THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **JASPER JOHNS (JJ)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: I thought maybe a good place to start would be the fact that you have an upcoming show at the Modern.

JJ: They say so.

SZ: Which means you don't have much involvement in it?

JJ: I've had very little discussion about it, so far. Kirk's [Kirk Varnedoe] just finished with the [Cy] Twombly [exhibition], so I don't think he's had too much time to devote to my show, and if he has, he hasn't told me much about it.

SZ: Tell me, if you remember, about the first time you ever went to The Museum of Modern Art.

JJ: I don't really remember the first time. It was probably shortly after I first came to New York, which I guess was about 1949.

SZ: What I'm really trying to get at is, for you, at that point in your life, what did the Museum signify? What did it mean?

JJ: I came from South Carolina, where I had a couple of teachers who were interested in modern painting. So the Museum was spoken of as a kind of mythical, glamorous

spot. I came to it with that feeling, and it was my first contact with real paintings, I guess. There were none where I grew up. So it was the first time I really saw the kinds of paintings I had heard about.

SZ: Maybe there's a better way into this. I know the story, but I'll ask you to tell me about it anyway. I guess your first contact with Alfred Barr and the Museum in terms of your own work....

JJ: That was later, in 1958, when I had my first show with Leo Castelli. That's when I met Alfred and Dorothy [Miller]. But before that, I had seen a number of exhibitions at the Modern that had been very important. I can't remember when these shows were.

SZ: Which shows were they?

JJ: The [Georges] Braque show [1950], I remember. I think there was a big [Henri] Matisse show [1951-52]. There was a [Edvard] Munch show [1950], there was a [Paul] Klee show [1949-50], and an American, primarily a watercolorist--he did acrobats and such things--[Charles Demuth, 1950]. But at any rate, I think all of those exhibitions are probably from the late forties to, say, around '51. Also, Dorothy Miller's show of some of the Americans; it had [Frederick] Kiesler and [Clyfford] Still and [Mark] Rothko [Fifteen Americans, 1952]. Then, when I had my first show with Leo Castelli, one day, probably one Saturday, I was at the gallery and Leo invited me into the office and Alfred and Dorothy were there.... Alfred said he wanted to get some of these.

SZ: In just that [way]?

JJ: Something like that. He said he didn't know whether they would hold up because of the way they were made, with newspaper and wax, but he said he felt that perhaps they would last longer than some of us would [laughing]. He also said about the paintings in the show that perhaps there wouldn't be many more like this [laughter]. It

was a very nice encounter. That was the first time I met him. I had heard about him, of course.

SZ: Did Alfred and Dorothy have a certain reputation among young artists at that time that you were aware of?

JJ: I didn't know many young artists then, but I guess Dorothy must have been known for those shows that she did, which were so important to in focusing on American painting. I assume she was important to American artists at that time, and I think Alfred was felt to be of such importance that many artists were either critical of him or admiring of him. Artists who felt neglected by the Museum felt that this was a mistake and I suppose hoped that something would happen to correct it.

SZ: Did you get to know Alfred well?

JJ: No, not well.

SZ: But your impression of him and his...I guess what I'm really thinking about is how it's said that he missed the boat, that he didn't have an appreciation for the original New York School and what that meant for the collection for a long time. I wonder if you had an opinion why, what he didn't see in it.

JJ: I didn't have an insight into that. My few contacts with him had to do with my own work and were occasionally just social contacts, of no real substance...always polite and not probing, I would say.

SZ: And Dorothy?

JJ: I loved Dorothy. She was a beautiful...I suppose my main contact was around the show that she did that included a group of my paintings--some number of Americans, I don't remember which number it was [Sixteen Americans, 1959-60]. And then, I saw

her a good deal, not a lot, but not infrequently socially. She was a good friend of Louise Nevelson's, and I saw her occasionally with Louise, who was a friend of mine. For a certain period of time the Robert Sculls were very, what would you say, socially active, bringing people together, around their collection and their collecting of paintings and their liking to have artists and such people around them, and some museum people usually would be involved in that. So I assume that that's part of the normal courtship of museums attempting to acquire pictures [laughing]. But it was a segment of the activity that I happen to relate to, or was involved in, a bit.

SZ: When you went into Leo's office and Alfred said he wanted to get these pictures, whatever, I guess. Philip Johnson ended up getting at least one of them for the Museum, right?

JJ: My understanding--I don't know that my information is accurate, because it's just kind of hearsay--is that the Museum acquired three of my paintings, and Philip acquired a painting of the flag. Alfred wanted to get the flag painting for the Museum but was afraid that it would cause trouble with some patriotic organization or something, and he didn't want to...court that, and so I think Philip bought it with the idea that at some point it would go to the Museum when it was felt to be appropriate. But I'm not sure that that's right. Certainly Philip would know.

SZ: I was trying to get a sense of how you were involved in any of that, and it seems like not a lot.

JJ: The only way I was involved in that was that Alfred said that he would like to get...I had a painting, a large target with plaster casts in compartments, and one of the casts was of male genitalia, and that upset some people. Alfred thought it might cause a problem. It appeared that he wanted to get that painting and asked how I felt about these boxes being closed. Because I had always imagined that any viewer could open or close the compartments, I said it was all right with me if they were closed some of the time but certainly not all of the time. This was while he was in

Castelli Gallery, looking at the show. Later it became clear that he had decided not to get that painting and he got the others. He wrote me a letter, that year or the following year, when they published recent acquisitions in a brochure or something. The three paintings of mine that MoMA had gotten were reproduced in a photograph. Mr. Barr sent it to me with a note saying, I think, that someone had suggested that he had minimized MoMA's interest in my work by showing these things in one photograph. He said that actually his intention had been to emphasize that they had bought three paintings instead of one.

SZ: And if you had put your money on one or the other.... [laughter]

JJ: I hadn't even thought about it [laughing].

SZ: Tell me what it was like for you, the involvement with the Museum. It was in '58 that he bought the paintings, and then it was in one of the Dorothy Miller "American" shows, just what was it like to suddenly be a part of that?

JJ: It wasn't like anything. Whatever my involvement was, it just required...I can't explain it. I had no sense that I was involved. Rather, that my work was involved to some degree. I simply had to do what was necessary to deal with whatever happened, which was just a couple of things, just these couple of shows. It was important to me in terms of my ego, but actually, there was no real separation of the Museum from other things in my life. It was just a detail, in a sense, a very important detail, in those first few years of showing paintings; because it was all so new to me as an artist that nothing stood out in any particular way. I was just trying to proceed, whatever happened.

SZ: So changes at the Museum or in the Museum as they happened in those years, that's not something that you would have a...?

JJ: I didn't know enough about the Museum, you see, to really know what was going on. I

didn't really understand the structure of it--still don't [laughter].

SZ: And now it's changing again.

JJ: Apparently, yes. Nothing has happened, has it?

SZ: No, not that I'm privy to. But in fact, I guess a large cast of characters in the last twenty-five years, that is really changing. It's changed. Well, Kirk [Varnedoe] is there now.

JJ: It's true of most things, though, isn't it? Everything they're dealing with is changing, so it has to change. Of course, the scale of it, it's increased so much. It must be very tricky dealing with accumulation. It's hard for an individual to deal with that. It must be very difficult to know what to do. So if things do fall apart, maybe they'll be very grateful [laughter].

SZ: I didn't mean to imply that things were falling apart.

JJ: No, I was thinking of Alfred saying that the pictures may not last [laughter].

SZ: Who were some of the curators at the Museum you've really had the most contact with?

JJ: Recently, Kirk. Riva Castleman--she did two shows of my prints; I'm not certain, but I believe so. Wendy Weitman, because of her involvement with Riva's department, and I've known Kynaston McShine since before he went to MoMA. I valued Bernice Rose when she was there, and I'm friendly with Rob Storr. I had very little to do with Bill Rubin. I knew Bill before he went to the Modern, just slightly.

SZ: Well, Kirk's interests and intentions are quite different than what occurred under Bill Rubin, so I just was wondering how you see that.

JJ: The only way I see it -- what's terrible about this kind of interview is that I just end up talking about myself, because my connection to these people is through my own work and not as a kind of overview --

SZ: I would be interested in your opinion as an overview, too.

JJ: I don't have one, that's the problem [laughter]. The difference is that I don't think that it would ever have occurred to Bill Rubin to make an exhibition of my paintings, whereas I assume it did occur to Kirk. I don't know how Kirk came to that idea. I've never asked him. But I don't think that Bill had that kind of interest.

SZ: Did you see High and Low, Kirk's first show?

JJ: Yes.

SZ: Bill Lieberman you must have....

JJ: I knew Bill, yes. I don't know how I met Bill--possibly through the Sculls, possibly through Louise Smith. I don't know.

SZ: Not through Tanya Grosman?

JJ: I knew Bill before I knew Tanya, I believe. I don't know whether that was any reason for us to come together, because of ULAE [Universal Limited Art Editions] or not. I don't really remember. Tanya had very high regard for Bill's opinion and, I think, frequently listened to him for guidance.

SZ: I think your interest--I should pose this as a question--your interest in lithography and I guess Riva's tenure timewise are quite close, is that right?

JJ: What does "tenure" mean?

SZ: The time that she's been there as director of that department.

JJ: Yes, I suppose so. She worked under Bill [Lieberman], didn't she?

SZ: Yes.

JJ: I don't know what the relationship was then.

SZ: And then she took over the department, I think in 1971, so she's been there a long time, coinciding with the development, which you really took part in, the renaissance of this medium.

JJ: That all started in the '60s, and by the '70s it was very lively. There were a lot of good print shops in various parts of the country, I think, at that time, by the '70s, and I guess Tanya Grosman and June Wayne had begun that kind of revitalization of those media. I think both did work, Tanya in particular, to interest artists who were not printers to work. June Wayne was perhaps more important in training technicians and in interesting people to devote their skills to do that. She'd gotten a big grant from some foundation [Ford Foundation] to support it, so she operated on a scale I think quite different from Tanya Grosman, who was using her garage to produce these things. But both were very important.

SZ: It was through Tanya that you really learned to do that?

JJ: Yes. I never worked with June Wayne. I worked at Gemini later, which was a slightly later thing. I think Tanya...Tanya was involved with Bill, and then I suppose through him with Riva, and with the Modern, through these people. I think some arrangement was made -- I think it was with the Bartoses -- to acquire an example of each of Tanya's publications for the Modern, and that lasted, I believe, until Tanya died. I

don't know when it began, but at some point, either Celeste and Armand or one of them, I don't know whether it was one or both, supported the program of acquiring one of every print of Tanya's.

SZ: Were there particular trustees at the Museum that you've had a relationship with?

JJ: Well, is Philip a trustee?

SZ: Yes.

JJ: Philip, partly because he acquired the Flag and then continued to acquire my work, I think through the influence of David Whitney, to a large extent, but he has been a very important patron of mine, and a friend. I don't know who the trustees are. Louise Smith, Agnes Gund. Those are all people that I've known and feel friendly toward. I don't know who the others are. I was never involved with the Rockefellers or the Paleys.

SZ: I mentioned Peter Selz before, and Bill Seitz, and you remembered them. Was that from that time?

JJ: Yes, from the '60s, I guess. Bill Seitz and Irma...I'm a little confused, but didn't Bill teach at Princeton?

SZ: Yes.

JJ: But he had taught Frank Stella?

SZ: That's right.

JJ: So I don't know how I knew them, him and her, but I may have met them as part of the general scene around the Sculls out in Great Neck. At that time there were

certain people who were actively seeking out younger artists and trying to show interest and curiosity in a very friendly way. There weren't many of those people. But it was a lively kind of social scene at that time -- artists and collectors and museum people and gallery people.

SZ: Speaking of gallery people, how did Leo get to you originally?

JJ: Apparently by chance. There was an exhibition at The Jewish Museum in which a painting of mine was included, and Leo had seen it. He was about to open his gallery or had just opened his gallery, and he was, I guess, looking for artists to show, trying to decide what he was going to do. He knew Bob Rauschenberg's work and arranged to go see Bob, who had not had an exhibition in some years but previously had shown a good deal and Leo knew his work and wanted to see what he was doing and arranged through Morton Feldman and Paul Brach to go see Bob. Bob lived on a floor above my floor on Pearl Street--I had the refrigerator--and Bob said he had to go get ice for Leo down at Jasper Johns's, and Leo said, "Is that the person who painted that target?" And that was the beginning. I don't think he knew it was a target, actually; he said "that green painting" [laughing]--which is now in the Modern.

SZ: So that was an important thing for him as well, for his career.

JJ: For Leo? Oh, yes, it was quite an amazing thing for everybody. The freshness of his career and mine made it very lively, because, I don't know how old Leo was, I think he was in his fifties, and he opened a gallery. So it was very important to him, his taking this step to actually become a businessman--I don't know what his idea was or what his image of himself was, but it was obviously something very important. And, of course, I was young and it was of extreme importance to me because it was right at the time that is classically important for a young man [laughing], and I think that the combination of my lack of...well, of people not knowing who I was, very few people

knew that I existed, didn't know my work, and people interested to see what Leo was going to do, because Leo was known, in a certain way, because of his involvement with artists and as a collector, and his involvement with [Sidney] Janis. It made for a lively few minutes.

SZ: Few years [laughter].

JJ: I think it helped to direct him. I think it threw him into something that he hadn't expected, so if you look back at the things he was showing, he revised...he didn't revise, but where he might have gone is not where he went. He went somewhere else because of certain things that happened, and I was part of that. It was nice. Are you talking to him?

SZ: I already did. It's interesting, because I guess early in your career there was this...well, the artist, the gallery, and the Museum, the three entities were important to and somewhat dependent upon one another. Would you say that's right?

JJ: For me? From my point of view?

SZ: Yes, for you, from your point of view.

JJ: Certainly it was of extreme importance in terms of the way my life has developed. I was a young artist working fairly privately for what seemed to me forever--I think it was three or four years [laughing]--but at any rate I had accumulated a certain amount of work and it seemed to me that I wanted to show it, so the next step was to find someone who would show it. I contacted a couple of people. Actually, I only contacted Betty Parsons, because I wanted Betty Parsons to show my work. Betty said she had too many artists, she couldn't show them all, and she didn't even come down to look at my work. So then I didn't know what to do, because most of the

galleries in New York--there weren't many--but most of them were involved in second-generation Abstract Expressionist painting at that time, and it didn't seem that my work would fit with that. But Betty Parsons had a gallery where I felt each artist was kind of on his own, with no particular tendency of the gallery. So that's why I thought that she would be a place that might show my work. So when Leo showed up, that was just...he looked at my work and he said, "I think I might like to give you a show. Do you know my gallery?" I said no, and he said, "Would you come look at it?" So I did. It was just pure...nature [laughing]. It didn't seem to me that I had had anything to do with it, or anyone. It just seemed to happen, so that was just wonderful. Then, Alfred's decision to buy paintings was completely flabbergasting to me. You adjust to these things very quickly. You think, "Well, this is how it happens, this must be the way it goes." [laughter]. Tom Hess had used a painting of mine on the cover of Art News. I don't know whether that's what attracted Alfred to come see the show or not; I don't know. I don't know whether that magazine had appeared or not. I don't know why Alfred came. At any rate, a number of glamorous and unusual things happened to me, and I was delighted and not able to put it, really, in perspective, because I didn't really know if this was as unusual as it seemed to me. It was certainly unusual in my life, but if this was the way the art world worked, I didn't know. I think it was pretty rare. I think the whole moment was a very lucky one for me, and for Leo. And all of those things, I believe, reinforced one another. That's what's interesting about it, and you can't pull one of them out to describe cause and effect, it seems to me. It's just a certain kind of coming-together of things, and you couldn't break them up if you wanted to. And the Modern, in my life, was really the only Museum there was. In the world! [laughing] I had never been to Europe. This was it for me.

SZ: I guess the obvious question to ask is, to some degree the importance of the gallery and the importance of the Museum, those things have shifted over the years, the influence of the Museum in the whole way in which the art world works today is somewhat different.

JJ: How do you think it's different?

SZ: I was going to ask you if you felt that was correct?

JJ: I do think it's different, but I don't know exactly how. I think that one difference is, that in the '60s, when I associated with the Sculls, they began buying a lot of paintings very quickly....

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JJ: ...and I think they influenced other collectors to do this. What happened was, these collectors began to acquire works with great speed, and I don't think the Museum was accustomed to that. The Museum was accustomed to having--not only the Museum, but museums generally--were accustomed to having a lot of time in which to consider what they should get, and suddenly these things were just being snatched away. I think that interfered with their customary stance.

SZ: And the escalation in prices also made it....

JJ: Of course. That goes with it, of course, the fact that people were buying things quickly and with rivalry, and collectors influenced what the museums had to do or could do. And I don't know what they did, I don't know how they've adjusted, really. Obviously, one thing is to court these people, to try to get gifts, but that's only good with certain people at certain times. I don't know how they survive, the museums, now.

SZ: It's an interesting question, and the relationship of the museum to the living artist has changed, as you've just described it and more, because of it. Which goes back to

the old argument: What should a modern museum be, and how modern is modern, and what part they can really play?

JJ: I think it's a real problem. I don't understand the art world well enough to have an opinion, because I'm sure there are people who think there is a lot of work that is neglected and that should be brought to public attention, but if it is, when was it made? This year? It's a funny sense of time, right now.

SZ: That's why your story is such a great one.

JJ: The speeding-up of all of that and having to deal with things quickly, new things, and make judgments very quickly, must be very difficult. The relationship of these to a certain extent, novelties to older things, the weighty, important material the Museum already has, it's a real problem: how to equate or relate these two kinds of things and give them the right accent. But I can't believe they would ever give up all of that stuff [laughter]. Can you? That would be, obviously, one solution, to not have all that history involved.

SZ: That's how it started out.

JJ: Yes, exactly. But I don't think the trustees could let it go. I think it is their lives, or has been; I guess the trustees are changing now. But many of the trustees are people who were involved with all that. I wonder what they'll do. I guess they'll just become bigger.

SZ: How much input will you have in what goes into Kirk's show?

JJ: I don't know! [laughter] I don't know if he's made all of his decisions or not. Someone told me he had heard that he knew pretty well what it was. He hasn't mentioned that

to me, and I'm sure I know of things that he doesn't even know exist. And I think he will at some point begin to want to know about all that.... But maybe not.

SZ: That show should be...it's a milestone, yes? It will be?

JJ: What do you mean by "milestone"?

SZ: Big and important.

JJ: It will be important to me. I think my last big show was in '77 at the Whitney and it traveled about a few places in the world. So I mean that seems to me recent, but then if you think about people who were born then and how old they are now, then it isn't very recent.

SZ: Well, I think that's it.

JJ: Okay [laughing].

SZ: Unless you have something else.

JJ: I can't think of anything.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1

END INTERVIEW