THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **IRVING BLUM**

INTERVIEWER: **JEANMARIE THEOBALDS**

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BEGIN AUDIO FILE Blum_01

JT: Today is October 26, 2011. My name is Jeanmarie Theobalds. I'm here with Irving Blum. We're at The Museum of Modern Art, the fifth floor of the Architecture and Design conference room. So could you please introduce yourself just a little bit?

IB: Yes. As you now know, this is Irving Blum. And I was in the Air Force until 1956. 1956 I was discharged, honorably, and came to New York and went to work for Knoll Associates, the furniture house. They were right here on 57th and Madison. And as you may know, 57th and Madison was kind of the hub. It was kind of where most of the New York galleries were located. If they were located uptown, they were located somewhere on 57th Street. And I had the privilege of visiting – well, the two most important galleries, I think, for me, and this is, now, 1956 going into 1957, was Sidney Janis -- it was half a block away -- and on the same floor, on the back end of where Sidney was, Betty Parsons, who had, I think, a fabulous gallery. I met her. She was a really extraordinary lady, not only a gallery dealer but an artist, as well. And I found myself, finally, right in the center of the community of artists that were here in New York at the time, mostly second generation Abstract Expressionists. I got very friendly with Al Leslie and Mike Goldberg, as a matter of fact. And working for Mrs. Knoll in that department that she headed up, she would, from time to time, send me out looking for work that she needed to do for these big corporate decorating assignments that she was involved with. She always specified size. Size was roughly 24 inches square, 30

inches square, 36 inches square, rarely anything bigger; that wasn't, kind of, in her head -- and color, very involved with color. So she'd say, "24 inches square, something red." And I'd go off and I'd visit Mr. Janis, and I'd say, "24 inches square, red;" and he'd bring out a red Albers, which I would take on approval to show to Mrs. Knoll. She adored it. And I wound up buying several paintings by Josef Albers. I mean, it was just easy, in terms of definition, you know. And I became aware of Janis's program, and I became aware of Betty Parsons' program, and went to openings. Never a drink with Mr. Janis, but you'd see a lot of people that you recognized, first generation artists, for example, Bill DeKooning, Franz Kline, Ad Reinhardt, at Betty Parsons. And I became alert, really alert to the work they were doing. And I came to the conclusion in 1957, after taking a look around, that the art world was the direction I wanted to go in. I had very little money. It was kind of the end of '57. Hans Knoll got killed in an automobile crash: he went to pre-Castro Cuba and was driven off the side of a mountain road and died. And when he died, a lot of the energy was lost. And so, I missed California, I missed the weather, I hated the weather here. I mean, winters and summers were hard; they're still hard for me. [Laughing] And I decided I'd go back west. Although raised in Phoenix, I had been to LA a number of times; I have family there, relatives. And so I packed up at the end of '57 and went to Los Angeles, and found a place to stay, and became familiar, as familiar as I could be, with the LA art scene. And it seemed to me that the most daring gallery and the most interesting gallery and the most ambitious was called Ferus. And Ferus was started by Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz, and started three or four months before I arrived. And I went to the gallery several times -- it was a kind of shambles; I mean it really, it needed work -- and introduced myself to Walter. And we went for a beer, and we talked. And I said, "You know, I've been to the gallery." And Walter said he was aware of the fact that I had come in several times. I said I'd lived in New York and I was very familiar with the gallery scene in New York, and interested in participating with him in Ferus. I thought I could bring something to bear on the gallery. And Walter was delighted. He said, "You know Kienholz, who I started the gallery with and who built a lot of what you're looking at, Kienholz is bored sitting in the gallery, you know, being a dealer. He's really an artist. He wants to go back to making work, and he wants to go back to studio activity, and my guess is that you could buy his share of the

gallery." And I said, "Great. I'll pursue that." And so I called Ed, and we went out for lunch or something, talked about the gallery. I told him about my ambition and about how I'd like to get involved with Ferus. And he said he was absolutely thrilled to hear that. He wanted to go back to his studio and do work there. And he said he would be prepared to sell his half of the gallery. And I said, "Well, what sort of money are we talking about, Ed?" And he said, "Five hundred dollars would probably do it." And I said, "I can do that," and was quick to give him a check for $500.00 and reintroduce myself to Walter. And we sat and we planned a future together. The gallery was worth less than I paid for it [Laughing], but, that's life. I said, "Look. We have to do two things." I said, "I don't know what else we have to do but, from my point of view, you're representing sixty or sixty-five artists. No gallery can do that. I mean, it just isn't possible. We have to kind of eliminate a number of artists and get down to a manageable number. And two, the space is too irregular. We have to find a new space." And Walt said, "Well, you don't have a lot of money and I certainly don't have a lot of money;" and, "How are we going to do that?" And I said, "Well, maybe we can find a backer." And I said, "Who comes into your gallery, in a regular way?" It turned out, very few people did. Vincent Price, the actor, who I went to see, and he wasn't at all interested in being supportive. Gifford Phillips, an important collector, related to, somehow, I think an uncle of his was Duncan Phillips of that gallery in Washington. And they were very, very hospitable. And Gifford said to me, "Look, I like your idea; I like your plan." He said, "I'm not prepared to give you any money in terms of your going forward, however, what I will do, and what I will promise, is that I will buy art from you. You can count on me as a client." I said, "Wonderful." I said, "I really appreciate that," and I enjoyed meeting both Gifford and Joanne, his wife. And the third name on the list was Sadye Moss. Sadye Moss was a lady who was very generous to various art organizations. The Monday Evening Concerts was a program started by her in the late '50s. Her husband had died. He had a big accountancy firm, and she had quite a bit of money. And she said, "Well, tell me more about your program," and I did; I told her as much as I could tell her then. And she said she'd be prepared to give me a certain sum, and she'd be prepared to do that year after year, if necessary, if I needed it. She liked my idea about the gallery and how I intended to go forward. [0:10:50]

JT: Now what was your idea, your conception that you were pitching to them?

IB: My conception was to limit the number of artists to a manageable number -- very, very important, say, for example, fifteen or sixteen, down from this ungodly number that Walter had begun with; number one. Number two, since I had very many friends in New York, to go to New York, maybe once a year – I couldn't go more often; it was too expensive – and to bring artists from New York to California, so that the gallery would have more than just a provincial cast. And she liked that idea, and she said, "Do you have any artists in mind?" And I said, "Well, you know, there are people like Joseph Cornell who I've met, and I'd like to do something regarding him; I'd like to do something regarding Albers, and anybody first generation in New York that I can somehow engage. For example. DeKooning, Kline; maybe to get three paintings of Rothko's." And that could be a show, as far as I was concerned. Well, she liked that idea; she was very pleased with that idea; she thought it was workable. And so we began in earnest to – I found a space, not far away, and I mostly architected it myself. Very simple, but very clean, and much better than what the original gallery was like. [0:12:40]

JT: Describe the original gallery space, what made it kind of

IB: Well, it was behind another, primitive art gallery, run by a charming old man called Streeter Blair, but it was narrow. And, you know, the buildings didn't have to be very permanent in California because the weather is so sympathetic. So, [it was] made of lumber, but rough, really unfinished. And maybe one good wall, [Laughing]

JT: One good wall in the gallery. [Laughing]

IB: But one good wall in a gallery wasn't enough. [Laughing] And so we proceeded to shape a new gallery. And I came to New York in '57; I came again in '58, and I became friendly, happily, with Leo Castelli. Leo Castelli started at exactly the same time I started, in 1957, here in New York. And I watched what Leo was doing. And the more established first generation artists were beginning to kind of find their sea legs, were beginning to find an audience, were beginning to sell, were hard to attract, you know, to an unknown situation, as far as they were

concerned. So I thought, what I had to do, apart from my initial plan, was, go forward, with younger people, much easier to attract, and a better program for myself. [0:14:35]

JT: But your conception was to bring east to west?

IB: My conception was to being east to west.

JT: And was that, because, when I read lots of transcripts about artists in that time, I'm always shocked to read they were reading from magazines with black and white pictures about new artists. So, was that something that you were conscious of? Did you intuit that,

IB: Yes.

JT: At the time, that there was this need to connect the coasts, connect the line of communication between the coasts?

IB: Yes, yes; that was absolutely my ambition; absolutely. But you have to understand the climate at that time. There was first, second, and maybe even third generation abstract expressionism; nothing else. I mean, that was the dominant New York style, you know? And that's what I thought I'd be involved with. And so, I went to the Stable Gallery, went to Sidney and to Betty, but *most* of all, I was aware of what Leo was doing. And Leo early on showed the work of Jasper Johns. And *all* the artists in California, and by that I mean Bob Irwin, Ed Moses, Billy Al Bengston, Craig Kaufman; these were the people that we winnowed down, and these were the people that we started with in LA, but these were the people that -- Ed Kienholz himself -- were very intrigued with Jasper's work, as was everybody. You know, it was hard to position it, post-surreal, maybe? You know, there was no name for it, for the style, but they were interested in the activity. And I said to Leo, in '58, I said, "The artists are very interested, on the West Coast." Some of which he knew, most of which he didn't, but, in any case, I said, "They're very interested in Jasper, and is there some chance that I could do something with Jasper in California?" And he said, "Oh, my dear," he said, "he's the one artist I can sell. I can't sell anyone else. I have a waiting list of two or three people for Jasper Johns' work." And he said, "I don't think there's any promise that I can make you, and I don't think there's anything I

can really do. He works very slowly. We sell whatever he produces." He said, "However, here's his telephone number." Can you imagine one dealer doing that to another today? I mean, it would never happen. "Here's his telephone number. Call him, and maybe something will happen." And I said, "Thank you very much." And I went into another office besides his, and I called Jasper, and Jasper said, "Where are you?" And I said, "I'm in Leo's gallery." And Jasper said, "Well, come down to where I am. I'm on Houston Street." And he had an abandoned bank building.

JT: Where was that on Houston? I was trying to [0:17:55]

IB: Houston off of the Bowery.

JT: Oh, okay.

IB: Just off of the Bowery on Houston. And in an abandoned bank building, an enormous room that you walked into, a little corridor then an enormous room. It had been a bank. And as I walked through the corridor into the big room, I saw a little Schwitters collage that he had traded somebody for. And I knew who Schwitters was, and I'd seen them at Sidney's, you know. And I loved his little collage. And then I walked into the big room. There was a long table and Jasper's sculpture, for example, the light bulb, flashlight, The Critic Speaks, the ale can, the Savarin coffee can was probably there – kind of lined up on this very long table was his sculpture. And I said, "What on earth are those?" And he said, "Sculpture; I'm thinking about it now. In any case, I've made these. I've got several more ideas," he said. And we talked. And we talked about LA. He was interested in what I was doing. He was interested in the scene in LA, and who they were looking at, and who they were talking about. And finally, before leaving, I said, "Jasper, I have an idea I'd like to explore with you." And he said, "Let me hear." And I said, "Your sculpture and Schwitters collage would make, I think, a fascinating show." And he said, "Where will you get the Schwitters?" And I said, "There's a German expatriate lady who lives in Pasadena who has a group of them." I said, "I've never seen them; I know she has them, and I can borrow them, maybe have some for sale, and do your sculpture." And he said, "Well," he said, "call me when you get back to LA." He said, "If you can borrow the Schwitters, if you can get the Schwitters, if you can get a group of them, I'll

send you my sculpture." And I said, "Great," and, "I'll do what I can." And I left. I went back to Los Angeles. I spoke to this lady and she, indeed, let me have six or eight Schwitters. And I called Jasper and I said, "I've got the Schwitters." He sent the sculpture, and in 19, the end of '59, the beginning of '60 – it could have been 1960 – I showed Schwitters collage and Jasper's sculpture. And nothing sold, and I kept the bronze *Flashlight* and the *Light Bulb*. My recollection is that they were, at retail, $500 apiece. I got a discount off of that, of course. So I kept the two sculptures, and I tried *forever* to buy the Savarin Coffee Can with the brushes [*Painted Bronze*]. And I called Jasper once a year for twenty years [Laughter], and he said, "I appreciate your calling," and we had kind of wonderful conversations, but he said, "Not quite ready to do it, but, stay in touch." And so I kept doing that, but I was never able to land it. Never. And I think about it to this day, and I'm miserable as a consequence. [Laughter] [0:21:45]

JT: Now, can you just do a little relativity about what $500 was for a sculpture then, versus, like, in today's market? Was that, for a new artist, what was?

IB: For a young artist, $500 would be the equivalent – I can't tell you exactly; I don't know. But my guess would be close to $5,000.

JT: Okay.

IB: That would be a comparison. So, I mean, it wasn't a great deal of money, but there wasn't any money, so, $500 could have been $5,000, even then, very easily, just, you know, it didn't work.

JT: And Johns, though, what was his idea of west coast artists? Like, did he have an idea who was there?

IB: No, but he was very interested in what the activity was. And I described, as well as I could, the artists that I showed. And I had photographs of their work, in some instances. And there were two or three artists that he particularly focused on. One of them was called Hassel Smith. Hassel Smith was a kind of first generation, because he worked in the late 40s, right through the 50s, but an Abstract Expressionist whose work was completely unsaleable. I mean, I couldn't do a great deal for him. I bought two or three of his paintings, which I

still own. They're worth today, in 2011, what they were worth when he did them in 1950. I mean, you know, they haven't gone anywhere in terms of value, but they're wonderful paintings, and they continue to be wonderful paintings, and I love the few that I still own. He's gone now; he went to England. He went to Cornwall and took his studio there, and died several years ago, with no success. I mean, it was just tragic, you know. But in any case, that was the style. I remember, just to give you a notion, in 1959, Henry Hopkins, who was an art historian that I knew and liked very much, Henry and I went to have a drink, and we were sitting there, and Henry, at one point, looked at me and he said, "Let me tell you about the art world." And I said, "Tell me, Henry." And Henry said, "It's become like music. There's one kind of dominant style. It's international; it's in Italy; it's in France; it's in England; it's in Spain; Abstract Expressionism; and there are tributaries all over the world, rather like the world of music." And I thought, you know, he's quite right. And shortly after we had that conversation, the Pop style hit, and that was that. [Laughing] That was the end of the musical analogy. [Laughing] But, in 1961, on one of my trips, which, as I say, happened very seldom, but in 1961, I came to New York. And when I came to New York, I referred to two or three people. The two or three people were Henry Geldzahler, before he became Henry Geldzahler, who was a good friend, all through his life; Bill Sietz, who worked here at MoMA as a curator, from Princeton; and the third person I spoke to was Dick Bellamy, who had a gallery called the Green Gallery. And I thought his gallery was first rate, and he took chances; he risked. And he was brilliant to talk to. And I would call these three people, in California before I came to New York, and I would say, "Have you made any studio visits, and who do you think is interesting?" And they'd give me lists of four or five people. And any name that appeared on more than one list, was somebody I called. I didn't have a great deal of time. I wasn't here for very long. And in 1961, I got those lists, and Andy's name appeared on two lists, on Bellamy's and on Geldzahler's. And I called Andy. And I told him who I was, told him that I had a gallery in California, and I was very interested in looking at his work. He said, "Come on over." And I went to his house on Lexington Avenue. He had a little house on [242] Lexington Avenue. I can't remember the street, but he lived there with his mother, whom I caught a glimpse of on a couple of occasions, but she was very shy and very private. And he kind of kept her apart. And in any case, he said,

"You came at a very good time." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "There's a window designer at Bonwit Teller who's a friend of mine." You can find out his name; I don't remember right now. [Gene Moore] But he asked to borrow a half dozen unfinished cartoons by Andy, and put them in the window. And they were just back. And there they were. And I looked at them. And if you can imagine, that was my first kind of glimpse at something radical, and something really different, and something I had really no way to gauge. And they didn't seem incredibly relevant to me, somehow. However, Andy was extraordinary. I mean, he was very straightforward, curious, interested in talking, interested in everything that was going on, and where had I been in New York, and what had I seen, and so on and so on and so on. And we had the most wonderful conversation, and it was really about the art world, and it was really about what was going on in New York, and a little bit about what was going on in California. And I invented stories about movie stars because he seemed so much star-struck. He was terribly star-struck. [Laughter] And finally it was time to go, and I thanked him. I told him, you know, how much I appreciated the visit, and that I would think hard about the work, and that he would hear from me. And he loved that. And I left and put the whole thing kind of out of my mind. I mean, it was buried somewhere in the back of my mind, but I really didn't think very hard about it from that point on. Several months later, I had the great fortune – this is in '61, still – of being in the gallery and dealing with a man called Edwin Janss, a collector who I sold quite a lot of work to. Finally, I sold amazing things to him, you know? One of the most important collectors in my kind of orbit. And Ed said that he was going to New York. He said, "Do you know anything about Giacometti?" I said, "Yes, I know a great deal," but in truth, I knew nothing about Giacometti, but I thought, I mean, what's he after? And he said, "Good," he said, "I'll take you." He said, "I'm going on to Europe; you'll have to get back on your own, but I'll take you to New York, and you'll look at this Giacometti that I'm thinking about buying, and you can tell me what you think of it." And I said, "Done." It was an opportunity to fly to New York for nothing. And we went to the Klaus Perls gallery on Madison Avenue, and it actually, it was a Giacometti painting, which I thought was exceptionally beautiful. And he bought it. And he went on, and I was free in New York. I had a few days I could spare. I could

cover my expenses for three or four days in the city, eating very meagerly. [Laughing] [0:31:50]

JT: At the automat? [Laughter]

IB: At the automat? God, I loved the automat. [Laughter]

JT: Anyone who was in New York in the 50s, say "the automat" and there's this beaming

IB: Everybody likes that.

JT: Yes, my mother goes on and on about automats.

IB: It was spectacular; it was just spectacular. Little slots where you put several nickels and opened and got a wonderful ham sandwich on white bread. It was heaven. [Laughing] In any case, what I did immediately was, well, the very next day, as I recall, I went up to see Leo, as I always did when I was in New York, becoming a habit. And as I waited for Leo, who was in his office talking to somebody, I began talking to Ivan Karp, who worked for Leo, and subsequently, years later, opened a gallery called OK Harris in Soho. It's still there, I think. I haven't seen him in a while. In any case, Ivan Karp said, "There are some transparencies I'd like you to look at." And I said, "Fine." And he gave me these transparencies, and they were cartoons. And I said, "Andy Warhol." And he said, "No, these are by a guy by the name of Lichtenstein, lives in New Jersey, and he's doing these cartoon paintings, and we're thinking about showing him." And I said, after looking hard at them, I made, with Roy's work, which, it never happened to me with Andy, I made a kind of Léger connection. The black outline of the different things he was working on; I thought of Léger, and I thought, "Christ, these are not bad." And I said to Ivan very quickly, "You know, I'd like to show them in California." And Ivan said, "Well, we're planning a show here. We're going to be showing them here." Roy never forgot that early support. I mean, it stood me in very good stead. Through the years we became great, great friends. One of the artists I was probably the closest to was Roy. I really adored him. In any case, I ran out of the gallery, not wanting to show my hand, went to a phone box – they had phone boxes then – called Andy and I said, "Can I make a visit?" And he said, "Come right over." I said, "Super." Went down to

the same house on Lexington Avenue, and there was a corridor. And as I walked down the corridor to get into the living room, Andy was back there, there were three soup can paintings leaning against the wall, on the floor, but leaning against the wall. And I said, after saying hello, and what are you up to, and how's your life, I said, "Why three soup can paintings?" He said, "Oh, it's part of a series. I'm going to do thirty-two." I said, "What?" He said, "I'm going to do 32 soup can paintings." I said, "Why 32, Andy?" He said, "There are 32 varieties." He said, "You know, in ten years, there'll be sixty. And in any case, I had this idea to do them, and it's what I'm involved with now." And *right* at that moment, right at that moment, I had an epiphany. I can't tell you why. But thinking about Roy, thinking about – there was no such thing as Pop. The style didn't exist at that time: didn't exist, didn't exist until '61. This is '60, you know? [see above] '62, full flowering, '63. But I had this notion that I would like to show them in LA. And I said, "Any response?" And he said, and he paused, and I felt that he was thinking: I did them in New York; I live in New York, my friends are in New York; who will see them in LA? He never said that, but I felt that coming from him, in some miraculous way. And I took his arm, and I said, "Andy, movie stars come into the gallery." Which was a lie. Movie stars, with the exception of Dennis Hopper, whom I got to know, and was a friend. [0:37:50]

JT: And Vincent Price.

IB: Uh, sorry?

JT: Vincent Price?

IB: No, never came, didn't come in. He came in once or twice but didn't bother, didn't bother, somehow. Wasn't interested in what I was doing. I could see him walk into a gallery called Felix Landau, which was across the street, who showed Klimt and Austrian artists. Felix was Austrian. [Oskar] Kokoschka. Kokoschka was Vincent Price's taste. It wasn't what I was doing. [Laughter] So, in any case, after saying "Movie stars come into the gallery," Andy said, without even pausing for a moment, he said, "Let's do it." And I thought, "Bravo," you know, "there it is." And at that moment, I wasn't sure about what I had done. And I wasn't sure that it was even the right move. And in any case, I was committed, '61, and at the end of '61, the beginning of '62, he sent the paintings, no, a little

later, he sent the paintings out and the show occurred at the Ferus Gallery in July of 1962 for a whole month. Unlike the New York season, the summer season in California was buoyant. In other words, a lot of people came from everywhere to LA in the summer. They came for the sun, the beach, to go to Santa Barbara, to go to LaJolla, one thing or another, but there was traffic, from out-of-town, from Europe. So July, as I explained over the phone to Andy, was a great month. He said, "Terrific; let's do it." So, in July of 1962, I hung the paintings, and as I hung them in one line, completely around the gallery -- there was one partition -- on the partition on both sides, and then around, I couldn't get them straight, somehow. They looked a tiny bit crooked. I did it all myself. And I thought, what am I going to do? They need to be even. I felt they needed to be like on a shelf, and a shelf was the idea. So I built a kind of a four or five inch kind of narrow shelf, and I rested these paintings, with a little bracket on the back, I rested these paintings on that shelf throughout the gallery, and there it was. [0:40:45]

JT: How did you determine the order?

IB: I didn't determine the order.

JT: You just, any one, as you picked them up out of the box.

IB: The one I picked up first, as I took them out of the box.

JT: Okay.

IB: Exactly right. Exactly right. There was no order. And I think to this day there's probably not really an order, you know.

JT: Do you consider the flavors or anything when you look at them, or?

IB: Privately, yes. But they were so graphic, walking in, I mean, I was so taken with them in a way that I never imagined I would be. And then I sold, well, they were a hundred dollars apiece. I sold four or five. And kept looking at them. And somehow, called Andy and said, "You know, I'm really taken by the paintings, and I have an idea." He said, "What's your idea?" I said, "Andy, I'd like to keep them together. I think that's a lot of their power, keeping the series intact." He said, "I'd love that. Great." And I said, "Let me get back to you." So I called Ed Janss, this man I was telling you about. I called Betty Ascher. Robert Rowan,

another person who had bought a single painting. Dennis Hopper. Don Factor. Those were the five people. And I explained my intent to all of them, and there was nothing at stake. As I say, there was no Pop style, there was no big investment involved, and every one of them said they would give up their pictures. And I said I would make it up to them down the line, in some way, but my intent was to keep them together and would they not be willing to let me do that, and they all said yes. And I called Andy, and I said, "I've got them. I've got them intact, and I'm going to keep them intact." And I said, "One day," I said, "I'll probably sell them to a great museum." That was [Laughter]

JT: [Laughing] Did you really say that?

IB: I really did. I really did. And I said, "In any case, I'm thrilled to death to have them;" and I said, "Will you give me a price on the group?" And he thought for a moment, and he said, "Yes, yes, I'll give you a price." Well, there were 32, $50 times 32, was net to him. He said, a thousand dollars for all of them. And I said – a thousand dollars was quite a lot of money – I said, "Andy, how long will you give me to pay?" He said, "How long do you want?" I said, "I want a year." He said, "Doable." He said, "I'll give you a year." And I sent him a hundred dollars a month for ten months, and bought them that way.

JT: Was it an effort, to always come up with the hundred dollars, in the back of your mind?

IB: Yes.

JT: [Laughing] Yes?

IB: Yes. I mean, my rent was sixty dollars a month; you know what I mean? I mean, everything was so cheap.

JT: Right.

IB: You know. I had a used car. I mean, I had *very* little money in the bank, really very little money in the bank. I kept putting it into the gallery, you know. And I needed things to be insured; I needed things to be shipped. So, I mean, there were, you know, costs, and I could barely, in truth, keep my head above water. But I managed. I managed, and whenever I couldn't manage, this lady Sadye

Moss would make up the extra $2,000 at the end of the year that I needed. Or $3,000; or $4,000. I mean, I could rely on her to do that. She did that for six or seven years. Otherwise, I couldn't have gone forward. [0:45:30]

JT: Right. So, after the show, you packed them up, put them in a box?

IB: After the show I moved them to my apartment. I had a little apartment on Sweetzer [Avenue]. This could have happened a little later, I think; yes, it happened later. I wrapped them and put them in storage. I had a storage area behind the gallery, not very safe, but they were there, and nothing happened. [Laughter]

JT: Otherwise all of this would …[Laughter]

IB: And then I moved them, and I had them on one wall in my apartment on Sweetzer in LA. And I kept thinking that it was the right thing to have done. And as time passes,

JT: And how was it arranged?

IB: In four rows of eight.

JT: Okay; the grid.

IB: So, boom, boom, boom, boom; a grid. And I did the same thing I did in the gallery, four shelves. The ceiling was high enough so that I could horizontally install four shelves, and I placed them in a way that I had in the gallery, on these shelves, and so they were completely orderly and in a grid.

JT: Now is that something you confronted when you walked into your apartment, or?

IB: No, you had to go into the living room. There was a corridor where you saw nothing in front, and you made a turn, and then there they were.

JT: What were the visitors' reactions when they saw that?

IB: Everybody thought I was mad. [Laughter]

JT: That was the topic of the cocktail parties?

IB: Yes.

JT: He is mad.

IB: He is mad. I never got a lot of praise for doing it, until much, much later [Laughing], where I got too much praise. [Laughter] It's never equal. [Laughing]

JT: So you lived with them for, what? Almost 34 years.

IB: I lived with them, yes; I had them up in my apartment, then I moved into a house and put them in storage.

JT: Okay.

IB: And so they were largely, during all those years, some thirty-odd years, they were stored. Which is why they look as well as they do. [Laughing]

JT: But museums borrowed them, still, or?

IB: No. No.

JT: So they weren't often loaned out?

IB: No, they were not loaned out.

JT: Okay.

IB: They were not loaned out; no. And you know, he did variations on this set, so people could borrow a soup can if they wanted a soup can, but they didn't come to me for them, for loans.

JT: Who did they go to?

IB: They went, finally, to Leo.

JT: Okay.

IB: They went to Leo who showed them, but not at the beginning. At the beginning, his first show in New York, this is, we're talking about July of 1962, his first show in New York was the fall of that year, at the Stable Gallery.

JT: Okay.

IB: And the Stable Gallery, the show caused such a ruckus, that it got Leo's attention. And Leo offered to take him on. And Andy *adored* Bob and Jasper, adored them both, and this was his opportunity to show with what he considered to be, and many people considered to be, and I considered to be, really the most important gallery in New York, Leo Castelli's gallery. And he went to Leo. And happily, I had this wonderful relationship with Leo, and I had a second Andy show where I showed the Elvis Presley paintings in the front, and in my storage area, ten silver Liz paintings, at the same time. And Andy was, by then, pretty much off and running. [0:50:05]

JT: Did you have a conversation with Leo about your show, during that time, about showing the cans?

IB: I had, yes, I remember talking to Leo about it, and I remember telling Leo that he should think about, early, he should think about taking Andy on. I thought he was really that intriguing. Leo hesitated, and as he hesitated, Eleanor Ward at the Stable Gallery took him. And they had that first show in New York, and then he shifted over to Leo.

JT: Okay.

IB: Yes, that's the way that went. [Laughter]

JT: So they stayed largely in storage, unbelievably, except for when they were on your wall.

IB: Yes, they were largely stored, except that time when I lived in West Hollywood on Sweetzer, on a street called Sweetzer, and they were on four shelves. But by then, I mean, a little later, the Pop thing hit with a bang. I mean, it was called Pop by, I think, Lawrence Alloway, and the style presented itself and it *stopped* first generation painting in its tracks. So those artists, having *painfully* achieved a certain fame by then, by 1960 to 1961, were more lost than not, you know what I mean? And the Pop thing got all the focus, all the attention. And the move I had made showing them seemed to a lot of people to be prescient and they began to take on a value, and I got nervous about keeping them around in my own place. And so I stored them, thinking that one day, I would get them out and hang them in some glorious way, but that didn't so much happen. Kirk Varnedoe became

very interested, and I thought they belonged in a great museum, and Kirk, with the help of Aggie Gund, made it happen. And I was completely thrilled. I mean, I hated to lose them, but I was completely thrilled that they wound up where they wound up, here at The Museum of Modern Art, and I like seeing them here. [Laughter] [0:53:27]

JT: So was it yours that hung in the retrospective, the 1989?

IB: Yes.

JT: Okay, so that was Kynaston's.

IB: That was Kynaston.

JT: So everyone was kind of calling you, talking to you, kind of like you were calling Johns, about the, trying to see when you were ready to part with them.

IB: Exactly.

JT: Except, how long were they

IB: There wasn't a lot of that.

JT: There wasn't a lot.

IB: I must say that there wasn't a lot of that, no. I had to really argue with Kirk, but, I mean, there was a certain resistance when they were acquired. I mean, it was quite a lot of money then, you know. It's still quite a lot of money. [Laughter]

JT: I'm not Laughing at that. [Laughing]

IB: But they have a value way beyond that now, you know.

JT: Right.

IB: And that will continue to grow, you know.

JT: What was his resistance, Kirk? He didn't approach you?

IB: He kind of did, but it wasn't number one on his agenda, and it was number one on mine. And I think that was the difference, you know.

JT: Okay. And why, at that time, was it at number one on your agenda?

IB: It was number one on my agenda then because I felt *absolutely* that this is where they belonged.

JT: Now, as opposed to, in 1980 or

IB: Yes, yes.

JT: What was going on now, here, at MoMA?

IB: Well, just the, MoMA was in possession of the collection that it had. I mean, it was unparalleled in the world.

JT: In Pop?

IB: In whatever it had in 20th century, in all ways.

JT: Okay.

IB: And I felt that the soup cans, that that series, were iconic, and I feel exactly the same today, only more so, if you can imagine. And I wanted very much for that to happen. I wanted very much for that to happen. Andy was gone. Was he gone then, when?

JT: In '96?

IB: In when? In '96. I think he was. He died in the late 80s. Is that right?

JT: Yes, I was,

IB: I think around '89, I think. [AW d. Feb, 1987]

JT: Yeah, '89, yes. I'm not going to tell you what part of my life that marks, but. [Laughter]

IB: [Laughing] Good; I'm grateful to you. [Laughter]

JT: So when did you first have a conversation with Kirk? What was that?

IB: I don't really recall, but I was very friendly with him. I thought he was just extraordinary, you know, in terms of his intellect and his intelligence. And he

understood enough about the importance of those paintings in a way that nobody else that I had encountered in the museum world ever did. And so it seemed a natural thing for me to pursue.

JT: Had he interviewed you before, about the Cans before the acquisition, or?

IB: I don't think so. I think after.

JT: It was after; okay.

IB: I think after. Yes, we had a talk after, I believe; yes.

JT: And so Aggie Gund was in on?

IB: And Aggie Gund, in terms of making a lot of the money happen. I think it was difficult for the Museum then, but Aggie made up what she needed to make up. And she's always been extremely generous and a great lady. And she thought, exactly as I thought, that this is where the paintings needed to rest.

JT: And she's one of the people that helped make sure that, that you went to, to move it up on the priority list, or?

IB: Yes.

JT: So you kind of had an active campaign.

IB: Yes. I kind of did have a campaign. But I met a lot of resistance, [Laughing] I'm sorry to say. [Laughter]

JT: I actually, I read Kirk Varnedoe's transcripts.

IB: Oh, really.

JT: Yes, and it's actually one of his proudest acquisitions.

IB: Oh, incredible; incredible. I'm really, I'm so thrilled, because he was, he was absolutely first rate. The guy was first rate in his thinking and in his performance, and I always enjoyed any kind of dialogue I had with him, you know. And he's a reason, along with Aggie, I think, that the paintings are here.

JT: Was there anybody else that was after you for them?

IB: Uh, not really.

JT: No?

IB: No. [Laughing] No, there wasn't a clamor; no. [Laughter] No, I'm afraid, even then. So.

JT: So then, I'm just going to ask you some general questions. So, we covered how they were hung. Did you hang them in New York at all? I thought I read that you had hung them in your New York apartment, as well.

IB: I probably did, in my New York apartment. I still live in the same building, but I have a bigger apartment now than I had then. I had four rooms at 784 Park, and they hung in the living room of that apartment, which oddly was bought by, the smaller apartment that I lived in, was bought by Anthony Duffy, who's still in the building, still there. I saw him a couple of days ago.

JT: So what did you hang, what did you replace with, once you took them down?

IB: Well, you know, I showed Ellsworth, and I have a lot of work by him, and I have quite a few paintings by Roy which I've kept right through the years. And so, if you come to my apartment, you'll always see, not only work by Andy, but work by Roy, work by Ellsworth, work by Frank Stella, work by some west coast artists, Robert Irwin, a sculpture by Ken Price. These are all things that I've kept through the years and still own. And the apartment, well, you should come; you should come. [1:00:40]

JT: Oh, I would love to. [Laughing]

IB: You should come and have a drink sometime.

JT: Oh, absolutely, I would love to.

IB: No, do, because I've got things up now, including a peeling label soup can, the big, great, great early painting of Andy's. It would be fun for you to see.

JT: Yes. Most definitely. But did you come when they were displayed here, when they were on show?

IB: Yes.

JT: Did you come?

IB: Yes.

JT: You came. What did you think when you saw them?

IB: Oh, I was absolutely thrilled. Thrilled. And not only that, MoCA in California asked to lend them for a month and a half or two months this summer, and they were on loan in LA over this past summer, and I visited with them then. And I love seeing them up as often as they are up here at MoMA, and I often come to greet them. [Laughter]

JT: You just come and sit down, drink a cup of coffee, back in your living room.

IB: Glenn Lowry was

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IB: Incredibly generous in letting them go to California and we're really appreciative of that gesture. And when they're up here, as they are often, I try to come and look.

JT: And was Glenn instrumental in the acquisition?

IB: Glenn was instrumental in the acquisition. Yes, he and Kirk, both Glenn and Kirk were really interested in seeing it happen. And it's thanks to them, and to Aggie, as I say, that it happened at all, you know. I mean it was, at that time, quite a bit of money, and still is somewhat controversial, you know.

JT: How so?

IB: Well, as time goes on, the Pop style, when it had arrived in the early 60s, there were two or three hundred Pop artists. But as time goes on, it's increasingly clear that Andy and Roy and certainly Claus Oldenburg, are definitive, in terms of the style. And it's clearer and clearer, not only to those people who know, but to everyone, I think. So the paintings can only become more valuable, I think, in time. And they are, happily, where they are. [Laughing]

JT: Okay, and so, but I'm just going to ask you also about Pop outside of the United States. Were there any artists that you had your eye on?

IB: Yes, mostly English Pop. Allen Jones, Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, I liked quite a bit. But I really thought then, and think now, that American Pop dominates the style, in the same way that I think that, when you think of first generation, when you think of Pollock and Still and Newman and Rothko and DeKooning, they dominate that style. I mean, there were certainly English abstract expressionist painters, there were French, there were Spanish and Italian, but I think Pollock is still dominant, in a way that Andy is.

JT: Right, right. Did Richard Hamilton ever visit your gallery?

IB: Richard Hamilton came to the gallery, and in 1963, Walter, who was then a curator at the Pasadena Art Museum, persuaded Duchamp to have an exhibition, and Duchamp had a retrospective. And Richard came to work with Duchamp on that show, and with Walter. And at about that time, I acquired that very famous Richard Hamilton Pop collage, which I sold to Edwin Janss, this person I spoke about earlier, who then sold it at sale, at auction, and I don't know where it is now, but maybe the most important work that Hamilton ever made. It was pre Pop, '60, or thereabouts. [1956, *What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing*? Kunsthalle Tubingen] I mean, very prescient and extraordinarily important, I think, but I think the later work didn't hold, in a way that Roy's work did, in a way that Andy's work did. I think Andy's late work is still overlooked. I think the *Skulls* are extraordinarily important; I think the *Guns* extraordinarily important; the *Last Supper* paintings, I think will only get more valuable. And it's what I've been involved in doing over the past several years, buying late classic Andy.

JT: Well, as soon as they see you coming, they know something's up. [Laughter]

IB: Right. [Laughter]

JT: So, let's see; rumor has it with this acquisition of the soup cans, that there is a story, there is like a story. Is there a story behind it?

IB: How do you mean?

JT: I don't know. There's a story, there's a little bit of a lore.

IB: Ummmm, other than what I've told you, I can't think of anything to add. I wish I could, but [Laughter] it would be an embellishment. [Laughter]

JT: Okay. We don't need any movie star stories to add to embellish. [Laughter]

IB: No. [Laughter]

JT: So I'm just going to, and so did you work with Kynaston during the retrospective?

IB: Yes, I did. I worked with Kynaston and we were very friendly. Is he still around?

JT: He is; he is. Actually, we're working with him doing his oral history, and he actually – I just edited his interview that he did with Richard Hamilton.

IB: Oh, really? How interesting.

JT: Yes, it's like [INAUDIBLE 0:05:30], yes.

IB: Oh, you might tell him about that pop collage.

JT: Okay. [Laughing]

IB: Because not too many people know that Ferus acquired it and sold it to Edwin Janss and then it made its way in the world. I don't know where it is now. But, that's how it began its voyage.

JT: Kynaston is, you know that Richard passed recently; Richard Hamilton passed.

IB: Oh, I do know that, yes, sad, yes.

JT: So I wanted to bring that in, and I just have a couple other notes. New York in the 60s and the 50s and the early 50s, did you, you were friends with Bill Sietz, so you came to MoMA, you came to the *16 Americans* in '59?

IB: I'm not sure, exactly, how I met Bill. I was introduced to him at a party or something, but I found him so engaging that I maintained a very friendly relationship with him. And another important thing at Ferus during those years was bringing *Art Forum* down from San Francisco into offices above the gallery. There was no art writing that was worth anything, and I thought it was urgent that

there be some. So I worked very hard and succeeded in getting *Art Forum* to move from San Francisco to LA. John Coplans, Phil Lieder.

JT: There was somebody in LA at the time that was kind of your nemesis,

IB: Oh yeah, Henry Seldes. Just hated everything we did. Yes, he really did. He reviewed our shows so badly. I met with Walter once and I said, "We've got to give him something he'll like;" and Walter said, "Well, what?" And I said, "Well, he likes figuration; he likes literal." I said, "Why not a Morandi show?" And he said, "Well, can we do it?" And I did it, and I had this great Morandi show, paintings I borrowed from the [World House?] galleries, here, at the Carlyle, at the time, and drawings and watercolors, and etchings. And Henry Seldes hated it. [Laughter] There's a moral there. [Laughter] I wasn't going to win. [Laughter]

JT: If it came from you, that was it. So, but what was MoMA like in your life in the 50s? Did you come to visit? Was it

IB: Well, you know, I mean, MoMA was always the place to visit, always the place to come to. There were two great exhibitions of work by Frank Stella. I showed Frank, you know. I knew Bill Rubin and admired him. And to see work of a particular caliber, in other words, of the highest order, it was urgent to come to MoMA, and that was always its role.

JT: So I get the sense, so you never really came, well, it's been years since you just came as like a visitor on the ground level. You always came and saw specific people?

IB: No, when I was working at Knoll I would come as, simply, as a visitor. But when I did the gallery, I began meeting people. And it was very important for me to maintain certain relationships, and it changed then.

JT: And what did you feel about MoMA's growth, physically, taking over? [Laughter]

IB: Well, I mean. [Laughing]

JT: Describe when you were at Knoll, walking over and walking into the MoMA. What was that like, walking down 53rd Street?

IB: Oh, oh, yeah, I mean, it was a series of rooms that you walked through. The rooms weren't very big, but the work was, I mean, astonishing: great Cezanne and Picasso and Braque, and I mean, the best of European art was here. This is really where you saw it. I must say, you saw a great many things in Janis's back room. Sidney had – you could always count on seeing two or three Mondrians, Giacometti, Arp. But Sidney was, he was tight as a dime. I remember talking to him about Albers in a way that I did in the beginning, and at one point I looked at my watch and I said, "Oh, Mr. Janis," I said, "I'm terribly sorry but I have this call I completely forgot about and I *have* to make it. It'll just take a moment. Can I interrupt for just a moment?" He said, "Absolutely." He said, "Out that door, down the corridor, turn right, there's a phone." I said, "Thank you so much." Out the door, down the corridor, turn right, in his gallery, there was a pay phone. I took a dime out of my pocket and made a phone call. [Laughter] That's a memory.

JT: [Laughing] That's a memory. [Laughter] And every time you saw the MoMA grow physically, the buildings, what did you think?

IB: Every time I saw MoMA's growth, I was elated, at the same time, and terrified.

JT: Terrified why?

IB: Terrified of not having these early experiences which were more intimate than they could ever be today. I mean, MoMA has no choice but to do what it's doing. It's gotten big. My guess is that it'll get bigger. And the bigger it gets, the cooler it becomes. And when I was young and lived in New York in the 50s and came to visit, it was much more intimate. And I think I'm nostalgic for that. But, it's only done what it needs to do.

JT: Describe a gallery or a room or something that you saw here.

IB: Oh, well, Matisse, I believe it's called The Piano Lesson [MoMA #125.1946]. I mean, that's a painting I visited and revisited, and learned a great deal about from an artist I showed in California by the name of Dick Diebenkorn. And Dick Diebenkorn, that was his favorite experience at MoMA, and a lot of his work extends from that Matisse painting. And he made me see how that happened.

So the painting took on another quality for me, early, early. And I love seeing it now, and it brings back all of those memories. [Laughing]

JT: Okay. And I just, the Coenties Slip, Ellsworth.

IB: Oh, the Coenties Slip. There was a boy who worked, a young man, rather, who worked for Betty Parsons, called David Herbert. And when I was at Knoll, I became very friendly with David. And David subsequently opened his own gallery. But he worked for Betty at the time, and he said to me, he knew this young artist that he thought I would be very interested in. And his name was Ellsworth Kelly, and he lived on Coenties Slip. And we went to or three times to Ellsworth's studio on the slip. And he lived in this building along with Jack Youngerman; Jack Youngerman's wife Delphine Seyrig, who became a great, great, very well known French actress; Bobby Clark, who changed his named to Robert Indiana; Agnes Martin, and Rauschenberg and Johns, just around the corner. So, it was a hotbed of art activity.

JT: What kind of buildings were they? Are we talking of, like Revolutionary, like, wood, kind of?

IB: No, no, ordinary apartment buildings.

JT: Tenement kind of?

IB: Kind of tenement like.

JT: Okay.

IB: Exactly. But with a roof.

JT: But with a roof? [Laughing]

IB: Yes, so that you could get on the roof and you could do a barbecue, and people would join you, and it was fun. They knew each other and enjoyed each other's company. And those evenings were great fun.

JT: Now do you still find, and I've just got to wrap it up a little bit quickly, because I've been reading oral history transcripts from across different institutions, so I'm

mixing, right now. I used to work at the Judd Foundation. There was a gentleman, Daniel Templon who,

IB: Has a gallery in Paris.

JT: Has a gallery in Paris, and he was talking about his time with Donald Judd, and I just remember the way he described the marketplace, now, and then. What's your kind of your idea?

IB: Well I remember, I showed Donald Judd and I remember his coming to see me one day and saying, "Have you got a little money?" And I said, "Why, Don?" And Don said, "Well, there's property going very cheaply in New York, in an area called Soho." He said, "I just bought a cast iron building five stories high." I said, "Five stories high." He said, "Five stories high." I said, "What did you pay for it?" He said, "Sixty thousand dollars." For a five story high building. Can you imagine. And I said, "Probably that neighborhood isn't going to go very anywhere." [Laughing]

JT: [Laughter] Oh, you didn't. No you didn't. Now you're just being funny. [Laughter]

IB: I probably didn't say it, but I thought it, and didn't buy anything. [Laughing]

JT: But as you were coming back and forth to New York, though, that's the galleries, the artists' space, were moving, they migrated.

IB: But later.

JT: And the galleries. Later. The late 60s.

IB: Later than middle and late 60s, yes. But I was coming yearly, you know.

JT: That's true. Okay.

IB: And there was nothing there except industrial spaces.

JT: Right, right; okay.

IB: You know, I mean, it was treacherous. [Laughing] It really was. You didn't want to go there. [Laughter]

JT: Now people are, yeah.

IB: Now, people are *dying* to.

JT: Selling their left leg for it. Okay. So, I was just wondering, because he had said, and it struck me, because when you bought the soup cans, it struck me, the same thing that Daniel Templon said. At the time, it's like, you didn't buy the paintings because you thought of them in terms of an investment.

IB: No, absolutely right; no.

JT: But it seems to be that there's almost that kind of entrance into the marketplace, what happened in the 80s. What did you, was your view of that? Like, how did you

IB: Well, you just ride it. I mean, you know, if the market is somehow different, you just, you do it differently. But at the beginning, when I started, there was no possibility of your making a great deal of money in the art world. It just didn't happen. If you could sell something virtually for what you paid for it, you were ahead of the game. It was that kind of thing. So, there had to be something else involved, and that something else was passion. It had to be; because there was no monetary gain.

JT: Do you see that in the market now?

IB: No. [Laughing] No, I don't. [Laughter] I'm sorry to say. But I'm sure it exists. Younger dealers, you know, but they're more tainted than we ever were.

JT: Tainted how?

IB: Because of dollar value.

JT: The expectation of

IB: Of profit.

JT: Right. It's kind of the idea of what fame is as of an artist, because, you know, even as you said, a Hassel, he kept working and he is unknown.

IB: Through a lifetime.

JT: Through a lifetime.

IB: Through a lifetime. You couldn't give the work away. Had he lived in New York, he would have had possibly a little run. I mean, there was a bit of an audience here. But not in California. I mean, that didn't come until later, until the 60s. If they were buying anything in California, they were buying French.

JT: Okay.

IB: Matisse and Picasso. Chagall. [Laughter]

JT: Well thank you so very much. Is there something that you'd like to add, something that I should have asked you?

IB: I can't think. I think we've covered it all very, very well. It's nice to chat with you. It was terrific for me to be here, and I've really enjoyed doing it. And all I can say is, best of luck. [Laughter]

JT: Thank you so much.

IB: You're welcome.

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END INTERVIEW