

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **JEFF KOONS (JK)**
INTERVIEWERS: **CLAIRE DIENES (CD) AND LILIAN TONE (LT)**
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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

CD: I'm here with Lilian Tone. We are interviewing Jeff Koons for The Museum of Modern Art's Oral History Project [Program]. It's May 26th and we are at the Museum. So, I guess the best place to start is to ask you if you recall the first time you came to the Museum and under what circumstances.

JK: I imagine that the first time I was already in art school, and I was studying at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Maybe I came prior to that, but I really did not have a good foundation in art history. So I think probably maybe around 1972. I grew up in Pennsylvania. With my family I would go to the Philadelphia Museum of Art when I was younger. Really I did not know a lot of artists before I went to art school, after graduating high school.

CD: So, 1972.

JK: Yes, I'd say around 1972.

CD: So, you hadn't moved to New York by that time.

JK: No, I was just. . . At that time I was 17 years old. I was born in 1955.

CD: Do you remember what you saw at the Museum? Was there a particular show. . .

JK: I always remember seeing [Andy] Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, coming in. And I think that there was some sort of Pop Art exhibition that was at least down on the ground floor. I remember that. Of course, I remember seeing the [Claude] Monet *Waterlilies*. But there was a Pop Art exhibition down on the ground floor. And I remember pieces like [Henri] Rousseau's *Dream*. At that time I still wasn't involved in a [Marcel] Duchampian dialogue, so things like Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, these people I would have probably walked right past.

CD: When did you discover those?

JK: It wasn't until later on in art school. Not until. . . It was probably about my fourth year of art school.

LT: When you were in Chicago?

JK: When I was in Chicago. It comes more from just being around artists that were working with these ideas, kind of Pop ideas within their own work. I befriended an artist, Ed Paschke, and I always, when I was a younger artist, enjoyed surrealism. And I think it's just because it was one of the first. . . It's a type of art that was. . . A lot of books were made on it because of Salvador Dalí. It's something that young artists come into contact with. And I enjoyed it, but the more and more I was around Surrealism or folk art or work that was really subjectively based, I lost interest in it. But I had a kind of -- I'm kind of mixing things here a little bit because I mentioned Ed Paschke. Ed Paschke is somebody whose work -- he was part of the *Hairy Who* group in Chicago -- is kind of like a parallel of New York Pop but kind of subjective based. But I saw where he got his ideas from, and he showed me -- he's very

generous. He would take me around and show me the different tattoo parlors that he would get his ideas to put on his figures, or he would take me to different nightclubs that were really strange places, where the lighting was very odd or maybe only midgets would frequent the place, or just very strange places. And I think that Ed really taught me that everything is around you. You just have to be open to it.

LT: I was reading several interviews that you conducted in the past and this notion of subjective versus objective --this distinction that you make so often-- I don't think I ever quite understood. Do you think you could talk about it?

JK: I think of it as kind of. . . when my art was more based in a surrealism type history or just very personal, more about "Jeff", or, you know, as the artist myself, maybe what I dreamt the night before and, you know making a painting the next day of the dream, or just my own type of fantasy I think is kind of subjective based. A lot of folk art or naïve art . . .

LT: Do you think it has to do with the unconscious?

JK: The unconscious and very much just the self. And what I've tried to do -- and I don't think an artist can ever distance themselves from that, I mean you are your foundation, your own life experiences, how you see the world. But I've tried to take my art into an area that is as much about the viewer as it is myself, so to try to leave this more direct personal experience that is just identified with the self to a much more of a social experience of things that I believe that we've all experienced together, a more communal experience. It can still carry with it areas of fears, that could be communal fears, maybe how you use scale on a certain area. So it's not a void of different aspects of sometimes things that are termed more on a subjective route. Again, I don't want to be babbling. I'm not trying to confuse that when I was saying that [inaudible]. Because things can still have a little bit of a nightmarish quality without being a

personal experience, exactly.

LT: Yes.

JK: I'm making a work right now for Paris on the Champs-Élysées. They make these group exhibitions occasionally. And I'm doing this piece called *Split-Rocker*. And *Split-Rocker* is basically two rocking type horses for children, one's a pony and one's a dinosaur. And I always had a pony in my bedroom. And I wanted to use some image in a painting. And this painting was really about scale being a form of abstraction, and I wanted to put this head of this rocker in the back of this painting to create kind of a scale. I ended up not doing it. . . I used a dinosaur head which was from another rocker. And eventually I just wanted to split these two down the center and put them together and I realized that this piece has quite a nightmarish kind of quality. I was speaking with a friend, Jean de Loisy, a French curator and he right away was picking up on kind of this monster type quality but at the same time a very, very spiritual piece. But the only reason I'm talking about that is you were asking about defining the subjective realm. And I think that there's still, if you're trying to speak in a very large vocabulary and deal with archetypes and things that are important to people, that it's still kind of wide-range but can be not so self-specific. [Laughing] I hope I just didn't babble on too long for you.

LT: No, no.

JK: But I'm really just trying to be very much in the moment.

CD: Absolutely. But just to come back to New York. . . What prompted your move to New York and when exactly was that?

JK: I became really quite bored, just internally I could feel this boredom coming on, of not

really being so happy with this type of investigation of my art, just sitting and painting these things. At the time in Chicago I was painting a lot of landscapes. They were volcanoes or, kind of, ponds of water, and you can feel the underbased sexuality of these types of pieces, and they were trying to, I guess, kind of present themselves in a slightly more abstract, or a little less self way but it was all about dreams or certain feelings I would have. . . maybe waking up in the morning or some way I felt during my sleep. It was more of an interpretation of that feeling, a certain type of numbness. I wanted to get out of any type of fetishism that could have been involved with my work, kind of an emotional fetishism. Not so much images but emotional fetishism. I was bored in Chicago. My life was a little boring. But there was, kind of, no sense of community for me. I had friends there that I enjoyed, but as far as the art world, I didn't really feel anything. And I never had a desire to live in New York. So my life was just kind of a little vacant. And then one night I was listening to the radio and a DJ was talking about Patti Smith, the poet and rock musician, and he was saying that there was a scene in New York and it was really exciting and he played her album *Horses*, and I thought, "Well, this is, you know, this is interesting. I'm here bored. Why am I here?", and the next day I hitchhiked to New York. And I stayed here for about a month because a friend of mine that lived in Chicago had written a song for the Talking Heads called *Artists Only* and he knew David Byrne and people here in New York, so he gave me their numbers and I contacted this group of people. And I just stayed here. . . and eventually went back. That was in October . . .

CD: Of which year?

JK: Of 1976. Then I came back and moved here, I believe it was January 1, 1977, the first day of 1977. I applied for different jobs, as like a meatpacker, whatever I could find in the newspaper. I had a history of working as a preparator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, so I thought immediately to apply for a preparator's job here at [The Museum of] Modern [Art] and the different museums. And they had

no positions in those areas but they did have a position in the ticket booth, or Membership — it was under Membership/Development -- but it was really for the ticket booth. And they offered me that position and I took that position.

CD: Immediately? You started working in the very beginning of 1977?

JK: I think I received the job around my birthday. My birthday is the 21st, and something tells me it was around my birthday. It was pretty quick. And of course, I feel very, very lucky. I think my life would be very different today if that hadn't happened.

CD: What was your impression of the Museum at that time? Was it a place that artists wanted to be associated with, to work at?

JK: I think that it does give you a sense of being connected to something larger than yourself. Some artists do that by working with other artists or maybe they can feel that or they meet other artists, to be able to befriend them. I think the Modern acts that way for people to be part of something. It made me feel connected to the art world. And as I was stating, I grew up not having really any knowledge of the history of art on a more detailed way. So for me it was just like having these works right around me every moment, that I didn't really have to try to really put any effort into being able to absorb these things. They were just there. I'd automatically be a sponge without trying.

CD: So you would go into the galleries and spend time in the Museum during. . .

JK: During breaks. Whenever you'd have a break, a coffee break, just walk through the galleries and it was really unavoidable. But also taking advantage of the different films that the Museum was showing. And right now Bill Viola has a very strong career and is doing wonderful but I remember seeing the first presentation here.

LT: A *Projects* show back in the late 70s.

JK: Yes, it was just amazing. I always talked about Bill Viola from that time [laughing] because they had that copper tube, that water droplet would just come to the end and fall off and hit that tambourine. I remember a very different presentation of it than what I saw in the retrospective now. I remember more of a white room. . . But it was just wonderful. And Shigeko Kubota, I remember seeing her work. The *Projects* was very exciting for me.

LT: Laurie Anderson had a *Projects* show at the time.

JK: Laurie Anderson, yes. Barbara London was in charge of the program at the time.

CD: Did you get to know her at all? Were you involved in any way with staff members in curatorial positions?

JK: Well, I was working in the ticket booth in the very beginning but eventually I ended up working just behind the membership desk just giving people information as they'd come into the Museum, helping people process membership. So, in that situation I'd be able to talk to the staff a little more and so I befriended these people but not to the point where I'd be going out socially with them. I'd always say hello to Barbara London when I'd see her but. . . As far as artists coming in, I remember that there was a Rauschenberg retrospective [*Robert Rauschenberg* [MoMA Exh. #1170, March 25-May 17, 1977] when I was here, and some of his assistants I befriended, where I would run into them outside the Museum. Sol LeWitt was very nice. I remember Louise Lawler was also one of his assistants, and I befriended Louise.

LT: One of Sol LeWitt's assistants?

JK: Yes, I think that Louise was. I remember coming into contact and meeting her here. If she wasn't an assistant she was just a good friend then of Sol LeWitt. So, it was exciting. There [were] exhibitions, a tremendous Cézanne exhibition, a Picasso exhibition, a Matisse exhibition when I was here. So . . .

LT: Do you remember how the Museum was perceived in contrast with other New York institutions like the Whitney, the Guggenheim?

JK: Well, the Modern [was perceived], and I think it's still is perceived to this day, as kind of the epitome of a museum. And maybe during the '80s, when there was such a boom in the market and art had so many places where it was being presented, it felt that it was just independent of everything. Maybe a place like The Museum of Modern Art wasn't looked at as quite as important. I don't think any museum was.

LT: Like a low-energy place?

JK: Possibly.

LT: What do you mean?

JK: Part of it is . . . I mean, I don't know . . . For me, The Museum of Modern Art at a certain point, when it was under the direction of William Rubin. . . William Rubin was defining modern art as a specific time period in art history and it was within certain years that that took place. And I think that's where the Museum was going to, it seemed like, focus its energy and define itself within that framework. I think artists and another part of the public always looked at The Museum of Modern Art and modern art as something which was defining contemporary art, it wasn't just this specific time period. What the word modern had meant to them, at least in their upbringing, was more involved with the contemporary. It seems to me that's the direction the Museum's

going today.

LT: Did the perception that you had of the Museum at the time have any impact on looking for a job here instead of other institutions?

JK: Oh, sure. As far as the Modern, I mean, is the epitome of what a museum is. I have a retrospective coming up at the Guggenheim Museum in the year 2000. I'm very honored that the Guggenheim has asked me. The Museum of Modern Art never did ask me. If the Modern. . . You know, if I would have had a choice between. . . Well, I shouldn't even go into a question like that. But, of course. . .

LT: We can edit it. [Laughter].

JK: The Modern has a certain resonance that really, I think, to artists. . . This is international. I would think anywhere in the world . . . There are other museums like the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art that I think artists feel the same way about. I mean, when it comes to exhibition spaces that are just beautiful for their proportions, I mean the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam for contemporary [art] is just incredible.

CD: Considering this great reputation of the Museum [you just described] it must not have been hard to sell memberships. What was that like?

JK: Well, when I was here I was a little bored, sitting behind the desk. And also I was coming into contact with some of the public. I remember the first time I met somebody like Holly Solomon, the dealer, [I] was sitting behind the information desk, the membership desk. So I was able to meet people, but I became a little bored just sitting there. And I realized that, at the time, we were all just processing membership. So in a way, slightly in a performance way, I decided that I was going to try to sell memberships. And I guess it let me just interact with the public more. It gave me a

sense of a mask I could wear. I just kind of would be the salesman.

LT: This was not part of your function, selling memberships?

JK: Not to sell. We were there, we were supposed to be taking care of membership, but no one was trying to sell membership. People would come up to the desk and they would say, "Excuse-me, I want to renew my membership." And it would be, "O.K., here's the form, just fill this out." But instead I would try to have them go up the next category at least. So if somebody would come in and they would say, "I would like to renew my membership", instead of just giving them the form and saying, "Sign here", I would ask them, "What membership did you have?" Usually they would say, "Well, I have a Residence", and I would say, "Well, you should really keep in mind the Family/Dual membership that we have," and then go on and show them the books. And the Museum was offering great publications. There was a reason for people to move up. But if people would come and they were already a Dual/Family membership, I would try to move them up to the Patron, or to the Contributing, and from the Contributing to the Patron.

CD: And did it work?

JK: I think that it worked. On an average day I would probably have some eighteen to twenty Contributing Members, which was a minimum of a hundred dollars membership. And before that time -- this was 1979, 1978 -- before that time, I would think that maybe they wouldn't have gotten any, or maybe one every three days or something. And then I would go for Patrons. And Patrons, though. . . it was more difficult. I couldn't really be that aggressive or continue in a manner to try to get Patrons at the time. But I did get some Patrons, of course, which were one thousand dollars a membership.

CD: Your supervisor must have been pleased.

JK: They were pleased. I think one of the funny things was William Rubin because. . . When people would come in and out of the Modern, it was little bit like a performance for me, and I would wear inflatable flowers and I'd wear paper vests. I would wear things that, the people, when they were speaking to me, would get a little distracted by, and just kind of caught up a little bit in the event and hopefully that would help me get them to a higher membership level, just by getting a little lost in the cufflink, the way it was glittering or something. But when anybody really important came to the Modern. . . I remember that for either the Cézanne show or the Matisse show or the Picasso show — one of the shows — Bill Rubin had a very important Russian diplomat coming, and he had Richard Oldenburg call down to the front desk and ask me to please leave for at least the next two hours. [Laughter]. Because he felt that I was slightly a little bit of an embarrassment.

LT: Other than that, was there any censorship of your behavior?

JK: No. And, you know, Richard Oldenburg was so wonderful. He'd say, "Jeff, you do such a fantastic job for the Museum. And we're all so grateful. But I hope that you can understand that I would be personally very appreciative if you could do me this favor." And he just said that, "William has somebody coming by here. . ." Because, you know, I would be there with an inflatable flower around my neck and this, maybe, outlandish kind of an outfit. When I say outlandish, [I mean] maybe just a poke-a-dot shirt and a glittering vest or something. It was a little bit of a performance for me.

CD: It sounds like you enjoyed it, interacting with the public that way.

JK: It helped me. I think maybe I needed a little bit of a mask of some sort, and that's why I did that. But I also think it had to do with attracting the attention of people, they would

come over to talk to me. Because the only way to get them to really increase the membership was either to talk to them or have them talk to me, and I didn't want to, in any manner, be disruptive to the public.

CD: The building was slightly different at that time. Where exactly were you sitting? How did that work?

JK: When you would enter the Museum, if you're coming in from 53rd Street, the membership/information desk was on the left-hand side. So, where you would enter now to come over to the coat room, the granite wall just continued. . . Well, there was a little small shape there, but. . .

CD: So you'd be one of the first things that people would see. . .

JK: . . . over on the left-hand side.

JK: And there was also a board there that would list all the events that were going on within the Museum. We would hand write this board out during the day-time, saying what movies were playing that day. This was where the information was, where it's centralized now when you come in, it was on the left-hand side. And the bookstore was over on the right-hand side.

LT: How many people were working with you at the desk?

JK: There was a crew where not everyone was full-time every day. I would say that there were probably about eight or nine of us at the time. It was a nice group and we socialized after work a lot. It was quite compatible.

LT: Were there other artists?

JK: Yes. I remember one woman, Milly Iatrou, she was a young filmmaker. Harvey Tulcensky, who's still with. . .

CD: Still here. Yes.

JK: . . .The Museum of Modern Art, was a manager of the information/membership desk. Frederick [Lunning], who's still here. He's not an artist. But Frederick's still here. Tom McLaughlan was my manager. I think that maybe Tom is involved with a print gallery or a photo gallery at the present time, as a dealer.

CD: Were any of these lasting friendships?

JK: These were very nice people. I mean, lasting for me is a little difficult. I'm very involved in my work. I have obligations where I have to go to Italy every month. So, it's difficult for me to really maintain and see people a lot. I always think of these people as friends and I always enjoy seeing and talking to them. But it's difficult for me to see people.

LT: Were there other artists working in other parts of the Museum that you had contact with at the time? Did you have contact with Allan McCollum while he was here?

JK: No, no.

LT: Because I think there was a brief overlap between . . .

JK: And what department was Allan in?

LT: He was a preparator. He worked on the Picasso retrospective.

JK: No, I never came into contact with Allan. The people I really came in contact with were more from the bookstore, and with the membership desk. When Harvey Tulcensky went into being a preparator — I don't know if he did that while I was here or not — but he would talk to the preparators a lot when they would leave. So maybe there would have been a little crossover there, but I never remembered meeting Allan. It was really more Membership. I met a lot of people from the public, coming in and out, different friends.

CD: So, you were officially part of the Membership Department.

JK: Membership/Development.

CD: Membership/Development. Would you participate in any of the behind-the-scenes activities? In other words, would you come upstairs to the offices for any reason, or would you stay downstairs.

JK: I stayed downstairs. Everyone was very pleased that I was helping giving a push to increasing membership. And it was really just this realization that everybody was just processing and not trying to, in any way, kind of, promote going up. So Jack Limpert, at the time, was Director, and there was also a woman, Betty, that also worked for Jack. So, they wanted to do something to help me, but in a way, because this was a little bit of a performance that I mentioned, I didn't really fit in. My background. . . I grew up in Pennsylvania, I went to art school. And the type of people that may have been working upstairs would have been people that maybe had a degree in business from a different university or something. So, they wanted to do something for me, so Mrs. [Blanchette] Rockefeller created a title for me, as a Senior Representative of The Museum of Modern Art.

CD: Why, how did she create this title?

JK: She presented it to me.

CD: So, you knew her? You had a relationship with her?

JK: Well, not a relationship. But I think I received a letter from her when that was created. So, the Museum wanted to do something to show appreciation for me and I understood that. They also. . . But it was just. . . For myself, I mean I was an artist, I was making my early--my inflatable flowers pieces-- that I feel were the beginning of works that hopefully have some contribution. So, I had to move on a little bit.

LT: How long did you anticipate working here? Did you have a plan?

JK: I guess if any plan, I would have gone into being a preparator [laughing], you know, of going behind-the-scenes and working as a preparator. But I enjoyed the people that I worked with, I enjoyed meeting the public. I enjoyed the collection and going through [it]. Eventually I left the Modern in, I think, 1980. And the people that were coming in, that I was making into Contributing members and Patron members, they would start to say to me, "Jeff, you have to come and work for me", "Please, here's my card, you should come and work for me". And so I would start to meet with these people, and also the ideas for my work were ideas that were starting to need more support financially, so I decided that I would leave and try to create a higher income for the works that I had to make. That's the only thing, when you work at a museum or something like that, it can be more limiting. But it was hard to leave. So I left and then I missed the museum right away and I came back for another couple of months. And I think I was working part-time then with the Museum. And then eventually I stopped working here. So. . .

CD: So the people you worked with knew you were creating art? That you were an artist?

JK: Yes. Now, I wasn't an artist that at the time was showing. I mean, I would maybe have dealers come by, like I said Holly Solomon, whom I met for the first time there. The galleries that I really liked in New York at the time, in '77, would have been a gallery like John Gibson Gallery. He was showing photo narrative works. I was very impressed by that, that type of work. Bill Beckley whose photo narrative work I really enjoyed very much had an exhibition in the *Projects* gallery while I was here. It was really nice. I own a couple of the pieces that were shown here in the Museum.

CD: You mentioned before that you participated in some of the activities here at the Museum, like the films and that kind of thing. Can you say anything about that? Is there anything in particular that you remember? I guess I mean by that, the films, did you ever go to the Library, or did you see any of the Art Lending shows, where they had works of art for sale and rent?

JK: Well, I would go up to the Art Lending. I was aware of that program. I don't know if the program's still going on. . .

CD: No.

JK: . . . but I think it was a great program. I guess it was in the Patron's restaurant, or some restaurant. They would also have the works there, where people could look at and take them home. I would go to the Library and that's where I would be able to view some of the films, Duchamp's films, and different films by Man Ray and different people. I'd also go. . . I was young, I mean, I was in my twenties. I just saw a program recently that was saying that film is the most powerful cultural element to younger people and I know that my involvement with film was much greater than it is today. Maybe I view more television today. I like to see films, but when you're younger. . . Maybe I'd see three, four films a week. I just don't put that effort into it now. I remember this one woman, Milly, who I

mentioned before -- this wasn't at the Modern, but she took me to see a film, *In the Realm of the Senses*. . . Is that the Japanese film?

LT: Oh, yes. [Laughter].

JK: [Laughing] So, in my experimental film time these are the things we'd see. But here at the Modern, they would do, like maybe, Philippe Starck, is it Philippe Starck? Or no, Ray Stark -- the great film director and they would just have a retrospective of his films so after work, I would just go down every night and watch these fantastic films from the '50s. It was wonderful. And just being able. . . The Architecture and Design Department influenced me a lot and, in a way maybe most directly, in the long run all the departments [did]. But being able to just see these objects being displayed, like a toaster or a tea kettle or chairs or cars. . . And I started in some of my earlier pieces to put [objects] like a toaster, or a tea kettle, or a pot, and I would show them on a kind of modernist-type background, which is very much about the experience of working here at the Modern.

LT: [Would you say that those pieces] mimic--would you use that word-- mimic museum display?

JK: Well, I think that *The New*, a series in which I encased the pieces, mimic a little bit display. The light's very harsh and it's fluorescent, so it's a little more commercial.

LT: So it's something between Museum display and a store window?

JK: Yeah, I think so. I would say the most, kind of, Museum ones are when I'm using these colored plastic tubes. Like my toaster piece has these green stripes and white stripes. I always thought of Frank Stella a little bit. Or my first vacuum cleaner I ever did, an orange Hoover, kind of has like a Mondrian type background where it has an orange

Plexiglas, white Plexiglas and clear Plexiglas and. . . [inaudible] a Mondrian in a way.

LT: Are there works in the collection that were especially meaningful for you?

JK: I don't know exactly everything that The Museum of Modern Art has. I know that S.I. Newhouse has in some way presented the *Rabbit* as a gift of some form to The Museum of Modern Art.

LT: I didn't mean your works, (though I would like to know about that as well), but I meant works that you would see in the Painting and Sculpture Galleries, for instance, that had an impact on your work.

JK: Yes, yes. I think the Cézanne show was a really important show to me, just as far as finding something beautiful. You know, I'm not really so interested all the time in things that are just beautiful. But I find Cézanne not only interesting within a kind of intellectual type of program or aesthetic, but just beautiful. I just find him just really pleasing. And I love the quarry paintings. I never was so interested in Picasso. I was one of these artists that, eventually when I felt that I was starting to make things that were interesting, was very grounded in pop art and realizing that pop art was very much grounded in Duchamp, enjoy conceptual art and this area. But, as time passed, Picasso would continue to become more and more interesting to me. I really view the twentieth-century as Picasso and Duchamp. And really the dialogues of art are taking place between them. But I. . . Really you have to give so much to Picasso. So many of the ideas that Duchamp had, maybe he'd take them to a further extreme than Picasso but Picasso touched on them. So, to just kind of break everything down short. Well, like today if something comes to mind I just think of it like a wooden sculpture of Picasso, a very thin, two-dimensional type sculpture of a bull. *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, things like this. But it's more of a collective experience of everything than a specific work.

LT: And the Mondrians. . . Were you really thinking about Mondrian when you were making *The New* series?

JK: No, no. And I always enjoyed the [James] Rosenquist *Marilyn* that was down in the lobby. I always thought it was a shame that it was cracked. But these things happen. I tried. . .

LT: And you mentioned the [Andy] Warhol *Gold Marilyn [Monroe]*.

JK: When I worked here both the Rosenquist and the Warhol *Gold Marilyn [Monroe]*, and a lot of times the [Jasper] Johns *Green Target*, downstairs. Sometimes they'd have the Lam painting — am I pronouncing it correctly? -- the Lam?

LT: Yes. Wifredo Lam.

JK: Yes. They would have this painting of his. . .

LT: *The Jungle*, [(1943)].

JK: . . . *The Jungle* down in the lobby. Roy Lichtenstein, the drowning painting [*Drowning Girl* (1963)]. Was it Brad?

LT: Yeah, it's Brad.

JK: And in contemporary art, I really do enjoy Lichtenstein a lot and Warhol, pop art. I love that painting. It's a great painting.

CD: Did you experience any of the construction that went on in the Museum? There was

some construction in 1979, then they started the expansion in 1980, the West wing and the Museum tower.

JK: Any type of construction that was going on was peripheral at least in my experience of anything that was happening here. Maybe it was happening on the side or they were working with tearing down some buildings here. Am I correct?

CD: Well, it was the Museum Tower space, so according to how you described the Membership desk, it would have been sort of right behind. . .

JK: Well, we never moved.

CD: So, you were not affected in any way?

JK: No, no, no.

LT: In a questionnaire that you sent to the Museum in 1996--that was on the occasion of the acquisition of the [Elaine and Werner] Dannheisser collection when several of your works were acquired by the Museum -- you wrote that one of the best things about working at the Museum was that it informed you about the different directions that art could take you. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that statement.

JK: Again, just being around constantly things of quality -- or things of quality, that's maybe not the correct word -- but around different directions of art, like we're sitting in this room today and there's different things that are around us that . . .

LT: Different types of art, or different mediums?

JK: Different types of art, different exhibitions, different mediums, just all of these different

types of things which for me, more or less, created more of a neutral position for myself.

LT: While you were working here you were doing the series of works that preceded *The New* series.

JK: That's correct. I was doing inflatables.

LT: Inflatable flowers with mirrors.

JK: Inflatable flowers with mirrors. I did my first inflatable flower with rabbit then. I was also kind of making wall pieces during that time. And then I just stopped. And I started. . .

LT: What kind of wall pieces? I don't think I've. . .

JK: They were shelf pieces. I have them only in Polaroid form. Then in 1979 I started making the toasters, pots, tea kettles. And also my first, I think my first vacuum cleaner is 1979 or it could be the very beginning of '80. My first encased pieces, which I called *The New*, once I encased them. As a matter of fact, I called it *The New* even before that. I showed them [?] in the New Museum window. I think that was in 1980. And I encased by 1980 also.

LT: Did the wall pieces use inflatables too?

JK: No, vacuum cleaners. But I really think what the Museum gave to me. . . Again, growing up not in an urban area but a rural environment. . . And I lived in that rural environment until I was seventeen -- moved to Baltimore then, and [during] the first week of going to art school we took a bus trip to the Baltimore Museum [of Art] and there was so much art that we looked at that I wasn't familiar with. I mean I knew

[Vincent] van Gogh but there was, like. . . Manet. I didn't know Manet. There were so many different aspects of art and different artists I just didn't know. I didn't have a base in art history at all. I mean I knew Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol. But I didn't know art — history of art. So, going from that and eventually being able to be in a place like The Museum of Modern Art where you're really surrounded with things, was tremendous for me. Tremendous for me because I wasn't intimidated by it either. It wasn't like I had to go study this, it was just there. So, it was more like what wasn't in my living room when I was a child, was all of a sudden in my living room.

LT: You didn't have to go out of your way to see them.

JK: No, no. And in mentioning living rooms, I should maybe just mention that one of the reasons I'm an artist, though, probably is my family living room, because my father was an interior decorator. And because of that my family was always very supportive of my endeavors in art, in drawing. And also, I learned how your environment, and how aesthetics can affect your emotions, how you feel about things, how you respond to color, things like this.

LT: And it's also about presentation, right?

JK: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

JK: . . . this feeling of being able to take modern art history a little bit for granted, and to learn about it in that manner. I was not brought up around these things but [had] support for art or at least my interest in art. And at an early age — I think from around

the time of five — I enjoyed gluing things together with popsicle sticks, or if I made a drawing I felt good about it. My family was always very supportive of that. I took private art lessons from the time I was about seven, eight years old. Every Saturday morning [I'd] go and have private lessons. My family was supportive, it's just that we grew up in a rural environment.

LT: Did you have interactions with curators here, like Kynaston McShine?

JK: Only in just being able to say hello.

LT: Just in passing?

JK: Yes. And if I see Kynaston now, I'll say hello, we'll say hello to each other. William Lieberman, who is now at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], if I run into William Lieberman, we'll say hello and enjoy that.

LT: We wanted to ask you about exhibitions that included your work. How did you feel about the inclusion of your work in *High and Low* for instance?

JK: Well, you know, I was honored to be in *High & Low*, and it really meant a lot to me. And I think it was a great exhibition. What other exhibitions. . .

LT: After *High & Low*, we acquired the *Rabbit*. And then we didn't acquire any work until the Dannheisser collection, and then several works came in -- about five of them, I think. How do you feel about the representation of your work here at the Museum?

JK: Well, I believe that Kirk Varnedoe. . . I mean my interaction has been positive. I believe that he's supportive of the work. I believe that's the case, which has made me always feel good. I mean that has helped me continue to believe in my work. It's always been

important to me. I'd like to see myself represented even more so, hopefully in the future, at the Museum. Elaine Dannheisser's gift is, I think, really wonderful. I don't think that I have any work on permanent display here. I don't know if younger artists of my generation do.

LT: Very seldom we have. We don't have the space for the contemporary collections.

JK: I know in the future. . . But an artist like myself — and the only reason I mention it. . . So many people say, "Oh, you're an artist. . .", "Yes, yes." And they'll say, "Where can we see your work?" And in New York, I can't direct anybody to any museum. I mean, the Whitney [Museum of American Art] has a work but it's not on permanent display. The Museum of Modern Art has several works, they're not on permanent display. So, I'm just saying that an artist in, kind of, my generation. . . I mean, maybe the Metropolitan has some artists, not mine. I mean, if you were going to send somebody to see a Julian Schnabel painting, where would you send them in New York? I don't think any museum has one on. . .

I just use Julian as an example. I was using myself as an example, and I just wanted to. . . So, I think that the community, at least myself, everybody is looking forward to the expansion of The Museum of Modern Art.

LT: What do you think about the merger with P.S. 1?

JK: People that I talk to are very happy about that. They are excited about that. I think it's a symbol of the Museum showing that it really does want to have a dialogue in contemporary art. That means a lot to everybody. I mean how can I sit here and speak for everybody [laughing].

LT: No, I was asking your opinion.

JK: I think it's a really good sign of what the Museum would like to do in the future as far as be more involved in art of the present moment.

LT: Has your perception of the Museum changed significantly in the past years? The changes in the Museum have been so profound in the last years . . .

JK: In a way, I haven't spent as much time going to museums as I used to. And part of it has to do, again, just with my own personal life at this time. I travel a lot to Italy, every month. So, when I'm back in New York I really try to spend time in my studio. And I go back and forth. But as far as the Museum as a whole, architecturally, how I feel about it? I enjoy the exhibitions, the possibility of exhibitions. . . to come see the [Sigmar] Polke exhibition. It's fantastic. I mean, I feel very fond [of] and enjoy the Museum in its original form because it was more intimate then. When I view certain exhibitions at times at the Modern, I sometimes have no idea where I am. And I find that a little frustrating.

CD: What do you mean?

JK: Like, if I'm seeing the [Jackson] Pollock exhibition, I know that I'm entering here, and I'm halfway through the exhibition, and if I would have some Global Positioning unit, I absolutely would be lost. And I wouldn't have any idea within this architecture where I was.

CD: And that's disturbing or disorienting.

JK: Yes. You know when you go to a rock concert, you know where your seat is. I'm in seat C4, and you look around and you never lose your perception of where you are. I find it disconcerting. So that's something I don't enjoy so much about the Modern at

the present time. But I know they are working within their limitations. I couldn't even tell you now exactly where I saw the Pollock show. Was it on the third floor?

CD: Yes.

LT: Third floor.

JK: I know where you enter but it wraps around but I really. . .

LT: You mean there's no architectural reference.

JK: That's right. Maybe at one point you come into the old stairway that used to be the original stairway, but even that, as far as north, east, west, is hard for me to place.

CD: And it didn't always used to be like this for you? And if not was it because the Museum was smaller?

JK: When you start to get into your mazes, this starts to happen. So, maybe it even had that to a certain degree before but there were very definable references. I guess on the third floor you would have *Guernica*. That would always be there. So, when you would enter you would hit that. You'd go to the back, and I think Dalí would be back in that corner. So, there were more references that were more to a scale. When I came out of the Pollock [exhibition], where did I come out to? I just came out to this space. I didn't feel anything emotional. I mean, maybe there was this fantastic Léger that everybody should have picked up, that boom I'm really at a spot here. I don't know what I came out to. Nothing. I'm not here to criticize.

LT: You can criticize.

JK: Right now also, it's great to see those Ellsworth Kellys up there. I don't really at all mean to be criticizing the things but I just know that — I'm just trying to be honest here in talking — that I just don't like the experience when I lose track of where I am. I feel like I'm in a maze.

CD: Well, that show took up the entire floor, which is a rare occurrence.

LT: It's quite exceptional.

CD: I think it's the third exhibition ever to take up an entire floor and when it does happen, I think, it does allow for that sort of disorientation. . .

JK: It was a great show.

CD: So, it sounds like you do come. . .

JK: I do, but I. . .

CD: Anything else that you've seen recently that has particularly struck?

JK: Well, I was glad that the Museum gave Warhol a show. And it was nice that The Museum of Modern Art did that. [Pause]. Nothing really in particular.

LT: I wanted to ask you, what's your favorite work in your oeuvre?

JK: That's always very hard to answer because there are different pieces that I like a lot. There was a certain time when I would have more difficulty in answering a question like that because I'd feel insecure in choosing one. But I don't feel insecure in saying that I like the *Rabbit* a lot. And, I feel very good about it. I really do. I think it's a nice

work. There are other pieces that I really do enjoy very much, but I feel very comfortable with the *Rabbit*. It used to be my best known work. I don't know if it is anymore exactly. I think maybe my *Puppy* piece, maybe. . .

LT: I was looking at our files, our documentation on the works we own. The *Rabbit* is very poorly documented, in comparison with the works that came from the Dannheisser collection, which are really well documented.

JK: Do you mean as far as articles?

LT: No, no it's. . . We regularly send an artist questionnaire about the work, asking about the cast, where it was done, things like that.

JK: I didn't answer that?

LT: I guess we didn't send it to you. So, I was wondering if I could send it to you.

JK: Oh, absolutely. Some things were sent to me, and you know I always answer them the best I can.

LT: For the other works, we have superb documentation. It's wonderful. It's very important for scholars who come here and want to know more about the work.

JK: Oh yes, absolutely. If you have the form, I'll take it back with me.

LT: Alright.

JK: I think one of the reasons that I choose that piece too is that I really do like, and enjoy art that isn't overpowering and [that isn't] something that's above the viewer. And I

think that a piece like the *Rabbit* isn't. You don't feel intimidated looking at it. I like work that is not one-dimensional. It's really multi-dimensional, a symbol of Easter and resurrection. That's really important to me. For me, I think that art functioning in a philosophical realm is really important, one of its great strengths, and at the same time, sexuality. I mean artists have such few tools to work with, in a way. And sexuality is a tool that has to be dealt with in some manner within the work. And the rabbit can also be a symbol of that.

LT: Also you had already used the inflatables in earlier works. And you sustained it for quite some time, ten years?

JK: Yes, yes, yes. I still am doing. . . Well, the reason I made the *Rabbit*. . . I was making. . . The first time I was going to be in an exhibition at Ileana Sonnabend's gallery, and I wanted to show a little. . . Well, I was doing a body of work I call *Statuary*, and I had *Bob Hope* on one side and *Louis the Fourteenth* on the other side kind of a panoramic view of statuary within ten sculptures. And *Bob Hope* was a symbol that if you give art to the masses that it would become reflective of mass ego and eventually decorative. And on the other side, I had *Louis the Fourteenth*, that if you put art in the hands of a monarch that it just eventually becomes reflective of itself, its own ego and becomes decorative. And I had that rabbit inside as artist's fantasy and I had different pieces, *Doctor's Delight* as sexuality, *Two Kids* as morality, *Italian Woman* as beauty, these different highlights. But the rabbit was a symbol of fantasy for me. But it was really to give a history of my working with ready-mades.

LT: That's interesting.

JK: Because these were all readymade objects too, they were found objects. *Bob Hope*, I found it on the street. My *Louis the Fourteenth*, I found in a street. You could find it in restaurants too, and different places. So, to give a little bit of that history. But also, the

rabbit, because the carrots to the mouth[?]. . . it reminds me a little bit of an orator, somebody making proclamations, being a politician.

LT: And you said you were using it again recently?

JK: Not the rabbit. I mean. . . I continue to work. . . I mean, the vacuum cleaners are works that deal with air in a different way. I mean, they are, kind of, lungs, which always, for me, made them anthropomorphic to humans. My basketballs, my tanks, that's air inside there. If I go on after that work. . . I go into like *Luxury Degradation*. I have sealed spaces there, but not so much the air thing. In my new work *Celebration*, I have very large, kind of, balloon type shapes — balloon-dog, balloon-flower, tulips, different things. I think what I like about it is a sense of self in a way, a sense of emptiness and a sense of neutrality, of not having to specifically feel a certain way, or go in a certain direction but it's still a sense of self. Maybe it could be a little bit of a symbol of, kind of, hot air or of nothingness.

LT: There's such a love of materials, I think, in your work. Which materials did you like to work with the most?

JK: You know, I like to work with different materials, I really do. With every up side, there's a down side to every material. So, you know there are things I really love about stainless steel but there's things I don't like about it. The same with wood. I love the spirituality of wood. But it's also more difficult, maybe, archivally. You have to just accept certain splits you're going to have happen. But that's nice too. You just have to look at it like a religious icon; the same thing happens there.

I go back and forth but, I think, I like a mirror very much. Reflective surfaces, I like. And the reason for that is that, for me, it has an art work, kind of, stay-in-the-moment — that you leave the room, you turn out the light, and you know, you come back in, you

turn the light back on and it didn't fall asleep, it's still up and ready to go and always functioning. And anytime you interact with it, it's always functioning and moving.

LT: But also there's something about how you bring the viewer in.

JK: That's right. That's the other aspect of the participation of the viewer, their involvement, their reflection within it. They are caressed more-or-less in some manner by the work if their reflections are traveling over its surface.

LT: I wanted to ask you about conservation issues that have come up for you. Our conservators found out that you were coming here to talk to us and were wondering about what kind of problems you have encountered and how you have dealt with them in pieces similar to the ones that we have. I can think of the *Three Ball 50/50 Tank*. How have you dealt with discoloration? Is this something you don't mind?

JK: I always try to take conservatory — is that a correct word? — issues. . . I always think about these things. And I try to deal with them and remove problems as much as possible. But it's really like banging your head against the wall. I mean, art is not life, and you know, it's never in the moment. It's always in a past moment. And it's always on a course of deterioration. That's its future. So, you try to do what you can, and things last long and stay as fresh as possible. The problems with the basketballs. . . I'd like to maintain a purity. So if I put a chemical into the water, then the balls that are there will discolor, it will bleach them, or. . .

LT: A chemical to prevent algae?

JK: To prevent algae, yes. But then it'll end up bleaching the basketballs. So, it's really better, I've decided, just to have generic basketballs more-or-less. And I choose certain basketballs, at a certain time, that I'm working with. And, at some point in the

future, it'll just go down to their orange, or their brown, or if basketballs aren't made anymore and if the piece has enough value that people want to keep it displayed, they'll just have some created that are like that.

LT: But they are utterly replaceable, then?

JK: They are replaceable, yes.

LT: As long as they're the same.

JK: But the models change. So, I used to work with Wilson's Super Shots, where I'd work with Dr. J.s, and I like the Dr. J. because of Jeff. You know, Dr. J. I was doing a lot of working with physicists and everything in creating these pieces because I really wanted permanent equilibrium. I worked with really great physicists, a Dr. Richard Feynman, a Nobel prize winner for quantum dynamics. When the Space Shuttle blew up, he was the one who discovered how it blew up -- the O-rings and everything. He would tell me, "Jeff, you can make it permanent. You can do it". So, I would look for the liquid that would be the most compressible on itself, so you could create a density gradient. But you could never do it within the scope that I wanted to do it, in an artwork. I mean, if I wanted to make something as tall as your tower here, absolutely I could do it. So, I had to then give up the permanency for those works for a purity. Because I wanted it womb-like. I didn't want to use two different oils, and then have a line that goes across it. I wanted it very womb-like. So, they don't last either. I mean, they need maintenance. So, a total equilibrium tank, maybe, if you're lucky, it'll last six months. If it's in a place that's not getting too much vibration.

LT: How about condensation? Does it bother you?

JK: No, that doesn't bother me. And depending on how out you put them from the wall, if

you're off the wall about twelve inches you should only get condensation on the back and a little bit on the sides, but not too much on the front. So, it depends also [on] your positioning of that. There's a certain area in art that — a truth — that is more important than some type of aesthetic. It has its beauty as an aesthetic. I want that to be very truthful. With doing painting, I mean, there are conservatory issues that come up all the time, and artists will find out that conservators really don't know how to direct artists today. At least, I find it very difficult to find conservators to direct you with contemporary products because they really don't know the history of these products.

LT: You mean paint or. . .

JK: Paint. Best type grounds to use. It's very hard to get direct advice on. I always look for their advice but it's difficult. [Pause]. If you talk to a conservator, they'll know about how paintings were made in the past, you know, [in the] sixteenth-century, seventeenth-century but they really don't know much about the products of today. I'm not talking about The Museum of Modern Art staff, but I'm just talking in general.

LT: You think this is because of the wealth of products out there competing, or. . .

JK: Time. Not really having a history of these products.

LT: How they behave. . .

JK: To see what they do over time. Even though you can speed up different tests. I think that's the main thing. And there should be a market for it. There should be an economic market for these services, but it may not be that large enough of an economic market.

LT: Anything else, Claire?

CD: Do you collect art, do you have a collection, and if so, when did you start?

JK: Yes, I used to have a little bit of a collection of work . When I was younger, I used to collect things I liked, like postcards, posters, if I liked it, not necessarily works of art. And then when I was able financially to purchase other works of art, I collected some contemporary works that I liked. I've always enjoyed Martin Kippenberger very much. So I purchased Martin Kippenberger's work. I remember the exhibition here at the Modern I mentioned of Bill Beckley. I really have always enjoyed the photo narrative work, so I purchased some of that work. I've always loved Roy Lichtenstein's work, so I purchased one of Roy's sculptures, A Surrealistic Hen [?] I would get pieces like cherubs, Baroque, Rococo cherubs from antique stores in Europe. And some also contemporary [works] that some of the people that have made carvings for me would also make, within the tradition, let's say, of [Ignaz] Günther who's a kind of Baroque, Rococo carver. Some angels like that. Albert Alden's [?] work. Things like that.

CD: And you mentioned your upcoming retrospective. How involved are you in the planning of that?

JK: I'm really looking forward to my retrospective because I haven't really had an exhibition since 1991. And there's a lot of different reasons for that, personal reasons, what happened in my own personal life, things that I've had to take care of, and also just the economics of a certain body of work called *Celebration*, which I started making in '93. The economics of what took place with that. . . It took a long time. I was first just supposed to show that work but then the cost just kept getting increased to make that work, so it just kind of froze the project for a while until we were able to get the prices under control, the cost of manufacture. So, I'm looking forward to that. I'm participating in it as far as the choice of works, the layout. I would like a certain honesty to it. I mean, I don't think that I'm really really going to do any kind of razzle-dazzle thing

other than just present the work.

LT: It's going to be at the Guggenheim uptown?

JK: The Guggenheim uptown. Also, it'll go to the Pompidou Center in Paris, also to Berlin. But in Berlin right now, they're. . .

LT: Where in Berlin?

JK: Well, they're deciding right now, the directors. We don't know exactly, but we're very committed and we'd like it to go there. I'm told that there won't be any problem that it goes there but we just have to know where, whether it's the Hamburger Bahnhof or the Nationalgalerie. Either one of those places, I'd be very happy. And also, it'll go to Bilbao Guggenheim Museum. I'd also like a venue in the East, whether it be in Hong Kong or in China, in Shanghai or some place.

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LT: Tokyo?

JK: I've always wanted it in Tokyo, but the more that I hear, there's really no place there.

LT: The Museum of Contemporary Art. It's definitely large enough.

JK: It would be very nice. And I'll be showing some of the *Celebration* works there and also some new work that I'm doing. The works will be from 1979 up. And also I'll be showing sculptures, large sculptures, throughout different parts of the city, public sculptures, like *Puppy*.

LT: This is going to be the celebration of the new millennium?

JK: Well, I don't know about that.

LT: It's going to be read that way.

JK: It would be nice if it were going to be read that way. I'm just happy to show and hopefully I'll do an exhibition before [the retrospective], I mean, just at a gallery. Because I really do want to show. What happened to me was. . . I made models for artwork, and I was given a certain quote, you know, "We can make this for you", and. .

LT: In Italy or here?

JK: In the United States. I only work now in the United States unless it's a special project. So, we were able to sell the works in advance to have money to manufacture [them]. And then, after we sold it, the manufacturer came back and said, "We can't do it for that. It's going to cost this much", and then they'd come up, "It's going to cost this much". Until the end, prices were probably about five times the original. Yeah, so that's kind of a mess. So, it's not that anybody did anything wrong. I didn't do anything wrong as the artist. The dealers were doing what they said they were going to do originally. Everybody was very supportive of the project. We saw what was happening, we all liked the art and it's just we got caught in this economic area. And you know, I wish that the economics would have been different, as far as the art world, that it wouldn't have been a problem that lasted so long, or to find a solution how to get out of it would take so long. But that's what happened. So, for me, this is work from '93. But I'm doing new work.

LT: Wouldn't a contract have prevented this from happening?

JK: Well, we did contracts. But the fabricator that we were working with, one of the dealers already had a history of working with them. And so we moved into it, and all together –

- the dealers were aware of this too — in kind of more of an area of trusting the situation. And it's not that the fabricator was trying to be untrusting, it's that they came in far, far too low. They didn't know what they were dealing with, I guess. And the reality was that to make something like that costs a lot more. The stainless steel pieces on the type of scale that I'm working with, you have to think a lot, and you have to, kind of invent a technology to be able to create surfaces which continue themselves without deviation. And it's just a very, very slow process of doing that. It takes a lot of time, of sanding and staining, and sanding and staining. And what would happen is that people would want to rush that process. You just can't. So, they didn't realize how long it would actually take them to do that. I never rejected anything.

LT: Oh, you didn't even get to reject. . . You never got to that point.

JK: No, because they know what I want. One company that I first hired, I had to reject and I sued and I won a lawsuit for it by a jury in Pennsylvania. I won an award of one point four million [dollars], but it's impossible to collect because the company just changed its name or something. They just really couldn't do the work and they knew what the work was going to be. But the people that are actually manufacturing it increased the costs — the other company increased the costs, they just didn't know what they were doing.

CD: Is this ordeal now over?

JK: Well, over, yes it's over. I guess. Pieces are being made. It's more about financing, stuff like that. Some relations have changed a little bit, which is, you know, good. I'm pleased. I'm just going to be pleased to show the work.

LT: Thank you.

CD: Thank you very much.

JK: Well, thank you.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

END INTERVIEW