wait a minute, this thing is usually conceived of backwards, not the way it happened.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Because the assumption was that the Naturalism preceded the Abstraction.

JACK FLAM: Exactly. Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it makes perfect sense as a painter, and I expect you'd agree, that, yeah, he's working in a sort of 20-year-old style, Post Impressionism.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, yes, I say neo-Impressionism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And he come to the conclusion that, you know, this is idiotic, as I understand this has all been done and it's not that interesting and it's another generation's experiment. And so, he takes a leap. He takes a big chance—

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and this is his laboratory experience, he goes outdoors and he's painting with colors he would never rationally use, trying to push himself. And he creates a coherent body of work over the course of that summer. And then the next year he thinks "Well now I'm going to take everything that I've learned and I'm going to go back and look—

JACK FLAM: And solidify it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and look and not just—

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —posit this, you know, this idea."

JACK FLAM: Yeah, look in a very particular way, limit the palette.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: It's a much more naturalistic palette—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —it's closer to Cézanne too. He begins to develop a more restrained kind of straight line played against arabesque composition in a more restrained way, like Cézanne does, to some degree.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah, he did that, Cézanne is measuring, we were speaking about, you know, the automatic movement of the body and the arc—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and that that curve is all over his work.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As are these rigorous measurements. And so, he's got that dance going. And it makes perfect sense. But of course, someone who's trying to construct a Darwinistic kind of evolutionary narrative—

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —is going to say "No, no, no, the abstraction has to come after because it's more modern" or whatever.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But that wasn't the case. Which is useful to know.

JACK FLAM: Yes, very.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I hope that—have you expounded on that in English, in an essay somewhere that people could read?

JACK FLAM: I actually, I think, yeah, I wrote actually an article in Artnews, which is just a précis or summary of this reversal, shortly afterwards.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was like in the '80s?

JACK FLAM: The catalogue never got published [in English –JF].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sure, right.

JACK FLAM: It's a complicated story too. Two things happened. The catalogue never got published in English because the show didn't travel. And the other thing that happened was the Matisse estate had a certain stake in certain paintings being a certain date. And so, although I published in the catalogue what I thought the dates were, the layout of the catalogue does not always make that clear. And it was a way that the organizers, who were curators who had to deal with the Matisse family on an ongoing basis, I did too, but in a different way, accommodated the family's feelings about certain paintings—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —that were clearly, let's say 1905, that they dated, they kept the 1906 date and vice versa. Not in my article, but by the way they arranged things.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well there are many such compromises that—

JACK FLAM: Well, yeah. I mean I remember when we did that show there was a Derain painting that one of the—a French curator that I know, Jacqueline Munck, I can give her name, she was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris. Jacqueline told the people who were working on the show that she thought this Derain painting was a fake and that they should not put it in the show. The curators who were running the show were very thrilled though because it came out of a German collection and had never been published before. And so, they were really eager to publish it. This has caused many scholars a lot of problems, by the way, wanting to be the first person to publish something. And so, they included it in the show. And I remember at the time, I felt like I don't know Derain's work well enough.

But I would go to Jacqueline because Jacqueline really knows Derain's work well. And she has a good eye. Why don't we just leave it out, just be safe and leave it out. No, no, put it in. So, when the Beltracchi fakes came up a few years ago, and at that time I was very much involved with the whole question of authenticity because of the fakes that were coming through the Knoedler Gallery, the Motherwell fakes, among others. The Abstract Expressionist fakes, which we can talk about later.

I was very curious about the Beltracchi paintings. And I looked and there's a Derain. And I thought "My God, that looks just like the Derain that was in the show." I go my shelf, take down the catalogue, and there it is. It was a Beltracchi painting. And Jacqueline was dead right. And I think that, not wanting to name names, I think that there have been a number of scholars who have published fake paintings because they thought they were really scoring a coup by publishing something for the first time. And I think something similar happened with the Matter paintings. The Pollock paintings.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right.

JACK FLAM: It's like, you know, a real coup. So sometimes people think, "Well, only dishonest people publish fakes," or only people who are being controlled by the dealers who are selling them, who are being paid by them." That happens, that happens. But at the same time frequently it's almost a kind of hubris, you know, you feel "Gosh, this is such a discovery and I'm the person who made this discovery." And so the person publishes it and then it turns out to be a big mistake.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well there are many such tales.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thinking about van Meegeren, you know, and famously, and all the subsequent other,

Elmyr de Hory and—

JACK FLAM: And those things have, as so much else in life, you know, nothing's isolated, everything's interrelated finally. Van Meegeren. Some years ago, IFAR had an evening to discuss reattribution of Rembrandt paintings. And [. . . –JF] one of the men, who had been on the Dutch Rembrandt Committee gave a talk. And he was talking about the fact that paintings that they had disallowed were now being entered back in by them as genuine. And he said a really interesting thing. He said "You know, when we first started out on this project, especially because we're Dutch, we had a van Meegeren story in our minds.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And as a result we did not want to be duped by anything. So, we went extremely in the other direction and anything we were not 101 percent sure of, we said wasn't by Rembrandt." And it's only in the last seven or eight years that a lot of those paintings that were shut out, I believe the *Polish Rider* at The Frick is an example of that, have now been accepted back into the Rembrandt tent by the Rembrandt Committee. So I mean the Rembrandt Project is I think is what it's called. So, it's an interesting phenomenon the way in which a famous case like the van Meegeren case—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —you think of it as isolated, it happened during World War II, particular circumstances, you know, the scholar was an elderly man, in his 80s if I remember correctly. But those things have repercussions later on. And so later you have the Dutch Rembrandt Project being too rigorous or being too exclusive because they don't want to get caught with a van Meegeren [situation –JF].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. So, paintings that were formerly attributed to Bol or to others, a few, are being reattributed to Rembrandt.

JACK FLAM: Back to Rembrandt.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. Well I mean too there was that period of his life when he was working with a lot of students and assistants that were upstairs.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And there were a lot of hands in the work. I remember going to The Frick with Egbert Haverkamp-Begeman and a group from Yale. I was in a Rembrandt class at Yale, a Ph.D class as an MFA student. I talked my way into a doctoral class by having to stand for like a verbal exam on the spot, after he'd said, "You can't be in this class, you're not qualified." But made it in. Anyway, we went into The Frick and there were a bunch of drawings hanging in the offices that, as he's standing there talking about how these were school drawings that the first marks had been made by the Master, and you could see two or three different colors of ink where different students had worked on the drawing. And of course, the curator was standing there going crazy and doesn't want "No, no, no, this is— "

JACK FLAM: This is a Rembrandt.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] And he was talking about how also how the collectors would add shadows later and things to make them look more like the paintings. And the curator is spinning there in the office, just not wanting to hear this.

JACK FLAM: You know I remember John Rewald pointing out that Vollard used to paint the corners of Cézanne's paintings frequently, fill in a lot of the blank there, the white canvas, that we so prize now—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —that he saw as impediment—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was unfinished.

JACK FLAM: —to be able to sell it as a finished painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs]. Well that whole idea that was finished that was an interesting exhibition at The Met, and the inaugural show—

JACK FLAM: Yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Met Breuer.

JACK FLAM: Met Breuer, right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like what is complete versus what is finished.

JACK FLAM: And that, by the way, is one of the great contributions, if you want to, of Matisse. Matisse always knew when to stop. And it's a funny thing. Picasso, for example, who was an equally great painter, but Picasso more than sometimes overworks things. Matisse stops. It's as if he stops just before the painting is finished, just before, not just after. And as a result the best of his paintings breathe, even the heavily painted ones breathe with a kind of energy that's really quite extraordinary.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, there are some like that big painting in Chicago.

JACK FLAM: *Bathers by the River.*

JAMES MCELHINNEY: *Bathers by the River*, yeah. That's surprising.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, because it's so big, it's so worked and nonetheless—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: —it breathes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And some of the Moroccan pictures too—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or the Algerian pictures.

JACK FLAM: And if you look at the *Bathers by the River* over time, you know, it started out being related to *Dance* and *Music*, and the figures in it were originally painted in red. And over time as the, you know, the whites and the blacks and the grays have become a bit more translucent, you can see—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the pink coming through.

JACK FLAM: —the pink coming through. And actually, that's a lovely effect.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, that's the oil paint as it dries. A lot of people don't know, people who are not practitioners, have no experience, practice with paint. Over time oil paint become more transparent.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yes, definitely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so things that were covered up become visible again. And in that case, it's charming. So, you also wrote about Diebenkorn and—

JACK FLAM: Yes, I did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —there's a connection there. And of course, there was this exhibition last year—

JACK FLAM: Yes, Matisse and Diebenkorn show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —sort of apt pairing of the two.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Had you any contact with him at that time?

JACK FLAM: No, not at the time that I wrote. But I remember—I don't remember exactly the circumstances anymore but I got in touch with him. It was the exhibition that Gagosian was doing at the gallery. And there was a painting that he owned that I was going to be writing about and if I remember correctly I wrote him a note asking, you know, a "Dear Mr. Diebenkorn," note saying I was working on an essay and did he think it would be possible to lend it, you know, not for sale, but just to lend it to the show. A lot of the paintings in the show, in fact almost all of them, were not for sale. And he declined. And—but then the gallery I guess sent him the catalogue. He liked the essay a lot. And he got in touch with me and we spoke on the phone, and he said that he was really kind of sorry now that he hadn't lent the picture.

[They laugh.]

JACK FLAM: And then John Elderfield and Diebenkorn were quite good friends, and John arranged for us to meet,

you know, in New York when he was there. He was a lovely person. He reminded me physically by a certain kind of resemblance, but also the way he carried his body, of a certain kind of awkward grace almost, a bit of Motherwell.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, really? Yeah, yeah.

JACK FLAM: In a manner of speaking too. And it's kind of a very considered way that he spoke.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was not a little guy.

JACK FLAM: No, he wasn't.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Tall. And—I met him once because I spent a summer in Ocean Park.

JACK FLAM: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And it was then that I realized that his paintings were all landscapes basically. Extracting the sort of angled roofs and the concrete embankments and, you know, just rearranging them under the blue Pacific sky. And I had a friend who was a muralist, was one of the LA mural posse back from the '60s and '70s. And he discovered that the studio was like literally at the end of the street. I was on Frazier Avenue, and just walk around, you know, to Main Street, ring the doorbell at 4:30 and have a pack of Camel's and a six-pack of Henry Weinhard—

JACK FLAM: Nice.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —beer, and he'd talk. He'd talk to you. So, he did. We had a conversation. But it was odd and brief, but it was very illuminating because it helped me understand the connection between his work and that specific location.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. I remember going out there subsequently, [after –JF] he was dead actually. But, you know, just seeing the landscape and the views.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And, you know, the building, you know—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the gray cinder with the barn door that slides open.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And what he did, a wonderful act of imagination, an imagination that really is grounded in a specific kind of experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Like—

JACK FLAM: Like Matisse.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like Matisse.

JACK FLAM: Matisse almost always painted from life, except with the cutouts. Most of his paintings were done [from –JF] life, even paintings like *The Yellow Curtain* that's now in the Museum of Modern Art, so abstract it's hard to read what the forms are. Even paintings like that were done from a specific motif. And in fact, I remember being struck by a conversation that I had with his daughter about that painting, which has a large yellow, ocher area with a blue oval in it. And I always thought that blue oval was a pond. And then there are a couple of lines that look like trees with the leaves off them. And she said to me, his daughter said, "No, it's actually the entryway to the house at Issy-les-Moulinaux, seen from the bedroom to the left of the entry upstairs." And I went to the house in Issy and [went –JF] upstairs, and they had a glass canopy. And that blue is the glass canopy and the lines were in fact the support of the glass canopy. And even the top of the window, unusually, was curved slightly the way it is in the painting. So, it was, as abstract as it is, and it is a very Abstract picture. Nonetheless it was based on really quite careful observation of a very specific thing, seen from a very specific place. Because if you were anywhere else in the house you wouldn't see that view down onto the window, which gives you the oval.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he was literally inventing in the presence of nature.

JACK FLAM: Absolutely. And I think, I mean that was his method. I mean people write, they say "Matisse had a method to do with, you know, certain quantities of color." I think that's nonsense. His real method was inventing in the presence of nature, reinventing nature as it were—standing before, amid it. And at the same time also being aware of a way in which energies and certain formal configurations move.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: The way they can be exchanged. So, you have a woman seated next to a bouquet of flowers. The flowers are next to her but some of them are inside her body, and she's wearing let's say a floral dress. And Matisse is intensely aware of exchange of energy between different orders of being, from an inanimate object, to an object in the landscape, to a person. And I mean that's really his method, but the method is looking carefully at things and understanding the exchange of energy, the kind of interaction that exists in the world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it's a need also to take that experience and turn it into another equally specific experience.

JACK FLAM: Yes. A transcendent experience, if you will, that's based on a very mundane confrontation, a confrontation with the mundane.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But if it were based on a method that could be easily described, then it would not be able to obtain that level of specificity.

JACK FLAM: No. No. And it wouldn't be Matisse.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it wouldn't be—or it wouldn't be Diebenkorn.

JACK FLAM: It's not coincidental that he wrote "I work without theory." And he literally said that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Words to live by. He also said, as if I recall, that artists should basically not talk.

JACK FLAM: Right. Cut out their tongue is what he said.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Cut out their tongues, yeah.

JACK FLAM: But he talked a lot.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do as I say, not as I do.

JACK FLAM: Exactly. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So perhaps we could move away from the discussion of Matisse a bit and talk a little bit about Judith Rothschild and how did you come—

JACK FLAM: Okay. Yeah. I'd like to just interject one other thing, which is that I also have written a fair amount about of 19th Century French painting, articles here and there—catalogue essays. And in a certain way that is something that kind of radiates out from my interest in Matisse, going back.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hunting for antecedents.

JACK FLAM: Hunting for antecedents and just looking at things in a way, at the very beginning when I was very young, looking at things that he was looking at. You know, he loved Courbet, for example. The Cubists, as you know, said that Cubism began at Courbet, but Courbet was too literal. And so, one of the things I became interested in wanting to know was part of what Matisse loved about Courbet. It was literalist, but also the fact that Courbet is not literal, you know. So, I just wanted to say, one of the things that often happens, especially when you start working on something when you're fairly young, is that it leads you to other things, other areas of interest that are not really especially directly related in any way. Just as one of the pleasures of doing art history for me has been travel. I've done a lot of travel because I've done a lot of travel for my research mostly in Europe. Some of it giving lectures, you know, in North Africa or Asia. But most of it has been in Europe, and you meet wonderful people. You're meeting people who are interested in the same kinds of things you are—in art and music and poetry. And so, you know, you go to museums and a curator is taking you through the collection and then, you know, years later you're still friends with that person. You correspond, they come to New York, they visit, you go where they are, you visit them. I just wanted to interject that. I think it's a very rich part of an art historian's life that often isn't given enough credit, which is that it's a wonderful opening of human possibilities, of human interactions that's really something to be treasured.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it's a community, it's a worldwide, it's a global conversation.

JACK FLAM: Very much so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it's becoming even more so.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. So, with Judith Rothschild, I knew Judith, she was friendly with Motherwell. And in fact, the first time I met Judith was at her home. She had a house on Park Avenue, I think it was 1130 Park Avenue, if I remember correctly, around 91st Street and Park. And she—I would go to her studio from time to time. And then after she died, the man who was the executor of her estate and started running the Foundation, said that Judith had wanted me to write about her at some point, and would I be interested in doing so. So, I went and looked at a lot of the work. He had all of her notebooks and diaries. She kept very extensive detailed diaries throughout most of her life. And I became interested in her work, which I felt was under appreciated. And also in her story, of a woman of her generation. She was born in the, I think I should remember, but I think it's 1921, and, you know, she died in '93. I think she was born in 1921. And a woman of her generation, she married a writer, who kind of absorbed her life into his. And I became very much interested in the narrative story. So, I managed to put together an exhibition that traveled around quite a bit. It was at The Met, it was in San Francisco, it was in Philadelphia. Not Philadelphia, I'm sorry, Washington at the National Gallery. And it was—I'm sorry, did I say National Gallery? I meant to say Phillips Collection.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At the Phillips Collection.

JACK FLAM: And in putting that together I ended up writing a book that's quite a bit different from most of my other books. It was not a catalogue, per se, but it was a book to accompany the exhibition. In which I discussed at some length the kind of drama of her life, having given up a great deal for this husband who then ran off with his literary agent and left her high and dry. But that's when she became a really good artist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And she produced her most significant work she'd done right before she married him and right after they split up. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long was the marriage?

JACK FLAM: I should remember, but I don't. I think they got married when she was quite young, so they got married sometime in 1941—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —or '42, somewhere in there. They got married quite young. And I think they were married into the '80s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. Long time.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Must have been a shock though. And so, she died 10 years later.

JACK FLAM: She died in '93.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: '93.

JACK FLAM: Right. And I think they must have split up sometime around 1980 actually. Because that's when she started doing the big reliefs.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what did you find? I mean I know there's a lot of attention now being paid to the women of Abstract Expressionism.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A show that was organized at the Denver Art Museum that's been traveling, and others. And I was wondering just how her story sort of changed or affected your awareness of AbEx or—

JACK FLAM: I don't know that it changed my awareness of AbEx, but it did make me—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or the role that women were playing in it.

JACK FLAM: Well, it made me much more sensitive to the role that women associated, especially women who associated with male artists. Joan Mitchell—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Grace Hartigan.

JACK FLAM: Grace Hartigan. Yes, she was married to Harry Jackson at one point.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Isn't that crazy, yeah. And then he became a cowboy artist.

JACK FLAM: I know. I remember Grace saying once, I knew her slightly. But I remember a memorable conversation where she said, "The trouble with Harry was he was always playing a role of some kind." She said, "Here's this Jewish guy from Chicago and he suddenly becomes a cowboy." She said, "He was always playing a role." Silence, pause. And then she says "And of course being the artist is just the opposite. You be yourself, you know who you are and you're only yourself." It was not said in a mean-spirited way—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, No.

JACK FLAM: —it was said with a certain tenderness almost, you know, the way you think about somebody that you once were fond of, loved—who kind of was misguided. And it was said with great sympathy actually. But it stuck in my mind. Being an artist is being genuinely who you are, not playing roles.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well he kind of did end up having quite a stunning career as sort of an updated Charlie Russell type character.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Playing the whole thing and doing some amazing sculptures.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Which are all over the West.

JACK FLAM: Yep, yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: If you go to Cody, Wyoming it's hard to avoid them.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Speaking of Cody, Wyoming —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Home town of Jackson Pollock.

JACK FLAM: Well exactly. An acquaintance of mine years ago wanted to go to Cody to see Cody, Wyoming, because it was the home of Jackson Pollock. So she gets there and she's all—you know who it was, it was Jeanne Siegel, who used to be at the School of Visual Arts.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

JACK FLAM: She was also a student of mine at the Graduate Center. She came back to school later. And Jeanne told me that she was out there and took a tour of the town, a nice fast way to see the town. And at a certain point, it's all about Buffalo Bill. So, at a certain point she says to the tour leader "And you know Jackson Pollock was also born here." And he says, "Who's Jackson Pollock?"

[They laugh.]

JACK FLAM: That was maybe 1982 or '83, it's not 100 years ago, it's not 1947.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know they also have a Whitney Museum out there.

JACK FLAM: Do they?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Whitney Museum of American Western Art.

JACK FLAM: I didn't know that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A big, big, big sculpture by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney of Buffalo Bill.

JACK FLAM: Okay. I didn't know that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Riding at some great—

JACK FLAM: But do you know what was interesting, Nancy Holt and I went out to see the *Spiral Jetty* together. She was Smithson's widow.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: We went out to see the *Spiral Jetty* together right after it rose, because as you may remember what happened was when he built it the Great Salt Lake had a certain height and he consulted, Smithson, with an engineer who was building the rail line across the Great Salt Lake. How high would you have build the bridge, whatever you call it?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The causeway.

JACK FLAM: Causeway for the trains. And the man said, "Well we figured that it won't ever go higher than X, so we're building it X plus whatever." So, Smithson made the jetty in relation to these numbers. And only a few years later there was a very overcast summer, so things did not evaporate and there was a lot of snow in the mountains and there was a big runoff and the lake flooded. In fact, it flooded all the way into Salt Lake City, which is quite a distance away.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: So the *Spiral Jetty* was under water for most of its life. And it had just risen, it was when I was working on the *Writings* book [*The Writings of Robert Smithson*] and Nancy and I had become friendly. And so, I went out there and we went to see the *Spiral Jetty* together. And we drove out there. But before we drove out there, we wanted to see it from the air. So we hired a helicopter. And went down to the heliport, you know, the air field, and the guy in the helicopter started talking. I said "So, you know, where'd you learn to fly?" And he said, "Well I was in the Army, I was in Vietnam," which you'd expect. And I said "So, you know, is this like a full-time job?" He said "No, I'm an artist." And I said "Oh, really? What do you do?" He said, "I'm a sculptor." And I said, "No kidding?" I said, "And what kind of sculpture do you do?" Because I thought maybe he was going to be Harry Jackson type stuff.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And he said, "I do welded steel sculpture." So I said "Oh, so you must know the *Spiral Jetty*, we're going to see the *Spiral Jetty*." And he said, "What's that?" I said, "You know, Robert Smithson." "Who's he?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: My God.

JACK FLAM: So here's a guy, this is in the, you know, late '90s, and here's a guy who's a welded steel sculptor, who never heard of the *Spiral Jetty*, didn't know who Robert Smithson was. Now, that's changed there because when we went, it was later in the day, we drove out. And it was an interesting experience, I'll tell you in just a minute. I think this is worth putting on record. Anyway, we drove out and it was really hard to find. It wasn't marked in any way. Because when you go there now there are signs, you know, you don't have to already know the way. I was out there only a couple years ago, and there are signs.

When we went, something that really struck me, it was very moving, is we went in the afternoon and we stayed until sundown. And there's a silence of a kind that I have never experienced anywhere else. And part of it is because the Great Salt Lake doesn't support much life. So, you don't have fish jumping around, you don't have aquatic birds, in fact you see the skeletons of seagull-like creatures along the shore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: It's this extraordinary silence. I mean, it was really thick enough to eat, it was that thick. So, the *Jetty* had come above the water and we were able to walk on it. All the rocks were covered with salt, so it was like ice. In fact, actually I fell in up to my waist almost.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: Above my knees. I fell about up to my knees, slipped off, and then when we got back to the motel we were staying in, I changed to another pair of jeans. And I put the jeans on the hood of the car to dry overnight. And the next morning they had not only not dried, but they weighed a ton. I ended up just throwing them away.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. So, you couldn't wash them?

JACK FLAM: No. I mean, we were traveling.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah, so.

JACK FLAM: So, two years ago I go out to the *Spiral Jetty* and it's not only on completely dry land, but the water, the lake is a good 150 yards, 200 yards away. And it was interesting because when Nancy was alive occasionally we would have conversations about whether or not the *Spiral Jetty* should be built up again because clearly over the years some of the rocks had sunk. So, the idea was—this is when it was still, you know, above water. Should it be built up to its original height? And I didn't think so because of Smithson's interest in entropy, but I also

understood that, you know, there was a case to be made for restoring it. And we talked about it up and back, and our conversations were inconclusive, and then Nancy died.

So, when I went out to see the *Jetty* a year and a half, two years ago, I was with some other people. We were actually out there for a memorial for Nancy. And on the way there we got into this conversation about whether the *Jetty* should be built up, et cetera. Then we get there and it's on dry land. And I realized that the entropy effect is not only what you expect it's going to be, like with so many things in life, it turned out that nobody had figured on the water [disappearing –JF]. People figure on the water, the presence of the water, but nobody had thought about the absence of the water. And so, here you have particularly hot weather, lots of sun, evaporation. Because as you know, the Great Salt Lake doesn't drain—water comes into it and water evaporates out, that's the way it operates. And who knows whether there will ever be—well, in my lifetime in any case, the Great Salt Lake back again. It may be another 30, 40 years before it comes back.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, when you drive out on US-80. West of Salt Lake, south of the Lake, you can see the mountains to the South have these great steps that indicate the historic Lake levels. And the mountain is probably 3,000 or 4,000 feet high, and every 800 feet there's another step. So, you realize that at one point the water was all the way up there and now it's all the way and now it's—

JACK FLAM: Yeah, because it was part of the sea.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, it was the sea.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yeah, it's the sea. The sea came all the way up there. You still find marine fossils in that part of the world. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That was the famous story about the Donner Party that decided to follow the Humboldt River to the Pacific. And ended up at the swamp called the Humboldt Sink.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know, West of Utah.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it's a very hostile terrain, and, yeah, it's a great stunning place to experience that kind of nature.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And, you know, part of the actual experience of the *Jetty*, not the iconic photograph of it from the sky—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —but actually being there, is that the silence, is the feel of it, the way the air doesn't move.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I wonder did he—had he spent a lot of time there prior to doing that?

JACK FLAM: I don't think he spent a lot of time, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it must have been—I mean, it's an interesting—I know that I've read why he picked the place, but I mean there are other places that might have worked as well.

JACK FLAM: Well, yeah, well but I mean first of all the Great Salt Lake, I mean because of the high salt content and it was the red. I mean, he loved the red algae in the water. The water was red, by the way, when Nancy and I were there in the '90s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Crazy.

JACK FLAM: And it was red again.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's the only thing that lives there in that environment.

JACK FLAM: Pretty much. Pretty much.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, yeah, it's extremely evocative of all those Indian mounds, the Hopewelian and Mississippian culture.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. Well you know what's interesting is actually that first time we were at the *Jetty* we stayed past sundown. As we were walking back to the car, which we parked quite some distance

away, now you can kind of drive in a little closer. Heard something in the brush, and it was a rabbit. And I tell you, it's hard to explain. The experience of that rabbit, because it was so unexpected. You know, you're in this—it's as if you went to the moon and you got out of your rocket ship and you're walking around and everything is absolutely quiet and suddenly a rabbit's hopping around.

[They laugh.]

JACK FLAM: It was just, it was quite an experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's a lot of life out there in these terrifying places.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What has been happening with their estate? There is a foundation isn't there?

JACK FLAM: There is a foundation. It's a complicated story. I was designated by Nancy to be in charge of the foundation. But I was very disappointed by the direction things went in, and I resigned as a trustee about a year ago.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, this is getting back maybe to Judith Rothschild also, who I know left a foundation, with very specific instructions that it was to be used, if I'm correct, to assist artists who died within a timeframe defined by 15 years prior to her death and 15 years after.

JACK FLAM: After.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I looked at the website the other day, and I guess they're still having a look at artists whose lifespan ended within that period. But I do know that they have helped to fund a thing called the Senior Artists Initiative in Philadelphia.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which is interesting because it collects brief oral histories. They're not in depth oral histories like this, they might be 90 minutes total.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But they'll also send archivists into artists' studios and homes and help them get their papers together and explain to them how to construct a database to create an inventory of their artwork so that their heirs, when they do pass away, will know what there is and have it—

JACK FLAM: Right. And the Joan Mitchell Foundation is doing something similar.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Also does that, yeah. Yeah.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Yeah. I mean the Judith Rothschild Foundation did a lot of really good work. I think part of what happened was they put together the drawings collection, which was given to the Museum of Modern Art, and it depleted their resources to a certain degree. And I think that the—I don't know the details anymore, but I think the financial setback of 2007, '08 also had an effect on them. And they have a sunset clause. And I believe the sunset was 25 years after her death. She died in '93, so it's next year.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And so, I'm not quite sure. I haven't been in touch with Harvey Miller for a while. I'm not quite sure what the plan is for the deposit of whatever works they still own, you know, et cetera. Her papers and the rest of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's an interesting question because this period we're in is when a lot of the baby boomers are going to turn up their toes. And there are so many artists who've been reasonably successful, who've made—they haven't necessarily become super stars on the level of Motherwell or Rauschenberg or others who've left very well endowed organizations. But certainly people who have had an impact of some sort. And yet, in today's economy there's a very real possibility that they could be just utterly forgotten. And as I'm aware, also there are a number of organizations—is there a thing called Art Cart? Something like that. Something Columbia. I may have, you know, the name incorrect, but I think they're working with the Columbia Oral History Program.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yes, yes. The Oral History Program.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And which is now apart of an organization called INCITE, which is a critical theory

department within the University. But there was a session at College Art [Association] by this organization that's been, again, collecting oral histories and helping artists organize their papers and inventory their work. They're not like a catalogue raisonné, but at least, you know, to get them started on that.

JACK FLAM: And then there's the Aspen Initiative, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, yes.

JACK FLAM: Artist-Endowed Foundations. And actually Christine Vincent, who founded that, basically, so far as I know, invented the term, at least made it current. Artist-Endowed Foundation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. That report is very, very important.

JACK FLAM: It's very, very important. And she's been doing seminars for the last few years for artists, families of artists, studio managers of artists, who are thinking of starting a foundation or some kind of a legacy entity. And, I mean, I know because I've spoken at them every year that there's been one. They have really nice groups of people, some of them are people who already have had distinguished careers in other fields. Michael Conforti, who used to be at Williams College Art Museum, I think he was at the Clark, is now involved in an artist foundation. Steve Nash, who was a very distinguished curator, is now the director of the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation. So, there are a number of people who've made the transition from either academe or academic life, or curatorial life—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —to being involved with artists' foundations. And it's become a really interesting kind of sub-culture, the sub-culture of the artist foundation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It is. It is. And I know a number of artists who are working with artists' estates. Artists and art historians who are moonlighting, helping artists' estates. Perhaps a former teacher, perhaps a former mentor, establish some kind of durable artistic legacy.

JACK FLAM: Right. I think, I mean the different foundations have different missions. Most of them, what most of them have in common has to do with the protection or the safeguarding, guardianship of the artist's legacy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And then, some of them it's entirely that. Others it's other things. Most notably I would say the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, which gives grants to artists in need. Joan Mitchell also giving, you know, fellowships. Rauschenberg, which does a lot of really very good social work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ecological work too.

JACK FLAM: Ecological work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: AIDS and—

JACK FLAM: On many different levels and, you know, in many domains. Andy Warhol Foundation, and we, Dedalus Foundation. And in fact when Motherwell, it was originally called the Robert Motherwell Foundation. And then he changed the name not long before he died, to the Dedalus Foundation, named after Stephen Dedalus. He was a great lover of Joyce.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Joyce.

JACK FLAM: Because he felt that he didn't want the Foundation to have his name. His art had his name, the Foundation would have a different name. And one of our missions is to educate or inform the public about Robert Motherwell, so it's a legacy. But, it's not our main one, it's not our only one, and it's not, in a certain technical sense, it's not even the main one, in that our founding document gives our mission as informing the public about modern art and modernism, and then especially as exemplified by Robert Motherwell and his colleagues. So, that what Bob was interested in was a larger education mission. Which is why after we finished, or after we published the catalogue raisonné of the paintings and collages in 2012, we shifted our emphasis to educational programs. And we've had really fantastic education programs. We have that space in Brooklyn in Industry City, in Sunset Park area of Brooklyn where we have classes, we have portfolio preparation classes for junior high school students so they can get into art high schools.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Excellent.

JACK FLAM: We have portfolio classes for seniors in high school so they can get into good art schools when they

graduate. We have classes for adults. We literally have students that range from about 5 years old to people in their 60s and 70s. And we have a particular kind of footprint in that neighborhood which is a largely immigrant neighborhood, Hispanic and Asian, Chinese in particular.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's curious why you picked that part of Brooklyn.

JACK FLAM: We picked that part of Brooklyn—happenstance to some degree. I knew that part of Brooklyn because my wife's family owns a building in that part of Brooklyn, so I've been out there a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And actually someone I know, a neighbor of mine in Manhattan in my building, is one of the developers of Industry City. And they were looking for what they call a cultural anchor. And so, he knew that I was President of the Dedalus Foundation, and so he wanted to know if we thought Dedalus would be interested in being a cultural anchor. And we saw that as a great opportunity because this literally coincided with the publication of the catalogue raisonné. And so we ended up getting extraordinarily good terms for lots and lots of space. We have around 12,000 square feet out there. And so we have archives, storage facility, three classrooms. And there's a gallery where we've had exhibitions. So, it's really just expanded us enormously. And then we became interested in the neighborhood. It's such an interesting neighborhood, lots of relatively recent immigrants.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: Largely, as I say, Hispanic and Chinese. Brooklyn's Chinatown, which is actually a wonderful place, is not that far away. It's in Sunset Park, that's farther South and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: East.

JACK FLAM: —East in Sunset Park.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: So, it's been wonderful working with that population and it's something that all of us on the Board are interested in and that Motherwell himself was interested in, which is bringing art to populations that usually are not exposed to it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's not part of their everyday life.

JACK FLAM: It's not part of their everyday life at all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, just curious: I mean, as you were talking I'm thinking, the catalogue of sort of art and school programs that exist, like Studio in the School—

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Agnes Gund's program, and other New York DOE schools, even the school in Astoria that was underwritten by Tony, or is underwritten by Tony Bennett.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts or something.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, but you're actually operating your own classes with your own faculty and—

JACK FLAM: Yes. We are an operating foundation and we're operating our own classes. At the beginning, especially when we were working on the catalogue raisonné, we didn't have the time or energy to run our own programs on that scale. So, we had—and our main program was the catalogue raisonné. That was our main operation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

JACK FLAM: But after that was done we had always had the plan of education. Most of my board are educators. And especially the early board. I think everybody there was an educator. Motherwell himself was deeply interested in art education. And we sort of came up with these programs. I was teaching MFA students, one of the things that I had noticed is that there are two things that are valuable to an MFA student. One we talked

about last week, which is your peers. You know, there's a kind of cooperative spirit and interchange which will never happen again in your life. And they have not yet become rivals and you're all in the same space so it's a wonderful interaction. And the other is free studio space, which you never have again either.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's true enough, yeah.

JACK FLAM: So, I came up with the idea of this Bridge Fellowship, that we give a couple of each year, of MFA students right after they graduate. And they get a certain amount of money. For a couple of years we were able to give them studios at Industry City, but that wasn't sustainable. So, we upped the ante on the money that we give them. So, it helps them with that bridge into that first year out of school. So, a lot of the things we're doing are based on experiences that Motherwell had, that I've had, that other board members have had. And we realized there was a need, we have a, you know, Ph.D. Dissertation Fellowship.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who administers that?

JACK FLAM: We—well, we do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But is there an institutional partner?

JACK FLAM: No. No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's just—

JACK FLAM: It's national.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: So schools are allowed to send two applications, two applicants per year. And then we have a jury, an outside jury of distinguished scholars who judges the proposals. We have a Senior Fellowship for people who are writing books, which are not always in visual arts. The Senior Fellowship, we've had a film maker—critic. Wendy Steiner, who was writing a book on Shostakovitch's quartets, that we funded.

So, I mean, we see Modernism writ large. As you know, Motherwell himself was very interested in not only visual arts, but in contemporary music, contemporary dance, poetry in particular. So the board and I have similar interests, and as people have died off or leave the board, we've tried to replace them with people in a similar range of interests. So, you know, we're pretty dynamic. I think for our size—that is to say from the resources we have, I think we do at least as good a job as anyone else. I mean, just in terms of education and just having an effect on the world.

One of the things, of course, that we have not only in New York City, but everywhere in the country, is the problem that there's not a lot of money been given to the arts, period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not from the government certainly, anymore.

JACK FLAM: Not from the government.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's all—

JACK FLAM: It's all private. And for the last 20 years or so we've been giving scholarship money to graduating seniors. First for studio portfolios, and now this last seven or eight years, we give five in Art History. So, seven to artists and five to—in Art History. [. . . –JF]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How many other artists' estate run foundations are offering the same kind of—

JACK FLAM: I don't think anyone is offering quite that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I've not heard of it.

JACK FLAM: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I did recently learn of a thing called the New York Art Studio, which is on 33rd and 5th, which is a non-accredited, small school of some sort that has SEVIS accreditation, which allows it get JI Visas for foreign students to come and study there.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Is it free?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I do not believe so. But it is priced in sort of the same ballpark as places like the Art Students League and the National Academy School, which are, well I can't possibly comment, but rumor has it

that they're both in the kind of crises of mission. And so, it's interesting to think that privately funded enterprises like this are opening. I don't have any insight, I just opened an email this morning and learned about this.

JACK FLAM: And everything we do is free.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And not only is it free, but we supply the materials also. We supply pads, pencils, charcoal, pastels, whatever the medium is they're working in. And in the summer, we have intensive classes. We had classes after school during the school year, but we found they weren't very regularly attended. So, we've cut back on those. We concentrated those, and we have Saturday classes, which are very well-attended. And the Saturday classes, most of them are for kids, ranging from 8 years old, roughly, to high school kids. And those are encouraged if they want to bring their parents. And I mean it's very sweet. I mean, things happen to them that you couldn't predict. For example, when we first started the program, the education program, we had free art classes. And we give free materials. So, people are suspicious, they think "Well [who –JF] are these people, why are they giving us this stuff? Why are they giving my kid this stuff?" So, we invited parents to come with the kids to the class and get a sense of what it was about. And we were working with the local schools where they were kind of, you know, telling the kids about it, if they were interested to come. So, parents came.

And there was a contingent of particularly Chinese women, mostly immigrants, relatively recent arrivals in the U.S. And they seemed to be particularly suspicious, probably with very good reason. I think anything you get from the government or from an official organization in China you're suspicious probably of there being a string attached, a strong string.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah.

JACK FLAM: And one of the things that Katy Rogers, who's our Programs Director, had the idea of putting out some food for everybody. Just simple food like pretzels, potato chips, things like that. And something to drink, Coke or water or whatever—and the mothers were very, very reserved; very, very reserved. And then, when the food came out, they relaxed a bit. And then eating the food made them relax even more. And when they left, some of them gave Katy and her staff sticks of chewing gum. Isn't that lovely?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sweet.

JACK FLAM: You know, they didn't come prepared with anything, [but –JF] they wanted to reciprocate in some way. And that established a rapport with that whole community. And within a few months we were being written up in the local Chinese language newspaper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, you're drawing your students from the neighborhood.

JACK FLAM: Most of the students in the classes are from the borough.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or the borough.

JACK FLAM: And a lot of them from the neighborhood, although as the programs have become better known, and especially now that more and more people are online looking at things, just last year we redid our website completely so you can sign up for classes on line.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: So, we've had a broader range within the city, but especially within the borough, of people who are taking the classes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is there a vetting process for the students, for the community based—

JACK FLAM: Not really. I mean, we don't—I don't believe we interview. The kids for the portfolios we do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: I think the general education—and as it turns out I know someone quite well, who lives in the neighborhood, who sends her kids. She has a 9-year-old and a 10-year-old, and sends them there frequently on Saturdays. At first, I don't think she realized that I was associated with it. She mentioned to my wife that her kids were going to this Dedalus Foundation Programs in Industry City and they're really great. She said "Oh yeah? That's the Foundation Jack runs."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] Terrific story. So, you said earlier that the doctorial fellowships were open to two applicants from each school. So, you're not working with an individual school but it would be up to—

JACK FLAM: No, no, it's nationwide.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A university anywhere in the country, a university could—

JACK FLAM: An accredited university—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: May nominate.

JACK FLAM: —may nominate. And they do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: I mean we've had people from the Graduate Center who have gotten them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And the same thing is true of the MFA fellowships. Any MFA program in the United States. It has to be within the United States.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, it is open to any university with a doctoral program in the History of Art.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. And we send out, every year we send out a mailer in an email.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Well, now it's email, it used to just to be mailers. And posters, which we don't do anymore now that we send email. And we get lots of responses, so we have many schools.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But the individual students can't apply directly to the Foundation, they have to go to the—

JACK FLAM: No, no. No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Come through the department.

JACK FLAM: They come through the department. And so the department nominates people. And, you know, one could say "Well, maybe somebody's playing favorites," whatever, but I didn't get that impression. The people we've gotten, for example, in both of those programs, I'm not on those juries. When we first started out board members were on the jury, and we had board members including me, John Elderfield, Dore Ashton, David Rosand, in particular. So, you know, people with track records, art criticism, art history. But over the years, I've had fewer board members, and then I got it down to one board member on each jury. And the last maybe five years, there have been no board members at all, it's completely outside. And the same thing is true, you know, with the MFA jury.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you noticed a difference in the outcomes based on that?

JACK FLAM: No. I'd say there's no noticeable difference at all. I mean, I think when we had board members we used to have two outside people and maybe four board members. And now I think we have four outside people, period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How large is your whole staff?

JACK FLAM: We have I think 12 full-time employees.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Does that include the people over in Sunset Park?

JACK FLAM: Yes, that includes the people from Sunset Park.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, there, you've got like just an office, a person answering the phone. Is there a Director of Education?

JACK FLAM: There is, yes. Arianna Chavez is, her exact title, I don't know. But she is our Programs Officer. We don't call it educations programs. So, Katy Rogers is our Programs Director, Arianna is our Programs [Manager – JF]. She's a senior person out there, she coordinates all the classes. And we just hired a second person. And then, we have lots of teachers. And one of the nice things is we're able to hire artists as teachers, so we're also—and we pay them well, so we're also supporting artists by giving teaching gigs.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, in a way it's like Studio in a School in that sense, that you're employing—

JACK FLAM: To some degree, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah. Although, Studio in a School, the teachers are actually in the schools, they're not coming to a different venue.

JACK FLAM: Whereas here. The difference is here, they're coming to our facilities—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To your classrooms, your staff, your facilities, your—yeah.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As opposed to filtering it through, you know, the NYDOE.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. That's very impressive. I'll have to look closely.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Take a look at our website. And when we take a break I may still have postcards from our—because, you know, the scholarship, when we give the scholarships for the last three years, 13, 14, 15—no, for the last four years, we've also given the kids a show at the gallery at Sunset Park. And that show is up if you're in Brooklyn, Sunset Park. It's open Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Go and say hi to the dead relatives in Green-Wood.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which is right near there.

JACK FLAM: The Green-Wood is not very far away, 25th Street.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, it's—

JACK FLAM: Yeah, my wife's family's all buried there too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have a lot of relatives there too. It's a wonderful place just to go visit and look around.

JACK FLAM: Oh, yeah. And one of the things that we do when we're out there, because her building's on 25th Street, the building her family owns, so we go over to her parents' grave. And it just makes for a nice walk.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. It was one of the first parks in New York, if I'm not mistaken.

JACK FLAM: It was. It was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was the first park.

JACK FLAM: And, in fact, she has a relative that was there within the first two or three years that the cemetery was founded.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. Wow. This is probably, since we're talking about death and cemeteries, this is probably a good time to take a break.

JACK FLAM: Okay. Good idea.

[END OF Jack Flam_James McElhinney_3]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just checking. We are resuming. This is James McElhinney with Jack Flam on June the 7th, 2017. Hello, again.

JACK FLAM: Hi.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, one of the things that comes to mind as we're talking about artists' estates, apart from the challenges of funding and management and what kind of entity is appropriate to the, you know, to the mission and to, you know, the level of resources and so forth, would be, you know, how does an artist's estate actually generate income?

JACK FLAM: Most of the artists' estates generate income by selling art by the artist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's right, that's my understanding.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And we were talking earlier about the Judith Rothschild Foundation and that sort of has a sunset plan that they were going to disperse a certain—

JACK FLAM: Right. It was by their bylaws or by the founding document it's going to come to an end in 2018, I believe, is the year. And there are two models. One of them is the sunset clause model and the other is the perpetuity. We're a perpetuity foundation, that is to say we don't have—that doesn't mean you're going to be going in perpetuity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Necessarily, but we don't—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it's the intention, the mission.

JACK FLAM: The mission is to continue. And I would say, actually, that, generally speaking, if an artist-endowed foundation handles an artist, like I say, for 30, 35 years or so, maybe even 25 years—that's what the Rothschild Foundation [will do –JF]. It usually is enough time to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. To place work in—significant works in the right museums, to organize exhibitions, to encourage enthusiasm about scholarship. And that ball gets rolling and then you can say, "Okay, this is a ball that's going to keep rolling." The second model, I think, that is going on indefinitely, is I think valid and useful if the foundation is going to have programs that go beyond simply looking after the legacy of the artist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: Which is the model we chose to follow. And because Motherwell set the Dedalus Foundation up in such a way, our mission is informing the public about modern art and modernism, it's a pretty broad remit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And it actually has consequences that were probably unexpected to Bob Motherwell himself. For example, when we had the problem with the fake paintings that were coming through the Knoedler Gallery—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —through Glafira Rosales, et cetera. [Part of the reason that we continued with this was not only because I, as a art historian, and my board members, who are art historians also, felt that it was an important thing to do ethically in terms of the history of art, to avoid falsifying the history of art. –JF] But it's also part of our remit as a foundation, which is to inform the public about modern art and modernism, especially as embodied [in] the works of Robert Motherwell and his peers. And this bunch of fakes, which has been described as, and I think accurately, the biggest art fraud in American history so far.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: Was basically all of Robert Motherwell's peers. There were seven Motherwells, there were actually eight Motherwells most likely, but there were seven in the group that came through, that we know came through.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Through Knoedler.

JACK FLAM: Through Rosales and through Knoedler, and through Julian Weissman. And those—so there were seven Motherwells and then there were I think six or eight Pollocks, and there were a bunch of Rothkos. And these were all colleagues of Motherwells in some cases—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —such as Rothko, close friends of Motherwell's. And so, we felt that this was something, because you're a fiduciary. I mean I'm a fiduciary of the Dedalus Foundation and therefore my main concern is to act in the Dedalus Foundation's best interest, both I and my Boards members. So, the question was, what is the best interest of the Dedalus Foundation? And it seemed clear to all of us that the best interest of the Dedalus Foundation was first of all to protect these fake Motherwells from being accepted as real, and also because of our mission statement, to educate the public about real Modern art and real Modernist painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, and you also in your statements about Matisse, you're a meticulous researcher.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I would think would be very sensitive to soft information being accepted as standard currency.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. That's a good point. I mean, you know, one of the things that surprised me while this whole thing was unrolling, and to be honest it was a very painful experience. It went on for—I first told Ann Freedman that I thought the Motherwells were fake in December of 2007. So, it was almost 10 years, so it might have been eight years before this thing was resolved. And we had got a certain amount of bad press by people who were insistent that the paintings were real, we were acting badly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Party poopers.

JACK FLAM: We were party poopers and we didn't know what we were doing. I mean, it's quite a complicated and unpleasant history.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's well known at this point. I mean it was a very sensational trial and updates every day, and you featured prominently in all of that.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't think that for the sake of this conversation we really need to go over all of that because—

JACK FLAM: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —it's available from other sources. And anyway, in another 20 or 30 or 50 years, I mean I don't know that people will really care about the details of the case.

JACK FLAM: Right. But I think what is interesting about that is because people tend to run scared, they're afraid of lawsuits—basically people keep quiet. And I think that's, in terms of what you're asking in terms of artists' foundations, one of the thing that I found very interesting is when I realized when these paintings were fake. I went in, Freedman told me that other artists' foundations or experts on the artists, on the other artists, had said that the paintings by their artists were real. It struck me that if that was true, then there is a problem. Because in a situation like that, if one's a fake, they're all fakes, given this kind of bizarre history.

So, I went around. And when I went around and started talking to my colleagues at other artist foundations, they all said to me "Oh, yeah" well it was with a certain amount of silent sparring at the beginning of all these conversations. But when we began to speak freely they would say, we got a "between us, yeah, we've seen paintings by artist X or Y, and yeah, we don't think they're real." But nobody wanted to come out and say so publicly because they're afraid of a lawsuit for defamation of property.

And I think the important thing here in terms of running a foundation, is that it took us a couple of years before we really came out. Because we wanted to make sure that, as sure as possible, that we had enough documentary evidence. So, we kept on asking, you know, what about this 'Mr. X' collector, he was supposed to show up and he was supposed to send some kind of documents, never did. And then, we had the paintings forensically tested.

We wanted to wait for the results to come back, and there was a certain amount of stalling in getting the results to us. But after the results came back and it was clear that these paintings physically could not have been painted when they were supposed to have been painted, there were pigments that were not invented until later, et cetera.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: There were all kinds of outliers. And then, we said okay, so now these paintings are fake. And we didn't get any response. And at that point I went to the FBI. And that's what broke the case open. I went to the FBI, explained what was happening, and they said well—to be honest, they were skeptical at first. Just seemed, "Is it really possible that hundreds of millions of dollars worth of art, fake art, would be here, and some of it was being vouched for by experts on the artists?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Allegedly painted by a Chinese person who studied at the Art Students League.

JACK FLAM: Well, apparently, they were.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: And I don't know if they were all painted by the guy, the same man, but a lot of them were. And they say that he was the only guy. But do you know, here's an interesting thing. This comes from teaching MFA

students. We had a lot of Chinese students at Brooklyn College at one point. And they were very, very well trained academically.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: When we realized these were fake, I remember I went to Paris, we had a dealer in Paris, Galerie LeLong. And they were having a show. And so I went to ask them, "Had they had any fake paintings come though, had they seen any Motherwell fakes?" And the guy at the gallery said to me, "No, they hadn't." And they talked to me, they handled the Mirò Estate, and they said they had some Miròs come through, we talked about that. And so I said, "Well, you know, where do you think these things are coming from? Do you think they're coming from—who's doing them?" And they said, "Well we don't really know, but whoever does them is very good." And, you know, I remember saying, "Well, you know, it's interesting, because the two places in the world that I could see these pictures coming from would be from China or from Russia."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: Because you have that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Academic.

JACK FLAM: —tradition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And in fact the guy who painted the paintings was Chinese, who did go to the League, apparently. But he was good. And people always think being good means that you can render a face in a realistic way. Being good means that you can mimic almost anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And this guy was a good mimic. In fact as I said during the trial, these paintings look more like paintings by the artist than the paintings by the artist. And in a way that was a give away.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was the tell.

JACK FLAM: They looked too much like the artist.

JACK FLAM: That was the tell. Because he'd gone for all the salient parts of the artist's style and they were there in an exaggerated way. The Motherwells, for example, full of drip marks, and sort of like lacryma, you know, tearful elegies.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well that's something to be on the lookout for. It's a kind of a crazy idea that it's almost too authentic, it's almost too much—

JACK FLAM: It looks too much like the artist's work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Too perfect. Too perfect.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That you wouldn't trust that it isn't a contrivance of some sort. So all this being said, what measures should someone take, other than obviously an artist's estate would have a primary responsibility to the legacy of the artist's work to create a catalogue raisonné.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then with any questionable works, you would recommend IFAR or some other kind of testing to make sure that the materials are correct?

JACK FLAM: I wouldn't necessarily. I think that the artists' estates or the artists' foundations should take on the task of giving opinions. And we're almost alone in believing so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: Even people who did have stopped doing so. I believe that Keith Haring Foundation gave opinions until a year or two ago, they've stopped. Warhol, which did, has stopped. And I think that, you know, and people are afraid of lawsuits.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And Pollock-Krasner won't.

JACK FLAM: Pollock-Krasner won't. My own feeling is that if all the artists' foundations gave opinions, first of all it would be a lot less room for maneuver by fakers. Because part of the way it works, I mean years before I saw those first Motherwells, people had seen works by other artists and they didn't think they were right but they didn't say anything to anybody.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: For fear of litigation.

JACK FLAM: For fear of litigation. And my feeling is— nobody's ever won a court case like that, by the way, on authenticity. Nobody. In other words no giver of opinion, as far as I know, this is something that Cahill—John Cahill has talked about. That nobody so far has won a court case against someone who gave an opinion. But if supposedly, if you believe what you read in the newspapers, it cost the Andy Warhol Foundation $7 million in that last lawsuit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And it cost us a good deal of money too. We ended up getting most of it back because when we made the settlement with Killala and Julian Weissman and Glafira Rosales, the *Elegy* sold to them by Killala and by Killala to a collector, Killala gave the collector the money back, sued them, and then added on one claim against us. And one of our requirements for the settlement, we had two requirements. One of them was they would reimburse us for most of our legal expenses, which they did, because at that point they wanted to shut it down and keep things quiet.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And the other was that we wanted to stamp the back of the painting as a fake. Which in the United States you have no right to do. You do in other countries, I believe in France you can stamp a painting as a fake on the back.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A number of countries, yeah. A number of countries do have fairly rigid patrimony laws, as I understand, like Mexico and Canada. And Italy and France and other countries have strict rules regarding the importation or exportation of artworks, even if you create them yourself there.

JACK FLAM: Right. Yeah. But this is a little different. And this has to do if a work is found to be a fake. I believe that in Germany you can destroy the work if it's determined to be a fake, by the authority, you know, who's in charge. In France that authority usually passed down from a family member. You don't have that here. So we asked that they stamp the painting as a fake on the back, and they did. And that was the picture that showed up in the *New York Times*, which we orchestrated. We told the *Times* that this was happening so they sent a photographer down, and that's what made the case public. And once the case was public, people who had bought paintings by artists who were of that moment from these two dealers suddenly thought "Wait a minute, what about my painting?" And then everybody started getting them authenticated. So authentication, what do you need? You need a connoisseurship opinion. That is to say somebody or some group of people that really knows the artist's work well, that can eyeball it and can [say] "This is real." And you need good provenance research. You also need some really strong sense of historical context for that artist. For example, these Motherwell paintings were dated 1953. That's not the way he was painting in '53, it's more like the way he was painting in '59.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: So they were anomalous, stylistically, they're anachronistic. And the fourth then is forensic testing. And in a certain way no one of those is going to be, by itself, necessarily definitive. And usually forensic testing, because it's expensive, can cost you $12,000 to $15,000 to do a small painting, is a last resort. That is to say, you only go to forensic testing if all the other signals are negative and you really want to drive the point home because you have someone who's resisting. Who says "No, no, no, maybe it's stylistically anomalous, maybe the provenance looks fishy, maybe it's not what the artist was doing at that time, we still think the painting is right." So then you go to forensic testing and you find out that there are pigments in the painting that were not invented until 10 years later. Or that the ground is an acrylic ground at the time and [that –JF] this artist never went near an acrylic ground, probably didn't know what an acrylic ground was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So were the procedures used to do the forensic testing in any way injurious to the painting? Can it be done without taking material away?

JACK FLAM: Yes. That's an excellent question. Yes, they take a literally minuscule, I think enough to go onto the head of a pin.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: A very, very thin pin.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just a tiny amount of material?

JACK FLAM: Tiny amount. What we did, to establish norms, we then had Jamie Martin, of Orion Analytics, who's the best for this period, we had works here at the Foundation that we had him test from that period. And then we asked a number of museums if they would be willing to supply samples from works in their collections, museums that had labs, which they sent to him. So that we, in addition to everything else, we paid for about 30 tests. And these tests established a profile of which materials, including pigments, binders, et cetera, that Motherwell used in the 10 year period that bracketed when these works were supposed to be done. So that we not only were able to say that, in some cases the pigments weren't invented until 10 years later, but we were able to say in some cases, no, he never used zinc white, and these all have zinc white. Or he did not, even though acrylics existed, he did not use an acrylic ground until basically 1961 or ['6]2. So these all have acrylic grounds. And in the case of the Motherwells, they were all painted on top of older paintings. So I guess they bought the paintings at a flea market or something.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And then they sanded them down with an electric sander. And that was something else that showed up on microscopic examination, that an electric sander had been used. Motherwell, a, never sanded anything down because, like Pollock, as I understand it, when he repainted a picture even years later, he wanted the picture underneath to keep speaking to him. Which is why sometimes in mature drip paintings, Pollock would get a little eye buried in the picture because there was a figurative picture there before. So that was an important part of the process for Motherwell. So he never sanded anything and then put another layer of ground on it. And he never used an electric tool.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that would be an immediate sign that—

JACK FLAM: Right. But these—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But this is very expensive to do.

JACK FLAM: Right. It was expensive, but there was a lot at stake.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right. So since the majority of artist estate run foundations and trusts generate income from sales, protecting oneself from spurious works of art coming on the market is—would be a paramount concern, especially with an artist whose work has great value or, you know, has a high performing auction record.

JACK FLAM: Yes and no. I mean you raise a very interesting point.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean why is it a good idea for artists' estates to be authenticators other than the reasons that you—

JACK FLAM: Well, to me that's a reason enough.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: If you're responsible for the legacy of an artist, then you want to make sure that only works by that artist—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —that are really by that artist, are considered part of his oeuvre.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: It's as if, like why would Arthur Miller's family be annoyed if somebody wrote a play that wasn't very good and they signed it Arthur Miller. And they said, "Look, this is a manuscript that we just found."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Undiscovered, yeah.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Recently discovered.

JACK FLAM: Right. So I mean it's a kind of rough analogy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: But the market is very interesting because as I said, nobody has, so far as I know, lost a lawsuit over giving an authenticity opinion, saying that something that was not by their artist was not real. However, the lawsuits have not always been directly for the opinion. They're often for something that is ancillary to the opinion. So Pollock-Krasner, which spent a lot of money defending a couple of pictures, [as] you know, that they thought were fake, their real issue was people bought an anti-trust claim against them. Saying that the reason they said the painting was a fake was that they did not want the competition on the market and they wanted to get rid of that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

JACK FLAM: And that, with a layman's jury, that could sound like it made sense. And in fact we had—one of the unpleasant things that happened during this whole Knoedler thing is that someone who is sympathetic to Ann Freedman and Knoedler wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal accusing us—or in any case saying that we in fact had a market stake in that and that would be a reason why we might want to say these paintings were not real. And this is after I had stopped writing for the Journal regularly. But I went to see the editor, and I talked to the author too. And one of the points that I made, and they allowed me write an article in kind of indirect rebuttal, is that that's a red herring. Because if somebody has a Motherwell *Elegy* painting that they're going to sell, a small painting, for, you know, a good price, a couple million dollars for a small painting, it's not going to hurt us in any way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, of course.

JACK FLAM: Even if we had *Elegy* paintings to sell. Though as it turned out we do not own any paintings that look like that. And we did not own any *Elegies* at all whatsoever at the time that this was all happening. So we at the Foundation, we had already placed with museums or sold the *Elegies* that we had. So it was a spurious argument because there was no possible competition. But even if we owned *Elegies*, obviously if somebody sells a fake painting at a very high price it helps your market, it doesn't hurt your market.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Exactly.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Exactly. So, yeah, if a person shows up with an authentic, or with an inauthentic piece that is not known to be inauthentic and it goes to auction and it sells for some record sum, then that's going to raise the bar on what you can sell things for. It might increase your income, might actually be to the benefit of the organization.

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Especially since right now for Abstract Expressionist paintings, Motherwell *Elegies*, Rothkos, Pollock Drip Paintings, there are more buyers than there are works available.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: So you have a market that is a seller's market—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —a scarcity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And that's also, by the way, ironically one of the reasons that you keep getting these caches of Pollock paintings showing up, because people want to believe that it's still possible to buy a big Pollock Drip Painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Something that came out of an attic somewhere.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. It's like the Matter paintings.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Or the painting that—a very intelligent, knowledgeable, worldly person apparently that, Pierre Lagrange, who bought the Pollock, that he brought the lawsuit that was settled out of court. Well, you know, Lagrange was a smart guy. And he had other people, he'd been told, falsely as it turned out, that it was going to be in a supplement to the catalogue raisonné, not true, there was no supplement coming. But also he had other people involved in the sale who were honest people, two other private dealers, who helped broker the sale, and he figured "Well, you know, they must know what they're doing. Knoedler's one of the most prestigious galleries in the world, they must know what they're doing. So I'm in safe hands." You know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well if everybody's in an environment where everybody's going to benefit, then there's going to be a lot of wishful thinking and a lot of magical thinking—

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —going on.

JACK FLAM: A lot of wishful thinking. Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so people are going to see what they want to see. They're going to see with what agrees with, you know, the version of the tale that they hope is true.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. The reason that paintings are expensive is because they're rare.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: One of the reasons.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's interesting. As you know, in art appraisal, authentication is not a task, is not part of the scope of work.

JACK FLAM: Yes. Although, one of the things that's interesting is that in the last few years there's a lot more attention being paid by appraisers to questions of authenticity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm sure.

JACK FLAM: You're absolutely right, this is a very recent phenomenon. I'm aware that it's because the Appraiser's Association, American Appraiser's Association, I've spoken to them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of which I'm a member.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Okay. I've spoken to them, and as you know then, you've been getting all their emails and there are a lot of sessions now having to do with questions of authenticity and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The same way that auction houses have regular webinars and training sessions about spotting like money laundring schemes and—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —other monkey business that—

JACK FLAM: And as you probably saw, Sotheby's acquired Orion Analytical. Or in any case is working in partnership.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I didn't know that.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And that actually I think was brilliant on their part. And they did this, as I understand it, in part because of the Hals painting that they sold which turned out to be a fake. And some red flags went up and Jamie Martin tested it and found it to be a fake. And so far as I know, they're the only auction house so far that has an in-house forensic testing service.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting too, that Art Agency, Partners—

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —new organization.

JACK FLAM: Sotheby's also.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sotheby's led now by Christy MacLear, formerly of the Rauschenberg Foundation.

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is setting, is engaged in helping artists and collectors with a certain level of means to create legacy plans—

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —to establish entities and to establish some kind of postmortem or ongoing activity.

JACK FLAM: Right. So the bottom line is the bottom line. And, you know, the art market, and I imagine you're a good decade at least younger than I am, but when I was, you know, in my 20s, let's say.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: I remember The Met acquired the Rembrandt *Aristotle With the Bust of Homer*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I remember that. It was in the '60s.

JACK FLAM: *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer.* Yeah, I think it was for $2.1 million.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And that made a sensation—I had just started teaching then. And suddenly kids were really interested in art. "Man, this painting is like $2 million."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. The Beatles were earning a million dollars. That was unheard of.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. So millionaires were unheard of.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And so that was the beginning of a change, the way art was looked at in the United States I think. And now, it's a commodity. I mean obviously it's a commodity, but more to the point it's an unregulated market.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well the whole other conversation about how, in the words of the former head of a prominent New York Museum, pardon me for any misstep in attempting a quote.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I'll officially say it's paraphrasing, but said to me in person at a dinner party that the art world is a fiction designed for the consumption of culture in service to other priorities.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That there are so many other things going on that benefit from the consumption of culture that have nothing to do with the creation or enjoyment of it—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or understanding of it. Such as arms deals, money laundering, social climbing, you name it.

JACK FLAM: Sure, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: All those things.

JACK FLAM: Sure. Yeah. And in addition to that, the related activities—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —of, let's say, the Metropolitan Museum. So I was at the Metropolitan Museum a week or so ago and there's a line out in the street to get in. Just to get in.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And actually the same thing happened to me at MoMA. I was at MoMA on Monday, and when I came down 53rd Street I looked and there was a long line. I thought "What's happening?" And, you know, they're using

the old entrance now because they're building over on the new entrance.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And it's a long line just to get in to buy a ticket. So if you're not a member you have stand in line to get a ticket. And, you know, in a way it's great. But the other thing that's happening, of course, is you have restaurants—you have the guys that are selling postcards in the street. You've got cabs, you've got, you know, they really are a motor for the economy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: And the market itself, the art market itself, is really still unregulated. And although organizations like the Art Dealers Association will from time to time talk about doing something to discipline the market in some [other –JF] way or, nobody really wants to because it's the capacity for money laundering. Or not even money laundering, for sliding assets, for having assets come in under the radar.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: That's such an important part of the art market. And there are very few things, I can think of anything else that's like that. I remember overhearing a conversation once in a restaurant in Stockholm. And a Swedish guy and a British guy were having dinner, they were both stamp dealers, rare stamp dealers. And they were talking about how at that particular time, where there was a lot of unrest in the Middle East, that their business was thriving because people wanted to buy these stamps because you could move them so quickly from one place to another. And that customs guards would look for diamonds, but they would not look for stamps, not look for postage stamps. So, I mean the art market has always participated in something like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think always, I mean from the beginning of time it was about—

JACK FLAM: Yes. Absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was about the projection of power, it was about the acquisition of status, it was about espionage.

JACK FLAM: And trophies and Napoleon going into Egypt and taking all that stuff home.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course. It had all sorts of secondary values apart from what, you know, like we as artists or scholars value. The economy for all of that is quite small.

JACK FLAM: Well, yeah. And then back to what we started talking about, the catalogue—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —raisonné done by an artist foundation. Well, you know, the people who are doing the catalogue raisonné are scholars. And they're not in the market. But there's no way to keep the market away from them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well you wouldn't want a dealer doing it necessarily, they'd say, "Do you think we should put this one in? You think it'll get by? You think it's okay? I mean I'm not sure, are you? Maybe it's okay, maybe it's not." It becomes like one of the these Martin Scorsese kind of "fuggetaboutit"—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —conversations where it sits like, "Well, okay, we'll say this one's in, this one's out."

JACK FLAM: Yeah. So when this whole thing happened with the fake Motherwells.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: We were told by a few people, who were critical of us, "Well why don't you list them as undecided?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Attributed to.

JACK FLAM: Well no, undecided.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Undecided.

JACK FLAM: And it's interesting because—and I said, "Well we're not listing them as undecided because we're not undecided."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] We're absolutely sure they're fake.

JACK FLAM: Or "for further study."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: That's the other thing. There's no further study necessary, we're 100 percent sure they're fake. And I actually had this conversation with two pretty well known scholars. Not Motherwell scholars particularly, but people who know Motherwell's work well, but AbEx scholars.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You spoke earlier about the Rembrandt Board or the Rembrandt Committee.

JACK FLAM: Right. Rembrandt Project.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And how they were chary of making attributions because of the Van Meegeren precedent.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But the world art economy has become global. We have so many myriad more ways of making inauthentic objects and passing them off—

JACK FLAM: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —as authentic objects. We have lots of cultures that don't make the distinction between fine art and decorative art.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We have, you know, it's even gotten to the point now where somebody wants to talk about the fine arts, you're being Eurocentric, Neocolonial, you know—

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —I mean this is actually possible today. So, would it be useful to have some kind of international oversight or is it only more applicable to the United States because we don't have the same patrimony laws and we have a different tax code that enables art to be valued and used in the way it is here.

JACK FLAM: Well, we also have a different legal system.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's right.

JACK FLAM: You can sue anybody for anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Any time.

JACK FLAM: At any time. Right. Anybody for anything at any time. Whereas in other countries, in England for example, you don't hear about lawsuits like that. Somebody gives an opinion, you own a painting, you own a Rembrandt and I say it's not a Rembrandt and I'm an expert on Rembrandt, well, you know, that's my opinion. You can't sue me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Caveat emptor, right?

JACK FLAM: Right. So here though, unfortunately, the legal system supports that. There have been a number of attempts, I mean there's a law before the New York State Legislature that didn't get passed. But it also was sorely inadequate, in order to protect givers of opinion. And it's inadequate because it has no teeth in it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: I mean for a law to have teeth in it, it should have something like, if you violate this then, you know, if you come out on the wrong side of this, then you get treble damages.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well this, for an appraiser, let's say, doing a fair market value appraisal for tax purposes—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —for like a donation. If you make a mistake on one of these appraisals or don't do the diligence and it's disallowed and the client ends up losing a pile of money, the appraiser's dead, you know.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're going to get crushed. They're not going to be able to practice again. I mean there are real consequences.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there should be, so you're saying there should be real consequences.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, there should be consequences. If you, weigh, you know, take, what's the word, mount a frivolous lawsuit against me because you have a fake Motherwell and I said I said it's a fake. And you bring me to court and it costs me $600,000 to defend myself, then there should be treble damages.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: You should owe me $1.8 million, plus my legal costs.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And why don't you suppose, you know, the legislature is interested in—

JACK FLAM: They don't seem to be. I've heard different interpretations. I've been told that trial lawyers don't like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This must be very daunting to anyone who maybe is optimistically starting to organize a charitable trust or a foundation or something, they've got a parent or a relative who's a well-known artist and all of a sudden, they start hearing all of these dark tales. They might just head for the hills.

JACK FLAM: And most people have headed for the hills. Most of the foundations won't give an opinion. And we're pretty much alone, I mean there are not many people still giving opinions. And we're doing it because we think it's the right thing to do. And I believe strongly that if everybody did it, it would solve the problem. But it's because people are intimidated that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's bad for business. And it is attractive to people who think they're going to get something out of a specious lawsuit. Or even they might actually believe the piece is real.

JACK FLAM: In some cases they do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: I mean we had a very interesting case of a small painting on paper that we realized was not right when we were doing the catalogue raisonné. And I got in touch with the collector, who's a person of some prominence. And I told her that we'd like to see the picture again. It had been seen a few years before by a member of, you know, the team. And we had the collector send us the picture. And we realized it surely was not right. And we got back to the collector and said that we were not going to include it in the catalogue raisonné. And the collector said—was very upset, understandably. And said, "Well, you know, I was told that it was purchased from" and she named a very reputable dealer. And I said, "Well look, you know, what I would do is I would suggest to you that you go back to the dealer." And the dealer had said he bought it from another dealer, reputable. "I think you should go back to the dealer and ask the dealer for some kind of documentation of his acquisition of the picture." So she did. And she got in touch with me and she said "Thank you. I went to the dealer and it turned out the dealer had not bought it from another reputable dealer. The dealer had bought it at a schlock auction house."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: Like what Tepper used to, it's not that Tepper was schlock, but in other words it was not primarily an art auction house.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And I don't know if you ever went to Tepper when they were over on 25th Street, but you'd see Kandinskys, and they had a big sign that says, you know, "We do not stand by the authenticity of anything." And they were all in the style of. And so apparently the dealer had picked it up really cheap at an auction house, made up a story, and sold it to this collector. As it turned out, the dealer, though, was honorable in that the dealer gave this collector her money back, without anything—so it was kind of an interesting story. And the reason I'm telling you this, because it shows you how blurry the lines sometimes are.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: You know, here's the collector who's really annoyed at us, goes back to the dealer to get more provenance at our behest, and then—and it's because it just didn't look right to us. It just did not look right. And then the dealer, somewhat shamefacedly says, "Well, you know, I actually didn't get it from Source A, I got it from Source B." And then we look up Source B and it's a little auction house, provincial auction house.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So at least there are a few honorable people.

JACK FLAM: Right. And so this is an interesting theory. I'd say the dealer was not candid, to put it mildly, with the collector when he sold the picture, but he was honorable when she came back and said, "I've been told that this is not going to be in the catalogue raisonné."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: And he took the painting back. And paid her for it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well I guess the assumption is always that something is authentic if it's offered as authentic, and the person who's offering it as authentic, becomes the authenticator.

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the dealer, in effect, authenticated it by saying it was.

JACK FLAM: Yes. And you know, look, if you go to a Louis Vuitton store to buy a wallet, and you buy a wallet. You expect it's really Louis Vuitton—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —it wasn't made in Hong Kong or wherever. If you buy it at the Louis Vuitton store. Similarly, if you go to Knoedler—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: —or a really reputable dealer and you buy something, you're assuming that what they're selling is the real McCoy because that's who they are, that's why they charge what they do

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The problem is when something was sold first off of a blanket in Venice, by a guy from Cameroon.

JACK FLAM: Right. Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then it shows up in an elegant boutique.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This happens.

JACK FLAM: This happens. But as you also know, the guys who run, the people who run elegant boutiques really know the difference. [Laughs.] And so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course. And supposedly their customers should too.

JACK FLAM: And their customers should. But I have to say, I mean it is Caveat emptor. Nonetheless, if you go to a reputable place, I mean if you buy something from a guy on the street off a blanket and it turns out it's not real, whether it's a Rolex watch or a Louis Vuitton bag—well, you know, you got pretty much what you should have expected.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: But if you go to a very expensive store and a very elegant store, and a highly reputable store, you're expecting you'll get the real thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And that the people who are running the place, part of their expertise or part of their reputation is based on their expertise. They look at it, and they say "Yes."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what advice would you give to someone who's thinking about, an artist or artist heir, who's thinking about forming some kind entity to perpetuate or to celebrate or to maintain some kind of a

presence—

JACK FLAM: Mm.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —a legacy if you will. What kind of advice would you offer to such a person?

JACK FLAM: I would say that the first thing they should do, even, if it's possible, while the artist is still alive, they should speak to a very good lawyer who specializes in these sorts of things. Because there are number of false moves that you can make which will not allow you to transfer works in a way that's advantageous in relation to taxation. For example, if an artist, my understanding is, if an artist forms an LLC or a corporation. So, I'm an artist and instead of just being Jack Flam and selling paintings, I become Jack Flam Incorporated. When I die, you are not going to be able to get stuff tax free if you are the foundation. Because you're getting it from a corporation, and a corporation can't do that. Unless it had been set up for a not-for-profit corporation to begin with, if that is indeed possible. So I mean I think a really good lawyer is crucial. They should read Christine Vincent's book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There are a couple of them actually, guides to—

JACK FLAM: Yeah, it's been revised, and you can get it on line, you can download it for free is my understanding now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Also that conference years ago, the Marie Sharpe Walsh.

JACK FLAM: Foundation, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Foundation in Colorado had that retreat, that kind of a think tank that resulted in a book that I believe is available online. It's a free download, yeah.

JACK FLAM: I didn't know that that was—But I think it's important—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the Aspen Report is too.

JACK FLAM: And I think the thing to do, and this happens with us a lot, people come around to talk to us and say, you know, candidly, the children of artists or artists themselves—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: —in some cases, will say, you know, "So I want to set this thing up, who shall I talk to, you know, what shall I do?" But I think you need a good lawyer. It's one thing, you don't throw anything away, nothing at all whatsoever. That was the mistake we made, to some degree, we gave Motherwell's printing press to the Providencetown Art Association. We gave a lot of his paints away to artists, I mean at schools, we had a lot of paint. But you want to hold on to everything. In part because later if you have authentication problems it's really extremely useful to have samples of the paint the artist was actually using.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, good point.

JACK FLAM: One of the things that's really interesting, a really good forensic scientist can take a sample of paint, he can not only tell you who manufactured it, but he can give you usually a year that it was manufactured.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: And the reason is that a really good forensic scientist not only does good analytical work, but they keep library records of things. And so someone like Jamie Martin, for example, knows that in, I'm making these numbers up—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: but let's say for example, in 1958 Winsor-Newton was getting the earth for their yellow ochre from Italy. And two years later they were getting it, let's say from Romania. Or they were getting it from the North of Italy and not from the South of Italy. And so the chemical makeup is going to be slightly different. And so a really good scientist like Jamie Martin can tell you, frequently, what year that was manufactured.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

JACK FLAM: Also paint manufacturers sometime actually put in ingredients that are related to the batch so that there's a signature, a batch signature.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting. So a certain quantity of some inert material?

JACK FLAM: Exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like they might have aluminum stearate, which is—

JACK FLAM: Filler.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which is an anti-siccative too, right?

JACK FLAM: Right. And a lot of places used to use, remember like cheap paints would put [in] aluminum stearates. It was like whipping cream—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Aluminum stearate, Lenny Bocour trick. So, you know, I mean, that's another story. But they could vary the, by a percentage point—

JACK FLAM: They do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In order to give the paint a year signature.

JACK FLAM: They will put in fillers, markers.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Fascinating.

JACK FLAM: And so one of the things that Jamie Martin found, which he did not share this information widely until the time of trial, is that he discovered that some of the paints—the paint that was in the Rothkos and in the Pollocks and in the de Koonings had come from the same tube.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] That's wild. That is wonderful.

JACK FLAM: And when I say the same tube, it's basically, if it's not the same tube, the same box of tubes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. The same batch of paint.

JACK FLAM: The same batch of paint. And there they were. And one of them was done in 1949 and one was done in 1957, and the other one's done in 1961, and they all came out of the same tube of paint.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Busted. Wow. That's really amazing.

JACK FLAM: So forensic science has really come a long way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, I'll say. I mean everybody knew that people used to go to flea markets and they'd find old canvases and scrape the painting off or sand the paint off and use it, it's an old trick.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, that's what this guy did, that's what Pei [Pei-Shen Qian] did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or else they'd just find any old painting and sign it George Luks.

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

JACK FLAM: You know, what's interesting about this is it also has to be a really good forensic scientist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: One of the things that came up, you know, we did that 60 Minutes show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, I remember, yeah.

JACK FLAM: Even though, you know, you show up in a show like that for five minutes, yet they film you for two and a half hours.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: So they filmed me for two and half hours, and they filmed Jamie Martin for two hours. And we both stayed for each other's filming. So I was there while he was being filmed. And I was sitting next to his wife while he and Anderson Cooper were talking. And at one point he's talking about something that I did not know about until the trial, which is that E.A. Carmean, who had worked very closely with Ann Freedman, had tried to

persuade Jamie Martin to change his report on the Motherwell paintings. And so I said to Jamie Martin's wife, who I met for the first time at this thing. I said, "Wow. That's amazing." And she said, "You know, it's not as rare as you would hope." I said, "What do you mean?" She said "He is often offered large sums of money to change his results. " And which of course he has never taken. But I am told by others that there are people who do take the money.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, no doubt.

JACK FLAM: So if you're getting a forensic scientist, it's like anything else, you know, if you're going to get surgery, brain surgery—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Get a second opinion.

JACK FLAM: —and make sure you got a real brain surgeon that's doing it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. So what's new for you on the horizon?

JACK FLAM: Right now, as I told you, I'm thinking—I have a couple of book projects that I prefer not to talk about because I find if you talk about them—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Understood.

JACK FLAM: —you talk them out. But I have a couple of book projects in the works currently, on two different kinds of subjects. And then, you know, the work we're doing with the Foundation, which is extremely absorbing. I really feel like we're on the side of the angels, if I can put it that way. And I think that Bob Motherwell, who was a good friend, would be very happy to see the way things have worked out.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What do you see as being the future of artists' estate foundations?

JACK FLAM: I think they're going to multiply. I think it's become an entity. You know it's funny. When Bob first founded his foundation, started his foundation, it was in 1981. And it didn't really become active until he died, and that was the whole idea—it wouldn't become active. But it existed on paper. And, you know, it was an unusual thing. Pollock-Krasner, for example, was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Eighty-six.

JACK FLAM: Eighty-five or six.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Eighty-five or six. And Gottlieb was a year or two earlier?

JACK FLAM: Right. So, you know, these were pioneers.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And part of it is that, you know, they're been advised it's a way to protect a legacy and to do good works—and et cetera. Now almost any artist who has means thinks in terms of a foundation. And I mean I think it's a great idea potentially because most of them, you know, artists on the whole, even though they can sometimes be very difficulty people to live with, artists on the whole are really big hearted people in the, you know, the larger context. And I think it's a kind of generosity of spirit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: I think that, for example, the Rauschenberg Foundation has really tried to embody that generosity of spirit that Rauschenberg had.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, Change Inc. was the first—

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then it's just expanded from there.

JACK FLAM: Yeah, exactly. And, yes, this is something that is continuous from his lifetime.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And, you know, we had a precedent. Motherwell was constantly giving art to the auction for good causes of various kinds. So but I think that on the whole it's a good thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well especially since the government has now stepped away completely from patronage.

JACK FLAM: And I'm hoping that more of the foundations will in fact get involved in education, arts education of some kind or another. I mean [the] Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, which is very new, is doing a great job also. They just gave a big gift to Bennington.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We spoke about Cliff Ross the other day.

JACK FLAM: Right. And so then I think that the attitude seems to be changing a bit now from just doing the artist's legacy to now casting a broader net and thinking in terms of doing good in the world other than the artist's legacy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you been partnering at all with other artists' foundations?

JACK FLAM: Yes, yeah. We have. We have. We've done some things with Joan Mitchell. We do a lot with other entities.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK FLAM: Like Turning Point, Center for Family Life, entities like that. Or Denniston Hill, we just sponsored an event for them last night.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there's hope that even though the government has basically washed its hands of any sense of responsibility as a patron of the arts, that these kinds of organizations individually, collectively, collaboratively, are going to reconstruct, you know, the benefits that once flowed from government coffers.

JACK FLAM: I'm hoping so. And I know, for example, Katy, our Programs Director, just the day before yesterday I think it was, was meeting with representations of some other foundations, mostly archivists. That's another thing I would recommend. Get a lawyer, get an archivist as early as you can, so you're organized, you know what you have and you know how to organize the legacy, how to take care of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: And of course, don't throw anything away, at all, at all, for the first several years. And of course when someone dies the first impulse is to throw away a lot of stuff.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or to throw away nothing.

JACK FLAM: Or to throw away nothing, right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Old socks—

JACK FLAM: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —stay around for two years because they were dad's.

JACK FLAM: Yeah. Well that happens too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JACK FLAM: Actually that happened with my parents.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JACK FLAM: My brother inherited their house and held on to their clothes for decades.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well we're also still human beings.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's been great talking to you these two days.

JACK FLAM: Same here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I really appreciate your time and thank you.

JACK FLAM: Oh, it's been a real pleasure. It's a pleasure to get to know you too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Likewise. Well, we've been—

JACK FLAM: We've sort of been glancing against each other, having small conversations—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Exactly.

JACK FLAM: for over 20 years probably.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Something like that, yeah. So it's terrific to have a chance to just sit down and have this conversation. Thank you, Jack.

JACK FLAM: Yes and something I appreciated a lot is the fact that it wasn't—I didn't feel interviewed, it was a real conversation. It was interesting to hear your take on things and, you know, it's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm not inclined to be an interrogator.

JACK FLAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I like to think that I'm a storyteller

JACK FLAM: You are.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I like to hear the stories other people tell as well. Thank you again.

JACK FLAM: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]