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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Dennis
Oppenheim, 2009 June 23-24

Funding for this interview provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.
Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant
from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Dennis Oppenheim on June 23 and 24, 2009. The interview took place at the artist's studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Judith O. Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Dennis Oppenheim and Judith O. Richards have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards on June 23, 2009, interviewing Dennis Oppenheim, at 54 Franklin Street, New York City. Disc one, session one.

Okay, Dennis, I wanted to first note that this interview is going to pick up where, more or less, the last Archives of American Art interview ended, which was in August 1995.

DENNIS OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: So mainly we'll be covering the time from then to now.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Which is a good time.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: So if we could just start talking about the work you've made and spread out from there.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: And thinking about the work starting in 1996 perhaps, can you describe if you think that the works you were focusing on, a few different kinds of explorations in the works? I mean they're obviously not all in one kind of trajectory. There seem to be quasi-architectural works. There seem to be works that focus on common objects that are much larger. There are more personal, enigmatic kinds of works that relate to the body perhaps.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Is that correct? Were there sort of three or more avenues that you were exploring?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, yes, I can't speak for anyone else. But I mean I've always seemed to move around a great deal in my work. Meaning it can change rapidly from one thing to another. There are times when I'm seized by a certain necessity to alter my course. It can come overnight almost. There are times when I'm conscious of searching, strenuously, for something else because I can see boredom setting in. And I think parallel to these feelings is the belief that art should be a series of changes. That one should avoid a kind of continuum that simply services itself and does not allow entry of new courses to affect it. I think this is probably, if I were put into an interrogation chamber and told that I must tell the truth, I would admit that I still hold this belief even though - the belief being that there should be this ever-changing evolution, that it cannot stay. So you can't do the same work over and over again. Maybe you could do it twice or three times. But there should be some sort of urge to upset things, you know.

So this has been a factor in my work because it's as if being an artist is not hard enough, why do you have to upset things on top of that? But it does translate, when you look at the work and you ask questions, and I respond, it does come to the surface that there is this belief, you know, this belief system that at all costs the work should not remain stationary within a particular conceptual frequency or even the domain of a philosophical cavity. [Ringing of cell phone.]

[PAUSE.]

So having said this, easier said than done actually. I mean how do you force change if you don't have any ideas? And how can you be sure that the maneuvers you make in the name of this idealized state of flux,

metamorphosis, is going to be aligned to the higher characteristics of the artistic pursuit? How do you know that? Wouldn't it be better to say, well, I am committed to using all of my intelligence and all of my energy to align myself to the highest degree of projection of the art impulse into a physical shape. In other words, I want to make the best art that can be made during this time that I'm allowed.

Well, I've said that before. In fact, I did a class once in Florida for a few months. And I introduced the class to the students by simply saying, "Let's see if we can make our art better than it has been." Simply that. As if one can chart a course where that becomes their objective; is to, okay, the art is what it is now; but let's see, what can be done? What are these things that differentiate the high virtuous work from the work that's less imbued?

MS. RICHARDS: When you come to the point where you feel bored or not sure if you want - thinking about wanting to make a change in direction -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: How do you go about doing that? What are the thought processes or the prompts or the materials? Do you look back over the work? How does that process evolve?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, it's rather unclear. I mean there is a time when -

MS. RICHARDS: And has that changed over the years?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, there's a few clues that you get. One of them, I used to always announce that I'm in a state of periodic to constant distractions. Like I'm never really quite present in a conversation. And that is more than just walking around outside. I'm always sort of under the impression that I'm - a certain amount of my attention is being given to scanning and looking and probably some sort of subliminal thinking. You know there's a thought, there's a pursuit, a thought pursuit happening while I'm having a conversation that distracts me a little bit from the conversation but is out there looking for something. So I've always been aware that there seemed to be this feat because why wouldn't you? I mean it's something that follows you around.

The other thing you notice certain things about the agility with which you can come up with something fluid, an idea or something. Little clues like when you're on the train, for instance; it seems that sometimes when you're on a train, or I've been on a train, I've had episodes of fluid, creative scanning where things actually occur to me that may not have during a period when I'm still. So there are certain things that become apparent to you and you believe in that carve the avenue that could be used in purposely pursuing an upset or a change in direction.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you saying that travel and movement are catalysts for finding new images?

MR. OPPENHEIM: They could be, yes. I've heard this from other people, too. It's not a ubiquitous condition. It's some - I've definitely found in the past numerous occasions where I've been on a train and when I had a piece of paper - I used to go out from my home at night with a clipboard just like this one here.

MS. RICHARDS: From here?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, from wherever I lived, Brooklyn - And I would go to a coffee shop or a diner, and I would find that I could work in a diner where there's a lot of commotion going on. Little things like that. But those are only there to aid your belief, that, well, there might be a way that you could purposely set up some situations where you have a chance of enlarging your view of something or getting a better perspective or altering your point of direct reference. So, you know, you remember these things. You use them. You have them at your disposal.

But then the larger question of alignment: I mean being an artist, you can go back in art history, and you can look at certain artworks, and you can pinpoint what it was about the work that allowed it to elevate the art historical coefficient. I mean you can actually see in this work the idea that the artist perpetrated that made this work so important. Well, these are more difficult to conjure. Because I mean obviously some artists only need one of them, you know, for their own career. You just need one perception where it's strong enough to shift the boundaries of what is known. So it's a constant sort of fantasy, desire, of shifting the boundaries of what is known and coming up with a nuance, a certain abbreviation to the existing law which would elevate it and could be perceived not only by you but others as a bona fide, legitimate discovery.

MS. RICHARDS: You had talked about a sketch pad in the diner?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you're thinking, what part does drawing and visualizing ideas play?

MR. OPPENHEIM: For years it was not drawing as much as writing. For years the catalyst towards the

construction of a physical work or an installation would precipitate from a series of words.

MS. RICHARDS: Has that been true in the last ten years?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, you have to be careful with that because sometimes you're just falling prey to clichés, and you're falling prey to the fact that certain word combinations can be intriguing and can precipitate a visual counterpart. But are they any good? In other words, what - can you really believe in them? And all this stuff about language and how important language has been to conceptual art. Well, you know, even if you do have a kind of beeline connecting to a concept that could alter and could create a new vantage point that we could use in addressing art, even if you do have that alignment, it doesn't mean it's really yours. There's a few problems. It could be so manufactured by your intellectual desire for a new position to occupy you as an artist and give you all the radiance of discovery; but it could fit with your temperament and your whole method of working poorly. It could be a bad fit. And for you to steer it and to pilot this sort of occupation could end up being really troublesome. You know, it simply does not fit with your sense of operation, your sense of development, what you can hold within your orbit of occupation.

So I mean we know artists can operate outside their comfort zone. I mean, we knew, that Roy Lichtenstein didn't really like to do those paintings in the pure sense of the word. They were difficult, to make all those dots and things, you know. That's, you know, those beliefs. So you knew that you had a certain variance in which you could be found in a world of operation which was very uncomfortable for you, but you would do it anyway.

MS. RICHARDS: Has what you're describing been constant throughout your career? Has it changed in the last 15 years, your thought process?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well -

MS. RICHARDS: I also wanted to ask about the constant testing. Not censorship really, but testing of your ideas as they come up, as opposed to just trusting it to sort of happen, that this can be right.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, the other -

MS. RICHARDS: Evaluating.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, the other frequency, which we have to recognize here that runs parallel to all of this conditioning of the self and the methods of trying to transport yourself into a more exalted perceptual mode, the other frequency which coexists is the art world, the world in which you operate and your career is bounded by. And all of the operational flux and differential, the storms of critical and the sheer anatomy of art changing in its perverse ways is operating parallel to your self-momentum. So this bears heavily, perhaps much too heavily, on the course that you eventually find yourself in. In other words, everybody is a little different in their aptitudes to operate within the art world. Some people seem to have an uncanny understanding of the boundaries by which they can have their art steer forward. They seem to know that if they go off a little bit to the left, it's going to lose their audience. Or - they just have an antenna. Others don't have that quite as much.

MS. RICHARDS: What part does your idea of audience, the definition of audience, the interest or disinterest in audience play in your work recently?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, they're either there or they seem not to be. I mean if you get some attention, and you decide that the attention you're getting is due to a perception that you have and that you put into a work and the work was viewed and the reaction was - the reaction was one of excitement and had a positive ring, then you, for that moment, you tie the two things together. You say, well, this work came from me, within my interior. It was made physical, and it affected people in this positive way. So you build up some memories of these occasions so you at least know that you've done it. But to keep doing it, to always - to believe so strongly that anything you do is going to be interpreted in this way and have a positive outcome, that begins to erode because you simply don't. You do things that are misunderstood, that don't have the sort of range of physical characteristics as work that's been received better. It's not as cutting edge. It may not be as highly motivated. Every number of reasons. So this sort of critical - this kind of critical parallelism which travels with you, often unbeknownst to you. This large world of the art world dynamic is hovering over you and affecting both consciously and unconsciously everything you're doing.

And all artists have to deal with this. And you realize that because as you're traveling down these pathways and evolving, and your work is going, here, there, and it's getting a multitude of different reactions, some positive, some negative - and meanwhile there are other artists, some of them who are occupying more of what you could call a signature style; their work is not moving and torquing as much as perhaps your own. It's traveling in a relatively coherent conceptual vein. And this work occasionally survives very well within the critical storm, you know. So you realize that, well, your work is tortured because you're asking it to change constantly because you feel fundamentally it's necessary and that's what you think art should do. But meanwhile it may not be as

successful in operating within that art world critical storm as work that is less adventurous.

MS. RICHARDS: When you look back at your work, you know - it can be judged as a whole, and one can see a unique vision.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, they would have - I have a show now in Germany, and the director wrote a very short introduction. And he did - you know you don't have to be that perceptive to realize that this 40-year body of work has been very diverse. And so that was his point of departure was the fact that it wasn't signature. It was operating in this other system. But if somebody tells you, well, you know, if you're going to change a lot, the critics are going to find more difficulty in supporting you because they're going to feel that the work you've departed from, in your estimation, may not have been any good. And that's why you departed. So it could be said that you're creating problems. So it's just that -

MS. RICHARDS: Are there other artists who have done likewise currently or in recent memory, who serve as a kind of inspiration or support for that?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, there are some very good ones whose work - the works are extremely versatile.

MS. RICHARDS: And diverse.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. There's a few exceptional examples. But there's more examples of - well, a lot of artists have versatility. You know you'd be surprised. They undertake an avenue that is extremely successful, and then they have the fortitude, and they're pushed to alter it, you know, even though it may be risky. So there are these risk-takers. And you always kind of applaud it.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that critical attention or lack thereof or what critics have said has had, or I should say, what kind of impact has [critical attention] had on your work in recent years?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, it's both - it's both critical and it's also the marketplace. You know these are two factors that can either consciously or unconsciously or surreptitiously or directly affect the course of the artist. You know we've often been made to believe that a painter who comes into an area that is both important and commercially successful, they could have a difficult time changing because they would see that maybe it would upset the success that they're having commercially in the marketplace. Or, you know, if the sculptor also has come up with something that is marketable and successful, they, too, may have. But some of them have this belief that they can do it again. Or, you know, that they can change, and it's like this sort of trance that I've done it before, and it's in me, and I own it, and it is the gene that will allow me to come up with something else that will have equal success.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that how you felt?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, that's not necessarily the way I feel. But it's a way you almost have to believe, you know. I mean it's the way that I think the majority of artists feel, that they can do it again; that they do actually harbor this gift. So the thing that they can germinate within themselves and have it come out in this magical way once again. And it is a prophetic invention that they've been able to make their system generate.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you had a situation where you thought of an idea and either carried it out or got partly into it and realized it wasn't going to work and declared it a failure? Do you put it aside? Or do you keep working on it until you feel it's - ?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, I have to admit that is one area that I have grave trouble with, and knowingly. You know it's like there's another gene that artists are given when they start that allows them sensitivity towards damage. In other words, it protects them from decisions that will damage them. Some are given an uncanny sense of what concourse they must travel in, and swaying one side or the other will create friction and damage to their career. An uncanny sense of things that really requires an unusual combination of perceptual skills in order to determine. And then there's those of us who are less imbued in this area, and it's like a bull in a china closet: You can do things that others with this sensitivity will say, "Oh, my God! If you do that, look it, don't offer that work to the market. Don't - You know, tear that up." In other words, I'm very aware of - It's like - There's probably some artists that know exactly what their best work is. And any deviation from that, they will not allow to be seen.

MS. RICHARDS: So what you're saying is that -

MR. OPPENHEIM: I have less of that.

MS. RICHARDS: - you have a hard time recognizing a conceptual or a failure.

MR. OPPENHEIM: I sometimes exhibit failures. Yes, see, I can be very relaxed at times. For some reason this

thing about failure - Of course, you know, I'm not going to bring into visibility a bad work, a work that you feel fundamentally has failed. But generally there's a kind of a relaxed state within this landscape of danger avoidance. And some people, again, have a higher degree of perception of this than others. So I've been conscious a number of times of doing something that I probably shouldn't do. And I say it just like that. I say, Well, I probably shouldn't do this, but I'm doing it. So I don't know what's behind that. You know it's probably a little bit of a devil in the mix, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, if you're experimenting and taking risks -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: - you couldn't really be doing that if you weren't able to tolerate failure.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, it's true. You certainly have to be ready for blind alleys and conjuring positions that are simply not going to go anywhere. But, you know, this thing about holding the work until it is not only perfect but it is reeking of the selves of breakthrough, that it is revolutionary, you know, you are not going to release this work until it's revolutionary. Well, we used to say, probably a long time ago, that you can really drive yourself crazy. I mean you can find yourself unable to do a work because your demands are so enormous: that this work harbor not only a reorientation of the entire art world, but it encapsulates several movements all at once. And until you do that, you aren't going to concretize anything. So you find yourself in a forced sort of wasteland of a kind oscillation. It's a constant orbiting around things, but yet not attaching to them. And you can be in these modes, and artists have, for a long period of time, that nothing seems to - everything you come up with is not enough. Now, this is very common. And then you have to break it because obviously, you know, what do you do? So, you know, these things I'm talking about I don't think are unique. I think many of them would be identified by other artists.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about commissioned work.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Both public and private commissions. You've taken on commissions for many years, certainly before the beginning of the period we're looking at. But thinking about the late '90s, how does doing a commission proceed compared to doing a work in the studio on your own that's not commissioned?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a fundamental difference in the thought process? Why seek out commissions? Or maybe you don't seek out commissions. Maybe you accept them when they come to you. Or maybe they serve a very critical function in your practice.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, that is so full of methods in which it can be approached in terms of a question because -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you want to focus on one particular commission?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, I think maybe we can deal with it. Studio art for a lot of us, particularly those who may have been around during Abstract Expressionism, was a kind of situation where the studio was a laboratory. I mean you know it was really like a scientific laboratory, and you could experiment in the attempt of coming up with a solution. Literally. And there were no boundaries because your studio, you would walk into it, and you could lock the door. And artists in the late fifties, as I recall, would kind of think of themselves as being a little estranged from the rest of the world. It was very common for us to feel detached, and that we were harboring interests and concerns that simply were not - other people weren't privy to.

This was kind of before [Andy] Warhol became really - because Warhol brought forth his sort of, you know, the commonality of things. So with Abstract Expressionism, it became almost a religious sort of scientific pursuit that you would do within your - to conjure up. And your mind was all over the place because it was very cosmic. It was all about emotionality and about, you know, the way paint could be distributed on the surfaces. Very esoteric actually. So you don't really forget that. I mean if you move on several decades into public art, you never forget the occasion at which you were operating in the studio without any intrusion. Nobody coming in, nobody telling you what to do. You could do anything you wanted. Very unlike what you were in now if you were doing public work. Almost night and day in certain ways. In others, no.

So you have this sort of kind of schizophrenia, this sort of disparity between this occasion in which you are the master of this studio, and you can scan the universe, and nothing was controlling you, nothing was posturing you. And you could come up with something all your own, you know, purely your creation.

Well, okay, you have that picture, that scenario. Then we move over to public art where not only do you not have the studio, you have the real world, the public space. But you have juries deciding whether your work is going to be built or not. You have a whole apparatus of conditions which the work has to align with. Its physical characteristics have to be dictated by the codes and conditions of the real world and the way people operate in it. You find yourself immediately more aligned to architecture, you know, architecture kind of deviant art form that you've always felt was less potent than fine art because it had carrying on its shoulders a necessity to service a public. In other words, it was applied. It had an application. Pure studio art theoretically had no application, which people that operated with studio work, fine art, would always feel superior to the crafts-oriented people who they felt were unnecessarily governed by a fetish, a material fetish. So there are always these things that make you think that pure art was really - the whole theoretical thing was just, you know, you were right with the theoretical physicists. In fact who have traveled from that, there are many reasons why one would find themselves faced with this new world of public art. All of a sudden it comes more and more into your pathway. Galleries drop off to the side. The sort of characteristics of fine art become dim, they dim. And -

MS. RICHARDS: And when would you say this was happening for you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, probably 20 years ago, something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Late '80s.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, actually - Yes, yes, yes. In the early eighties I was doing giant machine-like projects which really came from the studio. They were very cumbersome. Nobody wanted them. They fell into a category of installation. And I would show them in museums and galleries. And somehow I survived doing those. I mean I survived financially. I was able to somehow keep it operating, although it was really quite an ordeal. I mean there were definitely periods of not acknowledging the precariousness of the work I was doing in terms of my ability to continue, which is good. You know that's the way it's supposed to be. You're supposed to be addicted to what you do, and you're supposed to do it even though commonsense could indicate to you that you're not going to get - your ability to continue is compromised.

So I mean doing land art was a great way to nurture this early kind of renegade sensibility because you were doing work that couldn't be received, couldn't be collected, any of that. So you're already showing that you were - we would call it, well, we're doing art for the right reasons. Well, everybody knows this, too, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: And that changed, though, later.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say the commissions then entered into your practice in the late '80s, early '90s?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. I would say to a greater degree, yes. Right now, presently, we're immersed in commissions. You know but I'm quick - to add a footnote to that - I'm quick to say that it is extremely problematic, the area of public art. To me personally, I find these conflicts of studio art form - I find all these things unresolved. Others may have found peace.

MS. RICHARDS: What about commissions from museums as opposed to [inaudible]?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, that's another thing. Yes. Okay. Well, see, this area that I'm in has no curator. I'm not working in the world of - I'm almost not in the art world. It is so oblique in many ways to the art world that it operates independently. Coexists - exists in the same timeframe - but does not connect at all.

MS. RICHARDS: Looking at, for example, the work you did in 1996 called *Rabbit Factory*, was that a commissioned piece?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: It's one of the quasi-architectural works.

MR. OPPENHEIM: That has a little more integrity. You know some of the - Well, integrity meaning it was overseen by - You know it's funny how we - and I'm sure it's not right - if our commission comes from an astute individual, I guess we're going to feel better about it. If it comes from a municipality out in the middle of nowhere, I guess, you know, even though we'd like to fight it, we do find ourselves falling prey to this sort of belief that, well, it's the more astute viewpoint obviously should be acknowledged with greater seriousness because it's aligned with the art world, it's aligned with art history. I don't know. I would like to really alter my view of this so that the voice that comes from the public, without all of this pedigree, is at least equal. You know it may not be imbued with this sort of curatorial cachet. But forget that curatorial cachet because maybe that's something subliminally you're trying to avoid, you know.

Maybe what can happen to people like me who enter the art world doing conceptual work, that has a low degree of obvious commercial merit and later finds themselves volleying between positions that critical forces are finding difficulty in supporting, and some of this difficulty might bleed into other ranges of the art world as you operate within it, maybe what happens to people like that is that they want to find an alternative, you know. You sort of build up a -

MS. RICHARDS: As an alternative to what sort of thing?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, to the world which you find your - the art world - that you find yourself surrounded by or in some cases thrown around by. And so you would vent into public art because it would be, as I say, it still has the word art attached to it. But it's oblique and detached to the degree of operating within its own world.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that one would have, ironically, a greater sense of control over your career operating in those commissions?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes. Well, you know, they say that -

MS. RICHARDS: Rather than being thrown around.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, the critical world - you know a lot of what the critical world likes, I like, too, you know. So I can't pretend to be operating with a perception that is unique and strongly radical and not in alignment with the status quo. I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: Can you give an example of a commission that you did, public, private, U.S., non-U.S., in the late nineties that you'd want to -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, I've done a few that I like. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there one particular one you - ?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, there's one I did in Freiburg, Germany. It's called *Jump and Twist* [1999].

MS. RICHARDS: *Jump and Twist*. Do you remember what date that was?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I think it was '97 maybe, '96-'97?

MS. RICHARDS: And what characteristics did that - how did that evolve, that commission, in Freiburg?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I won the competition. I was competing with other artists; I think most of them were German. And first of all you're -

MS. RICHARDS: Was it a municipal competition?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it was a university building.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. OPPENHEIM: And they have a similar situation that we have here, where one percent or sometimes two percent of the budget of the construction goes to an art work, you know. That's what we have here in America. It's called the one percent. So this was of that ilk. And 1 percent of the budget, which amount to quite a bit, maybe \$400,000, could go towards an artwork. Well, the fact that you win, you compete legitimately, often without a great deal of optimism. First of all, you're American. It's Germany. I mean you don't know the architects. Maybe one of the people competing in it is a relative, maybe it's some kind of political camaraderie.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know the jury?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, you don't know. So when you win, you feel - well, you feel lucky because it is the nature of it to realize that your proposal is going to be looked at by various temperaments of individuals and varying degrees of aptitude aligned to the art world. A lot of the jury will not be - they are not artists. They're deans of the school. They're maintenance people. They're engineers. And many of them have no idea of the political apparatus of the art world.

MS. RICHARDS: Faced with that kind of situation, do you bring into your proposal written information that would bring some of those people up to speed, as it were?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you -

MS. RICHARDS: Or I mean, I don't know, do you attempt to relate it to the art world?

MR. OPPENHEIM: You know there are so many different levels of approach, depending upon what kind of artist you are. You can talk to some artists who will say they never compete - they would never compete. They would never be in a situation where they would be determined by jury. You either give them the commission or leave them alone. There are many artists like that. So you have that sort of you want me, you ask me, and I do what I want. Really, there's a lot of that. Well, I mean if you're going to find a home in this rather perplexing world of public art, which is in a constant state of metamorphosing, you're going to have to shed some of that arrogance and some of that sort of fine art aptitude, and replace it with a certain kind of democratic field of view. And you're going to have to become realistic - which this is an interesting thing which aligns you more to the architect. And we used to say that - 30 years ago - we'd say, "Oh, my God! Architects? God, they're - who wants to be an architect? We must be a fine artist; we can do whatever we want." But now you can't say that because the architects are all good. In fact many people think they're better, they're getting better things that are objects. There are a number of reasons for that, that a lot - this sort of hierarchy of architecture being applied art with great burden, great weight on the shoulders to provide housing for people. Oh, my God! How can you do anything transcendental if you have that sort of necessity? Well, forget that. They're doing amazing things.

MS. RICHARDS: So with this jury in Freiburg -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you not want to put anything in your proposal that would enlighten some of these non-art juries?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, you know, I got the sense, because I think I went over and met some of these people; I met the architects. These were not unenlightened people. The architects working at the University of Freiburg were heavily endowed, both theoretical - they knew art, they were something to contend with. So I knew that I had a group of people who could probably consider seriously a radical work, you know. So I proposed a work that structurally was radical. I mean it penetrated the façade of the building, it broke through the building; it occurred in two places. It spun around. It did all kinds of things. So I think that's a - Look, one should be happy doing that. You know if you could do that the rest of your life, you know. But as Gilbert [Proesch] and George [Passmore] said when they were asked in China if they were happy, they said, "No, we are never happy. We are artists." So no matter how good a thing could appear as a situation that can occur over and over again, it's never good enough.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you got that commission, it was for what you proposed. Is that exactly what was built?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that unusual?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, it doesn't happen every day. You lose 80 percent - 80 percent. You lose eight out of ten. And these commissions are not always - When you're short-listed, you have a lot of work ahead of you. They might give you a little money - it's never enough - to do the model. Then you have to apply there. You have to meet the people. You have to look at the site. It could take months of prelude.

MS. RICHARDS: And that particular piece - how did you function in the building? Can you describe it, like when you broke through the wall?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, *Jump and Twist* was operating - First of all, I think I had a good, sound conceptual foundation. Because it perceived the Macro-Technology Center, the building which it was attached to, it perceived it, it understood it as almost a mental cranium, almost like a mind. Because macro-tech is highly theoretical. The students in there obviously were dealing with extremely advanced technological theoretical stuff. So I saw the students in there, the people occupying that building, as being very atmospheric, very intangible, like the science that they were studying. So that's beginning to get interesting. You're aligning your artwork to a way your perceiving the architectural use of the building and what's formulating within it. So already you're building a nice sort of synchronicity and harmony between the reality of the building and the way your artwork is theoretically being constructed, you know.

So it started out a big, heavy kind of animated sort of architectural structure that sat outside the building about 50 feet away, and it looked like it was an architectural metamorphosis between a shelter and maybe some kind of almost an insect, almost something that could - had wings that could actually move. It looked very much as if it could move, particularly jump. So the next part, three-part piece, the second part, it found itself penetrating the building in another stage, Stage No. 2, 50 feet into the building, half way in, half way out. And as it did that, it became lighter. The materials became less heavy, they became more diaphanous, and they began to reflect. And as it penetrated the membrane of the building, which I perceived as the mind, it twisted, it turned, and then it metamorphosized. It was like a - it was metamorphosis. It was very much like a butterfly coming out.

But as it changed, it became more and more, lighter and lighter. And then the third stage, the last stage, it was hanging, this giant geometric concept with all this reflective, very lightweight material turning in the atrium. And as it turned, it reflected the staircases, the walls, the interior of the building. So it was a kind of three-dimensional parallelization of what I perceived as the mental process of the people in the building. You know it was the oscillation, the scanning. Because I think this orbiting is pretty much universal in the way that people begin a process of trying to break into a thought, is they oscillate. So that's what this did. So it tried to mimic the cerebral architecture of the proponent of the building, the students.

MS. RICHARDS: That's no doubt why it was selected.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I don't know if I've said that.

MS. RICHARDS: How was it received by the school?

MR. OPPENHEIM: They liked it. Yes, they liked it. It's still there. It's still there.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever find out in these type of things what your competitors [inaudible]?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, you often do find out. Yes. You can find out. Often you go to these competitions, and you're all there the same day. Yes, you wait out in the -

MS. RICHARDS: That's awkward.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, it's a little awkward. Yes. You find yourself, you know, "how did I end up doing this? You know. How did I start out in art school, and then here I am in this corporate office."

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a difference in your experience between commissions in the U.S. and commissions elsewhere, say in Europe?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, there probably is. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Do your experiences - I mean do you feel that one is probably going to be a better experience than another?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. I would say that Europe is going to allow you to do more advanced work.

MS. RICHARDS: But why do you suspect that that is?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it's partly because - and again, sometimes the decisions for these public works is made by a museum director. So that's both good and bad.

MS. RICHARDS: And in the U.S. it's not?

MR. OPPENHEIM: It's less likely to occur. It could occur that the architects, you know - and you can have a very enlightened architect. But, see, that's dangerous because the architect is already looking for something that's going to be relatively subservient to his building. But I would say from my experience that the commissions that come forth in Europe are often finally better artworks, you know, and I wish it weren't true. And maybe it isn't completely true. But that's my perception. First of all, you have a lot of - For some reason you have artists in Europe who, if they were American artists, they wouldn't be competing. They're the arrogant ones who would say, "No, I don't compete. If you want my work, you call me up and send me a check, and I might do it for you."

MS. RICHARDS: So the level of competition is higher in Europe.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, the artists have somehow allowed - very good artists in Europe will compete. You know they kind of bite the bullet.

MS. RICHARDS: Something about kind of a general higher degree of respect for talent?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. It's some sort of -

MS. RICHARDS: They're not risking loss of respect?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, the artists that will not compete, this is a - you know, good for them. They have a real strong sense of their value. You want them, you - I mean the risk they take is that nobody will ever commission them. But there are some artists who, okay, well, so be it. "If you want me, you give me the commission. Otherwise I won't" - And they never build anything. So I don't know, what kind of a person do you want to be? How about like just, you know, throw caution to the wind? Alright, I'll compete for anything. So you

throw yourself into a situation where you're losing 80 percent of the commissions. But everyone also is, too, because that's about the percentage. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm going to change disks right now.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Okay.

[END OF DISC 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards with Dennis Oppenheim. Disc two, session one, June 23, 2009.

Around the same time - we were just talking about the *Jump and Twist* in Freiburg, Germany, that was in the late '90s - ?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: You participated in the Venice Biennale [La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy], maybe not for the first time, in 1997. Could you describe that piece and how that happened? Was this part of the main -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it was just - See, I don't know how these things happen. Germano Celant just - who was the director of the Biennale, said that he had procured a space in Marghera [Italy], and he wanted to include that in the Biennale. And it was a giant industrial space that was part of a glass factory, and it was going to become an important alternative space. And it was just a question of a *vaporetto* [water bus] ride over to Marghera, which wasn't very long. And I was showing at Blum Helman [Blum Helman Gallery, New York City] then, and I'm trying to remember. One of the pieces that I was working on then was called *Device to Root Out Evil* [1997], and it was an upside-down church. It was a country church turned upside down, balancing on its steeple.

It's really an example, that period, that occasion, where everything kind of fell into place. There seemed to be the procurement of a funder. Yes, yes, that's it. Yes. Of somebody who - well, no, there wasn't right away. It required me to have a certain amount of faith in the situation. And I had to proceed to build this *Device to Root Out Evil*. I had to finance it and everything. This is not unusual. Sometimes you have to advance. You simply - you have to build. You're an artist, and you just have to build it; you can't wait for things to sometimes work out where your works are being supported or funded. And in addition to building this *Device to Root Out Evil*, I was asked to do a major exhibition of many sculptures, sculptures like 30 or 40. So it was a great big space.

MS. RICHARDS: The same venue.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, it was the same space. Yes. Big. You know, big deal. And we shipped all the work there.

MS. RICHARDS: And Germano made the selections?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, it was all shown. Yes, there was some overview. But it was all installed inside this industrial space in Marghera. And outside the building was the church, the upside-down church, *Device to Root Out Evil*. So I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: How did this piece evolve from the beginning?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well -

MS. RICHARDS: The idea of it.

MR. OPPENHEIM: I had the idea that if you turned that particular type of building upside down, you would achieve this very dramatic cantilever where the body of the church would be shot out in space. My interest was basically visual and structural and had to do with the sheer physical dynamic of balancing a building on its *cupola* [domed roof], on its roof pinnacle. The fact that it was a church didn't really interest me very much, although it became evident that it was something that I shouldn't have overlooked.

MS. RICHARDS: Especially in Venice.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, less so in Venice than in America. Yes. I discovered you can't really do anything to churches in America. But in Venice - So the show - Well, this big space, and it was about five times as large as this whole loft, maybe ten times, enormous industrial space that was just being converted into a space that could be an exhibition center, it was working with the Italian government, the political. It was very hard. Everything was difficult. They had no money. They had no help. I brought over my own people. So I was funding this. I was basically taking a risk. But, yes, this is what we do. You know the Biennale, what better time to take a risk! Everyone else does, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Is this color accurate?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. It was red glass.

MS. RICHARDS: What purpose - I was going to ask you about color - it's very emphatic, the color you choose.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, this is Italian, Italian handmade glass because you're so close to Murano. The glass - the roof tiles, which are usually red or could be red, were, in this case, handmade glass.

MS. RICHARDS: Bright red.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Yes, so it was beautifully made.

MS. RICHARDS: And the rest of it was blue.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, the metal was all silver. It was a beautiful thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you decide to make it red?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, I don't know. I think it was probably because in the generic home, you know, the generic kind of childhood view of a house, it's often a red roof, you know. I think it was something as simple as that. I wanted it to come from this world of the universal, generic, simple, unadulterated country church, you know. So red was the color that I thought would bring that forth. So here was had this enormous show and this extraordinary work that had to be engineered to not only tilt but pivot. It was very - I mean standing next to it was really quite an experience. It has a real -

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a sense of threat that it would fall on you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, not necessarily. It looked precarious. But it was very well received as a sculpture, as both a concept of architectural sort of reorientation - you render this building unusable by turning it upside down, and it's not functional anymore; so it becomes sculpture. So it had some clarity, some very simple veins of theoretical truth to it. But in reality at the Venice Biennale, Marghera, it isn't as close to Venice as one would think. I mean it's close.

MS. RICHARDS: So fewer people dropped in?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I mean the Biennale Committee had to organize *vaporettos*. Okay. When does the *vaporetto* go to Oppenheim's show? Well, it could be now, it could be - I don't know. So it was hard to see, you know. But then I had some pieces in Venice as well. And we had posters and stuff like that. So -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you end up selling that piece?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, I ended up selling it. Yes. I ended up - that was the other miracle. Somebody, some wealthy woman -

MS. RICHARDS: American or European?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, American. Yes. From Texas, one of these proverbial Texas billionaires, who was a friend of one of the women at Joe Helman. And he sold it for quite a bit, enough to pay me back for the expenses. And then she gave it to the Denver Art Museum [CO].

MS. RICHARDS: And is it there now?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. But it's not being shown. So there lies the germination of a whole story about *Device to Root Out Evil* beginning with the gift to the Denver Art Museum by Ginny Williams.

MS. RICHARDS: Ginny?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Ginny.

MS. RICHARDS: Ginny.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, Ginny, who was a trustee of the museum. And they brought me down there, and they were going to install it behind the museum. And for some reason I said, "Well, this is not really good. You should have it out in the open." Because it was all walled in. And little did I know that their offer to put it up in this rather protected situation was really one of considerable perspective on their part because they knew that it could never go up in front of the museum because of the content.

MS. RICHARDS: Only later did you learn that?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, I realized I made a mistake because it's still not up. So it's been 15 years. It's in storage. But now they're talking about putting it up in front of the Clyfford Still Museum [Denver, CO]. Well, what that did, when I said, "Well, you should put this up," and they said, "Well, it's going to create - there's too much opposition because we have a conservative clientele here," I built another one. And that was going to go to Stanford because I went to Stanford. And I talked to the people at Stanford, and they thought it would be good. And so we built an identical version.

MS. RICHARDS: You did?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, another version.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you call it Version Two?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: The version for Stanford?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes, *Second Version, Device To Root Out Evil*. Well, everything was going fine at Stanford until the dean of Religion got his -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I remember reading about this -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. He said, "We cannot have this at the university because it's blasphemy." And I talked to him. I said, "You're projecting. Come on, relax. It's art. It's not going to hurt you." But he got the attention of the president, and they rejected it. So then it went to Vancouver [British Columbia, Canada].

MS. RICHARDS: Let me understand. This had already been built.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, it was built. I built it and paid for it. But I received nothing from Stanford. So it went to the Vancouver Biennale. And a private organization bought it and gave it to the city and put it in a beautiful location near the water in Vancouver. Well, there's water all over Vancouver. And it was there for about a year, and then all of a sudden the same thing happened. The city all of a sudden started to get complaints from people who lived around the piece that the work was disturbing them, the content.

MS. RICHARDS: How did they describe the content?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, they thought it was sacrilegious. They thought I was making fun of the church. So then another developer in Calgary [Alberta, Canada] came forth and said he wanted this piece, and he would buy it from the foundation, and he would install it on property that he owned in Calgary. And so that took place, and they moved the piece to Calgary. He installed it not in town, kind of on the outskirts in some sort of strange location. But it looks quite beautiful there. I mean you come upon it, and you wonder what this is. And it got a tremendous amount of press because it was this notorious Vancouver thing that had been rejected and had been rejected from Stanford. But then before all that, a collector in Nebraska, Robert Duncan, a big collector with giant space in Nebraska, wanted it for his collection. So I built a third one with a blue roof. And -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you continue to get the glass from Venice?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no. We had people here.

MS. RICHARDS: And is that piece on exhibit?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, it's really - it's right out his bedroom. He built kind of like a castle for himself and his wife. He's aviation, a giant aviation company. He owns work by everyone: Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, everybody, hundreds of pieces. And he loves this work, and it's seen by a lot of people. He'll give the whole thing to the city when he dies, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: Omaha [NE]?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. And that's where this artist Jun Kaneko lives. And we built even another one, but a different type of roof, entirely different, in Majorca [Spain].

MS. RICHARDS: But also a church.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, *Device to Root Out Evil*. There's five of them. And all precipitating because of one I had trouble. You know I wouldn't have gone on. And the one in Denver is still not up. But they're building the Clyfford

Still Museum behind the [Daniel] Libeskind Building in Denver, Colorado. And they swear - the director of the museum and the architect - swear that *Device to Root Out Evil* will be on their property.

MS. RICHARDS: And you're happy about that.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, well, I mean, yes. I was unhappy. I got angry a few times with them. I said: Why are you buying into this sort of conservatism perpetrated by people that you're afraid of stretching their imagination? This is not a work of blasphemy. It's a work of spatial art, architectural dynamic that has to do with sculpture, and not, you know - Actually had a professor at Stanford come here with his wife, a real senior professor of philosophy, and he was going to write a book about *Device to Root Out Evil* and use it as a major part of a historical examination of when political art becomes corrosive and starts to create a kind of cancer and the problems. Well, like the *Titled Arc* [1981] of Richard Serra.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. You've mentioned that you were showing with Blum Helman.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: What were the years that he represented you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I think it was like '90 to about let's see - Yes, it was probably '92 to '97 or '98.

MS. RICHARDS: And could you describe your relationship and how it [inaudible]?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it was really pretty good. I mean he didn't really - He wasn't an active - he was more like a benefactor. Because this was not work that he could - he did sell this one piece, and he sold a few other pieces, but very little. He used to occasions with people like Bryan Hunt and Sultan, Donald Sultan, in the eighties where - and Ellsworth Kelly and stuff - he was into high-volume selling. He was really a salesman. So taking me on, he -

MS. RICHARDS: High volume meaning the artists were very prolific?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, and he was selling a lot of their work, you know. Selling was important.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he think that would happen with you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, not exactly. I think I fell into his - I don't know. Maybe he had no reason to think that it may not. But I've never had a strong market, I know. A market has never been -

MS. RICHARDS: Were you working with Joe Helman?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes, I was working with Joe Helman, as opposed to Irving Blum.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. You said you never had a strong market.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did you - talking about drawing for a second. I don't mean to leave the gallery questions. But thinking about selling, sometimes sculptors do preparatory drawings which then become objects that one can sell.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, some drawings sell. Yes, yes. Yes, there has been a minor market, but not a strenuous one.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he take you on just because he loved and respected your work? And obviously it helped to enhance his gallery.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Uh-huh. Well, I guess to some extent. Yes. I mean he was obviously - he wanted to be connected. You know I did some very good shows with him. He had big spaces, especially downtown. He had a building, a ground floor.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you showed with him at that time when he had that space in SoHo [Blum Helman Warehouse].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. And a show uptown as well.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Actually I remember your show there.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes? Yes. I guess he still owns that loft - I don't know what he owns. I haven't seen him for

many, many years.

MS. RICHARDS: What ended your relationship with him?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, he closed the gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm. That could do it.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, yes. Everybody he showed had to scurry off into other formats. But I was - and then I kind of got aligned with Marlborough, and I spent quite a bit of time with Pierre [Levai] and with them about doing a big show. But I never felt comfortable with Marlborough.

MS. RICHARDS: Why not?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Because I realized that the art that they support was everything that I was against during land art. It was the generic, prototypical, monolithic object, you know. I mean he's very supportive of bronze casting, and that used to be something we would ridicule. I felt this was basically wrong for me to be with a gallery that so underlines the work that I resisted and why land art came to be, you know; it was very much against the object, particularly the vertical object, and particularly bronze casting. And that's what Marlborough shows by and large. But they're very successful. I mean I -

MS. RICHARDS: They've changed recently.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, very lightly. They still can't change too much. I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have an ambivalent feeling about whether - whether or not you'd want to be represented by a gallery? Or was it just a matter of finding the right one?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, tremendous ambivalence, yes. From the very beginning.

MS. RICHARDS: Of your career?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. I've never liked the relationship that galleries have. I thought it was all bad, meaning - Often the dealer, particularly if the artist was young, and we were all young in the beginning when I was with Sonnabend, they want you to - they want to be your mother, you know. They want to tell you what to do, they want to take care of you. And they want you to pass on to them, because you're obviously a child, all the important decisions about your career. And they're going to make the decisions and tell you where to show. Well, this is the way Sonnabend was, Ileana. But some of those artists stayed with her a long time, even Barry Levai who's - But somehow they didn't have as much trouble as - I had a lot of trouble with that, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you try to negotiate some kind of ground where you could maintain the decisions?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, but it was always - it was always flawed. The relationships were always, you know, a mismatch. There were too many compulsions on my part. I just didn't want to be governed by somebody else. But I could see it as a big problem that I was going to have because I showed with Yvonne Lambert, and then I showed with Hans Mayer [Dusseldorf], and I had all these shows with this person - And finally now I don't have any of these relationships, you know. I don't. Well, I practically can't work with a gallery because I don't do that kind of work anymore. So even though I could, you know, I haven't relinquished studio art. But because I've been operating in this sort of renegade manner -

MS. RICHARDS: That means you maintain your own archives and respond to press inquiries and do all that yourself?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, I've been with some good galleries, and none of them do as much as you would like them to. They are - they have all those artists to take care of, you know. The artists who are successfully working with galleries and have long-term relationships have conceded a lot and have allowed the mechanisms that are powered by this belief system that the artist is a child, and the galleries are the mothers. They've accepted that, and they like to be treated like a child. And the gallery wants artists who are like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think there are any exceptions?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I don't know. There can be very tough adult individuals who are showing in galleries. There can be. But the galleries will prefer, as you can imagine. If I had a gallery, I'd prefer a really good artist who is a child, who you could totally manipulate any way you want. That acknowledges that you have experience, and you're going to lead them into the world of art, and you're going to - you're going to tell them when to raise their prices and when not to sell and what museum to sell to. I mean what artist wouldn't want that? You would think. But it's never quite like that. The dealers are never quite that altruistic. And invariably - I think artists just almost

across the board have just terrible frustrations with the dealers because they're occupying such a personal - the personal proximity to the artist is so close, and you're dealing with their children; the artworks are the children. And here's this parent, and what am I? You know. I mean it's just made for disaster.

But here we have all these occasions which are other, all these unions that have gone for years and years and years and years. A harmonious partnership between the dealer, Pace [Pace Editions, New York City], and the artist, you know. long term, 30 years. Jim Dine and Pace. I mean, wow! So obviously there's something I'm not totally acknowledging, or I simply haven't had the experiences that these people have.

MS. RICHARDS: And maybe your work doesn't demand it in the same way.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that - so after Blum Helman closed, and you tried Marlborough, it didn't work, did you consciously decide, "I'm going to create a new model - "

MR. OPPENHEIM: No.

MS. RICHARDS: " - I'm not going to deal, work with a dealer?"

MR. OPPENHEIM: I've never needed a dealer from the very beginning. That's never been important. So it was really nothing. They play such a minor role. I mean we're basically entrepreneurial. I mean everything is simulated by us, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: When you did the *Device to Root Out Evil*, which is kind of fusing sculpture and architecture, you had also previously done a few others, a few pieces that way, and you continue to work in part. There's a piece called *Drinking Structure With Exposed Kidney Pool* [1998], which is a really interesting quasi-architectural piece. Was that a commission? It's 1998. Was that a commission?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Actually, they wrote me and asked me to propose a work.

MS. RICHARDS: Who was that?

MR. OPPENHEIM: It's called Europos Parkas in Lithuania in Vilna [Vilnius]. Well, this is very interesting. You get letters like that. And first of all, this was an ex-Communist country. They had no money except they could build anything that you wanted. They didn't even have enough to fly you over there. So I made a model. I did two works there. And I was -

MS. RICHARDS: How did you make a model of it?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I made a metal model and maybe some acrylic and different materials. It was a real substantial maquette of two pieces. And the first one they built was called *Chair/Pool*, and it was really -

MS. RICHARDS: I see, 1996.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Uh-huh. There was nothing about this situation that I didn't like. I had no problem with it. They had no money. They couldn't fly the artist there. But they would execute and keep - they would own the work. No problem. I mean if they would build - these were giant pieces very difficult to build. But everything about that seemed okay with me. They were going to build it, they were going to pay for all the materials, they were going to engineer it, and they were going to put it in their park forever. Well, we somehow, through affiliations with Eastern European patronage, we got enough to fly one of my employees over, and he spent a month in Vilnas working on this piece with the Russian fabricators.

MS. RICHARDS: And have you to date seen it?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, I've never been there.

MS. RICHARDS: This piece, the *Chair/Pool*, among others, as you said, is very, very large-scale. And it's among the works that you've done -

[SIDE CONVERSATION.]

MS. RICHARDS: It's among the works you've done that involved making something, a common object, gigantic.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Blowing up the scale -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: - of objects with which you were involved.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Would you like to talk about that venue of your work, the *Drinking* structure, the *Blue Collar* [1998], which is [inaudible] man and all that. *The Engagement Ring* [1998].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. You know -

MS. RICHARDS: Both of these architectural structures. Because it's really common - you may think your work is [inaudible] all the commonalities.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I tell you - Yes. I tell you, that is an interesting -

MS. RICHARDS: And the *Blue Shirt* [2000].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean can you talk about these scales -

MR. OPPENHEIM: You have to almost say wow! Wait a minute. This is occurring often enough to become a sensibility, you know, a major component of a sensibility. And one would have to say also that wait a minute, this blowing up to gigantic size of smaller objects is something that has been occurring in the art world for a long time in the hands of people like [Claes] Oldenburg. So what is it about this that requires - why would you have to continue or partake in a stylistic intervention that is substantially registered already in the art world? A good question.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, this is putting it in that [inaudible].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I would, and I did. Yes. I mean often when I did like the *Blue Shirt*, I would say, Well, wait a minute, you know. Every time an enlarged thing comes into my vision, I think of Oldenburg." Then I say, "How can we get from under? And why is it that this piece is so necessary? And why couldn't it be something else?" Well, like *Blue Shirt*, which is a three-story building in the shape of a shirt, which is elevated and attached to a corner of an airport - it was never built.

MS. RICHARDS: It was never built?!

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no. It got rejected. The city felt that it was making fun of the blue collar in Milwaukee [WI]. Anyway, I said, "Well, there's just something right about this." I mean I have to just forget about the fact that it may be a condition that's been examined by the art world. And I have to move forward because I'm proposing a building that is a torso, that comes from an image that is ubiquitous in sculpture, that of the torso, the bust. But this is a bust that you can walk inside of, and it's all transparent, and it's a building. And it has exercise equipment inside of it because it wants to parallel the physiology of the chest and all the operations and heart pumping and lungs. The thing becomes rich enough that you proceed, and you just overlook this. But you never like it. You never like the fact that you're - Like the *Engagement* rings, you know. Okay, they're houses instead of gemstones, and they're way up in the air. But it's a giant engagement ring. I mean it's -

MS. RICHARDS: There are other artists: Charles Ray's giant *Firetruck* [1993].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes! No, there's - Vito [Acconci] has his. No, there's a lot of - But still you don't like it, you don't like it. You'd rather it not be there. You'd rather be having your image kind of in a 360-degree orbit of discovery and not just a partial one.

[Ringing phone.] Maybe I have to get that. I don't see -

Oh, yes. Anyway, so you never like it, and it's always a little uncomfortable. You might like - I like some of these pieces, I like - But, you know, *Jump and Twist*, *Jump and Twist* is not like that. It's totally abstract, totally invented, you know. But then I've found myself in like the giant chair [*Chair/Pool*], you know. The thing about the chair is it has a circulating pool that is clearly a recessed area that was created by a body sitting in it. It's like when a person sits in an easy chair over and over again, it creates this cavity made of the presence of some person. And that's what *Chair/Pool* was. So you can only do that if you do a chair, and it has to be big, you know. So anyway -

MS. RICHARDS: This, the *Drinking Structure* looks a little like a kind of wagon pulled in the west.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And you've done a few or maybe many pieces that relate to the American West. Maybe even the church upside down is a kind of a Western church. If that's correct, is it correct that you were looking at Western imagery and maybe cliché work from then. How does that happen?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you would - Yes, like the shape of that could be like a wagon train? But, you know, it's - this Western thing has been pointed out before. But that shape actually comes from the Quonset hut of World War II, the kind of architecture that was built quickly for that use. And I've used that Quonset hut shape knowing that it comes from that because I was around during the forties. So I'm not as aware of the Western. I'm partly aware of it. But it isn't something that I carry around with me.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. OPPENHEIM: I am from the West. I mean I'm from California.

MS. RICHARDS: What about the use of humor or dark humor? I mean you didn't just - the scale issue can create a humorous situation. I wouldn't say this reflects all your work by any means. But sometimes are you aware, are you conscious of this?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Just a second.

[SIDE CONVERSATION.]

MS. RICHARDS: Consciousness of using humor and dark humor? Or is that really a -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, that's another thing that is often asked, you know, that some of this stuff, you must be conscious of the element of humor. You know so I have to acknowledge that in the entry into some of these pieces, I do end up with a rather absurd thing that often does, you know, create a viewpoint that there's humor here. But I often tell people when I'm asked that, I'm not always aware of it. Or you know some things that in the end people see it, they all see it. And I still have to admit that somehow in the making of this it was not intentional. And I don't know how to explain that other than - Maybe what happens if you come, if you have the orientation that I do, which is evolving from the late fifties with Abstract Expressionism - I think I'm losing what I was going to - Well, you may, evolving from that early period where things were extremely serious - I mean sure, you could've had another offshoot, but by and large you're evolving from a point where the work is relatively - the studio art, the fine art - is relatively serious. That that becomes something that carries with you, it evolves with you. And even though you may end up doing things that people find are humorous, you still have to say, "Yes, but, you know, I'm coming from this other kind of orientation. So it didn't start out that way." Also I think in some humor there is -

The other thing is if you want to do a serious work and you maybe become emotionally and politically induced by it, if you make it overly serious, it's going to turn out bad. I mean I think this element of humor allows you to present a work that could be serious, but it's a proper tone. It's a question of tone. If it's too in-your-face serious, people are going - I mean if it's overly indulged, then you're going to be considered somebody who's kind of lost control. You know you're an artist who's gotten too over into the work, and you're out of control. So the humor thing is a - it's an aesthetic device. It's sense. If you say, "Oh, this has got to say this coldly and just with this orientation," it's going to feel over, you know, just over-indulged. [Ringing of cell phone.] Oh, sorry.

[PAUSE.]

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to studio practice, regardless of whether it's for a commissioned work or not. Can you describe how you run your studio? How you - what your day-to-day process is?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, it's - I think one thing that this sort of public art could do to an artist, although there's many other ways for artists to feel truly professional, is it postures you a little bit into the corporate business. I mean, there's a lot of artists who find themselves because of their production that they've undertaken a business. They have employees. They have secretaries.

MS. RICHARDS: Especially the sculptors.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Like Jeff Koons has hundreds of people.

MS. RICHARDS: Joel Schapiro?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. It's definitely a business. So you can find yourself in that not even through public art, which is certainly a way that you would quickly find yourself in a recognizable kind of enterprise that requires different skills. You need architects, you need computer people, you need a lot of different people beside

yourself. So you quickly find yourself - And that's pretty much what you would see here is since we have all these commissions, that the people here - And this is not my studio. My studio's in Brooklyn where we have people building stuff, you know. So I guess you develop into, you sort of - and this has been a long time coming, though.

I've had assistants for a long time. Quickly, it developed quickly. Even back when I was doing conceptual work, I had people helping me. I don't think that's unusual. I mean it started with minimal art where - [ringing of cell phone] -

[PAUSE.]

- with minimal art because it was clear that the artists who were involved in that had decided they no longer had to have the handicraft, the imprint of a hand. They could send the work out to be. So it opened up the whole Yellow Pages. You could have anybody come in and help you. That was a bit of a breakthrough. That opened up a region of the art world that didn't exist before because before that everything was made by the artist. And so that's brought into this, that's part of the - one of the tributaries that come into this.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was a natural - that wasn't - working alone versus working with people around you wasn't an issue for you.

MR. OPPENHEIM: No. Well, you know, collaboration, that's yet another. You know Vito - whom I know quite well - Acconci, feels strongly that to do public art you have to work in a public, your office has to be public. Many minds, many people - not just yours. He feels strongly that to do public art necessitates the artist moving away from the single voice.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Not as strong as he does. I mean when he mentioned this, I didn't relate to it heavily. And I didn't understand it completely because - yes, it just didn't have the same weight as it does for him.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] There are times when you need to go off and be alone and think? Or you said that you can work in a busy coffee shop maybe.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You know that you can work in the midst of a studio with each doing their - carrying out their responsibilities.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, when you begin in graduate school and before, you're really hands-on in the strictest sense of the word in terms of your product. You are making your product. Very few grad students are hiring people to make their work. Some of them could be, with the funds, could be farming it out. But by and large they make it. We made it back in the sixties. We made everything. There was absolutely no example of anything done outside of my own dexterity. So to come from that to now where nothing is done by me, except maybe some drawings, is quite a distance, you know, from total hands-on to absolutely not ever touching the work.

So now, because of that sort of concourse, which goes 35 years, I can barely touch a work, you know. In fact there is a period when - let's see, what was the sensation? I had a definite sensation. Yes, I used to describe it as like having sand thrown in my face. That having to touch the work was so uncomfortable, see. That it had to be completely cerebrally contained by an outside source - force. It was totally the mind.

MS. RICHARDS: What is the nature of the discomfort?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it was just - art to me was cerebral. It was conjuring the idea. And I didn't want to have to touch it, you know. It wasn't - there was no learning transmitted through a dexterous avenue. It was all prior concepts that could be allocated well to other people. And I just didn't want to - The discomfort was simply that I was so far out of the realm of manufacturing and the dexterous, the relating to the work through manual feeling, I was so far away from that, that it became uncomfortable to consider it. Yes, like if part of it had a piece of clay, and they wanted me to do that, No, no, that's - So it was a serious disjuncture from total immersion as everyone starts out. And there are many people in my position of having the work - But it's often simply because the work requires skills that you don't have, you know. Or it's too big. Look at architects. They don't build their -

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Obviously when you have employees, you need to supervise them to some extent. And that means you need to keep kind of the same hours as they do. Is that actually true? Or have you always kept regular studio hours?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you a nine-to-five worker or are you around the clock?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, no, I can think anytime. And most of my particular work is thinking, although I do get involved in the day-to-day procedures of seeing that these projects are executed. But, you know, to some extent I'm protected from that. I can drift into just reading and thinking. And I have a house that I can go to out of the city.

MS. RICHARDS: Where is that?

MR. OPPENHEIM: It's in Springs, East Hampton [New York].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. OPPENHEIM: It's right next to Jackson Pollock's house.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh! How long have been out there?

MR. OPPENHEIM: About 25 years. So I can go there. There's no studio. I can go there and think. But I'm sort of thinking most of the time. Yes, you know, but -

MS. RICHARDS: You don't need to be in a studio supervising?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No. I don't really need a studio. I don't go to the studio very often. Days and days and days go by.

MS. RICHARDS: Obviously you have trusted employees.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. I don't know how it's evolved to that to degree, and it probably isn't good, totally, but that's where it is now. It is the conjuring of the idea is just where all - And often in doing these projects, they take years to do. And they get in the hands of engineers and architects. And by the time you're ready to build, you've sort of lost the connection. You no longer have the rapport that you had when you conjured it.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. OPPENHEIM: And you find sometimes that you're no longer interested. It's a little bit of a frustrating situation, to retain the level of excitement that you would like to have about doing a work over a period of four to five years. I guess architects have this problem, too. It morphs into another level of materiality that is outside the cerebral. And it becomes more and more in the hands of other people until it has become estranged, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you actively looking for new commissions yourself? Is there somebody on your staff who does that?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Yes, we're like an architectural firm. Very small, mom and pop. I've been to some of these offices, the architects, like Steven Holl, who's a friend of mine, where he has 50 architects. And then I look back at my situation: There's only a few people here. And I think there the demand on their managerial skills and their levels of sanity, which require them to have their own personal time to think of architecture, and then the enormous requirement to facilitate the building of these enormous buildings, and all these architects and all these people working for them, and all the financial. There's no way to see that except to be extremely impressed, I think. You know they're very impressive.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe it would be good for me first to know exactly where your studio is now and how long you've had it.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. I've had it for about ten years only. And it's at 195 Plymouth Street in DUMBO [Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass, Brooklyn, NY].

MS. RICHARDS: And who do you have on your staff? What are their roles?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, now I have only four people. There's Lars Christiansen, who is really an extremely skilled fabricator. And then I have June Kim, a Korean, who has worked for me for ten years; he's the longest employee. Well, Lars has worked a long time. And then I have -

MS. RICHARDS: Is June a fabricator also?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. He's more than a fabricator. He's - I guess you would call him, he's 360 degree skilled. That means he can make a model of detailed proportions, and he can also build a big piece. So he's unusually

skilled in all materials, you know, every material and every tool. Because the way they train them in Korea, they become apprenticed. He became an apprentice to his father who was a sculptor. So he grew up making sculpture. And he does electronics, too. And I have another Korean, a young Korean, Sung, who is also an extremely skilled fabricator. And they can make models, beautiful models based on detailed plans. And they can solve structural problems, and they can make mechanical things that function.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you have an office manager?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Someone who takes care of the paperwork?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Amy?

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Amy has been here for 35 years or even more. She started in '76.

MS. RICHARDS: She takes care of all the bookkeeping.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, she does - no, she does more than that. She worked with the engineers and the architects and the fabricators. And she can work with the legal departments. She has a background in - she has many degrees that don't pertain to what she does here. She has degrees in psychology. Her father was the scientific editor for the *New York Times*. So she has a very strong scientific background. And she does all the contracts. She's an expert in international shipping and currency. Can really understand a contract, you know. She's almost like a lawyer. But then she's an engineer.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you scrutinize the contracts as well?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I never look at them. I trust them. But sometimes, you know, you look too closely, and then you create problems there. I'm very trusting. I haven't had much trouble. But you can. You know you can find yourself extremely abused in this area. And you can find yourself under enormous distraction because of the perplexities of these projects, and in a not truly interesting terrain. You know you can find yourself caught up with kind of mundane, uninteresting things that could be part of anyone's life and not at all an artist's, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe this is a good point to end.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Okay.

[END OF DISC 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Dennis Oppenheim at 54 Franklin Street, New York, on June 24, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

So we'll try to pick up where we left off yesterday. And it seems like this may not entirely be meeting that, but I wanted to ask about a few of the public projects you've done in the last ten or seven years. And one I looked at and saw - unfortunately not in person - and was intrigued by is called *Performance Piece*, 1998, in Kansas. And it's a little bit different. Uses brick. There's also that architectural element, twisted chimney.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: How did that piece take that form and what were the - ?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Let me see if I can recall.

MS. RICHARDS: Now it's more than ten years ago.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. It's not too long ago for me. It actually somehow developed when I was thinking about architecture and also about performance, and wondering - I wish I could really capture the exact thought process that would describe not only the way that that piece was originated, but also somehow give some insight into the conceptual mechanics of the thought process itself as it's pursuing some kind of idea or some sort of coherent objective. Because I was thinking about performance, and I was thinking about architecture. And I thought, well, if somebody walks down a hallway, and they're making sounds with their feet, footsteps, which are echoing on the walls, could that be considered, somehow, a performance? The walls are providing some kind of acoustic effects on the sounds that you're making with your feet. So you could construe that maybe that could be presented as some kind of performance, architecture performance. And it's funny. There's another commission that I tried to get and lost in Kansas City, where I proposed another work called *Performance*. It was

called maybe *On Performance Architecture*. But it did in fact fall into that same conceptual wavelength.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there something about, kind of the specifics and criteria of the commission or the site or the institution, that referenced performance?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, for this piece? Well, the institution, it's Johnson Community College [Overland Park, Kansas]. There's nothing necessarily coming from the site that would affect what sculpture. This was really - it was almost like a studio artwork. It was a giant work which did not have a designation. It was not commissioned, it was not designated. It was something we'd built in a studio without knowing where it would go. So it is unusual in a way, although there's nothing stopping me from doing that over and over again. And considering all the work I have collected in the studio, it's evident that I do it often because I have all this sculpture. It just happened that they took it; somehow a transaction was made that Johnson Community College, for a rather modest sum, acquired *Performance*, the *Performance* piece.

MS. RICHARDS: They saw it as a maquette first?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I think they - No, no, we didn't make a maquette. I think - I did a show in Kansas [Kansas City, Missouri] at a place called Grand Arts, which is a rather interesting venue financed by Hallmark Cards. So they have a lot of potential, and it's a beautiful space in Kansas. And I was involved in that And I think in discussion Johnson Community College came up, and somehow a deal was made for a *Performance* structure. But years before that I did compete for a façade of a building, and I proposed a stage set, a stage set that replicated, almost like Hollywood does, a façade of a building. And this stage set was attached to a building. So it was kind of operating in front of a preexisting façade. But the elements in the façade, the windows and all of the details, were able to move in the wind. They could capture wind, and they could spin. And I refer to that as performing architecture.

And a few years before that, I did a piece with furniture. In the eighties I somehow was seized by some sort of demonic force that actually pulled me away from making art and positioned me in a totally other orbit where I made furniture. And to this day I don't understand it exactly except it was a very powerful suggestion that literally felt as if it captured me completely and instilled this objective upon me. Because for over eight months, I did nothing but furniture.

MS. RICHARDS: And it's just functional furniture.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, yes, it was, functional. But it wanted to be other than furniture. And I'm going to use the word performance again, which is going to tie all these things together. I integrated with furniture the idea of theater. And that you would buy something for your living room, all these elements, the sofas, the chairs, the coffee table, the cabinets. But you were also buying a script. You were buying a theatrical - each piece paralleled a character in a play. So these, again, would perform like - First of all, all the furniture could move. It all had wheels. And then you could move -

MS. RICHARDS: Were these sets - this furniture was manufactured or created?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, I made it all.

MS. RICHARDS: How many sets?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I made about 20, 30.

MS. RICHARDS: So they exist somewhere.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Did people perform them?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, we had one - I have it up in my home - it's a desk, a very large desk, larger than this, that is in the shape of a revolver, a pistol. And you sit behind it, and it's a long - has a long barrel. Then out the barrel are bullets which are on casters, and they have cabinets underneath them. And they are positioned at the end of the gun. And then away from all of this in another part of the office is a figure that is lying as if it has been - has fallen over; it's a giant - it's another desk, which is a woman. So here is an occasion where you could tie in these theatrical events into a scenario. In this case it was some sort of I guess kind of a detective story. Maybe it was a murder scene or something. But your office would be based on this plot.

So I was just mixing theater with furniture. But it was making it interesting to me. But this is very unsuccessful work. It never got - nobody was interested in it. Nobody bought it. Our attempts to show it were kind of strangely - we showed it here at the studio; we sent out postcards to people. They'd come, and nobody really liked it. And nobody really understood it. It wasn't clear.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that relates to this twisted chimney [inaudible]?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, the chimney piece, which everybody likes, is the occasion where architecture's performed by walking down a hallway, and the footsteps could be considered music that is influenced by the acoustics of the room. So you don't have to be a major theoretician to be realize that you are working with performative aspects of architecture because you have a body walking through the space, and it is emitting sound, and the architecture is playing - plays the body because of the way the hallway's built. So the chimney piece is like the chimney, it's tied in a knot. So it alludes to this idea but not directly but indirectly. And that has bugles that look as if you can blow into the chimney. In other words, you can play it.

MS. RICHARDS: Like a wind instrument.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. The same way that you can play a hallway or a room, you know, if you clap, you can say you're playing it. It is becoming an instrument that affects the sound.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever written a score to play any instrument?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no. I've never been that inspired. These things come and go. I never did a follow-up piece. It's never -

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to move a few years later to a really intriguing piece called *Monument to Escape*, 2001. You did it in Buenos Aires [Argentina]. It's an extremely evocative piece, again, of the relationship between architecture and sculpture. Could you talk about how that piece - it was painted steel and concrete, three symbols of building?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well -

MS. RICHARDS: And how it came about.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, in a hierarchy of commissions - I mean if you're a veteran commission, you know, masochistic enough to go after all these commissions, which I mentioned before you lose 80 percent of them, some of them simply are better than others. And there's a big difference in both the amount of money involved, which means you can do something quite extraordinary, or the site is extraordinary, or - What was extraordinary about the commission for the City of Buenos Aires and the Monument for the Disappeared [The Committee for Monuments to Victims of State Terrorism, Buenos Aires, Argentina], well, obviously it's different than doing a piece for a supermarket. Here you're asked as an artist to consider this event in history which was so enormous, this murdering of young people by the military junta in the seventies. And I was down there in the seventies. I was staying there during the time when this was going on, for a little while. So I had an understanding of the situation.

So they asked - there was a competition. And once again, they asked artists from all over the world to submit proposals for the Memorial Park. Attached to the University of Argentina - or the University of Buenos Aires [Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina], I guess - on the grounds attached to the museum was this recently-built memorial park, enormous memorial park. And on this park they would commission many, many, many artists to do works which would memorialize the event called The Disappearance.

So when I won one of the commissions, by proposing this *Monument to Escape*, I was very happy because I could relate to the event. It was an extremely poignant thing. And it precipitated my proposal. My proposal was based on cellblocks that were rendered nonfunctional. They were uprooted from the ground. There were doors open, there were windows open. These cellblocks were no longer capable of holding anybody. They were easily escapable.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you also say there is that element of chaos that sometimes is -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I mean it looked -

MS. RICHARDS: - Disruption.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it looked as if maybe the way they were sort of repositioned that it kind of occurred with a hurricane. They were reassembled. There was chaos behind it. And we used a similar kind of material as we did on the *Device to Root Out Evil*. We used a red translucent, very thick acrylic red roof. So it did have some optical effect. I guess that could have been blood, you know. So it was a very simple almost maybe even simplistic view of a situation where I was advocating, in a way, a position against the penal colony, against containment of people generally, universal. And when I was there, I met the judge who - the famous judge who tried [Augusto] Pinochet, the Chilean dictator, and got him very close to being jailed. He happened to be there with a group of journalists. And, you know, I was telling the title, "This is called *Monument to Escape*." And he said, "Well, do you

think all prisoners should escape?" You know. But it was really more focused towards obviously the people who were taken from their homes and then murdered - and incarcerated. So anyway, it was an occasion to apply your energies towards something that, again, had a little bit more substance than doing a piece for a used car lot.

MS. RICHARDS: How interesting. In a kind of similar - well, no, not similar at all - but again the connections with architecture and sculpture, you did a totally different piece called *Reconstructed Dwelling* [2007].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: It looks like a dwelling taken apart.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: And the floor plan is set out, and the pieces of the dwelling in some way connect it to be presented. How did that idea develop? And how - maybe you could talk also about the evolution of your thinking of this relationship between architecture and sculpture, and if you see any kind of point-by-point evolution in your development with these things. Or if it isn't linear at all, it's maybe finding different points in a constellation.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Can I go for just a second? I'll be right back.

[PAUSE.]

Well, you know, years and years ago, as a sculptor, particularly in college, when you would think of architecture, you would often look upon it as a bit of rival and one that you would envy because of the enormity of the objects. And you were also making physical objects. And here was this profession, architecture, in which the objects were able to use massive sums of money to generate giant structures. So there was always this naïve kind of, you know, talking about freshman year of art school, of envy. But also you would say to yourself, well, I'm a fine artist, and these people have the burden of having to address social problems, and it's not what I do. So obviously you were in fine art because you felt that the other profession had strong differences, and fine art was more theoretical. You thought. You were able to engage in the theoretical journeys without what you felt to be a burden.

Well, you know, this is so different from the way we think now. But it was so clear that that was the way many of us thought then, that this necessity to engage social problems and, more than that, build shelters for people that had to have this extraordinary conscious and painstaking detailing of plumbing and electric and hallways and codes. I mean this was so far away from the way one fantasized the world of pure theoretical inquiry. So you constantly rejected it.

But then one began to find that there were characteristics of making sculpture that had to do with - I think in 1967 when Michael Fried wrote that article for *Artforum* about theatricality, this really opened up the door because it used minimal art as a catalyst for focusing on the spectator and indicating that the work was theatrical. That it was providing this theatrical counterpart. Well, that was certainly a vent into architecture in a way because it provided the thought that sculpture could produce this other function, this, again, theatrical counterpart as part of its objectives.

The other thing that occurred - and I think artists like Nauman is probably somewhat responsible for this kind of thinking - is that he came up with the idea or forced himself to consider that sculpture could be, sculpture and art, could be the carving, the shaping, the reconfiguring of the sensory, the sensory map of the viewer. Not map, but the sensory landscape of the viewer. In other words, sculpture could be manipulating, it could be other than building objects, it could be affecting the sensorium of the spectator. So how do you do that? Well, if you build a corridor, and the person walks down the corridor, the artist is, in a sense, shaping the way in which that person perceives that because it's quite constricted. It's almost deprived. So the art - you can see right then that art-making could become an instrument by which - not retinal, not viewing - but that of reorienting the viewer's sense of the perceptual space that they live in. And architecture can do this, walls can do it, corridors, talking down staircases and missing a step. All those sensory things became all of a sudden a credible way in which art could enter. And it's partly due to some of these people like him who - and [Robert] Irwin and some of these sort of light-and-space artists. So there are reasons why architecture and art started to have this intense conversation. Also Richard Serra, of course, insisting over and over and over again that to understand sculpture you had to walk through it, you know. Saying that over and over and over to the point that, and reinforcing it with example after example.

So it evolved through these various events. But we're talking about space, in a way. We're talking about the effects of the viewer's space. And there's a few artists who say, "Well, okay, here I am carving a piece of wood and making an object. And then over here I'm carving into the psychic space of the viewer." It's the same. But

yet amazingly transcendentalized. So that's a real perceptual - To have considered that as a survival pathway that you could take as an artist is quite a - that's a real quantum leap. So that's a bit of a breakthrough.

MS. RICHARDS: It's certainly - I certainly picture that in many of your works, including this *Reconstructed Dwelling*. When you are moving this space in a completely different, reconfigured way.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. But, you know, by then the cat's out of the bag. You know I don't think there's anything in art except the pure discovery. I mean if you really want to be hard on yourself, you know, like yesterday I was saying there's times when you're beating yourself because you're not allowing yourself to do anything really because everything is falling short. But you can really be hard on yourself. And during these periods on occasion when I've felt like that, I felt that every idea is not enough. It's not going far enough. It's not changing the order of things. And then you end up not doing anything. But there's a lot to say about - art is what you don't know. And everything else is art history. So if you're sitting down ready to work, you know that everything you're doing, it's already been done. I mean you've done it, and you keep doing it. So, you know, if you want to really be hard on yourself, you would say, "Well, I've got to stop this. I've got to go back and reconfigure it." But very few people do do that. I mean they do it at some point in their life, but to keep redoing it -

MS. RICHARDS: This assumes that like you know what a thing is going to look like before you've even made it, assume that you understand the piece and all of its elements before you've made it. Which eliminates the possibility that it could be more than you imagined.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, there are painters who look as if their serial signature - painters who, when you pull them aside and interview them, will build a case that the painting you're looking at that they've just done thickens the plot a little bit more than the one preceding. They will tell you that they're making headway. That the idea is getting clearer. Or they've turned a corner. They've turned a corner, and they see something. Okay. Well, you can believe them or not. I mean maybe they're telling the truth. Maybe they are seeing - and that's certainly of understandable. But they could be operating in a landscape that it's a very modernist progressive viewpoint. But that they are advancing upon the ultimate view of what they've been after. This gets quite ethereal. And they're doing that rather than what you suspect, is that they're parroting, their simply reproducing the idea over and over again without any alteration. And it's not going anywhere; it's just staying where it was, which is someplace. They may have discovered the general proximity of where the work lies; that may be their discovery. But they are moving forward.

Well, you can't always move forward. Or you can't always expect every piece you do to be a revelation and new discovery of the amplitude that could create a movement. That's rather unreasonable. I mean it takes a lot of integrity before you start on a new piece to want to know how it's departing from what you did before and going toward something more fertile. To wait for that and to demand that to be part of your use of time at that moment is, you know, that really would be quite a - that would be an artist of considerable moral strength.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that that artist, operating from such a position, was more common in the sixties and seventies than they are today?

MR. OPPENHEIM: You know I've lost track of artists today. Have you? I mean there are so many of them. Am I the only one who - I mean I talk to my friends, some of whom have been around as long as I have. They immediately say they have absolutely no idea of what's happening. Meaning they don't know the younger artists.

MS. RICHARDS: It's very common, from my experience, that you - I'm talking to older people -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: - that you really focus on your own work more and more.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Right. Well, I guess they -

MS. RICHARDS: It's not a consciously not being interested in what's going on. It's just -

MR. OPPENHEIM: In what you do nobody else will. Yes, yes. It's sort of like unless you do - Well, it's kind of like I said: You're the only one who's really going to do it because everybody else is focusing on their work.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of friends, it's kind of a tangent; but how has your relationship to your fellow artists, in kind of a community, evolved? I mean you can't go back to the beginning of your career. But even in the last 15 or so years, has that changed? Has it changed? And if so, why?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I think it deteriorates is my experience. But I don't know if I'm unique or if - But my sense of it is that if one slowly constructs, even though they may be unconscious of how this is happening or why it's happening, in fact kind of wanting it not to happen, but it seems to me your world is shrinking. Well, the people

that used to be involved in it are somehow fading from view, if not in reality; there's fewer and fewer components which remind you of the past.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think there's perhaps less, in a sense, less of a need for fellowship with artists who are your peers - or not in the way you might have known the need decades ago?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, it's not as vital. I mean if you sort of remember the kind of urgency and vitality there was in the beginning and the sense of discovery, they were such a large part of the syndrome unknown to you then, that over the years you contribute to. And a lot of what you discover within the syndrome becomes negative, and you want to forget it.

MS. RICHARDS: Have a negative effect on your work?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, a lot of what you're doing to discover, if you're 18 years old and just getting your master's degree or 21, a lot of what you're going to discover out in front of you is going to be negative.

MS. RICHARDS: Is this about looking at other artists' work or about having relationships with other artists?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, everything. Everything is going to have or could have a negative component. It's not all going to be roses. There's going to be a lot of episodes that are going to be troubling, uncomfortable, that you're going to learn to stay away from. It depends what kind of artist you are. I mean I used to think that it was so simple. But I said, "Gee, it reminds me of grammar school." There are these students who are always so well-behaved, and the teachers love them. They had this certain understanding of the way the system worked. Obviously you don't throw chairs around in your sixth-grade class. And you don't walk up to the teacher and slap them in the face. Certainly you don't. But there were those who just had an uncanny sense of behaving within the system. Their behavior was somehow modulated by them to fit carefully within the system that they saw in front of them. Then there were these other students that this wasn't the case. They didn't seem to - either they were hostile a little bit to the way the system was positioned in front of them; they were unable to match their behavioral instincts to the way the school system operated. But they were a little bit out of synch. And I used to think the art world was a little bit like that. There were those who knew how to operate; they had an uncanny - I talked about this yesterday -

MS. RICHARDS: Their connection with a gallery?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. Not only the gallery, the whole thing. The whole thing! They just - it was like a hand in a glove. I mean they were made for it. Everything they did seemed to make - you know they just had an ingrained sort of rapport with the way the art world functions. And others could never figure it out. So I don't know where I fall here, somewhere in between these things. But I am led to believe that there are those who operate within it very well, in the same way that they operated in that sixth-grade class with the teacher and the principal and the school system and the way it functioned very well. And others simply don't.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, you certainly work incredibly well within the system of creating public work.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well -

MS. RICHARDS: If you say, you only get 20 percent.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You've been extremely productive. One of the intriguing - to me - projects is the project you did for the Olympics in Beijing.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: That must have been - that's an unusual aspects to it.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Called *Raining Halos* [2008].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. Well, you know, I guess -

MS. RICHARDS: Was it more trouble than it looked?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, I'm thinking that we talked about a number of these pieces, and I can remember all of those sort of mishaps that occurred. And I am again inclined to kind of speculate on this sort of hierarchy where some pieces - like we talked about *Jump and Twist*. I always regurgitate that work. I always call

it back in when I'm talking about something that was successful.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, we should talk about - maybe this isn't the right piece. Maybe it's another piece that has more resonance.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, no. No, I'd like to talk about the Olympic piece. But it does, again, call to mind that there is this sort of tendency to calibrate work. This one was really successful; this one things happened, it wasn't as successful as this one. And it all has certain sort of relationships. They aren't all - it's not like your work is signature, and it's always the same, and it's going to be what it is every time no matter where it is. My work is - Sometimes - I don't believe this - but some people think that I start all over again every time I do a new piece. I'm like a new artist like I never - I do it just as just I've never done a piece before. Well, this is not true. But it's kind of true because when I'm entering into a new work, I really don't have too much to rely on. I just have the memory of being able to do some work in the past. I don't know where to direct my mind.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, there's a fundamental let's just say confidence that you believe you're going to succeed in coming up with an idea that is inspiring to you.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. But, you know, this can erode along with some of these features where you were talking about being a victim of entropy. As you get older, you can start to lose the confidence because -

MS. RICHARDS: In any field -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it just evaporates. You know where did it go? [Laughs] But the Olympic piece - You know because when you're approached to do a commission or to do a show or do an installation, the way you enter it can be so different from the last time you did it, the episodes, the conditions, and they can affect in a lot of ways the way it turns out, the outcome of the work. I talked about *Jump and Twist* as being successful because the artwork was so integrated into the use of the building that there was a fundamental rightness about the work. It wasn't decorative, it wasn't arbitrary. It seemed to have a rightness about it. The work for the Olympics: Somehow through the course of the evolution of that work, the original proposal was rejected. It was another work that was proposed by me called, I don't know, *Spiral Building* or something. It was a giant 80-story building that had the characteristics of a screw that could actually turn and twist and go into the earth. Well -

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't an actual building, but it was a metaphor -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it was 80 feet high. You couldn't live in it, but it was a theoretical - you could say a model. Well, this is because my interpretation of the situation, when the Olympic Committee contacted me to do a work for the Beijing Olympics, I knew how much energy they were putting into their Olympics. They were building that stadium by Herzog & de Meuron [Herzog & de Meuron Artchitekten, Basel, Switzerland]. So I proposed a grandiose work, and they rejected it; it was just too big. They couldn't do an 80-story - I think it was 80 stories. [Laughs] Anyway, so then I had to become more realistic. And I kind of, I was a bit deflated after they - So I pulled out this other piece called *Raining Halos*. Well, I literally pulled it out. I had already proposed it to a children's courthouse in Florida, and it was rejected. And what I had proposed to Florida in front of the courthouse was a pavilion which had all of these spinning discs, these spinning circular discs - I called them halos - of different sizes, some inside others, some turned. It was just a whole heaven of halos.

MS. RICHARDS: That's interesting, next to a courthouse?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I wanted it to - and you would pass through it, you know. You would pass through it; you would walk through it. And mists would come out and little drops of water because it was so hot there. So it was kind of a mist sensation. And then you would walk - well, I fantasized as children who had just committed the crimes or their parents. That courthouse being a place that is going to be approached by individuals, many of them who have fractured the law of some sort. And so this was kind of, you know, [Laughs] sort of naïve little blessing that, you know, this heaven is going to somehow make contact with these downtrodden people who have become victims of the court.

Well, that's what I proposed for the Olympics because I thought there was some sort of relationship between the discs as always being symbolic of the games and all the balls, all the things that you play with, for the Olympic Games. So many of them are round. Anyway, so that's what they built. And you know I mean I don't think they - I had to go there twice. It was positioned way over in a park near the women's volleyball competition. It wasn't very visible. So in the course of events, as it finally ended there, it wasn't a big deal for me. It wasn't near the stadium, it wasn't seen. You know it was somewhat diminished in terms of an event. And I went to see it. It was all built in China.

I'm working on something for the Shanghai Expo [Expo 2010 Shanghai, China]. So that grew out of that. I met some of the principals of the Chinese government, and they asked me to be a consultant for the artists, the Society of Artists. So I'm an official consultant for the Chinese government.

MS. RICHARDS: What does that involve?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I think it's ceremonial. I don't think it involves anything.

MS. RICHARDS: They're not asking your advice?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no. They are not communicating.

MS. RICHARDS: No meetings?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, nothing really. I think it was just a way to make us feel good. I think it was given to all the artists who participated.

MS. RICHARDS: You did another piece in Asia for the Busan Biennale [South Korea].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: I've seen it in pictures called *Electric Kiss* [2008].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: It's quite interesting.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I tell you, it turned out to be a big failure.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, that's interesting to talk about.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. You know it's interesting to talk to me because you find that so much of the stuff is other than what one would think.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. So how did that happen?

MR. OPPENHEIM: We never finished it. Nowhere near completion, to this day. A big failure. Well, a failure in that it never got built.

MS. RICHARDS: So the image that I've seen is a mockup?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. The image you saw is other than what exists in Busan, Korea, right as we speak. What exists there is a frame, a framework; it's a completely unfinished work. A giant what I call *Electric Kiss* is an image taken from a chocolate Hershey Kiss, but dangerously close to an onion dome, an Islamic image - I mean in fact almost identical. What it is is a teardrop that's truncated, and it sits on the ground. Well, it's sitting there right now unfinished. But finally after a year of working, we finally organized the completion. And the City of Busan has raised the money to finish it, which is to clad it with this acrylic material. That was a big problem.

MS. RICHARDS: And put the lights on.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: The lights will still be on?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. There will be a light switch inside, which will pulse. Is it an important work? I don't think so. I mean, you know, it falls in a category of - yes, I mean if you're sitting at your desk and you want to come up with a revolutionary perspective on art that is transcending where it is now and looking in a totally new way at things, it's nowhere near that. So you drop your objectives down a little bit and something that you can live with. And so in that area, that strata of things you can live with, there are probably many things that you would finally say, okay, I can go after that, I can build that. And this sort of fell in the lower edges of that. Nothing about it -

Electric Kiss, okay, you would say to yourself, well, it is the shape of an onion dome. You see those in Russia, and their roots are Islamic. But you didn't invent that. How do you claim the use of that? You're simply appropriating it. Well, that's okay, but is that enough? And then you say, Well, but it's similar to a teardrop; it's a truncated teardrop. So isn't that interesting? It has this emotional content. The shape of the architecture has this sort of possible physiological counterpart that it emulates a state of sadness. Okay. Well, maybe that's interesting. But what else? You know as you're trying to get yourself into it to give you reason to make it. Well, could you say that the shape of the *Electric Kiss*, the shape, the architectural shape has even more affinity with an emotional transaction like a kiss, like the actual physiological mechanical act itself. Could you say that the shape somehow is exemplified in an actual kiss, like the function? And so you say, Well, let's see, a kiss: there's this sort of, your

lips do this, and then they do that. So maybe you could say that, you know, stretching it a little bit, that this could be a three-dimensional replication of the mechanics of a kiss, the way that it extracts and expands. Well, okay. That might, you know, if you want to make yourself believe that, maybe that is enough to set this thing in motion, and you might be able to build it.

And then what about the electric, what about the electrifying this and pulsing it? Well, okay. Well, maybe that makes sense because you are talking about emotionality here. You're talking about a kind of occasion and a truncated teardrop. It wants to stand in for the architectural parallelization of a kiss, and the kiss is heated and pulsed, and it comes alive. Okay. And people go inside of it. And then it's radiant, it's all electrified. And, okay, maybe, maybe we can build this. So that's kind of how you talk yourself into a work.

Well, what happened in Busan is they couldn't get the right material for the exterior. You know these people - or these people meaning these sensitive Asian people - they take this stuff very seriously - that there was a mistake made, and the wrong material was purchased, and it was partly my fault - did not sit well with them. They did not like to fail like this. They're known to inflict damage to themselves when they do things like this. They were very upset because it was the only work in 150 works for the Biennale that didn't get finished. So, you know, so it didn't bother me that much. I was unhappy that there was confusion about the material, and I knew that eventually it would be built, so - There were other works there from friends of mine, like Robert Morris did a piece. And it was a good show. It was an important Biennale.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm. Are there - before we leave the past works, are there any others you'd like to talk about that had reverberations that were, you feel, very successful?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I might instead - it might be interesting to talk about a work that I feel was unsuccessful.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MR. OPPENHEIM: And the tendency is that the kind of instruments at play that are responsible for that - it's not totally unsuccessful. But there's a work in Philadelphia [PA] called *Wave Forms* [2007].

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. OPPENHEIM: It's right in front of the - it's very near the university [The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia]. Well, it's a competition. I had to win it. And for some reason, as I was developing ideas for this large site - it wasn't a small plot of land in front of the museum. It was like a whole plaza that I was given in front of a commercial - well, it would be a residential building. And it was a one percent. They had almost a million dollars. It was a big - you could do a major work, you know. So when I entered in the idea, for some reason I felt strongly that it had to deal with Philadelphia, it had to deal with the history. And I knew the Liberty Bell was just a block away. And so I just couldn't get over the fact that it should in some way maybe deal with that. Now I think that was a mistake. I think that's why the piece to me is not successful, is because it's too obvious, you know. I mean I said to myself, well, okay, I'm going to deal with the bell because -

MS. RICHARDS: It could have been one of the reasons why you got the commission, however.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it may be. Yes. See, that's another thing that's suspicious, I'm very suspicious about. Am I playing up to it? You know. Am I too - do I want to win? See, this is something that can haunt you when you're doing this kind of work. And you can say to yourself, well, don't architects, when they're competing, kind of want to win? Do they want to win? And are they going to purposely try to lose because their work is going to be too radical? I mean of course not. But before you could say, well, architects have all of this stuff that they have to accomplish in the work. They work has to address all these delicate needs and requirements. So I mean they have a real burden on top of their creative spirit. They have to be interesting in terms of architecture, but also be responsible for all these sundry requirements. So what an extraordinary effort! Artists, they have less baggage. They don't have to carry all this functionality problem. But I remember I brought this subject up with Peter Eisenman at a conference.

MS. RICHARDS: The subject, how much do you play to what the commission wants you to give them?

MR. OPPENHEIM: I threw out to the panel, I said, "Is it true that the best works in a competition lose, the best art?" I said, "Isn't it often that the best works - that the architects who lose say they lost because the art was too good?" That's the justification: that the jury was too conservative. Well, maybe you could say that 30 years ago. But not with the buildings you see now by Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry and de Meuron. I mean these are major radical - Rem Koolhaas. They're winning. Of course they lose as much -

MS. RICHARDS: Certain competitions.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. But they win enough to be visible.

MS. RICHARDS: So you feel that's -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it's a factor.

MS. RICHARDS: - In the piece *Wave Forms*.

MR. OPPENHEIM: It's going to come across everybody's mind when they're competing: Do they want to win? Is what they finally propose, is there an element of "do I want to win" in the proposal, opposed to completely uncompromised? There's no do I want to win? There's only what is the best - And it should be - you don't want to say radical, the most radical. But I think you should want to say the most advanced. Because why else do it? So the artist who thinks like that on these commissions, you know, who is proposing work communicating with the highest pantheon of art history, directing his work towards the atmospheric gospel of art historical transcendentalism and not even considering will this win, well, you know, you have to respect that, you know. And can you do that over and over and over and lose over and over and over? Well, maybe there's somebody who does that over and over and over, but wins once with one of those. Well, at least he's got one out.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe more often in Europe, as we were speaking about yesterday.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, in Europe what - I tried to clarify this - what I think is happening is artists in Europe who are famous and supported critically by museums and critics, compete for artworks in Europe. They will go into a competition. The same kind of artists in America will not. These exalted artists that have achieved everything, they don't want to compete.

MS. RICHARDS: So would you say that makes your situation more difficult when you're competing in the U.S. and confronting this issue of how much do you want to win, and whether you present something that is your ideal?

MR. OPPENHEIM: You just have to be careful. It's a question of steering your integrity the way that you feel about art. You know what I've said about forgetting do you want to win is probably the best. Forget it. Like go after the art.

MS. RICHARDS: So in terms of this *Wave Forms*, other than the bell form that's fundamental to the image of the work, was it successful then?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I, you know - There's no end to the circuitous and the undercurrents and the kind of subliminal strategies that one can find themselves engaged in when they're pursuing a commission. But you can tell yourself that, "Okay, I'm going to win this commission, but then I'm going to change it, you know. I'm going to win it. And I don't like exactly what they're going to like. But I'm going to change it after I win it. I'm going to subvert it."

MS. RICHARDS: Does that often possible?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, you can try it. You're under the impression - you only have your own instincts to draw from. There's no gospel, bible, out there, a book that will tell you how to operate. But you will say something: Well, if I go in this direction, I think they're going to probably find problems with it because there's all these jurisdictions, there are all these codes, there's all this conservatism. Why don't I propose this, and get the commitment, try to win the commission. And then once I win, I'm going to try to talk themselves out of it and change it. Let's say you want a big fire pit in the middle of the work. Well, you say, "They aren't going to accept that. But let me try to do it after I win it." I mean I don't like that because obviously it's devious. And you say to yourself, "Gee, are things really that devious? I mean does somebody have to play this?" Have I found myself in a situation where my mind has to go through all these sort of concourses in order to come up with an artwork that should be built?

MS. RICHARDS: Let me change this tape.

[END OF DISC 3.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Dennis Oppenheim at 54 Franklin Street, on June 24, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number two.

So we were talking about the idea that one could get a commission, then you try to change it.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, I think I'm -

MS. RICHARDS: Did that happen in Philadelphia?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, I'm kind of using this occasion to talk about my experiences. They may be the experiences of others who work in this public art sector. But these kinds of things have fallen in my path. There

have been occasions when I have thought that maybe I will change the work after I get the commission and make it more like what I would like to do. But I felt that presenting it beforehand would jeopardize. But, you know, I think if you lined up a bunch of artists that you respected, really liked their work, and asked them that question, would you do this? most of them would probably say no. In other words, they wouldn't enter into this devious gymnastic of pulling their punches and manipulating the context. Except maybe you might get some of them saying, well, those of us who know the reality of the way this system works might be inclined to do this. And that would be because they've experienced a lot of - If you get rejected a hundred times for doing a certain thing, there will come a time when you might consider changing it. In other words, your position changes because of the experiences you have in operating it. And as certain feedback - it's cybernetic - certain feedbacks occur, you're going to reshape your entry.

But, you know, I really don't - I haven't discussed this a lot with artists. I mean I have very good friends who do public art: Alice Aycock and Donald Lipski and Keith Sonnier and many others. And many of them are quite versatile, and they are not necessarily - I think Donald Lipski is an example of an artist whose vernacular, his dictionary, is quite large. His works can change enormously in their appearance. He's not a signature - He will take a - he probably reads the commission site the same way that I do. It's an occasion to bring it into the work, to communicate with it, to somehow have it affect the way the work will look. That's why the bells in Philadelphia. But I use that example as something that may not have turned out well.

You know what I did is I said, okay, well, why don't I take the bells; and instead of focusing on the visual, let's focus on the sound. So I did wave forms, sound waves. So I was conscious of the cliché. You know I was conscious of the fact that, okay, you're in Philadelphia, you do something about the bell. But I was subverting it by focusing on the sound waves. But did I get away with it, you know? In other words, if you look at that piece, it has a big garden based on curves, and those are sound waves. But, you know, whatever you want to do, you want to do good art. You know you want to do good art. And can you do good art with this kind of consciousness, drone, this droning consciousness about applicability, about the relationship to the site, the relationship to the history of the city? Does art care about any of that stuff? In other words, did that produce a Jackson Pollock? You know. So you begin to - you know you get suspicious about the very atmosphere in which great art is made. And you say, well, you know, maybe this isn't quite the incubator that great art is made in. And maybe you don't want to have this kind of conversation necessarily about these things. Maybe that's not going to really do you any good when it comes to coming up with a work that is truly breaking down some new barriers.

MS. RICHARDS: You have a show up [Janos Gat Gallery, New York City, June 4-27, 2009] right now of proposals, which, I presume, are of work that aren't going to be built.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, the show here, the Gat Gallery show. Uh-huh.

MS. RICHARDS: And some of those look like they may be an answer to this issue you were just raising, where you imagined a work without any restrictions whatsoever because it was going to be - like that piece called *Burning Contract* [2009].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Or the *Splash Building* [2009], which sounds a bit like that first proposal for Beijing.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Are those dream projects or actual proposals?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, they're a little of both. The so-called *Splash Buildings*, I made a lot of those. I'm showing them in Germany. I'm not sure how successful they are. I mean, you know, I had the occasion to do a job in Germany at a museum, I fell across my lap, you know. Those are good things. You want to respond to them with a certain amount of energy and seriousness. So I set upon the task of coming up with some works for this show at the MARTa Museum [Herford, German], which is a Frank Gehry building. So they're a series of ideas. And I hired David, who works for me now, who is an extremely skilled architect. He knows all the programs. And he can enter into virtual world and generate. Because I thought I would need the aid of the computer.

MS. RICHARDS: He's not someone who you mentioned who's working in your studio. But he works for you here.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, he's here. So he came onboard. And we began to explore certain things. And I said, Okay, let's explore phenomena. Let's see if there is a program out that could replicate in the virtual world the dynamics of phenomena like a water drop or an upheaval or an explosion and things like that. I was after - I thought my show in Germany should be architecture, ideas for buildings. And one idea was to approach a building as if it were the outcome of an event, an event being like an explosion or a water drop or a flood or a tidal wave. And I've kind of done this before. I did this in Alaska 20 years ago, where I did a building that was the outcome of catastrophic events. And that led up to this *Flash Building*, this building that theoretically would be

formed by the simple event of a water drop, a big teardrop. Here's the teardrop again splashing upwards.

So this events sculpture - and I knew I'd heard this word before from my friend Barry Le Va, because Barry for years talked about his work as event, the outcome of an event. Throw - paint a glass on the floor, and it looks like that. So he operates in that world and world clues, certain - How do you reconstruct what happened? So kind of interesting. So these are the ways you enter something that you find compelling enough to actually make physical. So I was captivated by the photograph of *Splash*, the famous shot of that. I said, well, that looks like a volume; that could be a building. More particularly, it could be like a stadium, you know, this big enveloping, cascading.

So I did a whole series of these *Splashes*. But finally - You know I think what artists are trying to do, they're trying to seduce themselves, you know, through the apparatus of engagement, of mental engagement. They're trying to trigger their synapses, and they're trying to get their attention by throwing at their mental space impulses that hopefully are going to sit there and resound; and occur and set off, file off, time after time after time, not just a one-time Charley, but really capture yourself. You know you're trying to actually engage the mechanisms to establish a mental volley that is going to chain react and literally create an episode that is going to gain you entry into an artwork over and over again.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned a computer program. But I was going to ask you how technology of any sort, in recent years, has affected your work.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, some of us who are, seem to be, we seem to be - it's uncanny our ineptness and inability to traffic technology into any range of coherency where it stays with us. It just goes right through my body. I don't get it. I think when it comes to me, it kind of goes off course and goes around me. It does not appear to me to be a methodology that I can use. I mean obviously I see a usefulness in it, but not personally. I mean I -

MS. RICHARDS: Architects, for example, hardly make drawings anymore.

MR. OPPENHEIM: I know.

MS. RICHARDS: Everything is on the computer when they realize the forms in space.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you or your assistants have a software to imagine - ?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. I'm definitely involved in it. But kind of indirectly, not personally. But I can see its obvious power and the necessity for this kind of mechanism. It serves you. I mean you can build up resistance. I mean there are probably those architects here saying, No, I don't want this entering my life. But most of them are using it because it's like a pencil. You may as well use it. I mean it allows you to do a drawing and then turn it 360 degrees. I mean how else could you ever see the back of that, you know? So it has a considerable effect on architecture, considerable! Maybe it is singly the most profound advent, the most profound advance in the making of buildings is this virtual thing. I'm sure it is. I'm sure it is *the* most revolutionary part of this whole renaissance of architecture. We are in a - we're building the most extraordinary buildings ever at this point. So it's kind of exciting being a sculptor now because you're somewhat - you're operating in a similar area, but not the same. There are those like Vito who profess now to be architects, and perhaps he is. But what better time?

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever imagined collaborating with an architect whose work you admire? Have you thought of proposing such a thing?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, I've been asked to work with a few - I don't know how seriously they were - Steven Holl who's a friend of mine. But I don't - I don't know. You like to think of your discipline as being sufficient. Like, okay, you're an artist. That's sufficient to hold your attention for the rest of your life. Okay, you're an artist, you aren't a philosopher, and you're not a scientist. You're an artist.

But I was watching some program once, and they had a young maybe he was an architect or he was a city planner from Harvard, probably in his thirties, where he was giving a dissertation. And he was describing extremely advanced technological systems, and he was talking about the future, and he was talking about the future of architecture and city planning. And he was using statistics, an enormous amount of statistics. He knew about population density, he knew about circulation, he knew about atmosphere, he knew about global warming. He was just infinite in his knowledge about the world. And he was an architect. And he was talking about cosmology, and he began to talk about the fact that cars are doing this. Pretty soon cars will be collective - be computerized. And they will also go up into buildings. They will come up to a building, and then they'll turn into an elevator. He was talking about the world as I'd never, ever considered it. And this was just some young fellow. I mean there are probably lots of them. Well, okay, you're haring this, and you can't help but be impressed because he's - well, he's not an artist. But he's sort of an artist. What is he? Frankly he seems more than an

artist.

MS. RICHARDS: Does he make you feel that being an artist isn't enough?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it's sort of -

MS. RICHARDS: You talk about collaborating with Steven Holl, it sounds like the issue -

MR. OPPENHEIM: You're going to have to - you're going to have to confront what you're experiencing. I mean that would - you'd be inclined to say, well, wait a minute. What kind of weirdness am I pondering here in relationship to this guy? I mean I'm operating on some mysterious nuance that may go nowhere and has absolutely no application or functionality factor. It's not based on any informational foundation. I don't even know any facts about anything because I don't know any facts about anything. But here is this operative who has this enormous grasp of the physical world. Enormous!

MS. RICHARDS: But that leaves out completely the subconscious world, the non-physical world, the spiritual world -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, yes. But you have to weigh one thing against the other. I don't think you have to be defensive and protect your art as a frail kind of counterpart to other ways of thinking and other disciplines. It's not a sand art. When art gets too close to philosophy, it can show its weakness. And when it gets too close to science, it starts to fragment. It's a frail being, you know. It's easy to penetrate and to - you can blow it around. But when you blow it around in between these other disciplines, you see its own formation. That's when you see what art is in relationship to these other formations. When you try to steer it and it gets too close to philosophy and it starts to quiver, and it gets too close to science and it starts to like undulating, then it gets too close to theoretical physics or what have you, then it gets weird. So you begin to find out its amplitude and its architecture. You get to see what kind of discipline you're operating with. And these breakthroughs in art, well, I don't know, are they as substantial as breakthroughs in physics? You know. Do we hold them as potent as we do the discovery of quantum mechanics? Because everything is measured in terms of potency.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you, when you're reading, do your readings extend to any other fields? I mean you're interested in art. Fiction?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, sometimes I read and then sometimes I don't. It depends on how good my eyesight is at the moment. In reading, I'm usually very affected by the structure of the writing. The structure of the art form of writing itself interests me a great deal. So reading somebody like James Joyce or Thomas Pynchon or David Foster Wallace, people who are messing with the structure, that comes - who are really into language and what it does. Almost like a sculptor or architect.

MS. RICHARDS: Poetry?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, it would be poetry, too, yes, yes. But I don't read enough to be able to - to be a voice. But I know that these writers that I like I find them - their ability to be uncanny, I find I cannot believe they do what they do. So I'm obviously very affected by it.

MS. RICHARDS: You've done some writing. You've done -

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: In a new book there's an essay written by you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. No, not really. I've written short things. No, it's simply - I mean for me to have taken up that - because I like language. I mean I really do. And I'm enormously moved by it. I mean I can read and become so energized by it that I have to stop, you know. I find it very catalytic.

MS. RICHARDS: Does the same thing happen with music or theater?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Any other past time?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Music is potent, yes. But now like we don't play, not as much as I'd like to. But reading, I've been aware of for many years that I can start reading something, and it just makes me want to do something. So I put the book down. It inspires me. Yes. And it's usually the structure. Like [Samuel] Beckett, you know, the structure of how he makes those words sound so energized. And, you know, how he does what he does. You read it, and you think he died, and then he's still alive. You know how does he do that? How do you do that with language? So obviously I'm reading it - I'm seeing it, and I'm finding the interest in that art form that probably

applied to some of the inquiries that I'm making myself.

MS. RICHARDS: The formal concerns?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Which kind of implies that social and political events don't necessarily enter into your work.

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, they don't - Well, often the formal may not enter in as much as one would think either. But we're all a little bit afraid of political content because we've seen so much bad art which takes political content as its objective and is unable to manufacture a successful artwork because it lays so heavily atop of the form. And it's always undernourished in terms of form. Artists who art captured by a political theory often the artwork is reduced. I guess the only successful way of doing that is to generate an inspired form and somehow fit the political current into it carefully; but have the powerful form survive and not be driven down by the political - necessity for the political content to be readable.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to touch on - asking you which of your exhibitions, in recent years, have been the most important. And I know you have a big show - just had a big show - in Europe of public projects. Have you ever - which shows have been most important to you? And have you had the reaction some artists talk about when you see a retrospective or a survey, and it kind of throws you and has both a positive and a negative effect?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, when I engage one or when I see one?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I guess let's say two separate questions: Which exhibitions have been most important to you of your work?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And the second is I guess why and what kind of impact have they had? And then of course it would be wonderful to talk about what other - exhibitions of other people's work have had on you, too?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You can have other things influence you but not other artists.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I've had a few retrospectives. The first one was in '74; that's a long time ago. And then there was one in Canada in I think - the one in Canada was maybe, it was in the early eighties, I think. And then the one at P.S.1 [P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY] was in '91. And maybe we'll do one in Korea or in Asia.

Well, I wonder if these retrospectives - they have to be looked at within the timeframe in which they occur. If you're 18 years old and you have a retrospective, it's going to feel a certain way. If you're 89 and you have a retrospective, it's going to feel differently. So at the various times that you have them, the age that you are when you have them and the amount of work that you've done when you have them, will differentiate the way they affect you and the way you understand them. So I've had them at various points in my life. I haven't had one recently. And so I guess if I do have one, this one would occur kind of at the end of a lot of work.

You kind of remember them. I mean I guess the last one was at P.S. 1. It was worked out with Alanna Heiss at the P.S. 1, and we had the greater part of that museum. So we had quite a bit of space. I remember it. It was kind of unusual because the museum was being worked on. It had structural problems. So I was able to work in the rooms for about three months before the show opened. So it was kind of unusual. So I could build rather large work.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you surprised at the effect of seeing so much work had on you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no. I'm kind of curious why my recall and my reaction to discussing the retrospectives seems to be so neutralized. I can't say it didn't affect me much. I can't say that it wasn't important. But I don't seem to have much to say about it. It's almost as if it's somebody else's event - maybe. Maybe that's partly it. It happens through circuitous ways, and all of a sudden it occurs. And you throw all this stuff together, and they have it. And then it evaporates. And then you're back to your problems. It's not a big deal.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there more of an impact when you've received awards or received some -

MR. OPPENHEIM: I don't receive a lot of awards. I mean everybody -

MS. RICHARDS: You got a Guggenheim [John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, 1972]?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, well, everybody gets -

MS. RICHARDS: You have that award in 2007, a kind of a career award [Lifetime Achievement Award, 2007, Vancouver Sculpture Biennale].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, well, everybody gets those. I mean no, no. No, I haven't received a lot of awards. But actually I think as you get older people like to have them, don't you think? I mean whether they deserve them or not. People are often pleased when they get these accolades. These things are - I don't know, what are they? They're configurations which occur as a result of or in the pathway of your operation. But your operation is really what you're focused on.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, the surveys or the retrospectives could be occasions for critical new assessment [inaudible].

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Writings that prompted the thoughts and hopefully were positive.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. It can, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think those shows affect your ability to get commissions, your market?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Maybe. Maybe they do. You would have to be a clever little - [Ringing of cell phone.]

[PAUSE.]

You'd have to be a rather perceptive little creature to travel in those circuits, to analyze the effects upon your career and the way you're understood.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. OPPENHEIM: You know artists are all concerned with this stuff, some of them deeply concerned. And they probably would all like not to be concerned. I mean why be concerned about things that are relatively ambient to what you do?

MS. RICHARDS: That are out of your control.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. But they are. Yes, and I am, too. I mean we're all kind of thin-skinned in a way. You know you take critical dissent, you're descended upon critically, it probably hurts most artists, depending upon the rightness about what is said. So we're all a little bit sensitive.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. OPPENHEIM: I mean if you say you aren't, wow, you're lucky if not, you know. So these things like retrospectives and stuff, they figure. I don't know why in talking about some of these I've had because they were very positive experiences. The one at P.S. 1, I enjoyed doing it. It was important. I could resurrect a lot of work. It allowed the work to be seen by a lot of people. Then it traveled. It went to strange places like Finland and Poland.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of travel, did you go to those places?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, I did.

MS. RICHARDS: Is travel a positive influence, or is it a distraction? How do you feel about that? Have there been important trips you've taken?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, travel, I travel a lot. As you get older, travel becomes physically more, you know, your bones are creaking, and you have to be at the airport, and everybody complains about it - I do. I'm always complaining about traveling, especially in the last ten years. In the beginning it was wonderful. And of course you do have to travel. Actually, doing land art, has set up a continuum of traveling because people wanted to hear you talk about it. So you were always asked to visit universities. So you got onto a big lecture circuit. That's how land art was supported in the beginning. You didn't sell it, but it became a kind of curiosity to the art world. And you would be asked to lecture, and that's how you made a living.

MS. RICHARDS: Other travels, or just trips not because you have to be present for the opening, but because you want to go someplace to see it or experience it - travel, is that part of you - ?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, I never travel unless I'm doing something because I do so much traveling. I would never think of, oh, I have a little time. Let's go to - No, I wouldn't. Also I like the combination of discovering a new country, like going to Beijing, and doing a piece there. It's a wonderful combination.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sure. I'm sure.

MR. OPPENHEIM: So I don't think I've ever - maybe I took a trip to Haiti once with a friend as a vacation. That was the only vacation I think of that I've done.

MS. RICHARDS: What projects are you developing right now for the future that - either dream projects or actual -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, we have a lot of these public art commissions right now that have kind of ganged - that I've won. Because public art projects can take years, you can assemble them and have them kind of in your drawer in varying stages of completion, just like an architect. You know an architect can have 50 projects because some of them are very close to being finished, some of them are just beginning. But that's kind of what we have here. We have about eight or nine or ten commission, projects. Well, some of them are not only public art; some of them are exhibitions. But things that we're working on. About ten or more, you know. So, you know, I bet it's pretty -

MS. RICHARDS: And you're lecturing, too?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever taught?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Never aspired to teach.

MR. OPPENHEIM: No, no. I've had what they call Visiting Artist occasions. I've done that numerous times. But that's not really teaching. Although you are - you might be, for a very short period of time, you might be operating like a teacher. You're giving critiques and things. But it's not the same thing.

MS. RICHARDS: When you talked about projects, I'm kind of intrigued by this image of the *Burning Contract*.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And wondering what precipitated that. Is that an idea that's commissioned that's going to happen?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, it's one of these building ideas. It's like, "Gee, what if a building is based on a rolled-up piece of paper." And what about these flames? How can we maybe cast acrylic and light and animation as fire, all these occurring on the top of the building and giant flames? How about that? What would that look like in Manhattan?

MS. RICHARDS: What you're doing is burning the contract for the commission?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, it's kind of tongue in cheek. You know sometimes you enter into these works with kind of a off-the-cuff, very quick sort of - maybe not a lot of thought. But a certain momentum behind the idea. Quite often the idea can be simply the words, *Burning Contract*. Maybe somehow you stumbled as you were doing some drawings and writing some titles down, one thing led to another, and before you knew it - Maybe you were doing this piece of paper, and somehow the idea of flames. You know it can be as sort of wantonly arbitrated as that. It can be just things coming into your mind. And depending on what kind of artist you are, and what constitutes a trigger to use and not use, you allow these things to enter into the domain of possible physical reality. They can become sculptures, these sort of fleeting ideas. You can accept them. Again, depending on what kind of artist you are and how strongly these things have to be before you incorporate them in your work.

You know there's some works that you kind of speculate when you see them about other artists, and you asked yourself, Gee, how firmly does this person believe in what they're indicating here? How big of a deal is it with them in their life? Or if you interview them, if you question them, will they say, Oh, I just had that idea. I don't even know what it means. I just thought I'd stick it in the work, you know. It's a joke, you know. So you can have any kind of response from them that this thing that you're looking at has grave and potent and extremely dimensional meaning in terms of this artist. Or it's just meaningless, it's just they let it in. Why do you have this giant butterfly in the middle of your painting? Oh, it just flew in. I don't know. So I think *Burning Contract* is a little bit like that. In other words, it seems political. It seems to have something - it seems rather, sort of almost current about it, something current.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there something suspicious about that?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, no. No, it's okay. It's okay. It's okay. I mean because we've looked at good art before that's been current. It doesn't hurt it. If it's current and potent and right and successful, you let it in.

MS. RICHARDS: We were talking about other artists' work. Have there been exhibitions recently that you've seen here or elsewhere that have had a real impacted, were the Contemporary art were not? You talked about not being so attuned to the newest work being done.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. Well, you know, but I can't help but feel there's a lot of good art going on, you know. I don't think it's because I'm getting older and things are appearing to be better. There's a lot of extremely ambitious work as far as I can tell just in my scanning, my kind of remote, myopic kind of intake of what's happening around me, from this enormous art world that nobody can figure out, it's just too big, and there's just too many people; nobody knows what's going on. We hear the same names over and over again, but you know that there's millions of artists out there. Millions! It's not just a couple hundred thousand.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. OPPENHEIM: There's a couple hundred thousand *cities*.

MS. RICHARDS: With artists.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. And each one has - it's enormous. I mean if somebody really wants to like figure this out, it would frighten all of us, the amount of art, how big the art world is.

MS. RICHARDS: Some artists whom I've spoken to talk about estate planning. They talk about going to - a much more mundane topic - they talk about archiving.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Really!

MS. RICHARDS: Organizing their work. Not necessarily artists in their eighties but younger. Has that come into your thoughts? Is that something that interests you?

MR. OPPENHEIM: No. I mean it has in the past, way, way - Like it's funny. It happened when I was younger. I said - I may have reflected. There was one time when I was thinking of starting a foundation, you know. So I can't say that I'm not thinking - I didn't think about it. But it never happened. And I don't think about it anymore. I don't want to burden my - Let's see, do I want to think about that? Sort of like, uh, rather not. Do I care? Do I really care?

MS. RICHARDS: Do you mean what happens to your work?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. Do I really care? I should care. If I don't care, I should make myself care. But do I really? I don't know if I care enough. Any why? That's not good. You don't care enough? There's a reason why. But you should care. And I probably under sodium pentathol would admit that I do care a little bit. You don't want - But do I - am I maniacal? No. Am I frightened about the way things are going to be? I think when you die, you're gone. I mean what do you - How could you possibly be affected by and how can you control - ?

MS. RICHARDS: Your legacy?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. It's not a really good place for your mind to be because wouldn't it get into, "Oh, my God! How am I going to be perceived?" Oh, there's got to be something wrong with that. But you don't want to be naïve. I mean you don't want to be oblivious to things. You want to be responsible. You want to be responsible to what you think has been a rather enormous amount of work that people put into their lives and their art. So you don't want to throw it around like a dishrag. But at the same time, it would seem - You know these are interesting areas.

You know I did a thing as a storefront it must be ten years ago. And what it was, it was an evening at the Storefront, and what it was titled was "Artists Reveal Their Support System." That was the name of it. That's what I called it. Come to the Storefront and reveal your support system. So I was a moderator, and a lot of people came, a number of artists: Dan Graham came, and there were others. And I said, Okay, look it. We're going to make a transcript of this. And we're going to allow everybody to read this. And what we're going to do is we're going to honestly divulge how we survive - how we operate. Because I think - I expressed my opinion - I thought people would be interested in this because this is an area that quite often goes unsaid. Well, obviously it was very successful because it's true.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there anyone else participate besides Dan?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, there were maybe a hundred people there.

MS. RICHARDS: Other artists who -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, yes. But I can't remember. They were all artists, everybody who came. But not all of them were - like you didn't get Chuck Close there telling you how he, you know, is socking his money into Swiss banks or whatever he does or doesn't do. But you did get - you couldn't help but get some sort of viewpoint.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it mostly sculptors?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes, they were. They were object-makers, sculptors, painters. A lot of the conversation centered around dealers, and they would talk about dealers. Their support system had to do with dealers. So we talked a lot about that.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there some thinking very surprising to you that you - ?

MR. OPPENHEIM: It would've had it gone on and on. There would have had to been many other episodes for it to really become a document. And you would've had to been - you would have had to have invited certain people.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Like it would be good to invite Christo.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, he's the most transparent.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, yes. You'd be inclined. But also invite everybody. Vito, Joel Shapiro, Damien Hirst. Even some young people.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think in order for artists to be honest and reveal their real support systems, you'd have to close it to non-artists?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, I -

MS. RICHARDS: To create kind of a trusting -

MR. OPPENHEIM: I didn't want them to feel that they were dispelling or giving off secret information. I wanted them to do it for the sake of clarity, because people don't - It's not like, Okay, Richard, who is that collector in Switzerland that paid \$4 million? I mean it's not about that. It's simply - and the artists were, a lot of them were unknown.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it mainly for the sake of younger artists whom you're trying to help see how to survive -

MR. OPPENHEIM: It was more for the sake of clarity. Yes, for the sake of clarity. Let's demystify this. Why have it so - Okay, Joe, it's clear that 80 percent of your income is derived from your mother, and she is supporting you. I want you to admit that, and that's going to help us. How many - In other words, it's just being honest, revealing your support system, no matter what it is. And the outcome of that was going to be I think helpful, you know. I mean to know, oh, gee, you know, I've been under the impression all these years that this was true. But now it seems that it's not true.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the outcome of the event?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Nothing happened. We didn't transcribe it. Is that what you asked? I'm sorry.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think the outcome was? Do you think it was helpful?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, again, it had to have been continued over and over again. But as a single event for the evening, people found it enormously interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think it could be - should be - repeated?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Oh, I don't have any interest in doing it. It probably should be. Yes. Now more than ever. Because you have these extremes. You said, Okay, Damien, 450 million pounds. Let us know how - how did it really happen? Well, actually it was one person who bought everything. You know. I mean what does it do? It's like facts. I mean when does it hurt us? Like the Kinsey Report. You know was it really that bad? I don't know. Well, the reason I brought that up was because of this other question you asked before I went into that. But I forgot what the question was.

MS. RICHARDS: About estate planning, legacy, archiving.

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. But I think it was - I was getting off on a little bit of an offshoot of that, that question that had to do with -

MS. RICHARDS: Other artists?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, you know, like what people think of their careers, you know. How affected are they by circumstances, by events? Could something like that be subjected to the kind of apparatus that I did with this revealing your support system? Could we all reveal, almost like truthfully - let's be truthful. You know like how enormous are these events in terms of shaping the way we continue, the way we think, the way our art evolves? What about the retrospectives and when does it occur? What are your feelings? This could be extremely interesting because - especially if people tell the truth, you know, and reveal. Because you might find a collectivity here. You might find sequences that pack in and become a coherent belief system that you're amazed how many people address a certain thing in a similar way, you know. And how effective certain parts of the art world can be and why. Why are they so effective, and why do they carry so much emotional content, and why do artists feel in similar ways? You know. These things are not only interesting to artists, but they would be interesting to all creative people, you know. Because we're talking about exposure here. We're exposing ourselves to criticism and to the public.

MS. RICHARDS: Isn't that something that artists do with every single exhibition and commission?

MR. OPPENHEIM: Well, many of them feel that way. Yes, some of them feel it more greatly than others, that you're literally exposing your soul for scrutiny. Well, like I mean obviously - and he's right - I mean, but not as much as actors. That's the real exposure, you know, where there's no objects sitting between you and the public. You're there.

MS. RICHARDS: Before we end, is there anything else you'd want to address?

MR. OPPENHEIM: This interview, how available is it? Is it available for reprinting?

MS. RICHARDS: [Inaudible]?

MR. OPPENHEIM: [Laughs] Well, here's my opinion: I think this interview has been very good, you know. I think you're very good at these interviews. You should think about this *Larry King Alive*. You should - yes, you should become an interviewer for a wider public. But I've had a lot of interviews. Okay? And this is a very good one because somehow there has been the occasion to, you know, delve into things a little bit more strenuously than other times. So, you know, and that's the real virtue of a good interview is when you see that the person, even if it might be on *Charlie Rose*, you see that the person is really creating new ground for himself and articulating it, you know. So I just asked.

MS. RICHARDS: Shall we conclude? Or is there anything else you'd like to -

MR. OPPENHEIM: Yes. I think a lot has been covered. I'm very satisfied. I mean, sure, we could go on for another day or so. [Laughter] But I think there's a lot of good information on this interview. And I say that knowing the other interviews I've done. And many of them have been transcribed and printed, you know. So -

MS. RICHARDS: Good.

MR. OPPENHEIM: I would certainly advise people, if they ask me, where to get information, go to this one.

MS. RICHARDS: Good. Thank you.

[END OF DISC 4.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...August 3, 2010