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Oral history interview with Robert Whitman,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Whitman on October 21 and November 4, 2019. The interview took place at Whitman's home and workplace in Warwick, New York, and was conducted by Christopher Lyon for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Robert Whitman and Chris Lyon 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

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is Christopher Lyon interviewing Robert Whitman at his home and workplace in, uh, Warwick, New York, on October 21, 2019, and thanks very much for submitting to this. And there is, you know, potentially just an enormous range of things that could be talked about, so I'll try to focus on things that allow us to address broad concerns. And as I've mentioned, I've organized this somewhat chronologically, but we want to go in whatever direction you would like to aim, so don't feel constrained to focus on specific topics. So let's see. You were born in New York City?

ROBERT WHITMAN: As a matter of fact, yes [laughs], but I don't remember it. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And grew—I'm picking this up from all kinds of different sources, so I'm sure I'll be making some mistakes but grew up on Long Island—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —or is that not right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —until the age of 10 in a place called Cold Spring Harbor, which is in Laurel Hollow. Do you know anything about that?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. I don't think I've been to Cold Spring Harbor but—yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, um—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did your parents work in the city or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, let's see. It's very hard to explain but you—it was the end of the Depression and the beginning of the First—the Second World War, and my father was too young and was 4-F-ed—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —so he got a defense job. And—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Out on Long Island?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In New York? [00:02:00]

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know quite what doing. So he never really got started, you know, in a life. And I—I'm just—you know, when you get of a certain age, you contrast what kids have now and what you had then, so I was exceedingly, I don't know, privileged to go to a very tiny school and a very—unbeknownst to me [laughs] at the time, of course, because you think everybody lives the way you do. Anyway, it was kind of a wealthy area with very few kids in the school. And it was a kind of a—I don't know—a kind of a school that doesn't exist in a way.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And this was in?

ROBERT WHITMAN: In Cold Spring, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In Cold Spring, huh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I mean, to give an example, since the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grades are all in one room, [laughs] and the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades were in the other room, so I realize that's kind of a unique and very interesting situation for little kids being exposed to big kids, and then jumbled together and involved in the same things. So I mean, for example, I can remember every kid—[telephone rings]. Excuse me, sorry but I knew this was going to happen.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: And what was special, one other thing, for example, every kid in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades would write a story every night. [00:04:08]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And there were few enough kids so that we'd sit around in a circle, and everybody would read their story. And I can remember, so, mixing characters in my story with borrowed characters from my friend's story and stuff like that. Now, you can imagine—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, how interesting

ROBERT WHITMAN: —how super interesting that might be in an educational situation, and I never heard of anything like that happening in any other school. So I was—but, see, I'm thinking back about what I thought was great. We were lucky enough also to have the possibility of science teachers, who I would not call teachers because they didn't come to teach exactly. They were there, available in a certain way or nature walks. But the Cold Spring Laboratories were there, so you had world-class—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Cold Spring Harbor, yeah, okay—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —had world-class people. And while you might not be exposed to the information in that way, you were certainly exposed to world-class people who had enthusiasm for what they were doing. You know what I mean, that kind of—so that's very unusual, and I've heard thing—if a whale came up, school would close and go down and look. Stuff like that would be part of normal. So I realize that's totally unusual, totally special [laughs], and completely bizarre. And then that—well, I can explain it in another way—because when we went back some years ago to the hundredth anniversary of my great-grandfather's house—or not a—it was their place. [00:06:14] It was like a, oh, my great-grandfather's—great-grandparents' place, my father's uncle Jay's place, my grandmother's place, her sister's place, they were all in this one kind of thing, and my wife said [laughs], "How the hell did you ever get out of here?"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So this is like a compound or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah. I mean, we're talk—[laughs]—they were not impoverished, let's put it that way.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So she said, "How the hell did you ever get out of here?" and I said, "It was easy, my father died, [laughs] so that, that sort of shifted."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How old were you?

ROBERT WHITMAN: About 10, I think. I know I—it was right after the war, so. And then we—I went to New Jersey.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Where in New Jersey?

ROBERT WHITMAN: A place called Englewood, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you went to school somewhere in that area?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, I went to a public school for a couple of years and then to a place called Englewood School for Boys.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Englewood School?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Englewood School for Boys, yeah—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Englewood School for Boys.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —at the time. However, it's now—[laughs]. And I don't mind using that because it sounds like a reformatory, I mean, but—[they laugh].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It does, it does.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Which was I would say excepting for some of the masters who were, uh, completely decent people, generally speaking, it was a very horrible experience. [Laughs.] Oh, well, of course, I was not a good student, so, which made it even worse. [00:08:05]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I have to ask you, were you athletic as a young person?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The reason I'm asking is because of the—some of the early performances have seemed to have been very physical.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, they were, exactly. And, yeah, part of that had to do with having seen the performance stuff that was going on at the time. Uh, and one of my reactions was to look at all of the stuff they were leaving out, you know? It's relative to what I always had in my head that all that seemed very, very precious in a way. You know I—because being a kid and not knowing anything you—[laughs]—being very insecure, one tends to be a little more judgmental than your grown-up self would have liked you to have been in the past, [laughs] to put it mildly.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: So that also—you know. So those early pieces were very physical. It changed a lot pretty quickly when I realized that the audiences were reacting more, more to the sort of pace and speed than to any kind of apprehension of an image. [00:10:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's interesting.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Even though pace and speed can be very much a part of the image but nevertheless, it—you would rather have people be back in their heads instead of on, you know, on the stage. I mean, you like a back and forth between the two but you—but I realize it was way too easy to, you know, get attention by this kind of dynamic, physical activity. And it—you know, so. So I moved on.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm curious a bit about—oh, well, just kind of a standard question but was anyone in your family involved in creative arts at all or writing or art, visual art?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I—looking back, you get to be aware of certain people who did things. I'd had an aunt who was a painter. I don't think I ever saw any of her paintings, but I know now—knew though that she would do murals for public—not public places but some place I heard that. And then I had a—the brother of my great-grandfather was a designer, and a plein air painter, and [laughs] went on a sketching trip in Europe with [Frederic Church -RW] and [laughs] one of the things like that, so I found out about him. [My grandfather was Robert W. DeForest, his brother was Lockwood DeForest, who went on a sketching trip in Europe with Frederic Church. My father was Robert DeForest Whitman. I am Robert DeForest Whitman, Jr.-RW] [00:12:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And were you attracted to performing in the theater at—when you were young?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, I was very shy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's interesting—

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, I'm—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —shy.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, completely. So okay, you're going to get all of my stories for the record, so. You don't know when something changes your life when it's happening necessarily when you're a kid. And for some reason, somebody in my family thought it was important for my

brother and myself to go to the circus, which in the context of the culture, you know, I can't—I can't put a figure on how that happened. But we were taken to the circus whenever—you know, pretty much a lot of times. So sometime, I'm guessing around 1940, I got to see Emmett Kelly perform.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And this, you know, you could probably put in exact dates when that he began because beforehand, he'd been an aerialist.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't know that.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, well, they didn't want them to do his Weary Willie routine because it was seen as depressing, which it was. And during the—you know, when I was a boy, there were still people on the road even though, you know, you'd see guys walking in through town if you—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hobos basically—

ROBERT WHITMAN: People that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —yeah, or looking for work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —who were homeless people really, looking for work.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, stuff like that, so. Of course, as a kid, you become totally unaware of this, you know, if you're affluent, so it's—it's just part of the background. [00:14:10] There were things on the street like hurdy-gurdy guys, and this is a very small place. The village nearby was called Syosset, which is by today's standard a [laughs] small village, smaller than Warwick or anything. But anyway, where was I? Oh, okay, so I'm sure you're familiar with the routine where he sweeps the light under the rug?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You are?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The spotlight, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Yeah, he sweeps it under the rug, and it goes out. Well, I was stunned. As a kid, I could not understand why the people around weren't frozen. It seemed to me right then, time stopped. Of course as a kid, you don't realize what that image contains and you can't —now, I can understand completely why they didn't want him to do it. It's a death image if there ever was one and very depressing. So, just as another note because this is much later, Carol Burnett had him on her program.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And she has a character that's like the cleaning lady?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes, yes, Carol Burnett, uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. That was one of her—that's almost a signature character for her.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Okay, that's almost the female equivalent of—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —anyway, so he sweeps up the light, but instead of put—sweeping it under the rug, she picks it up and puts it in the pocket of her apron, which is so—[00:16:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —[laughs] I mean, so astoundingly the opposite of the original image. It was so—I'm going, "How hip is Carol Burnett to get it?" [laughs] you know, really wonderful. So anyway that's an aside because just—but the effect of that on me probably at age five was akin

to, you know, it must have changed my brain somehow. But, of course, I think about five or six, I don't know exactly, but you could probably find it—one could find out by—some circus historian would know when they allowed him to start doing that, that act.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. So, I'm curious about these though there seem to have been just moments that turned you. I—this is looking a little bit later, but I guess in an interview at some point, you mentioned seeing short films by Émile Cohl, the French, the— animator, very early films?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You must have been a teenager by that point that you saw that, but I—you know, you can find anything on YouTube now [laughs].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, you can. Isn't that great?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And so I found the film that is called *Fantasmagorie* or something like that that you had mentioned in this. And it was so startling because there were four or five images in it that seem to be just like sketches for things that you did in your early—I mean, it was really interesting to me. [00:18:03] But I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about silent film people, Buster Keaton or whoever, that you were intrigued by.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You know, I was lucky enough to avoid most of that, so—[they laugh]—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —you know until I was old enough to look at what was happening. And did you ever see Arne's [Glimcher] film?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. It's—it—I don't know what the film is actually called, but it's *Picasso and Braque Go to the Movies*, and they did a show on the influence of silent films on Cubism.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How wonderful.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It was, and especially wonderful since a lot of intellectual critics looked down their nose at it, and my guess it's because they didn't think of it first. [They laugh.] Anyway, so silent films, I thank God for—among other things, that they didn't invent sound along with pictures because it forced these guys—it didn't force them, but it gave these guys the opportunity to make images that were visual and didn't have the sound so that—I mean, my own non-informed thread takes, you know, the real clowns who—those clown acts probably would not have made it into modern life if films had had sound when they first came in, you know? [00:20:14] So as a result, you had these spectacular guys who were really clowns like Buster Keaton, for one, and Charlie Chaplin obviously, and a bunch of the other guys. And if you look at some of the early clown acts, you—which unfortunately are not even remotely adequately—what's the word—archived or looked at, or filmed, or recorded. It did—it's a shame. But you can occasionally see a picture. Like for example, I remember seeing the Marx Brothers first do that thing with a mirror?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh yeah. Yeah, that's a wonderful routine.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's spectacular, and it's been copied by a lot of people. But I said, "You know, that has to come from a clown act." And I found a photograph where it shows a couple of guys doing it as a—a couple of clowns so I don't—it's in a book that I have of Fellini's. Fellini made a book about the movie that he made called *The Clowns*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. So if—I mean for me, this stuff would've been hugely important if I'd seen it or known it, but I didn't. You can see some—some of the effect of it you can see in a movie called *Entr'acte*?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yes, the famous, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. My feeling, of course, is that that movie was mainly directed by Picabia and Satie, and Duchamp, or whoever else was around and not René Clair who shot it.

[00:22:10]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm, okay. So it's more of a collaboration in a way?

ROBERT WHITMAN: My—that's my guess.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Makes sense.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You don't get much information from those guys—I don't know. I don't—haven't studied it all, but it's just a guess. But you can see lots of—oh, because at that time, the professional clowns, I mean, the great clown acts were the biggest stars in Europe. They'd get more money than anybody. That's how big they were. And that whole idea is simply ignored. Nobody knows what big stars—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well isn't—but it isn't in a way that that whole issue of documenting ephemeral art forms as has been a kind of challenge for you—[they laugh]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —throughout your career. I mean, you—you've done an extraordinarily large amount of work but accessing it is—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —impossible.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —must be, yeah, in many cases very difficult.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I took—I made a list. I should probably give you the catalogue, I—I'll find one, for the show I had last year at Pace.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So it's '61?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes, okay. They gave me a PDF of it, so I do have it, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Anyway, there were 50 performances recorded. That list—left out were ones that I forgot and ones that I may have suppressed. [They laugh.] So—and I said, "Holy Moses, that's a lot of work." And there is—there's recording of a lot of it one way or another.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, I think that—I mean, just as an aside, part of the reason I was so excited to meet you is that it's—I've come to think over the past couple of years, I'm really interested in that moment, the late '50s through the early '60s, it seems to me like a real turning point in not only American art but world art. [00:24:18] But, being able to examine that intelligently requires paying attention to performance, dance, film, you know, all these things that straight-on visual art historians, you know, really—

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —and the reason is it's so hard to document. It's so hard to get concrete information about these things. I mean, that's one of the reasons that [Milly] Glimcher's book is so valuable. She really pulled together a lot of material.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But she was lucky to have Robert McElroy's photos [laughs] to do it with, you know?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. She—and she was disciplined, and the point is, of course, everybody objected to that word "Happenings", and so Milly says—she said to me, "Yeah, I know. But it's what people will understand, get over it," [laughs] so okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think get over it is something currently that we all—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. I know I—I shouldn't have said that, [they laugh] but she said it first, let's put it that way.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well it's a terrifically interesting question. I mean, I spent a while rereading Michael Kirby's introduction to that Happenings book and he—and that's in the mid-'60s that

he's writing—does this real art historian thing of trying to—you know, come up with a definition that covers everybody. And in the end, he sort of throws up his hands and says, "Well, if that doesn't cover this and it doesn't cover that." And it's, you know, trying to nail a definition of this. But you—you've pretty much have settled on theater pieces or theater works? [00:26:04] Well, how do you prefer to—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I—you know—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —refer to what you did?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —right now, I talk about performance. Period.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Just performance?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, leave it at that. Now, I was going to say since I was talking about clowns, I'm quite sure that there's kind of a subconscious thread and influence of these guys, you know, that kind of magically passes down through generations somehow, you know? Because for example if you look at Red [Grooms' -CL] first big piece, he—in white face.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I was going to ask you about that.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You saw—now did—you saw the piece in Provincetown, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You didn't?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's interesting. [Milly] Glimcher has you at—[laughs].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Really?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —has you at—[dog whining]. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: I hope that's Sylvia [Palacios Whitman, artist and married to Whitman -CL].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Oh, okay. Well anyway, go ahead. Yes, the white face and that's the Pasty Man?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I did see somebody walk by a window.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh. Hmm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, now they're walking back.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Somebody coming in.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Let me pause this.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Mama?

[Audio Break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So Red Grooms in his white face is—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, I'm just saying that all that stuff, I would—although Red was very



conscious of that history. [00:28:00] I'm, uh—so it all has to do with nonverbal theater, which is important. That was one of the key things even though a lot of words got used in these performances, but it wasn't directed by that. I don't think—well, Jimmy [Dine] did. Jimmy had a lot of literal content in his stuff, but Claes [Oldenberg] and Red, uh, and myself were largely nonverbal, I think. And Allan [Kaprow] kind of was in-between and threw everything up in the [they laugh] mix—so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh, uh-huh, [affirmative]. Let—I just want to dial back a little bit—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Sure.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —on biography. So you ended up going to Rutgers in 1953.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you're—it sounds like you were initially intending to go toward English literature but became a little disillusioned with that or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, not really. It's just I was such a lousy student. [Laughs.] You know, I just—I didn't have the gift. I think today they would call it attention deficit disorder or something, you know [laughs]? But the other thing, of course, is that at that time—

SYLVIA PALACIOS WHITMAN: Okay, nice to meet you.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Nice to meet you.

SYLVIA PALACIOS WHITMAN: I'm on my way.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. [Laughs.] Um, the big things were exciting and the energy in—was in abstract painting, and I was unaware of any literature that had that kind of power. [00:30:07] I do remember Dylan Thomas creating a giant stir when he came on tour in the U.S. But anyway, so that naturally attract—that energy is what attracted me, and you could see, or I could, you could imagine that energy coming off the canvas some—at some point in the future, which as far as I'm concerned became the performance stuff.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So um, was there a studio that you had access to or in—

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] I would say I love these situations when I see them. The Rutgers art studio situation was in a room about this size. [Laughs.] So, we're not talking a giant facility.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, it forces people to behave a different way. You know, they start thinking or not thinking, but reacting to that space somehow or being in that space, in that life, so. But I think what's much more interesting about all of that is that—okay, Jacob Burckhardt asked me the question about something about this, and I said, "Well, I was there because I couldn't get into any college. And I had a—there was a friendly master at the school that I went to who pulled some strings so that I get in—get into Rutgers." [00:32:04] Lucas [Samaras] was there because he got a scholarship. Allan Kaprow, Allan was there because he couldn't get a job closer to New York. George Segal was around because he was trapped on this chicken farm, and Bob Watts was around because he was an engineering guy. I don't know why Roy was around. I don't think I met him at the time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Lichten—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Roy Lichtenstein.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Lichtenstein. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: And so Jacob, [laughs] Jacob says to me, "So that's how you bunch of losers got to be the Black Mountain of New Jersey?" [They laugh.] So—[laughs]. Then, I guess so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Rutgers has played a pretty interesting role ongoing and in—

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, well so I think that environment was probably really helpful and important to everybody concerned.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So how did you—did you meet Kaprow by taking his course?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And what, was it an art history course?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, modern art or something. I can't remember.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Were you like a third-year student or a second-year student?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I can't remember, probably second. No, hmm. I could've been third.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Now—Samaras was two years behind you, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: One or two, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One or two years?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. How did you meet him?

ROBERT WHITMAN: He just—he had a show at the gallery there, and he was—as I say, the art house was like this house, even smaller, you know? [00:34:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And that's what they called it, the Rutgers Art House?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: And so, I mean, if more than two people are in there, you're going to see each other.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, okay. What was your—I want to ask this in order. What was your first impression of Kaprow? I mean you know what was—did he—and he had the beard at that time or —

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't think so at first. Well, I was easily intimidated by everybody because everybody knew more than I did, so, you know? I was take—I took my first course with the guy whose name was Sam Weiner—or Weiner. And it was—I don't know if it was—probably an art history course of some sort, and Sam was also a painter. And, uh, there was—and this—you know, I wish I had the ability to have taken advantage of the opportunities. The chairman was a guy named Helmut Von Erffa who was a Bauhaus guy. Anyway, so that's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —right, right.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —it seems to me, we just plowed ahead or at least I just plowed ahead in all ignorance.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And George Brecht was there at that time?

ROBERT WHITMAN: George Brecht was around.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: He was around?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, he was working for Johnson & Johnson.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, so he was like—he's like, chemical engineer [Brecht was a chemist -CL] or something like that or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know what he would—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —some kind of—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —something like that, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —some kind of? Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. But George was—he was—oh, I know. Allan met George I think because they were both taking classes with [John -CL] Cage—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —at The New School or something.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, okay, that makes sense. [00:36:00] So what is the Sketch Club that I read about?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, shit. [Laughs.] Oh, my goodness gracious. Okay. I think there were—it was Lucas, myself, and one other guy, and George was the director.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Segal?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, I think it was somehow a way for [laughs] Allan to get George 25 bucks a week [they laugh] to teach these bozos stuff. Now, of course, I had no idea that George had—was a Cooper Union guy and really knew what he was talking about from a technical, and that background. I didn't he had—you know, went through that process of going to an actual art school, my goodness, [they laugh] so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Very impressive.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Very indeed. And if you've seen George's drawings, which I have done lately —

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah?

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's—it—just as another aside, I've been down to the—um, now several times—I would say three or four times to see Rena, who's taking care of George's stuff, Rena Segal, and just going through that. Of course, I resisted for a long time because I'm very uncomfortable around ghosts of that nature and very—you know, I was very moved and touched and, whew, yeah, so. But she's done a good job of showing the stuff that she has and trying to manage, so good for her.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. How close is the chicken farm to Rutgers or—[00:38:01] Is it far?

ROBERT WHITMAN: In those days, it would maybe—now, it's further because traffic is worse, but in those days, it was pretty close and, you know, 15, 20 minutes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, okay, okay. So—and then you graduated in '57.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you enrolled at Columbia? You were—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —going to pursue art history or art—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, it was a fantasy that I could learn enough to teach, which was a pipe dream if there ever was one. It was just not—it was not in the cards whatsoever.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. Good.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, two things one happened there: One is I got to see a lot of movies because I would drive in and go walk down Broadway to see a movie I needed to see. And—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was Meyer Schapiro teaching there then?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, he was and totally spectacular. Once again, among super genius people that I was able to sit in their class and get something but, you know, not nearly enough. I just didn't have it to be that kind of a person. I had the same experience at Rutgers. I took a course in dramatic literature with Frances Fergusson. Do you know who that was?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know. Mm-mm [negative]. Not familiar.

ROBERT WHITMAN: His major—well, I don't know if it's his major book but one was called *The Idea of a Theater* where he interprets what, with contemporary theater of the day like Cocteau and mostly the other French guys in terms of Aristotle. [00:40:01]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, goodness.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, you know, it's—there's something that's said, but it's a way to look at the structure of theater in terms of what he called action. So, once again, it was kind of lost on me. And one of them—one of the silliest—I mean, this is so—in the last class of a course I took on Dante was [laughs] myself, the professor, and Francis Fergusson, and I'm going—you know? I—I'm so completely and profoundly out of place in that situation, [laughs] but I nevertheless sat through it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, it's interesting, there's this little thread, you know, the Dante, and yet eventually, you do a series of works in the '70s, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Well, that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —that was funny. Okay, since at that point, I—artists don't read. Period. As far as I can tell. So I thought I was safe in the sense that when it came time, I could address trying to figure out how to visually cope with Dante. And then all of a sudden, Bob [Rauschenberg -CL] does his *Inferno* things, I'm saying, "How the hell did that happen," you know? That's just ridiculous. So then I figured do the *Paradise* because it's—nobody's going to read that. It's way—[they laugh]. Although *Purgatory's* is the—*Purgatory* is in a way the hardest and as well as the richest but—[00:42:07]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm, that's interesting.

ROBERT WHITMAN: The trouble with *Paradise* is that it's so—you've got to read all this stuff that you don't understand, you know, like Saint Thomas and everybody else. But anyway, so later on not long ago, I said to somebody, "How the hell did Bob ever do that? He can't read." You know, he's dyslexic—he was dyslexic. And she—this person suggested that Michael Sonnabend read it to him, and it makes all the sense in the world because Michael was a Dante person. He said he read a canto every day.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So um—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that makes perfect sense.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It does—absolutely 100 percent perfect [laughs].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. I mean were—and just you mentioned the class with Cage that Kaprow attended. How early were you aware of Cage, and did you see, for example, any of the Cunningham performances?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I—well, no—yes and no, because the dates are scrambled in my head. But what I—I was aware because of Allan's going in there. And at some point—and I think it must have been around '57, I'm not sure—I saw a performance of Paul Taylor. And there was some music in there, some stuff. And I've spoken about this before, the one that I saw with the most—they were very elegant, simple pieces, not dancy, very different from the stuff he ended up doing. [00:44:03] And I was completely, you know, where did this come from? [Laughs.] And I did

ask Bob, I said, " Bob—" because he did a sound piece for that. I don't know if you've ever seen any footage?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't think so.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. The piece that I thought was the most interesting—I mean, it's so simple, you watch it unfold. I mean, sometimes you like things that surprise you, and sometimes you like things that just follow in a natural thing, and you can see it right way how it's going to go, so. He had a—he was in a suit and started doing very simple movements with his head moving, you know, looking up, looking to the side.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I've seen this.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Now, you know what I'm talking about.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They—in the MoMA Rauschenberg retrospective, there a corner, and they had this piece, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And the sound was from the telephone?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes, and it's the, it's the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —the time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —time track, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, it's like every 10 seconds or something? Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Exactly. Okay. And I always had this, you know, I harbored for years the suspicion that Bob and Jasper [Johns] had a lot to do with what went on, because of what happened later with the way Paul Taylor's work went later.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So, okay, because—

ROBERT WHITMAN: But I did ask Bob, and he said no. So, he just must have been very influenced by what those guys were doing and that their kind of direct—although Bob's pieces were very rich, but Jasper's were blunt—and anyway. [00:46:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Um, so when did you meet Rauschenberg?

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's probably '57, maybe. I don't know exactly, yeah, but I would say that would be a good guess.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, through?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Allan.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Allan. Okay. Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And, of course, that—you know, I'm just a fucking kid, you know, I just—and —

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, Rauschenberg—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —I would—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —hadn't shown all that much publicly before '58 that, that Costello show.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, I can tell you what happened. I can tell you how I—there was a show, a super important show at the Jewish Museum called *New York* something *Second Generation*. This is a kind of thing that will never happen today. So the show had all—had Bob and Jasper in the show. And those—Jasper had the target, one, a target, a couple targets with doors, and Bob had this—some smaller pieces. And that's—so it would be right after that I got Allan to arrange, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it, great. And other artists active? I don't know, just fishing here but

[laughs] other artists that you were paying attention to at that time?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, what happens—I don't know quite when I met Claes and Jimmy, but it wouldn't be long after that. [00:48:03] And what you do is you naturally engage with the guys you like, [laughs] you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's a quote, and I don't know if I can put my fingers on it, but you talked about artists being kind of isolated at that time, you know, sort of not—and so you found a community that you could, that you could work with but—oh, damn, where was it? Where did I see that? Oh, I know where it is. It's in—[sighs], it's not by you. It's—the quote is maybe Julie Martin assembling it for that 1976 Dia brochure that—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —that was done. That's not important, okay [laughs].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Well, the only remark like that that I would've said—I wouldn't have used that—I would've talked about being marooned on the island of your own vocabulary—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's nice.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and never being able to get off, and no matter how much you try to radically change what you're doing within it, but it—you know, you still end up being yourself. You can't help it. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's a wonderful phrase.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Thank you.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —anyway. So, as I say, you naturally like that guys that you like and you know—I admire people who can appreciate everything. I just love that. It drives me crazy because I don't always do that. I'm always, as I say, still a young, insecure asshole [laughs] who gets threatened by things easily, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [00:50:00] Were people involved in performance at that time looking at or reading Brecht or [Antonin] Artaud? Was there interest in that?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Not in a theoretical way. I mean, I read Brecht's plays. I read a lot of plays and didn't like them very much because I couldn't figure out, why bother? You know, why? [They laugh.] You know what I mean? You've got enough drama going on in your house [they laugh] pretty much, I think. So.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's funny. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: I mean, you like things that are strange and mysterious, and you don't understand.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, right. Um—okay, so after school, you were showing as an artist at the Hansa Gallery, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes [laughs]. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What were you showing?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I had—[sighs] uh, I'm trying to think. Most of the work doesn't exist. There was one piece that I showed—oh, no, I'm sorry that's at the Reuben. I had made some pieces that were—I don't know what'd you call—checkerboards that were sloppy kind of. I think there might even be a picture in the Dia book of one of them, but I'm not sure.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't remember seeing it—

ROBERT WHITMAN: In the back of—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —but that doesn't mean it's not there.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, no, they're way, way back where they have a—[00:52:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: At the back. Oh, that is part of the *Chronology*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Uh, okay, get back further, '60—this? There's a couple of artworks there.

ROBERT WHITMAN: That will be something that never made it there. That, that I did show at—at the Hansa.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: This—I would've like to have shown—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Looking at page 201. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: But—so that's the kind of thing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Installation view—

ROBERT WHITMAN: You can't quite tell what it is, but it's—there's a center section with four—with checkerboards visible from each side, then another section in the middle?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: And some of them were like with this with aluminum foil, and some of them are just in plastic so that it's impossible to see.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Is it possible to walk around it?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, my goodness.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So really, you're already at that point thinking environmentally, sculpturally not really like, two-dimensional, on a wall kind of thing?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, kind of. I mean I—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, you know what happens with thinking about that sort of thing is that in the very beginning, I tried to rationalize what I was doing or articulate. And a couple of years later, I would go back and say, "Oh, God, that kid was so full of shit, he didn't know anything." So I stopped doing that right away, [laughs] and I think it's really a bad idea. [00:54:04] It has to be—you have to go somewhere and get in the zone or be intuitive. And I—and I always try to tell people things like this, and I'm—my granddaughter who I regard as, right, almost an intuitive genius in a way, so she occasionally—we have a friend who's an Afro-Cuban drummer who's really good, [laughs] really, really good. And when he's around, he'll say, "Fiona, come on up here" and so Fiona will pick up one of the things and do it. And so, at the end of one session, actually that we had a—this was spectacular. Oh, God, it's a long story, it's way too long, but they—all these guys had ended up here drumming away like madmen, so I know the house is not going to fall down. [They laugh.] And Fiona was playing the—you know, the gourd?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Telephone rings.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, let's—

[Audio Break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh, let's see. You were [laughs] talking a little bit about the piece that you showed at—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, Fiona

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —Hansa and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I was talking about—what—but not rationalizing—I was talking about this thing. So, after Fiona and then this was a couple of years ago, so she was 13.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is your granddaughter?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. And she turned around, and she said, "You know, once I stopped thinking, I got it." [Laughs.] Well, if you're not familiar with Latin rhythms or Cuban-Latin rhythms you kind of—you know, they are—you've got to—you can't pay attention. [00:56:08] You've got to get—either get the thing or not. And this is just another funny thing. So, before this, Fiona had been on the stage with Shie, and Shie told Fiona, he said, "Don't worry about it, just watch my feet," and Fiona goes, "I was fine until you started dancing." [They laugh.] Anyway. So, this is another funny story because right now she's at the High School of Music & Art, LaGuardia?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: And she got to play in a band—this is last year—which is unusual for freshmen. They don't let them in. And her—she got in for percussion, which anyway, you would think with all the Latin kids that go to that school, she was the only one who knew what a clave was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really? That's surprising.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It is surprising.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Even I know what that is.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. [They laugh.] So she got [laughs] the job. Anyway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. And so you have one daughter that's your—or do you have other children or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Well, one daughter who's living on White Street, one who's living Upstate, and a son in Berkeley.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: He was one of those guys that went to Berkeley and never came back. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Just went off the deep end, huh? Ah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, he did all the stuff that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm kidding.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —yeah, you want. Like he became prisoners' rights activist, a death row visitor, and stuff like that. I said, "Karl, for chrissake, couldn't you get anybody else to do that?" [00:58:04] [Laughs.] Because it's emotionally draining.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah, that's really tough.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So he—not for lack of trying but he finally got married at a relatively advanced age, 45. And now, he's got an early teenage kid, [laughs] so yeah—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's great.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and a contracting business. Yeah, so he's getting there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's good.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Anyway, back we go.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Back we go. So, we—we've reached 1960 or so, and you and your cohort sort of become the Reuben Gallery's, you know, artists—stable. I—one of the—definitely the most amusing interview I've ever done was a couple of years ago with Rosalyn Drexler.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, fabulous.



CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Who was so funny, and such a good memory.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, she's one of the great people. I know a young man who wants desperately to make a film with her.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh really?

ROBERT WHITMAN: He's done a—he's a done a trailer.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I hope he succeeds.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I do too.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She's, she's fabulous.

ROBERT WHITMAN: She really is, yup.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. And she said—told me that Anita Reuben had a sister who was an artist—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Correct.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —and that this was like kind of the idea behind getting involved in this. Is that true?

ROBERT WHITMAN: That is true. [They laugh.] Well, stranger things have happened, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, well.

ROBERT WHITMAN: One of the artists in the gallery, for example, they met in a lobby of a movie theater. [Laughs.] Right? What? [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. Okay. So let's see. [01:00:01] The performance that Kaprow organized in early January 1960, you produced a piece called *Small Cannon*.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do I understand correctly that that was the first piece where you used projected images?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Okay, okay. [Milly] Glimcher reproduces the text that Samaras spoke. Sounds a little ominous.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Probably was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There—just backing up a little bit, there's a bit of a dark side to a number of your early pieces—or not dark, um, but just—it's not all fun. It's—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh no [phone rings]. No, no. Although I do have—

[Audio Break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This Anita Reuben?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, it is.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was she like?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Um, I like Anita. She's terrific, but the problem with Anita now, I don't know how old she is, you know, but we're all getting on. But at the, at the time of Milly doing this, I think Anita had already had enough. She doesn't want to talk about any of this stuff anymore.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So here's the text in *Small Cannon*, "A steam engine slowly gathering momentum as the speed of its flywheel approaches 5000 rpm"—

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's not me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is not?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Nope, I don't know where that came from.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Interesting, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Am I credited with that?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I thought so. I mean, am I misreading it? Slides were shown. "Perched on a swing Pat Muschinski"—

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's correct.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —"portrayed an airplane being shot down as an ax chop the strings of the swing. Samaras gave a monologue in which he described in"—just, well, you can see it for yourself.

[END OF TRACK whitma19\_1of1\_sd\_track01.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —this indented part here.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Somebody has transcribed this from something.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Huh, well, that's interesting.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know if I would save, as the speed—okay, yeah, this is very gory. I forgot this.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, that's—unfortunately, it's correct, but not entirely. So I will just [laughs]—we'll just leave it at that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, leave it at that, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I probably would've suppressed some of that, but—yeah, that's very bloody.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So I'm—

ROBERT WHITMAN: And that was illustrated by crude drawings or paintings, or splotchy sketches.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That were projected or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, oh, that's interesting. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Um, so—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —I'm curious about your reaction to Kaprow's *18 Happenings*, and it must've been quite a buildup to this event, in a way.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I don't know, but at the time, it seemed a bit intellectual. [Laughs.] Allan's work often had the—I don't know what I would—part of Allan's gift was being able—was somehow being able to assemble materials from outside himself and influences. [00:02:12] So, you had that kind of intellectual piece of *18 Happenings*, then you might get another one that you could see had been influenced by Red somehow, so. And then later on, other stuff, which I was not that familiar with but—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Because you said about yourself that you were, as you put it, kind of marooned on the island of your own sensibility.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So Kaprow—am I understanding correctly that Kaprow, in a sense, had a gift for being able to pull in what was not really necessarily internally-driven?

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's—it was, yeah, it was—it's kind of hard. I mean, I'm no critic, so I shouldn't —

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, no, I mean it's interesting.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —I shouldn't, I shouldn't, but I'm trying to think of it—you know, that *18 Happenings* was kind of nice because it really showed the people around the possibilities, you know, especially of making something in an environment. I think that was a very big thing. And up until recently, it's always been a part of my work—is to make an environment specifically for a piece when I've had the opportunity. But, you know, as you see, the producers are not breaking down my door, [laughs] you know, to get—to commission the works or anything, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, um, the following year, Reuben moved to a ground floor gallery.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And I—as I understand it, each of the gallery artists was sort of assigned, or chose a month, and that would be your space—

ROBERT WHITMAN: That was it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —to do with as you please?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes. What happened is the core group decided to just do performance.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's an interesting choice.

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, arch—no art, right, just perform. Oh, I think that was the correct choice, and also, the other part was that it would disband after a year.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, you knew that ahead of time?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, because we'd already seen people hanging on to what was going on and staying on way too long, bound in a particular situation and not being able to move on. So, it was that—I like that idea, if you're young, you can do that. You can move on, you know, cut it loose. We did—let's see. I did two performances there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of them is *American Moon*, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Correct.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. But—and then at the end of that season, you did the *E.G.*, the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, *E.G.* was before that. *E.G.* was in the first Reuben Gallery.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, okay. So the '59, '60?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, okay, okay, '59. And then the '60, '61?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: '60, '61 season had *American Moon* and what else? [00:06:04]

ROBERT WHITMAN: *Mouth*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: *Mouth*. Ah, okay. Got it, okay, a little confused there. So *American Moon*, gets talked about a lot [they laugh] as a kind of exemplary work from your—when you're—as your style has come together at that point, and in a way that's recognizably—that you have established yourself as a primary figure in all of this. Did—how did—can you talk a little bit about how you conceived the piece, you know, developed the piece? It's not as—there's not a script, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: There's something that—I don't know if there was something like a script—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and I made some notes and stuff, yeah. But, um, oh, God knows, you know, you certainly have some—it's a long time ago. [They laugh.] But once again, it was an opportunity to actually build this—an architecture in a space that was specific to the piece and where the nature of the architecture would—and the space itself would be just as evocative as any other part of the content, any—anything else you might do in that situation, I think. You got me talking about this stuff. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know if you want to, but—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —this is a really interesting moment. You—and let's see.

ROBERT WHITMAN: One of the people who actually participated—helping out, not a performer actually kept notes, and he sent me those notes, which is still in the email because I don't read stuff. [00:08:18] [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Not a good idea.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's a—there are lots—there are numbers of descriptions of this thing, but the most interesting one to me was actually a recent description by Simone Forti, yes, who was interviewed by Danspace.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Really?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. I don't know if you've seen this, it's 2015. But what she says is, "It was very exactly choreographed. We each were doing moments of performance where we were visible and times of pulling ropes, and turning flashlights on or off, or turning the vacuum cleaner on, so it would inflate this inflatable piece of thin plastic, dry-cleaner stuff," she says. "So that got inflated and then Whitman and I leaned on it and then rolled across the floor. Then, I probably had to hand somebody something when I got there, and they probably ran across the top and pulled the pulley." [They laugh.] "And I remember one movement"—just to get—this again gets written a about a lot—"that I had to do, which was visible was a little bit like planking. Like you get completely straight, but my hands and my toes were keeping me off the ground and the directions were to heap around." [They laugh.] "So I was planking and heaping the plank around," and she goes on, and on. It's a really interesting—but the space, the audience was kind of segregated, right, into like three—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —tunnels.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —tunnels?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Six tunnels.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Six tunnels.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, three on a side facing and each other. [00:10:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, oh, okay, that wasn't clear to me, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Well—what—the pictures are in there pretty clear. So, when the movies went off—I like this part, there's a pretty good photo. When the movie stopped, the screens were pulled up, but the projectors were left running. So that the people in the opposite tunnel were illuminated by the flickering of the projector—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's nice.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and became part of that—became the other movie for the other guys.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know how people perceive this stuff, but it's all there. I mean, what amazes me, particularly if you look at Claes's stuff, who I admire the most I think, how rich this stuff was. I mean, there's always so much going on in the way—if people take the time to slow down and take a look. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you had made a film of the performers in the woods somewhere before?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, exactly.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ahead of this, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then the same performers appear actually in—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —in the piece.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —the piece?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. [Telephone rings.]

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: She's my grandmother in all of this stuff. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know her personally. I know her by reputation, so, yeah, yeah. So how did you meet Simone?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Um, [telephone beeps], oh shit. She came to me after the—a piece and said that they'd been doing stuff like this in California, and I was kind of like, "Bullshit." [00:12:05] [Laughs.] You know? Nobody's doing—but anyway, so we got together and then she performed in this piece, in *American Moon*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can—um, not too long ago, maybe it's last year, while that MoMA Judson Dance Theater piece—show was up, Forti was in town and Barbara Castelli organized an evening of performances. And, of course, she's not young now, but I was kind of astonished by her stage presence. I mean, she really was able to hold the—you know, in a fairly large loft with a fairly large number of people, and she didn't have any trouble controlling, you know, really maintaining the focus. I'm just curious about your thoughts about her as a performer, as somebody working—work—to work with?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I—I've been lucky enough to be involved with women who I can only say are all outstanding. [Laughs. Period. So, it's no surprise. What was I going to say that was kind of humorous? So, my daughter and I, when I have the opportunity to do something and she's got the time, she gets to be my director. Because it's something that I can't stand and know that she's good at it. So, we were in France a couple of years ago, and so we would call Sylvia every evening—or evening there, like dinnertime, well, it's lunchtime here. [00:14:20] So we call up—and so we call up, and Sylvia says, "Guess where I am now," and I say, "I don't know." "Well, I'm at this restaurant having lunch with Simone." [They laugh.] Oh, boy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, no. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: And—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm, that's interesting.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So no, they get along good.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's good. That's good.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So—I mean Simone is a great person.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She's sort of having a—or not sort of. She's having a moment. I mean, you know, MoMA buying those—several of those early pieces and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, you know, good.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, right, but—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Sylvia is having a—talk about having a moment.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah?

ROBERT WHITMAN: A couple of years ago, I mean, I'm—give you the—I always give you the long story so don't—a couple of years ago, some young lady said, "How do I—how do you survive doing what do you do? How do you do it?" And I said, "You've got to get a job," and then I went back and I said, "Listen, I didn't mean to be flip," but then I said, "And the other thing," I said, "make sure what you do, you get good photographs.] And if you're lucky, you'll get an iconic photograph like this,"—if this thing comes up. This one. [00:16:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know if you've seen that picture?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No. I have not.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. That picture—this is a show at the Hammer Gallery, and that picture was all over Los Angeles.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wonderful.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And then when the show came to Brooklyn, that was a—the picture in the show, and so on. So I—when I showed the girl this picture, I had no idea that this [laughs] picture became the image for that show, and it did all over the world now. And there is my son and his daughter, and wife, and there's Sylvia. And so, Sylvia was saying that everybody came had their picture taken in front of this picture. It was part of the thing for the show.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's great. What's Sylvia's background?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think she went to art school and then came here.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: From?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Chile.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Chile?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, and she thinks this is hilarious. It says, "Radical Women, Latin American—"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —something, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: "—*Artist*," and she thinks it's hilarious because she's been here for more than 60 years. [They laugh.] Yeah, so—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, we're in the age of identity here.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, so anyway. So she's doing a performance in NYU this weekend, which I've been after her for 40 years—40 years at least, to do something with these drawings from her childhood. Oh, come on guy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. [00:18:00]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Anyway, she's doing a presentation of these drawings. Then, she's going to Chile to do something, and then she's going to Vienna to do something, and she's been to Germany lately, and the Tate.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Good grief.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I know. So [laughs] she's doing a whole a lot better than I am at the moment.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think there's something to be said for persistence here, isn't there?

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's something to be—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Or longevity, one or the other.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I—what happens is sooner or later, some smart-ass is going to look

around and said, "Holy—you know, this stuff is fabulous, do it." Oh, she did a great piece. Oh, you see the hands?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's part of her performance.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I—I figured.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I have a fabulous film of the performance, but I have an even better film of her walking across the Brooklyn Bridge doing her thing with the hands, what she does, and she goes like this. And the cops, the cops were entranced, and so they all wanted to have their pictures taken with her, and then one of the cops says, "Now, you've got to give me a hug," [laughs] and so, what the—Isn't that great? I mean, those are New York cops. You know, the right cops are cool, so. Then, she did a beautiful piece again in a park—this is in a park in Brooklyn called—*Origami Tango*. So she found this guy whose name is Talo who does origami for the Met Christmas tree.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: And he—she got him to make origami costumes. So, they're like birds, cranes. And that—and they do kind of a pseudotango with—[00:20:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's wonderful.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's spectacular. And this young man composed some music for her that's tango-esque [laughs], you know, not really tango, but it's close enough. I mean, he knows what he's doing. So, that's a nice piece that she's done lately. Anyway, back to—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, yeah. I'd like just push a little more about your, your way of working with audiences at that time that—were they—[laughs] were they amenable to this? Were there—you know?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes. Because basically, I never—only once did I ask an audience to do something. I would never do that. I regard that as—uh, I don't know what you call that. That—that's not the relationship I like, where you have a boss. But once I invited the people to go on a walk—I've done this a lot of times, different walks, but this was a very specific walk that I did on a pier, a couple of piers in Lower Manhattan before the World Trade Center was being built. That's documented somewhere. And it was quite spectacular because—I mean, I consider it spectacular. Who am I to say? It was cold. [They laugh.] Anyway, we walked down the first pier. We walked down the end of the pier. It was dark, excepting the holes in the roof—you know, the sky is much brighter than we think a lot of the time, so you could see light coming through the holes in the roof. And you get—and there was a big heap of trash and rubble in the middle of this pier. I mean, it was big enough, so there was a car embedded in it at one point. [00:22:03] And you come down to the end, and at the end, there was a total—I don't know what you call it—spread-out marble, like elements of a façade, elements of windows but all marble, so it's totally white, these white architectural pieces, and then you see the lights of New Jersey across the river. Coming back, walking up this thing to the second floor and coming into a completely square room. This is what I—this goes to the—what I like, you know—is composing architecture in such a way that the experience of the space is part of the—it's the composition really. So, then another room just full of cubbyholes, then another room, a vast loft-like space, and the end of that other room was, I think, two big safes and a window. And I had made a little staircase up the window across the roof down into the next pier, which was the old Hoboken Ferry Terminal. So you're coming out on the mezzanine floor and walking around, and that—another beautiful architecture. And then we had some things that we did there, some little shadows, some sound, and that was kind of the piece. [00:24:03] It was basically a walk through these different spaces. As I say, I've done other walks [laughs] but sometimes I just—what happens is you—if you're in a strange city, nobody else gets up at five. [They laugh.] You know, so you walk around a lot. And you ought—I mean, it's just part of what I do, I guess, is begin to organize that walk in terms of the architectural experiences along the way, and so, and I consider this a work. I would have never listed it as such, but I've done it enough so that I realize that I'm being very serious [laughs] about it in a certain way. Well, unless you're getting something out of it for yourself, why bother? You know, make it more interesting. Anyway, where were we? This is going to—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. So I was mesmerized by your description. [Laughs.] Part of what I'm trying to reconcile on my head is reading the description of the space in *American Moon*, and I

think Jim Dine called it threatening and claustrophobic, you know? I mean, I'm not taking that as an objective thing. I'm just—thinking it was interesting that he had that reaction to it. Was that your—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, Jimmy lived in that building.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And it was—for it him, it might have seemed threatening because he was aware of all the garbage on the floor. [00:26:03] [They laugh.] And the fact that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, well, in that case—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and the fact that the whole thing could go up in flames at any moment. [They laugh.] So he had a kind of personal interest in all of that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So there's a very nice quote by you about that piece in that, in the 1976 Dia brochure, "I don't suppress some of the bolts holding the work together. I want the audience to be aware that this is done by people. I want the tension between the rational mind and the will that wants to become one with the performance. At the end, you have the fusion of the will and the rational mind." You said something similar an hour or so ago when we [laughs] started talking.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh boy, well, guess what, I don't—I suppose that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sort of, you said something about you wanted the audience not to—you didn't say it this way but you didn't—my sense of it was you didn't want the audience to project themselves into what was going on onstage. You wanted them to reserve some part of themselves.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, to be able to see it, yeah. Well, it's always interesting to me. Well, no, I wouldn't—you know, I—see, once you articulate that, the idea, you put a limit to the possibilities that the idea actually contains more than you can say. And so, that place is where I want to be. I don't want to be in the part you can say. But it's part of that vocabulary is that I like the idea of the in and the out, and including stuff outside in, so. Probably, I could go through a lot of the pieces and see that. [00:28:00] There's a piece in the Dia book that's got some pretty nice pictures called *Light Touch* where there's a lot of stuff that goes on with the garage door opening and closing, an image is being projected. That's part of the out. And now, I've done a lot of pieces recently where people outside the space will use cell phones to bring images into the space.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah, I wanted to—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and using those images.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —ask about those. Yeah. Um, so we'll—yeah, I'd like to be able to talk to you about the pieces, the—well, you did a very early piece with this like calling into WBAI, was it?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. That was the first version, yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But rewinding a little bit, so you're—the piece *Mouth* was the performed in spring of '61, and it was an actual meal consumed in it?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, no.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No? Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Just pretend.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, it was just pretend?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think so. They had a picnic. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. And—I was trying to visualize this from photographs. Did—is there like a large mouth?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.



CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do the performers go through it—

ROBERT WHITMAN: No—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —or how did this work?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —people come in, and they sit down in seats that are inside the mouth. And they become like the teeth.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The performers?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, the—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —the audience?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —audience, yeah. Well, you have to realize that the audiences for a lot of this stuff were teeny. Sometime, there was more of us than there were of them. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. Um, okay, so they would sit in the—I couldn't help thinking, [00:30:04] I spent several years working on a big book about Louise Bourgeois. And that *Destruction of the Father Piece* that she did in the '70s with the big mouth and the meal and all?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And I just—I couldn't help wondering if she had seen your performance because there—it's so anomalous in her work and—you know. She only made like two performances in her entire career, so this was, this was the one that kind of put her on the map as a feminist, artist, midcareer. Anyway, just a thought.

ROBERT WHITMAN: What do you say we take a break and get some lunch?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And—

[END OF TRACK whitma19\_1of1\_sd\_track02.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So we just—so the recording knows what we're doing, we're looking at the catalogue for Robert Whitman's '61 show several years ago at Pace Gallery, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: One year.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One year ago. And this is the piece you were talking about—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, with—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —with the two—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —the two.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —*Dressing Tables*, yeah?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Yeah, one shot '64 and one shot 2018. And if you look, she looks the same. I made some photographs and attached, I guess I call it transducer, make it—with a sound of each picture. So this is a shovel and the sound was of the shovel, [laughs] obviously, dropping ice cubes into the glass. Now, I made this as part of the piece for blind people as a film. I did it as a film and then as a still and when you slow down—oh, if you shoot in fast—what do you call it, slow motion, so the sound changes pitch as well. So the ice hitting the thing sounds almost like a gong. It's very beautiful, I think. [00:02:00] This was—this had a sound of a diving board. This had a match being scraped and burning. Okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How is this piece done with the bags that are shopping or—garbage bags or shopping bags?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, they're big.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Are they?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah. This, is more than three feet high.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative]. But what am I looking at? [Laughs.] That's what I can't figure out.

ROBERT WHITMAN: The *Great Lakes* in bags.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The blue is?

ROBERT WHITMAN: *Great Lakes*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, shit. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, it's hard to tell from this angle to tell you the truth.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay, okay. Yes, okay, I get it. But the—okay. So the blue is what? It's—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Water. It's one of the Great Lake—oh, it's painted.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Painted?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, and I—the, the predecessor to the guy in the body shop up there, he painted these tables, and the other guy painted those.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They're very beautiful.

ROBERT WHITMAN: They are. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They really are.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Made it a nice job.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And they're so striking. So these, the pieces that you're looking at now, these cinema pieces were '63, '64?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was the impulse to, I mean, to sort of use film to make as more of a sculptural device or—[00:04:04]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Who knows? You know in the end, you do it because you feel like it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The window piece almost seems like a cinematic version of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, the piece in the Philadelphia Museum.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Excepting that, apparently, this was first. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, oh, oh, got a leg up on Marcel, huh? Well, he—well, how long was he working on that, for decades or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, apparently.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Apparently, so he claims. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. I have a spectacular book, somewhere back there, of kind of a dialogue between Ulf Linde and Duchamp. And Ulf is putting himself in—because they knew each other very well. Ulf made all the pieces in the Modern Museum and is, in generally one of the really great people of our time. And I don't know why I have occasion to think about Ulf recently. I know something came up, but my mind wanders all over the place, so you never know what triggers a thought.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So we were talking at lunch about the space Nine Great Jones Street that you rented with Walter De Maria.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And the first thing you did there is you showed, you had kind of a joint show?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, we did, correct.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you showed stuffed vinyl sculptures?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Something like that, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Something [laughs]—[00:06:00]

ROBERT WHITMAN: They were very crude. I want to—want to talk about crude, I made a giant hand not very well that kind of moved its fingers, stuff like that. And Walter had these very precise wooden sculptures that later became chrome-plated steel. Yeah, you drop a ball in a hole, and it goes clunk.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You made—you, you said that maybe the reason you and he got along so well is you had such diametrically opposed sensibilities—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Completely different, yeah, I think so. Well, also I think he had kind of a wry sense of humor—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —that people didn't quite get all the time. He was very funny.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, and you—and—you also knew each other socially and you spent time—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Kind of, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —together?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. I mean, I can remember because I had occasion to think about it recently, we actually went bowling. We played bocce. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's funny.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It is funny.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, a really important work was produced there, *Flower*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know if it's important, but yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, a big work.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah a big work, yes, right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: A big work, I don't know how important, but there were like 20 performers or something?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Four, five, let's see, four, five, six, or maybe seven, I don't know. And then [laughs] you have to consider that somebody working a tape recorder, somebody working the lights.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, right, of course, yeah, yeah. Had a very—there's a very striking image associated with that. The—that's the large red—[00:08:01]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —flower?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —flower.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And it—[Milly] Glimcher thinks in her book that that piece is a kind of culmination of your early work. This is a kind of art historical question, but Lynne Cook looks forward more *Prune Flat* as being a kind of turning point. Do you—retrospectively looking back, do you see there being a kind of shift in the mid-'60s, and where do you see it?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, you know, I just—one just keeps on going, and I don't think like that necessarily. The thing I will mention—I don't know—and this came about—oh, oddly enough, because of a name in the news recently, a guy named John Brockman who is around the

periphery of—his name came in context with something that Epstein was doing. Some sort of an intellectual endeavor of some sort, or it could be Suitor [ph] [No meaning, I have no idea -RW], but anyway, John, John Brockman was—I don't know how it worked, but the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, Jonas Mekas, was doing a fundraiser. So John went to Bob, Bob Rauschenberg and said, "You know, Claes and Bob are going to do something, you want to do something?" And he went to Claes and said, "You know Bob and Bob are going to do something," [they laugh] and he came to me and said the same thing so that everybody said yes. [00:10:01] Well, the reason being is first, the people you want in your audience are the other two guys, you know, and that's the end of the story. So that's how come I did—I started on *Prune Flat*. And it was the only piece that—it's the only time I've ever heard of anything like this, which was to be so unhappy with the rehearsal that I went back and worked through the night. I don't know if it made any difference, but I was very unhappy, and it turned out okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, the space that you were doing it in was a very shallow stage, is that right? *Prune Flat*.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, originally, it was supposed to be—yeah, it was kind of a shallow stage, right, correct. And I think they did have a crossover in the back, but I'm not sure. I know that's been changed somewhat over the years because what happens is the only reference is the footage, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I—the reason I asked is that it—to some extent that conditioned what you were able and what you decided to do with the projections and so on, is that right, or am I misunderstanding?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Maybe, subcon—I don't know because I did it in my loft.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, oh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You know, I even rehearsed it there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I see, oh, I see, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Which was 20 feet wide or 22 feet wide at the time, I don't know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm. Um—so *Prune Flat* actually goes on to be performed, right, in—at an Off-Broadway theatre? [00:12:02]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Along with an untitled work, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: A piece that was titled *Untitled*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Titled *Untitled*, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. And that was Steve Paxton?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So the *Prune Flat* had Simone and Lucinda Childs in it, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And, um, it's this, this was kind of like a—this was real theater. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, it was. Well, that was the idea—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You did—yeah. We had a run, you know, at the end.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I thought, why I wanted to sort of—what's the word? I wanted to be—I wanted this kind of work to be seen as real and professional, considered and—you know? Well, you can see how successful I was at that, [laughs] you know? Forget it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It could just—it occurred to me to wonder, was it reviewed like with a

theater reviewer?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think in those days, no. The only people who reviewed stuff were people like at *The Village Voice*. Jill was—Jill was an early—Jill Johnston was an early person who got what was going on.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right. She's—her writings are marvelous.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, I mean so strange but—[laughs]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Once, she went over the top, [they laugh] she got goofy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, speaking of doing theater, there's a quote that Lynne Cook quotes you in her catalogue, "My point of view is a theater point of view. [00:14:02] This meant going back to what I think of as the roots of performance of theater where you're not relying on words." And then you mentioned what you called, "The plague of Shakespeare—" [laughs]—"leading to a reliance on words. Playwrights," you say, quote, "forgot that most of the people in the world spend most of their time not talking. They're looking at things and seeing things, and they're moving through space. The spiritually, most rewarding parts of their lives had nothing to do with talking, so that's where I put Happenings in the theater."

ROBERT WHITMAN: Jeez, that doesn't sound stupid. [Laughs.] That sounds all right to me so far.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sounds very acute to me. I like the plague of—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Did I—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —Shakespeare part, that's—not many people would say that. But this is—you talked about this in the beginning of our conversation about the importance of the visual as a primary consideration in theater and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup, I think that's—I mean that's—if you—I mean, I had recent—oh, I know why. Recently thinking about this sort of thing, besides clowns, there are puppets. And I hadn't realized—even though there's a lot of sound with puppets—but I hadn't realized puppets are antique. I mean, the Greeks had puppets. And just thinking about the pupp—it came up in my mind because I saw my barber on Monday, [laughs] which is Columbus Day. [00:16:06] And I said, "Vincent, you're working on Columbus Day," and he goes, "I'm not Italian, I'm Sicilian." [Laughs.] So I said, "I knew you were going to say that." [They laugh.] So then I mentioned that I knew somebody whose mom had been a patron of the Sicilian puppets, and he said, "That was my childhood."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: "I love them." I said, "I even made my own and played all the parts myself." I'm going, "Jeez, Vincent, I hope you've told your kids and grandchildren about this because that's—" so then I started thinking of the different puppets shows that I've seen. You know, we've all seen *Punch and Judy*. I've seen the Bunraku a couple of times, actually more. Have you?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I've never seen—I'm—I know what you're talking about. I—I've never actually seen it performed.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know what's on YouTube. The time that I tried to look something up, they just had some guy showing how they worked the puppet, and I—that wasn't interesting.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The—there were—there are people dressed in black who were—who was kind of behind it, yeah. Actually, I think I have seen—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Blue, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —one performance like that at BAM once. Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. So there's those guys.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Have you ever seen—I mean you, probably at some point, saw Bread &

Puppet?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Something of it, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm, mm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And what I was—oh, so I've seen those guys, I've seen the Sicilian guys, I saw some puppets in India, and those—all of a sudden, you realize that you—they're all over the place. And that was—what—one of the smartest things that Joan [Ganz] Cooney got. I think that's her name, the woman who did Sesame Street? [00:18:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh yeah, yeah, right, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, she realized that all these kids' programs had puppets—*Kukla, Fran and Olli, Captain Kangaroo*, later on, *Mister Rogers, Howdy Doody*. [Laughs.] And they're pervasive, which I find—now, and we talked, in those pieces, somebody is always pulling strings and moving props, which I consider kind of like a puppet.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, for sure. Yeah. Because then in—well, like *American Moon*, right, there's like this—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah, all those things—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —he—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —moving up and down.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —he, all those things are moving up and down.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. There is a video of that. Have you seen it?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't think so.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, it might be on the video of Artpix [Whitman refers to a DVD by Artpix: *Artpix Notebooks: Robert Whitman, 2003 -CL*].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. I will look for it. Um—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Which has got *Flower*, I see the picture there on the cover.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, oh. Huh. Um—

ROBERT WHITMAN: And *Prune Flat* is in there as well. I think there are four pieces.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: If you would allow me to borrow?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Sure.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, careful, you're going—Bob—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I'm plugged in?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You're plugged in. [They laugh.] Yeah, all, all good.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] And then something here. And then a bonus performance of *Ghost*, which has—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, this is great. [00:20:00]

ROBERT WHITMAN: —something that's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. Related to all this is a repeated comment that you make that I found not easy to understand. You talk about looking to create what you call the image, and let me just read the quote. "I conceive of each piece as one image, and by the end of the piece, the image is revealed through exposure of its different aspects. It is nonverbal theater using a vocabulary of space, rhythm, scale, and formal plastic elements that communicate the image without words. The work of doing the piece is the work of revealing the image."

ROBERT WHITMAN: Whew.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This notion of a unitary image as being the aim, goal, you know—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, it's sort of what happens, that's what I would say. I wouldn't—I wouldn't want to go any further.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, what—

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's kind of hard to—I'm not too articulate so it—I mean, I might have the idea somewhere lurking there, but it's hard to scrape it out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, it's interesting what you just said because what Lynne says, she quotes you and then she describes this image as, quote, "a coherence in the way things have happened," which is—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, that could be.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —kind of what you just said. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. I should reread that. I did read it once, and let's see—I have a hard time especially with the art speak and—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's totally understandable.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and I can tell you something very funny. I mean, I found it funny. [00:22:01] I have an old friend actually from high school, if you can believe it, who I'm going to see Sunday. And I gave him the catalogue and so his wife, Louise, made some comment about that. I said, "Louise, you didn't read that, did you?" And she said [laughs], "You forget, Bobby, I'm a law professor, I can read anything." [They laugh.] So, "Okay. So you got me."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's funny, that's funny. Well Lynne is one of those people who can write without too much jargons and she—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, she's pretty good.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —I think she's real—pretty wonderful but, um—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I have to say one thing in that, about the catalogue. David Joselit wrote that article without ever having seen anything. And—I said something to Lynne about it, and she said, "Oh, I was a little disappointed."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, I read it last night, and I thought, Hmm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Anyway, the thing about that, of course, was that Lynne had asked Coosje—oh, Claes's wife? Coosje van Bruggen?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, Coosje, uh-huh [affirmative], yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So Lynne had asked Coosje, and the deadline was too tight for her. And then, of course, it was extended so Coosje could've done it which—that was very disappoint—and one of the—for almost a couple of years, Coosje talked to me about it and stuff and doing—because she was going to write a book. The stuff that she had written, I was unaware how far until it was too late because I could've gotten it, but when I said I wanted it finally, they just shipped off all that stuff to get the Getty. [00:24:15] [Laughs.] I know. And Coosje's handwriting is hard to read, so anyway, there it went.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Sighs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, that's too bad. Yeah, that—so that piece is a little disappointing, but Lynn's essay is great, and it's good documentation and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The drawing article, I may have tried to read. The problem with that is that I went through the drawings with Coosje. I went through the drawings once with Karen who worked on this catalogue.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, Karen Kelly?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Karen Kelly, yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, I know her.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You do?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, I went—which meant having to reread everything and try to figure out stuff. And so I said, "Listen, but I'm having trouble," and said—and so Karen said, "Well, I've tried my best to figure out those, those last couple of ones and where to put them," and I said, "What do you mean?" and she said, "Well, I read it." I said, "What do you mean you, you read it?" and she read the *Paradise*, so she could figure out those drawings. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my God.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I know, that's what I said to myself, "Holy shit, [they laugh] good for you."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow, now, that's an editor, you know?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Well, she's a—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] You got—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —she's a pretty smart person.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She is, she is, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Anyway, so by the time it came to talking to the guy about the drawings, what's his name? [00:26:01] I can't remember. I even bought his book about Picabia.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Not, Ben Portis, no?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The—George Baker?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Anyway, I was just so up to here with it, I was too tired, my brain was full, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You know, the—one of the things about—I mean, you know, I probably made 50 books like that over the years for different things, and it's—it did—there's always this limitation on multi-author books. You know, the museums call them monographs, but they're not. And really at the end of the day, you have to have one person who is really just committed to getting everything straight, and even that doesn't always work, of course, but at least, you've got a fighting chance, you know? Well, that's too bad about Coosje that—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, she became ill at a certain point, right, and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: She was sick most of the way through.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I didn't know how badly. And bless her heart, I can tell you because I didn't know, because before they went to the West Coast for the last time, she went through the house and showed me where everything was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Whoa.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, I know. In retrospect, I'm going, "Oh, man [laughs], please."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow, wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And poor Claes.



CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Oh, this is, this is the other thing that I—that jumped out at me that I really liked a lot. Just a phrase that kept—that's said several times, give it a little run-up, "A story is a record of an experience or the creation of an experience in order to describe something." [00:28:14] And then you say, "At a certain point, fantasy is an object in the physical world. It's like a street or rain." It's so striking the idea that fantasy is—has its—has a reality like physical things.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, that sounds like me. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, but that's—that seems very central somehow to your—certainly, to the early work but that you—that these things have a, kind of a coequal reality, you know that—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm not expressing that well but—

ROBERT WHITMAN: The thing is that—well, one of the things is, I suppose, that if you look around, everything is fucking fantastic, you know? The problem is that if—you've got to kind of mitigate that because otherwise, you just spend all your time being amazed [laughs], somehow. [They laugh.] But I suppose that's really—that's probably a good thing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I guess, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I mean, if people spent their time being amazed, then they wouldn't have time to do any of the other shit they're doing. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, much better than taking things for granted anyway. So finally, maybe we could just talk—but I don't want to beat you into the ground here—just talk a little about film as raw material, you know the filmic image. [00:30:04] And there's this kind of marvelous—I won't try to read the whole thing but—text that accompanied the film images moment of your—1976. "I use film for spatial ambiguities, I use film for scale, time, and color. It can establish rhythms. Film acts as a clock, film is a way to architect space." I mean, it's this wonderful kind of inventory of all the ways—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —you can use film?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —that film can be used in a theatrical context. And I was very struck by that because I don't think people think of film as a thing, as a substance, but it's, in a way a sort of like fantasy. It's as real as rain—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —anything else, well—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —or the street, you know?

ROBERT WHITMAN: The funny thing is it's because you—it'll be good if you got a chance to look at Arne's movie—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I will.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —only because I say some things in there. I don't usually brag on myself, but I got a good review, [laughs] and when I told Arne that—because I know Arne has enough of an ego to have looked at all of material. He—I said, "Arne, I got a good review in that movie," and he said, "I know." [They laugh.] And probably because of all the other artists, I'm the only one who had—has been thinking about this stuff for pretty much my lifetime, so. I mean, not thinking like intellectual thinking, but it's been part of what I do, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: So I had kind of a leg up on [laughs] what to talk about. Yeah, that was a—I was so happy about that show. [00:32:04] I thought it was a great show, and it was almost kind of once he—addressing the obvious, once you look at the images that are so clearly derived from their experience of looking at these movies including images that actually include photographic stuff. And in the course of this—shit, I can't remember. See, my mind is forgetting a lot of important things, but the woman who organized the show for Arne—Bernice, Bernice Rose.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I know Bernice, at MoMA, yeah,

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Anyway, she—I don't know why she—how she related it—these two things, but she knew about an airplane made by an early aviator named Alberto Santos-Dumont.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Do you know him? Do you know about him?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm familiar with the name, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Good for you because nobody else knows who the hell this guy was. Yeah, and so she somehow associated one of those planes with some of the movie stuff. I don't know quite how that—maybe in her mind, anyway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I—because I—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She was a strange thinker about things, I mean just—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative], good.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She—yeah, yeah. A brilliant curator in a very unusual way, and MoMA didn't understand her, I don't think.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —but she was there for a long time [laughs].

ROBERT WHITMAN: —I don't think they understand a whole lot of anything, but that's just me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, definitely not now but, yeah. [00:34:00]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, okay. So I had this fabulous book. You know there are books, and there are books? And this was just a beautiful book with nice, nice shiny paper, beautiful type, beautiful photographs and illustrations about Santos-Dumont. And, um, he was the first real aviator because he used to fly around Paris in a balloon like he'd go to lunch [they laugh] and hitch it up. And his dining room was high, and the dining room table is about six or eight feet off the ground. He wanted people to get used to the idea of being elevated somehow off the ground. [Laughs.] So one of the—oh, her—the reason she got involved with this, the story of this guy, is because she bought a watch, a Cartier watch, and an electric one. And it wouldn't work, so she gave it back, and they got another one, it didn't work, get—and finally, the loaner watch she got was a Santos sport—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Huh?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —which is a watch that Cartier designed, and it was the first wristwatch for men. And the reason he designed this watch is because Dumont was going for a prize flying around the Eiffel Tower for a certain amount of time. And, of course, he was kind of a dandy, and he always wore formal clothes even when he was flying his balloon, and he couldn't get his watch—[00:36:08]—he couldn't do that while he was doing all this other stuff. So he mentioned this to Cartier who made this Santos sport, which became the classic Cartier wristwatch with the little screw things on it?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. So that's how she got involved in seeking out the story of this crazy Brazilian guy who was the first real aviator. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So I'm losing track a little bit. So Bernice did put this show together —

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right, of Picasso and Braque going to the movies.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it, right, got it, got it, got it, got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Which was interesting because I went up to the office once and I don't—and I —there were a bunch of pictures of paintings on the wall and—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —her office?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. And I somehow—I don't know how I realized. There must have been some indication that these pictures they weren't getting. And the—and I said, "But why not?" and she says, "Because—" I said, "You've loaned to those museums and those people," and she said, "They didn't like the idea. "

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And so that's where you get the idea. There's a lot of professional jealousy that goes on in some of these, the—well, I—[laughs] you know, from the outside, I would never have guessed. I should have. [00:38:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, again, that's one of the—just built-in negatives of museum books being representative of certain artists is you have no idea what the politics of lending that may or may have gone into that show, and made some things available and others not. How can a book be a balanced reflection of what its subject is? Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, that's interesting, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. I mean, and that happens in every show. I mean, every show, but so —

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, that's why I give Arne a lot of credit because at least once a year, he puts on a show that—better than any museum show that's just as good. You know, like that Rothko show he had a couple of years ago?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I mean, people and I—that Dubuffet show. He had a beautiful show of Roberto Matta, nobody gave—you know a lot of things, nobody gave a shit, you know? They're great shows, people should see them.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, it is interesting that the—while the museums are more and more about a certain kind of, one has to say, a political correctness—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, please.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —you know the galleries who are still run by individuals, [they laugh]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —yeah, can do things.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —can do things that are—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Correct.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —that maybe are, you know, a little purer in a certain way but—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't, I don't remember the last time I've been in a museum. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You plan to see the new MoMA?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Nope.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, you're probably not going to miss much.

ROBERT WHITMAN: What was it? I did see a couple of interesting shows. Oh, I know why, because for some bizarre reason, I got asked to be on a panel about Alberto—what's his—Cajal, [Santiago] Ramón y Cajal. [00:40:11]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh yeah, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Did you see that show at the Grey Gallery?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I did not, I'm afraid.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. The so-called father of modern neurology, which is a subject I know is —

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, wait, yes, I did. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I know who you're talking about.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The wonderful nerve drawings?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Totally, yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my God, that was an amazing show.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Wasn't that [laughs]?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm sorry, I was just blanking on the name but yes. We went back several times. You know, I dragged my wife back. I was like, "You've got to see this," and she was in love with it, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, terrific. Did you see the show downstairs?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. I'm—I looked at that show, and I was amazed also because I said, "Why in the world did I never hear about this woman?" Ah, obviously, she had a big effect on Picasso and Matisse. And then they find out that they made ceramics in the same place, so you can tell.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So she was—and, of course, my granddaughter thought she was great. [Laugh.] And did you see the piece with the three TVs?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Sighs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, one—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm trying to remember.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, the grandma is talking to the daughter in Arabic, the daughter is talking to the granddaughter in English, but one of them is speaking French so that all three languages came to play. The only people who couldn't talk to each other were the grandma and the granddaughter. [Laughs.] Because the grandma knew French and Arabic, the daughter knew both of those languages, but I think the granddaughter only knew English or something like that, but they got this mixed. [00:42:07] That was very nice.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do—one of the people that becomes involved with you on *Prune Flat* is Julie Martin? Or not—maybe not [inaudible], but around that time.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did—[sighs]. She seems to stay, continue as sort of like interpreter of your work, a collaborator—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, what's her role in your—in—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Helper.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Helper?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, I would never let anybody—the only person I would ever let collaborate with me is—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] And I did do other collaboration. Once. My friend Ulf called me up, Ulf Linde, who I mentioned is a great—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You did mention before, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —so he called up, and he speaks English. You know all Swedes—not all, of a certain generation speak with this kind of semi-English, [mimics accent], "As you know I don't travel." [They laugh.] "And besides I had this thing in my ass that has to be removed," and he goes on like. So, he said—he asked me to represent him at the Duchamp Centennial in Philadelphia, so how could I say no? So he said, "I have the—" He said, "I have this idea that *The Bride* of 1912 is the same as the photograph of Rose Sélavy, like the one with the hat—oh, they both have hats, the one with the round hat [The figure of "the Bride" in *The Large Glass* (1915-1923) is taken directly from *The Bride*, 1912. I cannot immediately see how superimposing photo of Rose Sélavy would work, but the two works of Duchamp employ the same figure -RW]. And I—and that—so, okay. [00:44:00] So that was the piece. So what I did was I superimposed *The Bride* of 1912 over the photograph of Rose Sélavy, and they're the same.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Now, you know that Man Ray and Duchamp would not have had the ability to figure that out and make the picture so exact. It had—I mean, it had to be so—it had to be like an instinctive, spontaneous, intuitive something because it—the other picture doesn't have any relation to *The Bride* either, the other picture of Duchamp as Rose Sélavy more or less at the same time. I think it's 1919 [1915-23 -RW] is the one that we're talking about. So anyway, so I made this piece playing with this idea back and forth and during—and using some shadows, and some other stuff. And then finally, I can't go—oh, I know what I did. I made this—I made a cut out silhouette of the photograph and projected *The Bride* of 1912 on the screen and the person behind the screen wearing a Duchamp hat. Oh, there's a bright light, and they tear paper—off, so finally, the silhouette of the photograph is revealed with blanking out *The Bride* of 1912. And, of course, the audience being very sophisticated because they're all Duchampians [laughs], and they got it, and there were some other stuff that went on as well as recording. [00:46:06] I had recorded a telephone conversation that I had with Ulf where he traces the image through the last piece and—you know the connections. So that was—that was my contribution to the thing. And I—when I was there, the director was Anne d'Harnoncourt, who—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Why did the good people go away so—anyway—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She was wonderful.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Totally. [Laughs.] Absolutely. I said, "You know—" I told her, I said, "Listen, I had the feeling that I'm hanging out with a bunch of people who think they've been kidnapped by aliens," I mean, talking about the Duchampians, and she said, "Yeah." [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She was more—she was so down to earth too, I mean, you know, sophisticated to the end of—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But just—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, of course I did—had no idea, her whole entire background.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well her father, you know, he was—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. But her uncle was John Collier.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I didn't know that.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think so, yeah. Well that's—my guess is that's how Rene d'Harnoncourt ran into him at one of those expositions because they both had an interest in other cultures.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Huh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Collier was, at that time, involved with the American Indians. Like wasn't he the department of interior guy or—anyway, that was his thing, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't know that. No, I only knew about—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Anyway—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —the connection to her father but—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, so. I met her very briefly. She was working at Chicago at the time and then—and in this time in Philadelphia. [00:48:05] That, that must have been a hell of a weekend because I only went for this particular thing, but I do know that Jill was down there, and [laughs] Jill was harassing—this is a story that I heard, that she was harassing Teeny Duchamp—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Huh?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —trying to get her to say that Marcel was gay. And I'm going [laughs] like, "Jill for—" my mind goes, [laughs] "Please." Well, you know she was a little off, right? [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, yeah. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my goodness.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, there was a lot of important people down there at that time. Oh, and Merce did his dance using Jasper's props or something. It had something to do with—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, there's—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —Duchamp.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —a set, yeah, that he made, yeah—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —with the—I think with transparencies.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Something, yeah. I can't quite remember. Anyway, that was my collaboration—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Whoa.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —with Ulf.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, no I was—the reason I had—this is not necessarily important but it's —[telephone rings].

[Audio Break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —thirty, well, what is she—83, 17, 30—she's going to be 38 [speaking about my daughter -CL].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But, yeah, just so yeah. So—I mean the other thing is they still—sometimes they're working out their deals from childhood [laughs] with your—with the parents, but we'll leave that aside.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, it was actually this Julie Martin quote.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She's—she was interviewed for her Archives of American Art recently, I guess in connection with E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology] and all that. [00:50:03] But what she was saying about you was—and we're talking about images—"The point about it was that Whitman's images just grab you from the beginning. It's not intellectual in any way, but you see that opening with the fruit and you cut it open, and the glitter falls out, and another piece of fruit, and he absolutely gets you. You're in his world, this world of images." Now, do I understand that the images were projected on to the live performer on—in *Prune Flat*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's on the tape. You can see how it works.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'll get to see—good. I'll get to see that.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, they were projected on them, and they relate to them, which I mean, it's not—it's—I don't like the—oh, well, you'll see, you'll see this video is so totally adequate.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Well, shall we call it—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Sure, you're getting brain tired.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm getting—[laughs]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: And that drive back is strenuous.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Well, you know, I'm going to run into traffic getting hitting—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, you are.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —New York. Um, let me stop.

[END OF TRACK whitma19\_1of1\_sd\_track03.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is Christopher Lyon interviewing Robert Whitman at his home and workplace in Warwick, New York, on November 4, 2019, good to see you again. I think we got last time up to the point of discussing or starting to talk about E.A.T. and the transition into technology through the end of the '60s, early '70s. But as I mentioned when I came in, you kindly gave me a CD of your—of several performances, and that prompted some further thoughts. And I thought maybe we could slide into this by revisiting some of the questions that came up last time. I wondered if you distinguish what you have come to be recognized for from—and you were the—as we said before, you're the only one of that kind of the four key Happenings people who has continued to do—just do performances of the kind that you make. I wonder if you would distinguish that kind of activity from what has come to be called performance art? Um, this sort of thing that RoseLee Goldberg has written about and she—the Performa series that they have in New York every year. And what I'm thinking about is the notion that so much of the kind of protoperformance art of the '60s thinking of Yves Klein, thinking of Chris Burden, thinking of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*. So many of those things had to do with the artist using or maybe abusing their bodies, their own bodies on this, and that while you do appear in some of your early plays, you really didn't put yourself front and center as a performer in that, yeah? [00:02:15]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, and so I'm curious to know if you see—how you see the relationship between what's come to be called performance art and what you were pursuing?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I—my only effort to try to figure out what was going on [laughs] was I went to something, I participated in something. And [sighs] I couldn't under—I couldn't—first of all, I thought most of the stuff that I saw or was made aware of had kind of a social or political content, and I thought all those issues had been long—let's see, they had long become boring. I mean, I thought—I mean, I thought the grown-up community that I belong to had gotten—kind of gotten over those issues, the issues of sexuality, culture—I mean color. And I'm going, what, why? And besides which, the work seem to be like—I don't know what you call it—cartoon or an essay on culture or something. And it's just that I always like my art to be something that you can't tell about you. It's got to be mysterious, or Meyer Schapiro used the word "awful."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, nice—

ROBERT WHITMAN: So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —as in "awe" and "full"?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, yeah. [00:04:00] So I think—so in other words, when I saw a bunch of these people talking about what they did—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And what was the occasion for this?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, I don't know. I can't specifically remember, but a bunch of people were asked to do two minutes on—or three minutes on whatever.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm, mm. Is this in recent years, or it's sometime back?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, within the last five, maybe five or six years. And I have to say that—

SYLVIA PALACIO WHITMAN: Guy.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, I know what happened. So I had wanted—I had wanted my little presentation to go for the two minutes out of the three, and leave at the last minute quiet, but of course, the person was not hip enough to figure that out, and I didn't tell them to start with. But anyway, the only person who I—there were two people there who I listened to who addressed—I don't talk about other people's performance—one was Anthony McCall who, I like what he does, and the other was, uh—I always think of her as Ulay and blank.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh—

ROBERT WHITMAN: The diva. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh, uh, Abram—um, no, I mean—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Abramović.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Abramović.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right. You know, I'm not a big fan of the aesthetic necessarily, but I admire the directness and the focus—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She's pretty intense. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: —that stuff. Well, yeah. So the—but the rest of it seemed to me very—oh, I don't know. I don't like to criticize other people necessarily, but it was unworthy. [00:06:03] [Laughs.] Not ambitious enough, not—you know? I guess, I shouldn't comment because I'm not really involved and I don't see—I didn't see the kind of—the liftoff of a cloud of wonderfulness and mystery, which I—you know, I expect that somehow out of a work of art.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's interesting because, in a way, one of the things you're pointing toward is the sort of prevalence of identity-related content in so much of contemporary performance, you know?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, whatever that means. I mean, does it—oh, boy, Sylvia just did a great piece talking about identity-related content, which I will—she told stories related to a series of drawings of childhood experiences, and it was pretty terrific. So that was identity-related but somehow transcendent because also they're very funny. So, anyway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the things that, that struck me in looking at, you know, these films and videos of your work was that your presence in the piece, so to say, was—seemed really more directorial than—I mean, I'm talking in traditional theater terms—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, right. [00:08:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —but more directorial than performing. That you're essentially behind the scenes, I guess, is what I'm trying to say.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, true. I don't like performing. I was always very uncomfortable.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. And I only did it because I couldn't find anybody else to do what I did. And a lot of the early stuff was very physical and demanding and you could get hurt. [Laughs.] And I—and so I figure I should be the guy to do that, so. And also in those days, of course, you didn't have access to willing performers. We were very lucky, and I don't know if I mentioned it



or not, you know, all those years of being able to have access to people to work with who were just so amazingly generous. Period. I mean there was the culture of generosity, and I don't know where that ever came from.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's a really interesting aspect of almost like mutual aid, you know, that that old—that old Kropotkin phrase where people are pulling together in groups that just kind of come together to do some specific thing not to be a group, but to do something.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I mean, if you look at the people who performed in my stuff, [laughs] that's a lot of talent there, you know? I'm trying to think. Like in those videos, there's—like in the piece called *Flower*, there's Walter De Maria and I'm—you know, who would've thought Walter would be a performer or perform in a piece like that? So there's Walter, Suzanne, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, and other people. But that's a—that's a bunch of really talented people [laughs]. [00:10:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And it's kind of brought to mind the question of the cross-fertilization, if you will, between dance and what you were doing. I mean, the visual art connection seemed very front and center, but in one of the videos Trisha Brown mentions that they were, at that time, working at Judson on kind of making—what did she call—pedestrian performance or something like that. She used some phrase with pedestrian, and like that it shouldn't be like ballet, but it should be like every day, you know, or something like that. And I'm wondering if that had an impact directly or indirectly on the way you thought about presenting figures in your work? That aesthetic, that Judson aesthetic?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't—I was too—I don't want to, I guess the word—too insecure and cutoff off to be influenced by much of anything. [Laughs.] Let's put it that way. You know, not—there probably—there might have been—I wouldn't have asked people to participate in my stuff if I didn't have a relationship one way or the other, you know, aesthetically or the—I mean, people—you're right, people came together and they were very generous. The best example that I can think of would be—would've been *9 Evenings* where you had—I don't know how many people—did I—I probably mentioned it. We had all those people participating for nothing. I think the two paid people were a union rigger and a bookkeeper or something. [00:12:05] [Laughs.] You need to have some legitimate people involved, but everybody else—yeah, I'm sure I told you all that stuff.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm. We talked about it a bit, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, I mean we did—I thought it was kind of hilarious that we did have a meeting with Ms. Goldberg who wanted to do something about *9 Evenings*. And I was trying to explain to her that in a billion years you're not going to get that kind of energy together again unless you have a fortune to spend. I mean, you're talking about a lot of hours of a lot of highly paid professional people, and it's just impossible. It's really interesting to me how people will imagine doing something with no clue about how much energy it takes or what's involved. And that was a good, that was a good example. She just—you know, I don't know what she does, but my guess is she doesn't—because of what I saw, that thing that I mentioned that this—people talking about what influenced them and what they did. The resources and energy that gets put into that stuff is very minimal as far as I'm concerned without being a minimal artist, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

ROBERT WHITMAN: By minimal. I mean, it's like—it's almost like it's too easy, and I always figure though, what's the point? [Laughs.] It's not—you know what I mean? [They laugh.] You have to find something that's—I don't know. [00:14:01] In order to make it, it's going to be a little demanding—or no, maybe it should be easy intellectually but demanding in terms of what the physical possibility might be. I mean, you can't be afraid of that, I don't think.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, it takes a lot of work. So, you know, it takes a lot of work to walk across the street sometimes, especially my age. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Still, yeah, yeah. It is, it's astonishing to look back on, just to think of just the sheer energy that went into it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It amazes me too when I look at those things. [Laughs.] I don't know how it got happened—how it got happened, that's a peculiar locution but anyway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How it got done, yeah, right. One of the other things that struck me about —Trisha Brown is so interesting in that video to listen to, you know—the piece, the part of—is it *Flower* where they're trying to take each other's clothes off?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And looking at it, I mean, you know, in—

ROBERT WHITMAN: So it's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —today's atmosphere, today's atmosphere of you know, violence against women, blah, blah, blah, it feels violent. It feels really—

ROBERT WHITMAN: It scared the hell out of me, I've got to tell you—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Because I think there was an undercurrent of real—I don't know what would you call it? Stuff there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It sure looks that way.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. I think it, I think it wasn't acting exactly all the way.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: When—I know, as I sort of say, it almost got scary to me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But she seemed to be able to kind of frame it as we had a task and we just focused on that task as hard as we knew how to do, and I just took that like, wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well that—that's the way I would give a direction or something like that. [00:16:02] I tried to have people, like, do something that was doing something, not perform a role, let's put it that way. Yeah, that, as I say, that did—that got my attention.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's pretty raw.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, and my guess is that they resolved those issues later on, [they laugh] later on, I mean—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was there—was the social atmosphere different enough then that you could take chances like this? That you—I mean, we think of the '50s, let's say, late '50s, early '60s probably as being socially much more conservative than now, but maybe in certain ways, it was the other way around. I'm just wondering what your memory of it is.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, my memory is different than what I'm finding out. My memory is that everything was—people were very friendly and socialized. There were parties and stuff like that. But recently talking to, uh, Melissa Rachleff—do you know who she is?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know who that is.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. She's at NYU. She did a show there about the downtown art scene of the cooperative galleries and stuff like that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, at like—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —at the Grey Gallery.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —the Grey Gallery?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. Yes, I saw that show.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. But the—she talks about—because she was doing—she's done some research on this, but she talks about some of these people and the lives they led. [00:17:58] And they seem to be a hell of a lot more rambunctious than I remember anybody that I knew being because I'm being, sort of fairly conservative myself, so I wouldn't have been aware. But now,

we're talking back '40s and people and—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Rambunctious in what ways?

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] Well, much more sexually active, and that kind of rambunctiousness.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That kind of rambunctious, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. But I've—I probably would've been seen as kind of square, [they laugh] I guess. I don't know. Anyway, yeah. So it was—but you were right about one thing. People did have kind of a common aim or goal, which—it's always to—I'm guessing, there seem to be some energy to, uh, assert a more progressive aesthetic. Now, I don't know what the hell I'm talking about when I say a thing like that because the big energy that was there when I started was Abstract Expressionism and then came the—what I call—I don't even know the names of any of these things—but the people I began being involved with, post-abstract expressionist guys like George Segal and Allan, and those guys, and then Bob Rauschenberg and that—those guys, so. [00:20:01] Trying to, I guess, assert another kind of aesthetic, and I don't know what the hell I'm talking about, about that because I—to define it would be really hard. Other people, scholars and all that do that, but not me. [Laughs.] But I like the idea that Trisha pointed out that getting a task, because that's the way to—for me, it's a way to define a performance activity. Just, okay, and now, you pick up that spoon and put it over there, okay?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's not—it is—it's not anything very emotive. However, [laughs] even—you find that even a silly, simple thing can be evocative of something much larger, which could be, it should be—it will be, [laughs] or it must be.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The, um—[sighs]—there is, there is a sense of multiple worlds kind of penetrating each other in those early pieces with the film, and, and sort of layers of filmic and actual activity that talk to each other, and then you do this repeatedly. You know, either the same character seen in the film and the seen in—the place where it first struck me was watching, you know, the—I take it, it's a film of the woman sleeping and tossing and turning?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, is that Forti, is it?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. While what's going on onstage is like a dream. [00:22:02] It's—I mean, it was very odd. It was sort of like the actual—the dreamer seems removed, and what one could take to be a kind of dreamlike activity is actual. It just seems like a kind of reversal of expectations or something. I wondered—I mean, numbers of people have called your—the scenes dreamlike, oneiric, and so on. Was that something you thought about at all, or it just kind of emerged out of the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: No. You know, what I do is just think of a bunch of stuff and put it together [they laugh] without—you know? Far be it for—I would never—I mean, I—things turn out to be linear sometimes, but I don't mean them to be. I mean, they—they're just going to happen like that. And sometimes, they happen because one thing happens that—one thing occurs before the other thing because unless it has occurred, the other thing can't happen. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative], right, yeah. Right.

ROBERT WHITMAN: In other words, unless you dig a hole, you can't have something to put something in. [They laugh.] You know? You can't put it in this unless you put a hole there first, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right. Yeah. Sort of like the ball girls with their opening with the newspaper stuffed inside their gowns. So—

ROBERT WHITMAN: In the original—you know, I used images from one piece and carried it sometimes over to another one.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: So Rosalyn was one of the original ball girls.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's funny. Um, there's a—there's an intriguing sense of looking at those, those early '60s pieces. I've spent a lot of time working on a big book about Louise Bourgeois with Rob Storr, so I got kind of Louise in my head over a period of several years. [00:24:07] But those layers she was making in the early '60s, those sort of pendulous hanging things like—and I mean, I'm looking at the ball girls and their outfits, and I'm thinking, That's interesting. I mean, this is all being done like almost exactly the same time, 1963, [196]4—you know? And I, again I'm so curious about the cross-fertilization between performance and sculpture, let's say. You know that there was—I mean, the glaring example is Bob Morris's minimal forms that he showed in 1965, which I take to have really originated with—as props for—of Forti dances in the early '60s. I mean, the things that are shown at Dia now in the installation of Morris's work. I'm just curious about your sense of the crossing between mediums, and of course, you made sculpture in that period too with the cinema sculptures in '64, is that—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, '63, '64, right. Hmm.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know if this is really a question exactly [laughs]. It's just a comment. I was just wondering if you were conscious at that time of the kind of borrowings or crossings between mediums and—or, indeed, if people were recognizing the distinction between mediums?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think if I had, if I had, I wouldn't have been able to do it. But I was being—I was kind of aware of being nowhere, like not identified as one thing or the other. [00:26:04] And then they invented that idea called multimedia, whatever the hell that means. [Laughs.] At first, I thought it might—at first, I think they meant something like collage.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And then, I don't know. Anyway, it's just—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, so much of this is driven by institutional considerations, you know, like, "Well, what department does this belong in?"

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right, exactly. [They laugh.] Right. [Laughs.] Yeah, that—it is confusing, or it must have been confusing because they probably like—I mean, curators and what, probably like to have things pretty well-defined.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, I mean that was always the issue of MoMA. You know, there was the silo for each department. And I remember meeting many times as an editor with Barbara London when she was working—she's working on this book about video, *Video/Art [The First Fifty Years]*, which finally did get published by Phaidon. I haven't actually read it, but it came out, I think, last year. But the problem was in my head, almost all of the artists she was talking about using video, like Vito Acconci would be an example, were also doing five or six other things [laughs][—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —you know so. But they're not video artists exactly. There were a number of them who've specialized in that, but it was more like, someone like yourself who's using film or video in a certain conte—

ROBERT WHITMAN: It just seemed to fit. I don't know how. Because now when I'm thinking about it, um—you know, it—well, first of all, I don't think I ever—well, there are a couple of things that I can remember now where I use the conventional format. [00:28:17] But usually, the projections are on something else. They're not on a regular movie screen.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: And they just seem to fit there, you know? It seems natural. The image appears doing something. I think in that book, there's a couple of examples in the piece called *Light Touch* that—where the videos just seem to grow and are consistent with what was going on. I don't like talking like this, by the way, just so you know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I'm sorry.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] That's okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, yeah, I mean, and you're—the screens you're using for your film include people of—[they laugh]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, they do.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That was pretty—that's pretty amazing that, the figure. Again, watching a not-really-great video of it, you just—it's not totally easy to see what's going on, but I guess there must have been multiple projectors?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Two.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Two projectors?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. And there was some way of blanking out the area where the second, more focused—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —one was?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —there was. Originally, I was going to sho—you know, that piece was so strange.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And that's *Prune Flat*, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. So originally, I had the idea that I would shoot the film with a mask over the—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Where the figure—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —while I was taking it, yeah. And then I realized that was way too hard because it would mean that I would have to be more disciplined than I usually am in the way of plot things out. [00:30:00] So, what happens is the projectionist is in front of the projector, and used a dodge to move it back and forth.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, really? Is that how that was done?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, interesting.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right. Now, the funny thing is that it gets harder and harder to find movie projectors. So, I've taken the trouble, not successful at the moment, but I did it once, of videoing the films and using video but with the sound of the projector. Yeah, because the projection, the sound of the projection, that's very important that that sound is in the room.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Because it's—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Because the opening image is of the film going through an old projector. So that's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, the *Prune Flat* that's on that DVD was as performed at the Pompidou in —

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —2001?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes. Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And along with the sound, you also, uh, include frames where the sprocket holes flash?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you said that in the early performances, you were using projectors that had a silent film speed?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Correct. So I used some of the beginning, uh—I think, I can't remember but anyway, I—you switch the projector from silent to sound speed somewhere in there, and I can't remember quite where.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So I think in the—what I was—

ROBERT WHITMAN: In the beginning.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —listening to, the beginning was at silent speed, which would've meant slowing it down, right? [00:32:04]

ROBERT WHITMAN: A little bit, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: A little bit?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, about a third.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: A third, uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think a third or a quarter maybe slowed down.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right. And the—I just have to ask this—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Sure, go ahead.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The cutting open of the fruit, is that a grapefruit, is that—what is that—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, let's see.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —red fruit?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think it's a persimmon.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I It is a persimmon, oh, which actually does have all those seeds inside it, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know if they—[laughs]. Maybe it does.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It looks like a persimmon but I could—it was very red, I just couldn't tell.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It is s red.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And there's also a pepper, right? I think there's a—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, there's a pepper.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —that has the feathers in it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, that's a pepper or maybe that's an eggplant.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, is it? Oh.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It could be. It has a kind of purplish hue as I recall.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's right. Oh. Uh-huh [affirmative]. Okay. Yeah, and it was interesting that both *Flower* and *Prune* seem to be two-part works. Was that a format that you felt comfortable with, or is that just random?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Random. No *Flower*, *Flower* very—was a two-part work. I think it might have

even—I don't know if that—an intermission or not.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, didn't—was—didn't there have to be a stop so that the paper could be kind of gathered up?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, correct.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And sort of—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, something like that, right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —yeah, right. And it was interesting you talked about the—it's something I was reading—the first part having a kind of dark aspect to it and the—talking about *Flower* now—and the second part, a more kind of positive, um—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, it's long gone, man.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's a long time ago.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So originally, *Prune Flat*, just talking about the title, was going to be presented in that little theater in the Astor apartments that are across from The Public Theater? [00:34:03]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Isn't that stage where that Blue Man Group played forever and ever and ever and ever and ever—

ROBERT WHITMAN: That I wouldn't know—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —yeah, just like—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I wouldn't know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —was it you stepped down a little bit to get in that theater?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, I think so. I think the building is called a colonnade [Colonnade Row]?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It has beautiful colonnades, yes.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, that must be it, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That one, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, there was something else in that building, but I don't know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's been various things I think. It's amazing that it survived. Okay. Jumping forward then, we did—I think we started to talk about E.A.T. and so in 1966, you Bob, Rauschenberg, Billy Klüver, and someone named Fred Waldhauer—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Fred Waldhauer, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —formed this, and was there a sort of leading figure in this, or was it really a shared—

ROBERT WHITMAN: My guess it was Billy and Bob. I mean, Bob had resources. Billy was—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was he like? He comes up so much in—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, man. [Laughs.] Oh, boy, what a question.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was he at Bell Labs at that time?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, he was. He was at Bell Labs as an engineer, as was Fred. And Fred, I think, had already been somehow working with artists, with composers, I think. Fred had made instruments, not instruments—but things that made sound effects possible for musicians, I think.

I think he might have been connected a little bit with David Tudor and John Cage. I'm not 100 percent sure. [00:36:07] Fred was a music guy—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —to start with. I mean, not a music guy to start with but a music fan.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: In fact, there's a story, one of the great Fred stories. It's his first day at Cornell, or night, he went and a professor went driving down to New York just listen to Charlie Parker. And there's a picture of Fred with Charlie Parker that he carried in his wallet until he died.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Interesting, wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Isn't that great? So, I think Fred was kind of one of those guys who's—I don't know what you call a guy like that—a genuinely positive, friendly, upfront, generous person. That was Fred who—you know, I might be over grossing the story, but he might have been the guy responsible for getting pulse-code modulation installed in the phone system, which is what allows more than one signal to go over a wire.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Because unless you can do that, you're screwed because it means you've got to have a wire for every call [laughs], so. No, no, Fred was a terrific engineer and terrific guy. I'll tell you a story about Fred. He figured out—he was the one or he came to be aware—let's put it that, I don't know how—that people who are deaf are deaf in specific frequencies. [00:38:04] And if you get a hearing aid that amplifies all frequencies, which is the conventional hearing aid at the time, it can be confusing to a deaf person because they only need to have certain frequencies amplified. So, he figured out that's the way to go to make a hearing aid, and he proposed that. Oh, Alexander Graham Bell started the phone company because his wife was deaf and he was trying to make a hearing aid. So that's the genesis of Bell Telephone. So, he made a proposal to them, which was rejected, I won't say naturally but—[laughs]. So he, I guess, resigned and went off on his own to do the phone—do a hearing aid, which he eventually achieved and got somebody to do something with, so that was Fred.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And Klüver.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And Billy, I don't know how to describe Billy exactly. He just loved—I guess Billy loved being involved with artists and art. He started this—a film society in Stockholm after the war, and they drove around and looked at movies [laughs], and had field trips looking then for films so that was—and then always involved with artists. For example, the first thing was, that I know about—I mean, the big thing was the Tinguely's machine at the Modern Art— [00:40:04]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So Billy did that with Jean Tinguely and so he was—basically, the idea was the collaboration between artists and engineers was—seemed natural to someone like Billy. Both artists and engineers are involved with figuring stuff out. [Laughs.] That's a simple way to put it. So, that the idea of technology was glued on by the lawyers who had to come up with a name. Okay. I mean, well, if you incorporate something, you have to name it. So that's how the—and the lawyers came over with experiments in art and technology. I think, my guess is if Billy and the rest of us had been involved, it would've been something about collaboration between artists and engineers, something like that. If you notice, the first big thing was—in *9 Evenings* was in art and engineering, not technology so that—because the word "technology" is a funny word that doesn't really have much meaning because it's a little too inclusive of. I mean, in people's mind, it has specific meaning if you look at the dictionary but people don't. You know like it'd be anything from a valve, a radio tube to a transistor, to a cog and a wheel. I mean, it could be anything.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, well—

ROBERT WHITMAN: It doesn't mean anything—



CHRISTOPHER LYON: —engineering seems more active. It's like what you just said, figuring things out.

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's what they do; they figure stuff out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Whereas technology is almost like, Oh, there's this resource. I can just dip in and take this technology, and that's a different concept entirely. [00:42:07]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Totally, yeah. I had a longstanding relationship with an engineer named John Forkner. I mean, we worked at stuff and fiddled around, and he actually made an invention that was brilliant. We never were able to achieve the ultimate piece because it was too expensive. I mean, it would be impossible. Now, maybe they could do it, but then, they couldn't. But in the process, I got to see what John was—he was an optical engineer, a genius at it. And so, we fiddled around a lot with lasers and mirrors and funny stuff like that. And so, all of a sudden, this peculiar something appears on a wall and so John kind of looks at it and says, "You know, in a million years, you could never figure out how that happened," and then about 10 minutes later John says, "Oh, I know how that's—" [laughs]. So he'd figured it out. So what he invented, because we would spend so much time looking at stuff through optical systems and whatnot that your eyes get a little bit—or your brain gets a little bit screwed up in the sense that you've become very aware, for example, that your eyes are seeing different things, you know, and parallel—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, within each eye?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, all that stuff. So I told John. I said, "Listen, I thought I saw something, but I know I didn't, but it would be cool to do it anyway, see if we can come up with something." [00:44:01] And what it was, was an optical system where, if you're looking at something where the thing that's far is the closer to you than the thing that's near, in other words, reversing space. Okay. So John said, "Okay, let's—" So he went around asking his physicists friends, and all of them said, "You can't do it." But he said, "I know you can do it because that's the other side of a hologram." So, the first thing he came up—[laughs]—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —the first thing he came up, he reinvented something called the Wheatstone pseudoscope, which was using prisms, and I think you reverse the parallax of your eyes. So what the right eye sees is shifted over to the left and vice versa, so you're looking through these things. And it worked, but it was what you would call a psychological trick because it depends on shifting your eyes from the right to the left, and left to right. So, if you actually wore this thing for a couple of years, your eyes would probably readjust, and you'd see it normally.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You know? Okay. So he said, "Okay, fine, that's step one." So step two was the actual invention where it wasn't psychological, it was physical. And what that—I like explaining this and seeing if you can understand it because it's really hard. [Laughs.] But anyway, what he did was he—using an array of tiny corner reflectors. Now a—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What's a corner reflector?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Ah, that's what I was going to tell you. A corner reflector is a mirror in the shape of a corner, so it's got—it's like where corners come together, not all three ways, yeah. [00:46:05]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, that's like looking up the corner of the ceiling when—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —the ceiling meets—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —so it has three?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Okay. If you make them really tiny—oh, the property of a corner reflector is that all the light that goes into it, goes back where it came from.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh. Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay? So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, so this is how the Pavilion—

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's another one. I'll tell—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's another one, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: We'll get—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We're getting there, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. So the thing is that, okay, now, if they're really tiny, so you've got an array of corner reflectors, the light that comes to the tip of your nose goes in and is reflected back, all the light that comes off it, you know, it will go back to there. The light that comes off your glasses, all the—you know, all the light will come back to where it came from. So, the trick is—now imagine that's happening to your face. So you've got this mask of light, the image of your face on your face. Okay. Now, the—how can you see this? I mean, if you could move backwards with the speed of light, you would see this thing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Almost like a mask or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: You would see a mask, right, correct. So, what he did is he put a 90-degree beam splitter, which is like a 5050 mirror, but in this case, you don't use other proportion but a 5050 mirror so that the light that goes through this mirror—oh, by 5050, I mean, it's coded 5050, so—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. So the light that goes through mirror hits the corner reflectors. [00:48:01] Half of it will come back to where it came from. The other half will hit the 45-degree—the mirror that's put at 45 degrees—will hit the mirror and go out that way where it will hang in space as a real image so that somebody could look at it. [Laughs] And that's pretty spectacular, and it really worked. Now, the funny thing about that is that when we showed it to people, they were—their minds don't accept that. They said, "This can't be," or say, "It sounds weird, but I don't get it." You know they—they're uncomfortable, for example, seeing somebody whose teeth are actually in front of their mouth or the eyeglasses go into the head and then they move, and this void goes—move into—the eyeballs are out in front. People, they don't get it. Anyway so that was a genuine, wonderful invention of John's. Isn't that terrific?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's amazing.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, it was great. And I'll just tell you there's a funny story related but not, and I can't quite remember. So, John was somebody I met in connection with Maurice Tuchman's art and technology project at the L.A. County Museum [of Art].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And that—and you were involved with that in '71? No.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, well, the, yes, '70.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Or '70, '71, like in there?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, that's '69, '70, something like that, yeah. So, in connection with that, one of the consultants was Richard Feynman and—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really? Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And this is the—I love this. So Richard went around and looked at all the—you know, he was looking at all this stuff. And I don't know how come he came back to—like we went and visited, and he came back to the car that we were being trucked around in. And we had some time together in the car, I don't know, waiting for somebody, and he said—so the two things happened that were wonderful: [00:50:06] one was he goes—I don't know if he kept his Brooklyn accent as an affectation or he just kept it, you know? But, in any case, he gets—like he says—he said, "Boy, where'd you get that guy? He's terrific." [They laugh.] He's talking about John Forkner. [Laughs.] So that was one thing that—and then he—we chatted for a while and I

mentioned that one of the projects these guys were working on was some sort of a membrane that they could use to figure out how to have a device that would smell the enemy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. So even I knew it this time—and I'm not a—I don't know anything about anything—that you can't smell the specific enemy because it's a function of genes. It's not a function of diet.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So the only thing that'll fool a dog, for example, will be identical twins.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Stuff like that. So I said—mentioned that. So then finally, he proceeded to tell me this story, which he's written about in his book, one of the books, that people's—people are—have much better sense of smell than they give themselves credit for. It's not—doesn't come within thousandths of a dog or an animal that really has a nose, but it's better than you think. So he said, "But the social norms prevent people from going up to each other and grabbing their hands and go—" [they laugh]. You know, that stuff, doing like that. [00:52:00] So he decided he would test it, and this is, this is why I love these kinds of things. So, his experiment was to put a bunch of books on the table with some guests, and each person would handle one book, and he would go around and try to find out, figure out by smelling who handled which book. And he was way more accurate than you would have supposed or guessed. See, that's—and so he failed when he tried to track his wife. He had his wife walk barefoot through the house, and he was going to go around and sniff and try to follow her by—[laughs] like a dog would.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, jeez, probably a lot of competing smells in there.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, the thing is too that this is—I use this as a reference point in a lot of times. Somebody asked something about winning a Nobel Prize. He didn't—he didn't—I'm going to paraphrase because he didn't put it this way, but it sounded like he meant it this way. He said, "It's no big deal. All you've got to do is look and see where the other guy made an assumption."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And the point is there it's a very big difference between looking and seeing, so you, you just look and see. And so, you find out right away that the guys who do things are guys who look and see. And I don't know if you mentioned that—if we talked about that show of Ramón y Cajal that was at the Grey Gallery?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Did we talk about that, the neurologist? [00:54:03]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No—oh, yes. The one who diagrammed the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —yes, the cells.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —yeah, the nerves, right, really?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Neurons and things.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Neurons and things. That—an amazing show.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Well, I was on a panel. I got out—asked the lady who ran the panel because I felt like a fish out of water. But I made the point that this was another case of a guy who looked and saw, you know? The other guy had made an assumption, which was that they were connected. He was the guy who figured out that they sent electrochemical signals to communicate, so. That's kind of—now, what the hell that has to do with art, I don't know. Oh, [they laugh] well, the other thing just as a side comment, I don't know if I mentioned this. There is a relationship between artists and scientists, I think, as well as engineers, but scientists too. And that is that people always talk about artists having imagination. I happen to think that's bullshit, because artists are interested in the truth. You know? And that's what's makes them

closer to scientists and engineers, I think, than people who make stuff up. So that's just my opinion.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm. Yeah, that kind of turns things on its head. [00:56:02] You know, you're not out there fantasizing. But that's interesting because was it—I guess it's Lynne Cook in one of her essays, she talks about you taking people's fantasies to be as real as facts.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh that maybe.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You know which is—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Sometimes, it's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —kind of a—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —sometimes a fantasy has more—has more truth and honesty than the facts, whatever they might be, I mean, whatever the facts are. My—one of my favorite old-fashioned movies is called *Miracle in Milan*. Do you know that movie?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Is that De Sica?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. You do?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: A long time ago, I don't remember the film.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, and they all were flying off on broomsticks?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, okay, yes

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, I'll just go to that one. So now, that is a fantasy film, but it's truthful enough and real enough to have been banned in both Italy and the United States when it was— [laughs] because, it was obviously seen as being a little too heavy, you know politically speaking, a little too honest, a little too real.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Well, this is—that was marvelous really. Just to—so that I can picture this, for the *9 Evenings*, you shrouded the cars in plastic, is that right? Did they —

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, I think it—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —so it was—there was projection from within the car on to the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —something else, yeah, on to the screen.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: On to a screen that, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Somewhere, there's a video of that piece that isn't bad. I mean, well, my—I'm so sloppy, I have no idea where these things are in my house. [00:58:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] That's okay. But, yeah, I will—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I liked it. I thought that they put it together, and they did a way better job than I thought they were going to be able to.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Now, you worked with, according to what I was reading, a couple of other engineers of from Bell Labs, Eric Rawson?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —and Larry Heilos, is—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Heilos, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Heilos. On a series of sculptures including the *Solid Red Line*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup. On the cover of that catalogue is a wavy line.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is the wavy line, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. And this is just the solid red one, the same. The wavy one though is different. The wavy one continues to flex and moves up and down, turns inside out. The *Solid Red Line* goes around the room and then—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —and then kind of erases itself?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Yeah, right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative]. And—

ROBERT WHITMAN: So they made that. It's so interesting. This is—this gets to kind of a point of the relationship between curators and artists [laughs]. So, the original piece, the hardware for that is massive, not super big. I mean, the—it's a laser tube that's about this long. It's got—the motor that drives the mechanics is like from a tape recorder.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay? It's just kind of—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you're holding up your hands about maybe a little more than a foot?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. And okay, so that's incarnation one. [01:00:07] And that came to pass that we wanted to update the piece. I don't remember the occasion or the event. So John, my friend John Forkner, I asked him about doing it. So, he made this elegant tiny, little device with a tiny, little laser, okay? And the only thing you need to do is get the same massing device that makes the line come and go and then stuff like that. So that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's like a helical—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, that's what it was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —thing?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Exactly.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So he made small ones, very elegant. Oh, and they were in the show. You can't see the machinery for that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And it's quiet, okay. So, twice it's happened to me where an art institution has lent one of those pieces to a show. And both times, it's been shown inappropriately. Both—twice—and it was like shown in a giant room with too much light. And so I called them up and I said, "Listen, we can arrange to have that laser strengthened, so it'll be up to speed like the other was," and the curator's answer is or the registrar's answer is, "But that wouldn't be the original." And my mind goes, but you don't have the original, you know, and besides I said, "The original is the idea, and I don't care how it gets done, so long as this gets done," and this case it's—[01:02:06]

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ROBERT WHITMAN: —not getting done because, because the equipment isn't what it's supposed to be for that installation. So, I have to write them a letter just to tell them. It's funny. I have heard of one other situation like this where Tinguely told the curator some—no, told the—I'm going to have to excuse myself for a second.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sure, sure.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know who I spoke to, maybe a technician or a maintenance guy at the Stedelijk, where they had a Tinguely. And he said, "Yeah," he said, "If something happens to this piece and you see it before the curator does, go down to the hardware store and get what works." [They laugh.] In other words, don't screw around with duplicating the exact part, just get the thing that works right. Somehow, curators haven't figured that out yet. I mean, I can

understand their point of view.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There was a—I—just one of my favorite examples obviously was a piece in the MoMA retrospective, Rauschenberg retrospective that was presented as being the earliest combine, and it was actually made as a prop for a Merce Cunningham performance.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Now, about two weeks before I saw that, I had been at the Walker and seen what looked like exactly the same piece. And when I saw it at MoMA, I thought, Wow, that's amazing. They borrowed it that quickly. [Laughs.] Well, it turned out that the piece at the Walker, which was presented as Rauschenberg's work was a recreation that Walter Hopps had put together at the Corcoran at the time of Rauschenberg's '76 retrospective. [00:02:02] Because NPR—no, I'm sorry, public television wanted to do some piece, and Merce wanted the thing back, so he could use it in this video. So, what the result was at MoMA that were was a video next to this actual object showing dancers, Merce dancers around it, but the object in that video was not the object that they were showing on the floor. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, okay. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You know, I mean, in one level, it's totally trivial. It's like Rauschenberg blessed the piece that Hopps made, but Rauschenberg had no hand in it at all, you know. And it was just as long as the public doesn't see [laughs]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —the, the little bait-and-switch there, I guess it's okay, but your story is marvelous. I was like, "What? You're missing the point here."

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I think this goes on now more than you know, but Bob found a wine bottle rack like Duchamp's and so he told Marcel about it, and he said, "Great, you want me to sign it?" [They laugh.] So he did.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wonderful.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, totally great. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So the—have you had some run-ins with health authorities about the use of the lasers?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I didn't, the gallery did.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The gallery did, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And now I—they—in fact, if somebody did look into those, there was a possibility of getting some eye damage. They—now, the ones I have are stronger and so the possibility—that's why this one was—we now show it so that it hangs in the ceiling at a height above people's eyes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I see. I see.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's not 100 percent the way I did it the first time. [00:04:02] But the first—things change, and I think it's okay that since I thought the work was okay the way it was shown both ways. But in the original installation, they were at chest level. In small rooms—gallery rooms in those days were tiny compared to now, these things, anyway, and there was smoke obviously in the room.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Because people—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Everybody smoked, so there was this little haze and so the red line made a plane in the space so it wasn't just a line on the wall, it was a plane in the space, kind of nice.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It—it's somewhat striking how many artists in the later '60s were using mirrors for one thing and another. I mean Lynne makes a point of this and then I thought of—she doesn't mention Robert Smithson, but Smithson did all these mirror pieces and everything like that, not using them so technologic—technologically—so engineering-related as you, but this idea of mirrors, it just seems to have been something that people were attracted to at the time. I

don't know why exactly. You did a piece at the Jewish Museum—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —in '68 where the mirrors responded to sound, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, they were—oh. Okay, they were Mylar over—I don't know what you—I don't know which—there's a technical word for this that I don't know. But, uh, if—in this case, there were some square shapes and some circles, and they were in closed spaces with Mylar stretched over the front, and loudspeakers in the back to act as air pumps. [00:06:13]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So the loudspeakers will go, *boop, boop*, and the mirror would go in and out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And it would change focus. [They laugh.] So, if you looked into one of these things, your image would move back and forth in space like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's neat.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Or if you did twice as much—oh, your image was illuminated by a strobe light that picked out—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —so it—so that you could see it move back and forth. So if you had the strobe going twice as fast as the pulse, then the images would go through each other like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. A little hard to imagine I mean—yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. That's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, these engineering collaborations, I guess, it would seem to culminated with the—now you worked on two pavilions, right, at the—for the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, the one piece—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —Expo '70 or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —yeah, the one piece was for the U.S. Pavilion, the one I collaborated with John Forkner on using corner reflectors for another purpose. Oh, so, this is a great story, and it's in the catalogue, but the company that they found that was going to fabricate these mirrors, well, they screwed it up, they couldn't do it, this fabrication company. What John had decided was to—oh, we wanted to make a movable real image. [00:08:09] A real image is the same kind of image that was at the pavilion. A real image, let's see, is what a camera makes when it puts the image on the film. In other words, if you took away the back of the camera and just look through the lens, you would see the image not through there. You—it would be hanging around here where the film plane is.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You could touch it or put your finger through it, let's put it that way. So that's a real image. Now, where were we, talking about?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So the company couldn't make the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: They couldn't make these mirrors. Because John had invented another way to make a cheap, a cheap system. Because basically, we wanted five or six mirrors about the size of Mount Wilson, [laughs] something like that, you know, a spherical mirror of optical quality is like—forget it. You know, that's—so what John had designed was two cylindrical mirrors: one this way curving that way and one that way. And the property of two cylindrical mirrors that are placed in the proper relationship will produce a real image in the same way as a spherical image—a spherical mirror will. So, they failed. So what John did—oh, man, what, bless his heart. This is an engineer genius. So, he got his union—Unitarian Fellowship to bid on making the mirrors because he knew how to do it. And so, what they did is they rented a storefront in Laguna Beach

or somewhere like that because that's where he lived, and put a pendulum up on the ceiling and made a Masonite curve that's to the mirror, but Masonite is not optically perfect. [00:10:16] So they made this thing, and then the pendulum had the perfect curve, and they put sandpaper on it, move it back and forth until this thing is perfect. And they had drilled a lot of holes in the Masonite and put a space in the back so that when it came time to put the plastic mirror on it, it sucked it down into this optical curve and so they made the mirrors, which I think is so super cool, it's amazing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's like making a mirror in your backyard garage or something.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Exactly.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, it's so practical and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, and so they made these mirrors.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How many?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I really don't remember. It could be—it must be in the catalogue of that show, which I don't have. Something about it annoyed me, you know, and then it—and I must say sometimes I get very childish and if there's something annoys me, I throw it out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You mean this catalogue?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —not that one. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Not that one? Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: The—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The catalogue of the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Of Maurice [Tuchman's -RW] show, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, ah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Anyway, so now—so that—oh, okay. So there we had these so-called spherical mirrors. They were up on top of the space and then the object—we put an object in there. One—I can't remember what the objects were. One was a TV, one was a radio, one was maybe a hot plate because, you know, heat will be reflected the same way that light will, you know? [00:12:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, we'll put something like that—okay, so we had these objects there and then—and we put another mirror that move on a, uh, like a hinge. So, if you were down—and this reflected that image down below to the room where people were. So people would see a ghost radio kind of approach them and disappear.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's amazing.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, it was terrific. I think so too. [They laugh.] So, stuff like that and we made—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How big was the space that—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I can't quite remember. It was fairly—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Fairly—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —reasonably large but not huge. And it was a room, a spiral-shape room made of corner reflectors. The theory being that the light that would go in there would never brighten the room because it would all go back outside since the corner reflectors would reflect it back out. Well, not being a perfect optical system, it was really hard to do, so it had that



effect. Anyway, that was the piece.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And that's the American Pavilion or the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, that was in the U.S. Pavilion.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: U.S. Pavilion.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, okay. Then the Pepsi Pavilion—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —was the—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —you had the *Mylar*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, the *Mylar* mirror.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The *Mylar* mirror.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And that produced—you've seen pictures I'm sure?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I've seen pictures but they were like—[laughs]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: What do they mean?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You know, you can't—really hard to interpret.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Well basically, the—if you look at the pictures, you see that there's a—also, the photographs had to be made in a certain way. They're not as—maybe now, you could do better. But the, the real image is a little blurry, and that's because of the—actually the mirrors vibrating and—but you don't—you wouldn't see it. [00:14:05] When you're there, you didn't see it, you know, somehow. So, in that case, you can look, look at the photographs and you'll see that a bunch of people around here, and then a bunch of those same people are hanging from the ceiling. So, those—that's a real image. And then, what, the part about that that I liked is that just because of the system, everybody will see something different. They'll never—no two people will see the same thing because they're on a different place, [laughs] so that's always kind of nice.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So there's an aspect of your work at that time where you're—you're creating situations where individual people can have their own unique experience in a space as opposed to kind of mass media, conventional movie-going, let's say, where everybody's expected to—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I like that idea—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —have the same.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —and it's—you know, I haven't been able to do much of it lately, but I like that idea. And it's always a community experience anyway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's an interest—yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: It's a convention. People just get together in the same place at the same time, and, yes, that's the convention of the theater. I suppose people can do something on TV, but I haven't seen any art on TV, so I wouldn't [laughs] know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, there's a, there's a kind of antiestablishment aspect to there's—to the period I guess. There's a quote from Billy Klüver in the, in this catalogue from back that time, "The Pavilion would not tell a story or guide the visitor through a didactic, authoritarian experience. [00:16:08] The visitor would be encouraged as an individual to explore the environment and compose his own experience," so kind of giving it a political spin there a little bit.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, that sounds like me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, maybe that was you [laughs].

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, no, no, but Billy was listening [laughs].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, oh, I see.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Pepsi was very concerned, how are you going to get people to get out? They want crowd control. And I said, "Well, they will. Like, don't worry about it."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How did—I mean, it seems almost inconceivable that you had the freedom to do this.

ROBERT WHITMAN: One hundred percent inconceivable. I have no idea. First of all, the idea itself was terrific, and I think that's what they got into, but they didn't understand the programming. That's, that's what—you know, the experience of the optical room and just going into this weird space was pretty terrific in itself. And they could've just had that, but we also did programming, which never got off the ground or—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was the programming?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, that's what freaked them out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] That's what got us fired.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oops. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: I spoke to Julie, and I couldn't—I think David Tudor actually got to do something. He got to do something. And then a Japanese choreographer named [Tatsumi] Hijikata had composed something for it. And part of what he did was he made a—he was—he had some kind of—it hung from the space. [00:18:10] He had a kimono, a traditional wedding kimono, and he did this thing with Pepsi cola, and he made it kind of a dough, and made this kind of thing, and he was smashed it on his face and he did this kind of. Anyway, the point is that the Pepsi executive in charge kind of went nuts [they laugh] and then—and that was the end of—that was the end of that, so that—which was too bad. Oh, I think another person who got to do some kind of program was an assistant of Roger Payne who's the guy who recorded the humpback whale, the first guy to do that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And this was the first ever public presentation of those.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was the acoustics like in the space? Or did it have any? I don't know.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think fairly—I think David thought it was okay, and he was the only one who—nobody would remark on them being peculiar.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm, just curious, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: But the thing is that they had designed this really elaborate and beautiful sound system, which you can read about in the book, but you could make the sound go around, you could make it go through, you can make it go up and down, so the whales could go across.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, nice.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Stuff like that. So you could—you know, I fooled around with the sound system a little bit, a very little bit, just long enough for David to hear what I was doing and come running upstairs and say, "I came as soon I could when I heard you needed help," [laugh] because he heard the sounds that I was making. [They laugh.] So, that's me and sound. The one thing that was impossible to overcome or to discover or figure out how to do was lights. [00:20:11]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm, oh, God.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Because, yeah, we just didn't bite the bullet and figure it out. We didn't have enough time to really—you really needed to build a model somewhere and just do things. So, the lights were odd, never got done right, which was sad, so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. So, in a sense, I mean, is that experience kind of like a high watermark for your involvement with technology, or do you think of it that way?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, I don't. I like the idea that I heard once Duke Ellington being quoted. And what's your favorite piece? And he said, "The next one," so that's—you know. You know—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, let me ask it a little bit differently. Was that, was that in a certain way, the availability of techno—the availability of resources to do something like that? I mean, have you had that level of resources available to you?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No. No. What was I thinking? Oh, it annoyed me that piece got to be so—it had the stature that it did. So then I—the next piece I did, I decided to—I was going to do it for \$20.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And that piece was the?

ROBERT WHITMAN: —was the walk on the pier.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The walk on the pier, okay. Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I went over budget.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, jeez.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Because I, because I had to buy whiskey for the troops, because it was so cold. [00:22:03] [They laugh.] And also because I had to rebuy some of the things between the first night and the second night or the first week, or the second—whatever it was because the guys who lived in those spaces took the stuff.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, oh, because they were people just homeless or—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, ghost guys, I call them. I call them—you know, obviously, people were living there. You could see signs of habitation. They stayed out of the way when I was there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. So this was a former Hoboken Ferry Terminal, is that right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, and an adjoining terminal, an adjoining pier as well.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And there was some kind of large, open space that you were able to work in to place things in and drop from the ceiling in?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, yup.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative]. And the piece is called *Architecture*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: I called it that, yeah, and don't ask me why. There's a funny book. Somebody used this piece—describes this piece in a book that just got published and I like the context even though at first, I was kind of surprised. He wrote a book, the book is called *Pier Groups [Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront]*. And it's the—basically the—I haven't read it so I—but I would like it to be a certain way. At that time, those piers or a particular one, I'm not sure which ones, not the ones that I was using but up a little bit, were—I don't know what you would call it. [00:24:08] I would like to think it had to do with gay people getting their shit together and saying, "Fuck AIDS, we're going to do our thing and this is going to be how we're going to do it, and where we're going to do it," and all that, you know. The—I don't know if you remember the piers in those days?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sure, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. So, that was a very active part of their life on the piers, and I think that's what his book—the focus of the book, but also a couple of artists did pieces there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, David Wojnarowicz is now probably the best known of the artists who were involved there.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I was thinking of Gordon. Gordon Matta did a piece.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, Gordon. Oh, earlier, the cut out?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, yeah, that's true. Well, that would be—yeah, that would be a few years earlier than that but—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know who David—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was Gordon gay?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, no, no.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't think they—

ROBERT WHITMAN: There were straight guys as well as gay. But Vito Acconci, I don't know what he was, but he did something there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did he? Yeah. Yeah, there's a famous picture of the sort of half-moon shape cutout of it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, right. That's in the book.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But the gay artist scene that you're—you know, that was a big deal.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I didn't know it was art. I just thought it was—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But, yeah, it was a gathering place and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: A presence and—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —a trysting place or something, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. And I thought the idea—I mean, my sense of it even though it was, maybe it was unconscious, was, it was the gay group—the gay people kind of rising up and unifying, a beginning of the—beginning of the—it's always sad that people who are most affected, the guys will have to affect the change that gets things going, you know, so. Anyway that's a—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So also, at that same time, you did the pay phone piece. [00:26:05]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Which is sort of like, kind of low technology, sort of, back in the land of Alexander Graham Bell? No, I'm kidding.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But you used radio. You had—it was broadcast on WB—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —BAI.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —BAI? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right. I did that piece in New York, Houston, and Minneapolis-Saint Paul on the radio. And it was piece that I like doing those other times. I like doing the radio piece in BAI. But the other thing was is that—because museums were funny. They want to put a piece in a show, but it's hard to get them do a performance. So, I made it a quid pro quo kind of, do this piece and these shows because they're going to show a piece of mine in the show, so. And both times, I got—I got a tour. So, the tour of Houston, I got, well, someone named Helen Winkler. Do you know who that is? Okay, let me tell you about Helen. Besides being one of the founders at Dia, she was a good friend of Phip [Philippa] *whose name now is [laughs] Fariha* [al Jerrahi] de Menil, Heiner [Friedrich], so. But Helen also got things done for Mrs. de Menil. She had a large part in getting the *Rothko Chapel*, doing that. [00:28:01] She managed Walter's *Lightning Field*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. So Helen gave me the tour of Houston, so you knew it was going to be a special tour. Now, for example, who would think of going to the railroad switching yards at night? Now Helen would and—or the San—is it San Jacinto, the monument, right?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Not San Jacinto [pronounces "San Jacint-o"]. San Jacinto.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Or the Turning Basin, the bridge over the Turning Basin that wasn't finished. You know, just walking out on this bridge and dangle your feet over the edge, I mean [laughs]. So Helen gave me that tour of Houston that only a fan of the town—I also got another tour from Helen of the parking lots that were being built in downtown Houston. [Laughs.] So these were—anyway that's, that was my benefit. That's how I got my pay. I got to—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was that the beginning of your involvement with Dia, or that come earlier?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, Dia came much later. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But you were on their radar obviously in some way?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I knew Heiner, and I knew—vaguely I knew Phip and I knew —*Fariha*—*Fariha's* her name—and I knew Helen, so. [Telephone rings.] Let me see what— [laughs]

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Where were we?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Doing those radio pieces.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, doing the radio pieces. And, and it seems like as technology developed, you just picked it up again with cell phones and then video cell phones—[00:30:10]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, this particular piece—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —much later but—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —this particular piece is still the same piece, it's just using the materials that are around now. I mean, I don't know if you could find 30 pay phones in Manhattan. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Probably not. It'd be pretty funny to do it though, wouldn't it?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. So you can do—yeah. So you have cell phones and then you have video phones. And these—the pieces exist and they are communication pieces that are sticking out of a separate thing. The last one I did was a variation on a piece done called *Children and Communication*, where in this case, I had kids in New York go around and videotape some stuff on their—or make videos on their cell phones, and kids in Korea do the same thing in Seoul. So, the presentation is the videos, sound reports that they made when they're making the videos, and then the kids talking to each other in different—you know the kids in Seoul talking to the kids in New York, and of course, the translator was in L.A., naturally. [Laughs.] So that was kind of fun. You know, I used that. It's this idea—you know, you can do these things, and they're doable now. [00:32:07] I don't—one of the most amazing things, I remember early TV—it's not so early, but early relative to what today is—was something so simple and elegant, and I thought, "Oh, fuck him. He's—he beat me to the punch." Edward R Morrow had simultaneous airing of the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean, you know, just showing—his idea, of course, was this is the miracle of television, you can do this, you know. He didn't realize it was art. [They laugh.] Stuff like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I wanted to spend a significant amount of time really just talking to you about the Dante drawings and the origins of those, the iconography of them. So, I just want to get that out on the table as something—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, let's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —to talk about.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Because I can't talk to—I will tell you.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What's your schedule? Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, no, no. I—I've got—my time is—when I was in college, I studied Italian. You know, I've—since my rationale, of course, is if nature gives you something, you take it, and say thank you. In this case, it was an insistent Italian professor who was going around hustling kids to, to take Italian instead of French or Spanish. [Laughs.] So I said, "Okay." [00:34:00] But I was lucky enough in a way to end up reading Dante, which even though it's a hard—I'm not a good reader, but my favorite one by Nabokovian standards because I don't have a good memory. But anyway, so I got through there, and when I got out of college, I said, "Okay, I'm going to do something with the *Inferno*." Well, then, Bob comes out with—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, I was going to say somebody beat you to the punch again. No, just kidding.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes, he did, and I—and I'm—you know later on, I thought, "How in the hell did that happen? Bob can't read." So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, Bob can't read, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, I don't know if you knew that. He was dyslexic like crazy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So I did ask Julia. I said, "How the hell did that ever happen? I mean how—" And he said—she had the idea that Michael Sonnabend read it to him. Michael was a Dante person. He always said he read a canto every night.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: He was a total Dante freak. So, all right. So the thing about the *Inferno* is it's kind of the easiest. The stories are pretty straightforward; the images are simple. Okay, I think the *Purgatory* might be the hardest, but the imagery is still colorful and easy. *Paradise* is the—I said, "Nobody's going to do that because it's going to—you're going to have to do too much reading of stuff that you can't read. I mean, who's going to spend all that time reading St. Thomas and Aristotle, and getting the background?" [00:36:06] Well, I did spend that time, but of course, I have a bad memory so that is all gone out of my brain. So that's why it's hard for me. So when I went through to do the drawings, I don't know. I did review the material for George Baker.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, the, the drawings I think are—unless I'm mistaken, they're reproduced in full—

ROBERT WHITMAN: They are.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —in the back of this, right? And each one is—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —on both sides, right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —on both sides, right. So this is the recto and this would be the verso kind of thing?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And the—like that?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. But I think I was being my typical pain in the ass, why should it be easy for somebody to look at them? [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know why, a little bit of perversion, but anyway, so. Gee, I just saw Karen who edited the book and did it. And she—and when I asked her about the last couple ones, I said, "Karen I got—I can tell you, I've gone over these things and I—I'm unsure and this and that and so on about which one is which." And she said, "Well I—" So, she did it. I said, "Karen, how the hell did you figure all that out?" and she said, "I read it." "What do you mean you read it?" She said, "Yeah, I read it. I'm going nuts, [laughs] nuts." I mean, it's fun to read, but it's not easy in terms of the story.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So she sequenced the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, I did all but the last couple.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But she could understand which order—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, they're very easy—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —the motifs went in because they relate to—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah, they're really easy. I mean, if you read his—[00:38:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, I, I spent a little bit of time. You know, it doesn't—yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, it's pretty easy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So they—you know, the iconography is minimal, but it seems to be clearly related to the text.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, if you read the text, you could see it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, it's fascinating really the twin peaks of Parnassus and Beatrice coming about the yellow and white keys and—you know? I mean, it's, it's kind of marvelous the eagle—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well that's the—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —and so on.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I'm not going to be—yeah, I'm not going to be complex or intellectual about anything. It's going to be the simplest thing I can find. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But in the photograph of the installation, well it's—it looks—and so they finally figured out a way that you were comfortable with to show both sides of it, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right. They suspended—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That took a while, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Hmm?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It took a while for—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. I don't know. I see Jed [Bark -RW] from time to time. I have to ask him who figured that out, how to do it. One of their people did it. It's fairly straightforward. I don't know if they're pinned between the—they shouldn't be. They should be hanging in between the—they shouldn't be pressed. A lot of them have texture.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That would be a problem.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Also, the image will glue itself to the glass at some point [laughs].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that would not be good. Huh. Yeah. Well, that a, that's a—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Anyway, so those, that's how they got done. It took a long time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Had you done a series of works of that extent before that? [00:40:05]

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, no.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How long did it—

ROBERT WHITMAN: A couple years.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: A couple years?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, it took a long time. And you know, I took it seriously in a way. I mean, I tried to read the material. [Laughs.] And it got so I could almost read Italian. His Italian is very—it's almost like Florentine now. It probably is. So, and you go—and, you know, it's fun.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I couldn't help copying it out. There was just a comment by Beatrice, "Yet an experiment, were you to try it, could free you from your cavil and the source of your arts course springs from experiment." Isn't that marvelous? "The source of your arts' course—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I think—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —springs from experiment."

ROBERT WHITMAN: —that's Dante talking. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Quite certainly. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yes. Well, you know his—it's worth reading because he's, he's so astoundingly revolutionary. I don't think—in this day and age, you don't understand what—how revolutionary he really was. He's the first guy to write in Italian, in the vernacular they called it, and he writes an essay about it, which is quite wonderful, but, good Lord, that's a major step. Everybody had been writing in Latin until then. [00:42:00] What else did he do that I think is interesting like that? The other thing, his rhyme scheme is very original, so that it's so tight that there's only one or two words that are—that have possible other words. You know, when you figure that it was all copied by hand so that there's only one or two words that might have been changed or mistaken or there's some talk about, which is amazing because the rhyme scheme is so tight that there's no other choice, when he did it. Isn't that great? [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes, it's an amazing thing. I was listening to—there was—everything's online now, and there was a reader reading it in Italian that you could download and just—I was just listening to the—

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's great—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —sound of it. It's so marvelous.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah. It's fun to listen to. I was a—this is just a side thing. It has nothing to do with art or any—it does, a little bit because of my interest in something. So I happen to be going by the barbershop that I go to on Columbus Day, and I went back, and I decided to get a haircut. I said, "Vincent, what are you doing working today? It's Columbus Day," and he said, "I'm not Italian. I'm Sicilian." So. And I told him, I said, "Vincent, I knew that's what you were going to say." [They laugh.] So, he's old enough so that—within, probably his grandparents' memory and the parents' memory was the formation of Italy. [00:44:05] You know, it's a pretty new place.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, 1860, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. So, I said, "You know, I know somebody whose mother was a patron of Sicilian puppets," and he went nuts, not really. He said, "That was my childhood." He said, "I made my own, and I played all the parts." [Laughs.] And I didn't—I wasn't quick enough on the uptake, but next time I go, I'm going to say, "Listen, you better make sure that your kids and grandkids know that part of their history." They are online, those puppets.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Are they?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, they're great. They are—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They're large, right?

ROBERT WHITMAN: They are. They're about people-size, maybe a little smaller. But the Italian story was *Orlando Furioso*, which is *The Song of Roland*. [Laughs.] Now, I don't think in Sicily, they were reading Ariosto, but they must've gotten the story. It's very episodic, and I'm sure they just do parts, the bloody parts. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, right, right.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Anyway, so that's—I mentioned the puppets so that that discussion caused me to think about the puppets that I've seen, which I consider very important. So, I realize I've seen puppets in India, which are also very crude, the ones that I saw. I've seen Bunraku, which are very elegant. We've seen *Punch and Judy* and various marionettes. [00:46:06]. I've seen marionettes in Japan also. One marionette performance is spectacular. And, you know, some of the plays written for Bunraku are the plays that are performed by Noh and Kabuki.



CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: You know, that's how, that's how classic they are, pretty spectacular. Anyway, I don't know what—I just mentioned puppets because they sort of flow into a tradition of performance and theater that we—I don't know if we mentioned it or not—that I find interesting. I might have said, thank God, for the fact that it didn't invent sound with the movies.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, right, right, you did say that, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. So, it gave access to a nonverbal performance.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I had the sense looking at something like *Ghost* that you were using the nonverbal, the spectacle resources of theater but animating them so that you were able to use objects and generate anticipation—

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] Uh-huh [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —curiosity, fear. You know, that they're these—I mean, it's like, it's like animating—it's like an animated mise-en-scène, you know that—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —where there are people participating sometimes, but they're in some sense demoted to the status of everything else that's on the, on the stage. You know, they're not, they're not necessarily the featured thing, you have objects. [00:48:03]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, that I don't know. You know—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm trying to get at the puppet aspect to this because that's the way I think of puppets—is you build a puppet for a specific job, and it does a certain thing.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I think of these things as puppets, that's why I bring it up. I don't—I mean not—I think of them in that flow, so when the thing comes through the wall and moves over and smashes it—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's marvelous—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —that's like a puppet.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It is. And things seeming to move by themselves, it's just like, What? Why is this happening? It's—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, yeah, that's right. That—that's got a lot of it in there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It does. And you used all of the directions too. There's things coming from behind the stage, there's things coming from down, down from the—oh, I guess it would be the fly loft if we were in a theater, but anyway. But that's—even from the beginning, you were posting people up on top who were like, you know, manipulating things.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, that's right, yeah. Well, in *American Moon*, which, there's that video, those things are clearly puppets that are on them—being thrown around.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's all those things in traditional theater, you know philosophy, thinking even of Aristotle, spectacle, and all those things are devalued. Those are considered to be least important aspects of the thing and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I don't know if I mentioned it, but in the Bunraku, the singers are the top—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —the top guys, and the puppeteers are down. They're the secondary. Isn't that interesting? [00:50:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I guess they figured—I don't know. Somebody decided early on that singing was harder to do than being a puppeteer. You know, they are spectacular. Because you talk

about practical solutions, so how do you have a fox jump out of a window? Well, you got the puppeteer with the fox on his hand. He's on a harness, and he jumps out of the window with the fox. [They laugh]. You know, that's really beautiful.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. So the first Dia retrospective in 1976, a number of pieces are restaged, remade, but you also showed newer work, a piece called *Salad P.N.*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, that I did in Texas—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: At—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —at one of the colleges there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, the Methodist, the Southern Methodist or no—

ROBERT WHITMAN: It could be there or Rice.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —someplace like that.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't know where it was. I can't remember. That was, that was one of those round up the usual suspects shows. [They laugh.] I mean, I have my funny—I don't know but—see, I never know who I've told which story to. But I was wandering around the hall, and I ran into John Cage, and we started talking about this. And he was upset because they—he said, "They haven't even opened my score. [00:52:03] It's been sitting there, and they could've—" you know? And he was angry because they—he felt it was disrespectful, which it was—to not have done that and given it over to people who are going to perform it and whatnot. So I said, "John"—this is just me being stupid, being a kid, okay—"you know, if you go upstairs in the museum upstairs in the galleries, they've got all the Goya etchings on exhibit. Go up and take a look, and you'll feel better." [They laugh.] Well, I was thinking about what would make me feel better, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Because I don't know if I was having trouble or not. I was—yeah, I was having some problems. Oh, and he said, yeah, he said to—he said, "Don't worry, you have your youthful enthusiasm to carry you through." [Laughs.] Yeah, I don't remember quite where that was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Anyway, so there's a mention in relation to that piece, which I wasn't able to imagine, of a screen moving over the audiences' head and—am I misunderstanding?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Which piece was this?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think *Salad P.N.*

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't remember that at all. I don't remember that piece very well at all.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I don't even think I have a script, which is very unusual for me not—I have some films and—but I just don't remember it very well. [00:54:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. And, okay, well—[laughs]—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —I'm going to tire you out at some point here. We can you march through. But one of things that I—what I was hoping to do today a little bit is just step back and talk to you about some of the underlying concepts that seem to have emerged in interviews and in our conversation. And in—again, thinking of theater analogies, it's pretty striking, or maybe operatic analogies, that you aim to set up visual echoes through time in pieces somewhat in the way that an opera score uses motifs, you know, the motif returns in the music.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. One of the things I can say about that is that's going to happen by nature, right. You don't have to make it happen. You don't have to conten—maybe musicians doing motifs do have to make it happen, but to my way of thinking, they just—it just happens. I mean, for example like the latest thing where I saw that happen, I'm going nuts about it a little

bit because it seems as though I consciously did this, but in a piece called *Swim*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, at the Montclair?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. I'm not trying to think. I do have a video of it. Okay, there's a sequence with a washing machine—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Why are you laughing? [Laughs.] [00:56:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know, it just happened. Go ahead.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. There's an actual washing machine there—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: An actual washing machine, okay—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —making that sound that washing machines make and then I don't know if the washing machine goes away or something, but then there's a film of the washing machine, and you know that sound they make, that, *squish*? Okay. So then I had somebody come out and do an echocardiogram.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That same—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —sound—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —sound.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —that squish sound.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay? And then after that, my granddaughter—I have a video of my granddaughter when she's about seven singing this song that she wrote called "Echo." And I don't know where she got the idea for the song, I don't know how it hap—I do know where she got the idea, but I don't know how she put this together in her mind. But the basic song goes "Echo, echo, echo. Do you want to be a copy person? Echo, echo, echo," and it's got a little more to it than that. "And do you want to be a soldier?" And I'm going, Gee, where did she flow, get the idea of echo, copy person, and soldier? That's real writing, you know what I mean? [Laughs.] So, then I had her come out and sing it live at about 10. She was about 10 years old when she did it, and I had a really good guitar player play it with her. Now, normally, I let her do her thing because she's extremely—I don't know what the word is—poised. She knows—she's not afraid of being in front of people at all or talking, or giving speeches, or anything. [00:58:19] She—and then I realized that now, she's what? She's 15, but she's been doing it for at least 10 years, you know, appearing and speaking and doing that stuff. Anyway, so she sang it, and my friend told me, he played it differently every time, and she came in right on the note, right on time. I mean, she's a pro, that's all. She doesn't know it. And instead doing her rock and roll stuff, which I've seen her do—I've seen her sing, you know, she sings with a band. [Laughs.] It's just goofy. She totally—she took the mic and just said, "Rock solid," and sang the song straight, and Jacob, Jacob told her, said—she said—he told her—Jacob Burckhardt this is—said, "Don't—" He said, "Don't be surprised if they clap," and which they did. [They laugh.] No, she was good.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's great.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, and then after that came the MRI sounds. So anyway, that's the flow.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you had the two—

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's seemed like—uh, that seemed like a sequence that you would have put together on purpose as a—like you said. But I think I generally let that happen naturally excepting for the song coming after the echocardiogram. Now, I don't know if I mentioned that I made that piece to be accessible for blind people? [01:00:05]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, I read that.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. So—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, so we—I think we've mentioned the last time just in passing but I didn't—the scope of it wasn't clear to me. In '79 with Dia's support, you, you had the space, Whitman Project Space, is that what it was called?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, I don't quite remember the years of that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, I think your—maybe your first performance was in '80 in that space from what I was reading.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. That sounds about right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Late '80.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Anyway, that is not—my experience with Dia is very checkered. And okay, that's fine, but then during the time when I had the space, I had devised a scheme where it could have become independent and supported itself without grants, and without Dia, and without anything, and still be available for artists to use. So I had already had—Glenn Branca gave a performance there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

ROBERT WHITMAN: A woman named Linda Mussmann did, and maybe some others, I can't quite remember but—and I had already figured out the way to do it was to have specific clients who would use the space for photo shoots. [01:02:03]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Ah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: And—

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CHRISTOPHER LYON: And this was on 19th Street?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup. So that scheme was being put into effect when Dia collapsed, and they were rather ruthless in their dealing with me. Ultimately, I'm going to—this, at least, I can get this on the record, so—ultimately, throwing out some of my work including that piece that we talked about with the gold pond that was at the Jewish Museum, and a couple pieces that were at the show at the Modern. So, as I say, we're—I still had a very—I had a good relationship with Philippe Vergne who was the director before this last one, and we were going to get somewhere, I thought, because he was asking me if it would be—you know about showing the pieces they owned of mine. The present director has said that it's not part of her program.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That one at Dia:Beacon?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. She has other, other priorities, so—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, that's, yeah—

ROBERT WHITMAN: I guess that's what—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —I mean, it's pretty evident what she's doing.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, I don't know what it is and I—but the point is that that's why you work your ass off and do things and sell them for cheap so they can be stuck in a basement where no one will ever see them. That's my, that's my crotchety old guy grouch [00:02:00].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: With reason.

ROBERT WHITMAN: But at least it's on the record. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: With, with reason.

ROBERT WHITMAN: So, you know, it's—the way I see it now, they could do a couple of things: They could give them to another institution that might show the work. They could throw them out. I don't know what else they could do with them.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] And what do you do? I don't know what you do with art that you don't do anything with. It confuses me. Museums must have this problem like crazy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, sure.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I will tell you one funny museum story. I knew somebody who worked at the Modern eons ago, and he came across these items in a closet—these sticks, and they were just hanging out there. I think they've been put there, and nobody knew what they were. They were Duchamp's stoppages.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my God, in a closet?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my God.

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] I think that kind of stuff is terrific—I mean, he could've just walked home with these sticks. You know, museums are funny that way.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, I mean, this goes back to the larger social thing too. I mean, what you're describing Dia obliquely and what's going at MoMA now in their reopening installation is a big turn toward a certain kind of political correctness, a certain kind of fashionable social stance. [00:04:11]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You know, and of course, they're being beat up like crazy on the left for their trustees being monsters, which many of them are. [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, they're the ones with the money, what the hell? [Laughs.] Excuse me. Somebody here was asking—I'm—been involved with a thing called Seligmann Farm. Kurt Seligmann was a minor Surrealist artist, less well known I should say who had a farm studio situation over in the next town. And he—the widow gave it to the citizens of Orange County. And somebody that—there was an attempt to generate some programming there that would be a little—more sophisticated than paintings of barns and telephone book covers. So—now, what was I going to say? Oh, so it needed money. I got involved, and I've generated some stuff where—I did a film program there, arranged a donation of a George Segal and another piece that's on loan there, and stuff like that. And so one of the guys involved said, "We've got to raise money. What are we going to do?" and I said, "You've got to find the biggest crook in town."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Like, "Really guys, finding the richest asshole with more—most money who needs to buy some God points, and that's the guy, and that's the guys." I mean, why do you think, why do think we have The Frick or all those other things?" [00:06:06]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I—It's hilarious in a way when you visit—I was at The Frick for a program last week and just looking at this and how solemn, and upright, and classical everybody is, and I'm thinking, "This is the guy who shot people," you know and then—[laughs].

ROBERT WHITMAN: Exactly.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And—you know?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right. And this is the guy—and, of course, I can't remember actual first name, Sasha Berkman?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, Alexander Berkman.

ROBERT WHITMAN: No.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, Sasha Berk—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Sasha. Yeah, I don't know what's his first—anyway, he was the guy who tried to shoot Frick.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: His actual name was Alexander Berkman.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, it was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And Sasha is short of Alexander.

ROBERT WHITMAN: I didn't know that, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And he was the lover of—

ROBERT WHITMAN: —Emma Goldman.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —Emma Goldman.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Right. Did you read that book?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I've—he's one of my great heroes. I've got his—a copy of his book—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, great.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —[*Living*] *My Life* or whatever it's called, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: He—I haven't read his book but I've—there's a book that I'm reading by called—I guess it's called *Sasha and Emma* or *Sam and Sasha* [*Sasha and Emma*], something like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah, but there's a great story. I think his gun jammed or something when he tried to shoot?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Something like that, yeah. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: I mean, the funny thing about anarchists is generally speaking they're, they're intellectually ahead of the game, but as far as affecting things, they're total fuck-ups, so. Although Emma Goldman was more than a fuck-up. She actually—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She made some changes.

ROBERT WHITMAN: She did, and she was a friend of—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She did.

ROBERT WHITMAN: —I mean, she influenced people like Eleanor Roosevelt. She did stuff like that. She's—and, you know—and like, she thought the publicity and nonsense about the Spanish Civil War is nonsense, so she went there to see what was going on. [00:08:11]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And she was one of the earliest to recognize what was going on with the Soviet Union, you know, and condemn it.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, she understood what was going on. Yeah. Yeah, she's amazing.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah. Anyway—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Dover kept those books in print forever and ever, her two volumes of her memoirs.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Well, he wrote—in his book, he also wrote a book about his prison experience, or was that a part of his memoir?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think it's part of his memoir.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's a bit chunky book. It's such a beat-up copy, I'd love to know to owned it before me. [They laugh.] I mean, it's an original, you know—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, that's great.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —from the period, 1919 or whenever it was published, anyway, so. But then the space that you had become The Kitchen?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Were you involved in setting up The Kitchen or involved in that at all?

ROBERT WHITMAN: No, I wasn't but I was—the only thing I did do was I tried to keep the space be available for the arts, and I can't quite remember how I did that. I think I got Bob to write a letter to Dia who carried some clout. And one thing about The Kitchen, I ended up not having a very good—you know, I had worked out some sort of relationship where my presence would be, you know, I could see something, and of course, that went by the boards. They also threw out some of my stuff. And I thought we had put some stuff in there, secret stuff, to utilize the space and keep the functioning, keep—you know, if you make a change in a space or if you do something, it means you can't do something else in that same place. [00:10:14] You've changed it. So I thought, you know, the least they could've done or at least somebody could've done was come and talk to me about that. I don't even think they have a—I don't think they have a clue. I mean, when that space was being built, I called in a lot of favors and got a lot of help from a lot of people to get the best situation, the most flexible situation for the money that they were going to spend and—anyway. That's why I say the experience is not necessarily pleasant. I got to do one piece there, or two pieces actually.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So one of them was *Raincover*?

ROBERT WHITMAN: Yup. Yeah. There's some video that, but I can't possibly recover unless—because it's on an old, three-quarter inch format and it needs to be copied and edited, and all that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's a nice description of that piece by Sally Banes—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, really?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —writing it, that's just quoted briefly in the catalogue. Yeah, I didn't write the page number down—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay, it's all right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —so I won't be able to find it quickly. Sally was a schoolmate of mine in college.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She, she had a—you probably know this, she had a massive stroke—

ROBERT WHITMAN: No.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —in 2002 or something and has been—you know, she's completely gone. [00:12:12]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, shit. Wow.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. A wonderful, smart person and really the—and we did a lot of theater together. Okay, so, um, we've talked about *Ghost* and then I think we talked a bit about the *Playback*. Well, you know—

ROBERT WHITMAN: We can get lunch.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Okay. I just want—I was just going to ask you, but I think you already said something about this—there was you commenting on *Prune Flat*. You say you want something "beyond my understanding." You say, "I want to be awestruck by it." I mean you—

ROBERT WHITMAN: [Laughs.] Did I say that?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You said that.

ROBERT WHITMAN: Okay. Well, let's use that word now, right?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Yeah. Well, so you quoted Meyer Schapiro.

ROBERT WHITMAN: That's right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I just thought I would kind of open the door at the end there to just say what—hear your thoughts about what you're looking for when you make a piece and—

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, you know that's funny because I think I'm beyond that. I mean, because you're going to be wrong. [Laughs.] If you look for something specific, you're always going to be wrong or you should be. I mean, that's like, that's like finding what you're looking for. That's—how boring is that? [Laughs.] I think it's more fun to find something that—that's unexpected and surprising. [00:14:05]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, that sort of settles my hash. [They laugh.]

ROBERT WHITMAN: Oh, well, no it doesn't. [They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Why don't we stop there? And how long have we been talking? Yeah, oh, since 11, 12, 1—1:30.

[END OF TRACK whitma19\_1of1\_sd\_track06.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]