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Oral history interview with Howard Hussey,
2016 June 11-July 30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Howard Hussey on 2016 June 11-July 30. The interview took place at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was conducted by Matthew Affron for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Howard Hussey and Matthew Affron have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MATTHEW AFFRON: This is Matthew Affron interviewing Howard Hussey at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on June 11, 2016 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one. Hello, Howard.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Hello, Matthew.

MATTHEW AFFRON: We're going to—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Glad to meet you.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Glad to see you. We're going to start the interview now, and I'm going to begin with a few questions about your childhood. I'm going to begin by simply asking you when and where you were born.

HOWARD HUSSEY: In New York City in Manhattan, the Lower East Side. My address at the time was 61 Jackson Street, and I lived there with my parents in a four-room apartment. And my mother was a very gifted and accomplished doll-maker, and at the age of four, very loudly, she reprimanded me from ever touching her dolls. I was not supposed to do that. I could look, but I must not touch; so this—it was a twist of fertile irony, really. And ever since then, I began collecting paper shopping bags—brown paper shopping bags, discarded wire hangers, and old string, old cord, old twine, and then I would steal my father's lighter fluid. And I'd put the twine onto the forms I would make out of the wire. And it was a star sometimes; it was a square sometimes; it was an octagon; it was a triangle; it was a circle. And after they were all covered with the cord, I would douse them with the lighter fluid and set a match to them and watch them slowly catch fire.

And to me, this was a great distraction from the fact that I really had no toys. I was a Depression baby, and this really started something that I was unprepared for. And it all happened on the roof. Nobody knew that I would go up to the roof and do this. And all my materials were kept on the roof house, which nobody ever discovered. And I would go up there, you know, whenever I felt like I needed a show, and start making these objects. And then cardboard boxes with string covering the front of them. And the same principle of using lighter fluid and watching them burn and seeing this whole design ignited. And to me, this was a great, great—what I would call mind-saver and spirit-saver because my parents basically didn't do anything for me. It was this dysfunctional family, and they weren't interested in having an artist in the family. They thought of me in other terms, but we don't have to go into that right now.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you started to say something about your childhood and your family background. Is there anything else you want to say about that topic?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I have no idea what my parents would have made out of the fact that I was doing what I was doing at such a young age. And then, at my fifth birthday, I was alone in my bedroom in a very clean, clean room, with the floor highly polished and lying on my bed. And suddenly I had a hallucination of a figure appearing, a figure that looked like it came out of William Blake. And I knew this was the Prince of the Invisible, and he was going to guide me and teach me because I was a deprived, but very talented, individual. And so he proceeded to introduce me to an occult way of life that my parents had no idea I was involved with, and it had a lot to do with what I was doing on the roof in all seasons, particularly in winter. I loved to be up there with the snow.

And I never realized he was a person only I could see. I thought he was a materialization of a figure that I needed very much at the time, which I did. And then he introduced me to working with books, doing things with books, not as books, but books as objects. And he would make a Stonehenge circle of the books and—with an entrance that I could go into the center of the circle of the Stonehenge, and next to a window in the bedroom. And I would jump from the circle onto the windowsill and open the windows, which opened like glass doors. And from there, I would take a very deep breath and I would jump from the windowsill about three yards to a tree

and pause to get balance and a certain sense of awareness and what I had to do and then take another deep breath and then take an enormous leap into the park that was across the street from the apartment house.

And it was the park as it was before it became developed into a housing neighborhood. It was more like a beach, and there was these figures, more like shadows, and I approached them and my guardian told the man in the hooded cloak, "He's not really ready to make this voyage, but he's in very—willing." And I happened to look down at the ground, and I saw that the bare foot of my guardian was holding down a wave, and the wave was writhing like an eel or a snake—very white, foamy. And then a short distance away was this rowboat. We were going to take a trip. So, since I wasn't really ready to make the trip, the session ended there, back in my bedroom. And he said, "We'll try again another time when you feel up to it."

In the meantime, he enjoyed all the games that we played on the roof, and then he introduced me to string figures and how to make them and play them. And he would arrange the strings and I would complement them and make other shapes with the strings. And little by little, I was getting to know the game of string figures. And so one day, or one evening, on the roof, I made this cat's cradle, and he took it into his hands. He said, "Now, put lighter fluid all over it and light it up." And I was kind of concerned that he might just burn himself, but I did what he told me to do. And here was this lighted string and no burns, no nothing. He was just impermeable. And it was a very good session. I learned a lot just from that one session about him. But again, it never occurred to me that only I could see him and nobody else could.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Would you say that this experience is connected to the development in your interest in art?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, very definitely. Yeah, I really had no idea that I was making art. I just thought I was doodling, passing the time, giving myself interesting things to do, but I never expected that I would have a guardian or instructor to tell me what and how and where and allow me the pleasure of being an audience to what I had been—little by little, reached a certain level of perfection. The forms were very clear by then. In the beginning, they were not so clear and made out of wire, but as time went on, they got to reach a real point of perfection. A star really looked like a star, you know, and a triangle really looked like a triangle, and these long rectangles with exact lines in them, everything to catch the lighter fluid. My father always wondered where his lighter fluid was disappearing.

MATTHEW AFFRON: I bet [laughs].

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And so can you say something about how your interest in making things and creating things developed as you—as you became a little bit older?

HOWARD HUSSEY: The brown paper bags and the other paper bags—I loved the brown color and I started to make drawings. And the drawings went on for some time. In school, when I made the drawings, a strange thing, it was the time of World War II, and I would always put a swastika on everything that I was drawing. And everything was underwater. Everything was taking place underwater. So the teachers wrote a letter to my mother, to my parents, really, "What is the meaning? Why does he put a swastika on everything? Are you pro-German? Do you have much to do with what's happening in the War?" And my mother said no, she never saw these drawings. She would like to see them. And no, it was nothing political. It was all—had to do with the imagination, so I got past that without any trouble.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you visit museums when you were a child or encounter—?

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, no. I had nobody to take me around, nobody to offer to do that. As I said, I had no real esthetic sense even then. But I was now aware of the fact that what I was doing could be considered art or a form of art, not just the drawings in pencil and colored pencil. I remember copying an image of Uncle Tom from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on his knees praying to God, shackled with a chain. And my mother was so impressed with this drawing that she took it. I don't know where she put it, but she folded it up and wanted to keep it as a sign of something. Maybe it reminded her that she should be doing more for me than, in fact, she was.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Were—did you do any art in school?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, it was all art. The art teachers loved me. Yeah, I was their favorite pupil. They would give me supplies to take home and work with, which was a great help. I didn't have to rely on all the collecting I was doing or hiding or hoarding, which it—which it really amounted to, a kind of hoarding of materials.

MATTHEW AFFRON: What would you say was your most rewarding educational experience?

HOWARD HUSSEY: When the art teachers decided that I could put my artwork up in one of the classrooms and have my first exhibition. And this was about 19—I would say, '40—'48? I must have been close, almost—just 10

years of age by then.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Because you were born in 19—

HOWARD HUSSEY: 38.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —38, so at around age 10—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —a teacher—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, decided that I should show my drawings to the rest of the school.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And where—and where were they shown?

HOWARD HUSSEY: In the school PS 110, and it was—it is a short walk from the apartment house. I did like that school, and they had a nice space, and I couldn't believe that it was all my work on the walls. I was very astonished that they would take such an interest.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So that, in a way, was your first exhibition?

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right. 1948. I was just about 10.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And would—do you remember any teachers or other students who you feel were influential in particular for you?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Only those that encouraged me. There was one who said, "When I look at what you're doing, my stomach gets very tight and I feel like I want to cry." And that was a great compliment coming from another student.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And what do you think that student was reacting to in your—in your work? Was it the subject matter or—?

HOWARD HUSSEY: It was the subject matter, right, indeed. He had never seen anything like that. He would do drawings very objectively of a subway or an apartment house or part of the park, which we lived across the street from, the railings and the plants growing and the benches where people could sit on nice, sunny days. On Eastertime, it was a great celebration, everybody in their Easter clothes. And my guardian, I would see him in the distance riding a stainless steel bicycle and getting lost in the crowd and then reappearing and playing hide-and-seek with me. And as I said, it still never occurred to me that I was the only one who could see him.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And so what do you think was the subject matter that this other child reacted strongly to in your drawings? What kinds of things were you drawing then?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Underworld life. Castles under the sea with mermaids and rocks and plants and fish. You know, and all very, I would say, in a secret sense, nobody could know that this was going on except me, that this was taking place under the water. And how could I live under the water except through my imagination?

MATTHEW AFFRON: So if we continue, now we're in high school?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you continue drawing and—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, indeed.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you change what you were doing or did you continue—

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, the students asked—some of them asked me to draw them and make portraits of them, which I did and it was very successful. I never sold anything.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And what school was this?

HOWARD HUSSEY: This was P.S. 12—P.S. 12 on Madison Street in New York City, which was, again, a short walk from the apartment house. And there, again, all the art teachers took a great liking to me and helped me. And then there was one event in which I was drawing instead of listening to the teacher speaking, and I think that she was talking about history. And I was making a drawing instead, and she saw me, and it disturbed her. So she told me, "Howard, go and sit in the back of the room in the last desk until I call you again." So I couldn't take the

drawing paper with me or the materials. I had to go in the back of the room and sit at this desk. And I got very tired, and I started to fall asleep.

And she came immediately to see what else I was doing besides sleeping. And she saw this scribble on the desk, and she immediately accused me of doing this scribble because she knew I was always drawing or doing something. And I tried to tell her, "Look, I didn't do this. This was here before I got here." And she was very upset, and she insisted that I go get a basin of hot water and a scrub brush and a—and some soap, and try to get the scribble off the desk. So I got this very hot water in a basin and brought it into the room. And as soon as I started to scrub, I got so angry that I picked up the basin and threw it at her. And she was very, very astonished by having all this hot water suddenly on her. And she said, "You'll be reported to the principal for this." I said, "Well, you're accusing me of something that I'm not guilty of. I did not do this scribble. I like to draw, but I wasn't doing anything illegal that I shouldn't be doing, and you're accusing me of it. And you're convinced that I did it, and I haven't." So she said, "You're still being reported to the principal."

So I was reported, and I had to go down and talk to the principal and tell him exactly what happened, and I said, "I wasn't defacing any of the school's property, even though she was accusing me. And the reason why I threw the water at her was because she made me so angry, not really taking my word for it. But I wasn't lying. I was telling her the truth."

So, I was excused. I wasn't asked to pay for any defaced property or anything like that. And he said, "Please, when you're in the class, pay attention to the teacher. And when you're in art class, that's different. You have to make a distinction that you can't be making drawings and not listening to the lesson, whether it's mathematics or geography or history or any of the other subjects that were given in the high school, including music."

MATTHEW AFFRON: Were you interested in music when you were that age?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, yes, very much so. When I put on the radio often at home, it was an old cathedral-type radio, and I would always turn it to the classical music station if my parents were out shopping or my father was with his friends having a drink or so, or raising pigeons on the roof, which he did. She would come in and say, "Why are you listening to that music? That's the music they play at funerals." You know. And I tried to tell her that this is classical music. It's not the music you would listen to. And then I found all my favorite programs, including *Land of the Lost* and *Let's Pretend* and I cannot think of some of the others, but those are the two most prominent radio programs that gave me a great deal.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you're—you get to the end of high school—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —and you're a child who's very interested in drawing.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: You were very interested in music.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes.

MATTHEW AFFRON: What were your other interests, and what did you do after you graduated?

HOWARD HUSSEY: At that time, my relationship with my father had gotten very, very bad. It had really turned a corner, and he was starting to become violent because he was drinking more and more. The Depression had really sent him down, and he never recovered again.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you tell us what his profession was?

HOWARD HUSSEY: He was a civil engineer, and I saw his drafting equipment and the paper—the linen that was turned into blueprint paper, which I wanted to use but I couldn't. And my aunt, who became my patron, she said right away to my mother, "We must go to the Jewish Family Service and see what they tell us about this bad relationship that's going on because it's not getting any better. It's getting much worse." So we went, and they said, "Do you know there's a school in upper New York State, Hawthorne Cedar Knolls School for children with emotional disturbances? And we think that your son should go up there because he'll find a very different life there."

MATTHEW AFFRON: How old were you at this point?

HOWARD HUSSEY: At that point, I was going on—gee, my graduation, I can't remember exactly how old, but I can guess. I was about 15 or maybe going on 16. And finally the day came, and this long, black limousine pulled up on a rainy day to collect me to bring me to Hawthorne Cedar Knolls School. And I forgot to mention that my

aunt had died and left me in her will all her money when I came of age. I was going to start having an allowance-based—

MATTHEW AFFRON: Is that what you meant when you said she was your patron?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, right. Yeah, and as I was getting to the car, I saw my aunt's ghost standing by the car weeping. She was crying, but she was very happy that finally I had found an outlet somewhere, that someone had taken an interest and was now going to help me find a life.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you went to Hawthorne Cedar Knolls School.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And where was that located?

HOWARD HUSSEY: In Hawthorne, New York. Right. And she was right because I did have a very different life. I lived in a cottage with 23 other boys aged nine to about 21, and we all had—there were two dormitories, the North and South Dormitories. I was in the North Dormitory with 12 or 13 other boys, and I was learning how to live with a new set of preoccupations and interests. In the meantime, I was seeing a psychiatrist twice a week because I wouldn't have been sent to the school otherwise if they didn't think that psychiatry would help me with my emotional difficulties. So he understood what I was doing and what I was saying. I never told him about my guardian, who didn't appear at the school because I was being given all the kind of guidance that he would have given me otherwise.

And they decided that I really wanted to become a dancer at the time, and all my drawings had to do with dancers and dancing and designing costumes and making presentations, and even in the—what do you call that? The practical training classes, printing, woodworking, dressmaking, in the trade shops. I was making an artificial theater and designing the sets and the figures and learning how to wire it to make lighting that would shine in the proper way on the décor. And this occupied me for a long time, and people were very curious about the way I was going about making these theaters that were occupied by cutout figures, dancers, doing ballets.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you—did you—were you taken to see ballet or dance in New York?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, yes, I was. I was, yes. There was a woman who would come on the weekend who was a volunteer, and she recognized the fact that I was capable of enjoying a ballet, so she got permission from the school to take me into New York and to attend the New York City Ballet at the time.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Do you remember any performances or dancers?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, I do. André Eglevsky and Maria Tallchief and Janet Reed. And who else? They were dancing *A la française* and *The Pied Piper* and I can't—yes, the second act of *Swan Lake*, and she had taken me to a special restaurant called Burger Haven before we went to the performance, and I was having a really good time.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Maybe we should move—fast-forward a little bit to when you left—did you leave Hawthorne Cedar Knolls School at—when you were 18?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Just about.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And what—where did you go?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Four years. I went to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and they gave me a scholarship to attend an art school, Visual Arts on 23rd Street in New York City, to learn commercial art.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Is that the School of Visual Arts today?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: To learn commercial art?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right, but I couldn't—I failed with the—what would you call it? The deadlines, when you had to have the work ready and bring it in and show it. And I couldn't meet the deadlines, and I was very upset about it and said—I switched to a fine art course and started painting with good instructors. Burton Hasen was one, and Robert Andrew Parker was another. And I worked very seriously and produced a great deal of work; and again, they gave me an exhibition. That was my second exhibition at the School of Visual Arts.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Do you remember when this was, more or less?

HOWARD HUSSEY: By then, I think it was—we were approaching the '60s—sometime during the '60s. And the secretary of the school came down to see this exhibition, and she said, "Howard, which pieces are yours?" And I said, "All of them." And she said, "What? All of them?" And I said, "Yes," because there were something like 22 pieces hanging on the walls. And the people who would come into the school to visit liked what I was doing, and they purchased five different canvases, which gave me some extra pocket money at the time.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Can you describe the style of the preoccupations, the type of painting you were doing?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I was very influenced by the surrealists and the neo-Romantics and the paintings that were getting larger and larger. Some of them were three-quarter life-size with figures in them, and there was one figure walking down a corridor with a hat shading her face, reading a book, but her clothes were open. You could see her breasts. And against the wall, there was a target and somebody was shooting at the target while she was walking. And Mr. Hasen liked that painting most of all, and he said, "You know, she has a name, whether you know it or not, and her name is Nadja." And then I found out that André Breton had written a book called *Nadja*, and in a few days there was a package delivered for me, and there was a copy of *Nadia* that he wanted me to read and get more interested in the surrealists and what they were about.

But I was also interested in the painter [Pavel] Tchelitchew because at Cedar Knolls there was an art teacher, Celia—Celia Rabinow, and she had taken me into her art class, which was very exclusive. When she saw an illuminated page that I had designed and it was exhibited, and she liked what she saw, and she said, "If you're interested, I'll take you into my classes, and you can begin painting, you know, learning painting, and I'll teach you what I know." And she did, and she was very good about it, with the paints and brushes and canvas. They were not stretched canvases; they were panels, stretched canvas panels. And I worked very hard, and she was very—how can I say it? Very astute in what I was actually doing and how I was doing it. But she always promoted my work, and when she said, "Now, this piece is too unfinished and it's too unbalanced," and she said, "You have to put some gray here and here and here and here and here, and then you can look at it and see the whole thing. Otherwise, it's just a lot of pieces of color."

MATTHEW AFFRON: You said that you got interested in the surrealists and the neo-Romantics while you were at the School of Visual Arts. Do you know—do you know where you were when you saw their work?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I didn't really see the surrealists' work for a long time, but Celia brought down the book of Tchelitchew's drawings and she made me wash my hands before I could look through it. And then she opened it up. There was a wonderful drawing of a nude, and she said, you know, "There shouldn't be any false modesty in what you're doing, you know. Be honest about the whole figure and the way you work with it." So she introduced me to the work of Tchelitchew, and he became a great inspiration to me. I never saw the show in 1942 that the Museum of Modern Art did of his work, but I did get hold of the catalog that James Thrall Soby put together for that occasion. And I kept this book with me because it was such an inspiration. In the meantime, I never saw my guardian again because I was fully occupied with what I was doing and how I was doing it.

And finally, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation said, "You're not getting passing marks in the commercial art classes, and so I don't think we can continue your scholarship. You might have to fend for yourself from here on," which I did. I continued working and going around to restaurants and different places and asking them if they would show my work, put work on the walls, for the people who came there to eat, to have meals, and I sold work right away. People were very interested in the imagery that I was using, very influenced by Tchelitchew, of course. And for a long time, that continued.

I was still living at home, which I should not have been because my relationship with my father had not gotten any better. So I just kept to myself and continued a self-education, and then at a certain point, this guardian figure returned and continued to educate me in occult science of working and what the figures meant and how they were painted and what I was going to do. And he said, "Did you forget all about the wire forms and the lighter fluid and the fire?" And I said, "No." I said, "I feel like I discovered fire at that time."

I went to shop for my mother in a grocery nearby, and when I came out, there was a telephone booth. And in the phone booth, someone had left a little compass in a leather case, a leather swivel case, and I thought, "Well, if I don't take it, somebody else will." So I took the compass. And as I was coming out, there was a trashcan, and on top of the trashcan, there was an old Chinese book on rice paper, very flimsy and very damaged, and I started to look at the Chinese characters through the magnifying glass and realized they were actually little drawings because the magnifying glass gave them color. The edges of the figures were sometimes red and green or blue and violet, and I thought, "Oh, I'll take these to the park and look at these in the park." So I went across the street after delivering the groceries to my mother. And I took the book and the magnifying glass, and I went to the park, which was deserted. There was nobody there. And I went into the grass and started to look at the pages of this Chinese text. I had no idea what it was all about, and I was holding the magnifying glass over the pages. And little by little, a black dot started to appear on the page, and it was getting bigger and bigger. And suddenly, it was a little fire, and I felt I had discovered fire at that point and that fire was going to be one of the

elements that I would be working with. I couldn't believe how that was happening, from the sunlight going through the magnifying glass and burning into the page. You know, that was one of the, I would call, outstanding experiences, that I discovered fire.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you were making paintings, and you were showing them in restaurants.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And you were living at home. Where were you—where were you working?

HOWARD HUSSEY: In my bedroom.

MATTHEW AFFRON: In the bedroom.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: At this point, are you about 20 years old?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And how long did that routine continue?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, it continued for several years, even though my father was very disapproving and again, not very nice to me. I seemed to be getting ahead with my life, and his life had come to a very bad end. He became an alcoholic and had a lot of alcoholic friends. And they were raising pigeons on the roof, and he would go to see them. He found drinking companions, and my mother was trying to be good-tempered about all his misdeeds and not being a good father to me or doing things that a father should do to his children. So I just forego—the situation was foregone. I didn't expect any more from him, and I didn't respect him anymore, and I didn't have any sense that he was my father anymore.

And my mother said, "You know, you will have, at some time, to get a job and make money and contribute to the household income." And I thought, "Why doesn't my father do that? Why doesn't he get a job and work and do this?" And she couldn't answer me. So, I looked around and I saw an advertisement in the newspaper about a very cheap apartment in the Greenwich Village in Bank Street—119 Bank Street, and—on the top floor. And I was so pleased to discover it because I had enough money to pay for it, but the apartment looked just like a little apartment would in Paris. The windows were very French. They opened out onto a courtyard, an air shaft really, on three sides. And the kitchen had one side, and the bathroom had another side, and the place where I slept had another side. So, it was a three-sided—what I would call, source of light.

And I was very happy, finally having my own apartment and living there and continuing my work. And it was as if this kind of independence was allowing me to experiment living by myself and taking care of myself and doing the things that an adult person would do. I was taking a nap one afternoon, and I heard this movement outside on the windows on the courtyard. And when I looked out, I saw this thief was trying to get into the apartment. And I quickly dialed the police, but I had to talk so loud that this thief heard me, and he disappeared. So it was an adventure that I realized this apartment is not safe. You had to put gates on the window, which I didn't want to do, but I did anyway. And while you could see from outside was that this was a house—an apartment full of paintings and drawings, you know, on the wall and some of them on a table. And art objects that I was making. And so I felt like a real artist at the time.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Were you part of any kind of cultural community in the Village when you were there?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, I did. I had—I made friends there immediately who liked my work and bought my work and I would do chores for them. My one friend had three cats, and I would take care of his cats when he went away on a job assignment.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Were these friends artists, or were they—?

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, they were regular business people, right? And I liked very much the routine of going to his house. He owned a whole house on Greenwich Street in the Village, and he had these three cats. And one was a jet black street cat, like—built like a tank, short legs and a thick body, and the others were house cats. They were very lithe and limber. They had long legs and a long tail, and we would play games, and they had nobody before that to play games with them. And I would make them jump, practice jumping, and trailing a cork on the floor with a cord, and they would run after it. And it was really quite—quite a time for me. And I was still making my drawings in the—in the house, and I did—drew portraits of the cat, which the man who owned the cats bought. And I felt this is probably just exactly what it's like for every artist, you know. You have friends and you influence them, and you inspire them and they trust you. And you do work for them, for which they pay you. And my life continued on for some time that way.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And then what happened?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, finally, I had to—I met a friend, and the friend took me to his apartment and we became very intimate. And he saw my drawings, and I did not know that he was a boyfriend of Andy Warhol. And someone was interviewing him who was writing a book about Warhol, and he said, "You know, Warhol did a big, big painting of me on a beach in my bathing suit, and like a fool, I threw it away. If I had that painting now, I would be able to command a great price for it." It was an early work of Warhol's. But he introduced me to a lot of his friends, who were very cultured people, and things went on from there.

I designed a Christmas card. One year, I went to the Whitney—the Whitney Annual [1966 -MA], and one room was devoted to Joseph Cornell—the work of Cornell. There were about 18 pieces on the walls, and I went in and three of the pieces were electrified. They were lit up from inside, and I was overwhelmed by what I saw. They were so magical. So I went out into the hallway to regain my senses, and realized what had happened, and I went to the secretary or the receptionist, and I said, "Do you have the address of Mr. Cornell? I would like to write to him." And she said, "Yes, here's his address. This is where he lives." So I designed a Christmas card that was three-dimensional. It folded up, and when you unfolded it, it was a blue midnight sky with threads and a star. And when he got this card, he was very inspired, and he immediately wrote back to me. And he said, "I have a project. Would you like to assist in a reconstruction job?"

My mother, when she was training to be a teacher, had these kindergarten exercises, origami paper-folding. And he said, "They were four wonderful albums. And I stripped down three. Very stupidly, I kept one. And you can make a new set of albums for me if you're interested in the job. Here's the one album you can copy as a model." And that began my relationship with Joseph Cornell. So I made the albums, and then came the time for replacing the cutouts—the origami folded paper pieces that were very beautiful and very precise, very meticulously done. And I thought when we come to the end of this job, that will be the end of my relationship. But he found other things for me to do.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Was this in 1966?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, it was. His brother and mother had just died. He was alone in the house, and I worked two days and slept there three nights. And he always had a routine to follow. He would be in the basement working on his boxes, and I was taking care of things in the house, doing some cleaning and arranging of things and being—more or less, helping him take care of his house.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you just described to us the circumstances in which you met Joseph Cornell.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: You became a studio assistant in 1966.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: How long did you work with him?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Until 1972, when he died. Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Do those albums that you worked on at the beginning still exist?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I believe they are somewhere lost in the Smithsonian Institution because all his papers and studio paraphernalia went up there. It was saved by Walter Hopps. He called the head of the archives and said, "If you don't do something with this work, it's going to be put in the furnace." So they decided to make a Joseph and Robert Cornell Study Center.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Now, you just mentioned that you met Cornell after you were very strongly affected by his work at the Whitney Annual and then contacting him, and it was just after the deaths of his mother and his brother, Robert Cornell.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right, yeah. Nobody knew that Robert was an artist. Cornell began to show me drawings. He said, "These were drawings that Robert made." And then I said, "They're amazing. I can't imagine what a—the kind of imagination he had, that he didn't have a show." So Cornell gave me a drawing and then he had an exhibition—a memorial exhibition, for his brother, and there were wonderful collages on the wall that had to do with their autobiography when they were living in a big house in Nyack, New York. And all the work and the mood, the mother was shown in a photograph holding Robert as an infant, and they didn't know that anything was wrong with him. He was about three years of age, and they realized he couldn't walk. He was unable to walk, but he had a certain brain damage, I would call it, though others said it was cerebral palsy. But it was a very interesting exhibition, and Cornell was present. And he had a very interesting following. I remember how

many people showed up at that exhibition. It was raining and cold and bitter, and yet people came out to see the exhibition at the Schoelkopf Gallery [*Robert Cornell: Memorial Collection, Drawings by Robert Cornell, Collages by Joseph Cornell, Related Varia*, January 4-29 1966, Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, New York –MA].

MATTHEW AFFRON: So when you were—first went to the house on Utopia Parkway—

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —where Cornell lived, he was alone in the house at that time.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right, he was.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And do you know if he had had assistants working with him there before?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, yes, he always had people coming and going. His mother needed a house assistant when she was alive, so she would hire schoolgirls to come and help her out. And Cornell got very interested in the schoolgirls. He decided they could be his assistants.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And then you became his assistant. You've described your roles as Cornell's assistant a couple of times in some of your writings. You've said that you were a gardener, a secret agent, a secretary, retriever, messenger, auditor, bookbinder, teatime companion, and the ghost of Franz Liszt.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right. That's right. He wanted—he said I resembled Liszt, and he treated me as if I was the ghost of Franz Liszt.

MATTHEW AFFRON: In what way did you resemble Franz Liszt?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I looked very much like Liszt when Liszt was my age. Yeah, so I said, "Do I really have to be the ghost of Franz Liszt?" I said, "I'm doing so much already," and he was very amused by the fact that I was shocked that he would consider me to be the ghost.

I—we were having tea one afternoon, and he was looking at me while we were talking. And then I noticed that his eyes passed beyond my ears and were focused on something—and I realized he was seeing something that I couldn't see. And after a while I realized Robert's spirit was still in the house and that he was communicating with Robert. Robert was still his brother—his spiritual brother. He was still taking care of Joseph. He wanted Joseph to feel that he was there, he wasn't alone. It was a very interesting experience. Cornell was really a mystic, and not many people realized it.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Can you describe the house as it was at the time in 1966 when you started working, assisting Cornell?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, he was already a very wealthy man, but you would never know it by looking at him. He had already accomplished a great deal, and he never wanted to change anything in the house. So it was a very middle-class atmosphere and there were books everywhere. He had about—at least 5,000 or 7,000 books in the house in his bedroom, in the living room, in the basement, outside in the garage where he worked. And I said, "You know, you—I ought to be cataloging these books, Joseph." And he said, "It'll be a waste of time." And I said, "No, it won't because in the future people will learn what it was you collected in these books and what you learned from them." But he still gave me too much work to do, so I couldn't really find the time to begin a catalog.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So the house—how many rooms did the house have?

HOWARD HUSSEY: It had an attic, which was quite magical. It had three bedrooms—his brother's room, his room, his mother's room, which he moved me into and called the music room. He put all his music equipment in there, and I slept there. And there was a living room, a sitting room, a fireplace. I remember a portrait of one of his ancestors on the wall, someone who had made the first steam catamaran [Commodore William R. Voorhis – MA]. Yeah, and invented something to, you know, move over the water. And I think he was a commander, and I remember asking Cornell a lot of things about the history, but he was very reluctant. He was very taciturn. He really wouldn't want to talk much about his past.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So there—so you just listed a number of rooms; the attic, three bedrooms, living room, sitting room.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Basement, which was a studio. The garage used to be his studio when his mother and brother were alive, but he switched to the basement and sort of rearranged things so he could work there. And he was also collecting films, so when Robert was having his lessons from Joseph and they were talking about Spain, Joseph would show him a film about Spain or a film about Russia or a film about the Canary Islands. So

Robert was having a very, very good time, basically, and really being educated.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Was there any other art on the walls apart from that ancestor portrait you were just talking about?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, they were very simple things. They were more decorations than art because his mother had put them up and needed—as I said, he didn't want to change a single thing in the house. One day he told me to buy a new teakettle, so I did. And I thought, "This is a surprise." And he started using it. And then one afternoon, I had to bring some collages up to the attic, and sure enough, there was the old teakettle. He couldn't throw it away.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So the basement was a studio.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And his art wasn't elsewhere in the house?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, yes, it was all over the house. Particularly, the closet in his bedroom was just packed with boxes. And when *Life* magazine did the article on him, "The Something Bachelor of Utopia Parkway," ["The Enigmatic Bachelor of Utopia Parkway," 15 December 1967. -MA] he was afraid that thieves would come to the house because it mentioned in the article that some of the boxes were worth \$15,000. So he started taking the work out of the house and bringing it to East Hampton, where his sister had a chicken farm, and he buried boxes in the barn that was there. And he felt that they were more secure there than anywhere else.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Let's talk about a few other roles that you said you had in your work with Cornell. You said gardener.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, he had a wonderful garden in the back with an Adirondack chair and a round, metal table with a glass candlestick in the center. And it was wonderful how when he lit it, it would be reflected in the garage windows. And I thought, "This looks like a painting by Magritte." No, I couldn't believe the resemblance. And then I found out he was very fond of Magritte, and I just was as helpful as I could be. But the garage was completely disorganized. He was missing things. He didn't know he still had things. I would find things and bring them in the house, and he would say, "Oh, there it is! There it is!" I said, "Well, it was in the—on the shelf collecting dust, and I thought you might need it." So I helped him retrieve a great deal of his past history and subject matter for his art.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And were you a gardener? Did you—did you do gardening?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, I did. I planted daffodils and I planted tulips. And he would come out and he would water them. And he would just see that I was doing a good job. And there was—he—his favorite chair was under the famous tree. I can't remember the name of the tree.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Is this the quince tree?

HOWARD HUSSEY: The quince tree, right, with a headboard at Wanamaker's for 45 cents. And so over the years, it had really grown up to an enormous height, but it was no longer producing quinces. His mother would make quince jam when there were quinces, but now the tree was just growing with leaves. And Cornell felt protected whenever he sat next to it or under it, and I was very impressed by the connection that the tree had such a history. One afternoon during the winter, it was snowing, and he looked out the window and he said, "Oh, here is my friend." And he just wrapped a blue scarf around his neck and ran out with nuts from a bag in the pantry and ran up to the quince tree. And he put a nut in his mouth, and a squirrel appeared and took the nut right from his mouth. And so Cornell sat in the Adirondack chair and the squirrel jumped on his knee, and he was feeding the squirrel nuts. And when he came back in the house, he was just glistening with all these like raindrops, but they were melted snowflakes. And it was very magical. It was a very magical—I said, "He's an old friend, isn't he? He must be very tame. You must know him a long time if you can do that with him and everything—come up to you and take a nut from your mouth."

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you were a gardener and you were a bookbinder.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, there were many of his books that were literally falling to pieces, and all I could do was glue the spines and replace the boards, the front and back boards. And he approved of my technique.

And then it was the part of the retriever that I did not like because one day he sent me to Susan Sontag because he wanted to have back a box that he had given her and because she wrote a book with a title *Death Kit*. He was very offended, and that's why he wanted the box back. So I went to Riverside Drive. She was living there then in a penthouse, and I went up and I said, "Miss Sontag, Cornell said you would have the box and the collage ready."

And she said, "Yes, I know he wants the box, but he made the collage for my son, and how can I give it up?" I said, "Well, I was given orders to tell you that he wants the box and the collage." And there were great tears coming down her son's face at the time, and I felt this is awful. But he had already sent me on other box-retrieving campaigns. So when I got back to the house, I said, "Joseph, I have something important to tell you." I said, "The look on Susan's face—" and her son burst into tears," I said, "I can't do this kind of work for you anymore." I said, "It's too heartbreaking. These people love your work so much and they're so used to having it." And he understood. He said, "You know, it was just a question of time when you would refuse to do this kind of work for me." I said, "Well, the moment has come. I must tell you I can't be a box retriever for you. You have to find somebody else who's willing to do it."

MATTHEW AFFRON: Can you think of some other people who you encountered who had works that Cornell had given them?

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, because he kept everybody very separate in their own cubicle. When I came to the house, it was only me. And then I would see signs that another helper had been there helping him, and I said, "How many helpers do you have, Joe?" And he said, "Well, they're all volunteers, you know, basically. They were all volunteers. They come to me. I don't go to them." And so I was very impressed by the fact that all these young people were really interested to see the mysteries inside his house—how he worked. It was quite amazing. It's too bad there wasn't a film made.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did—so you didn't see collectors or other people who came to the house?

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, but because I was working for him, I had occasion to meet a lot of the art dealers who were interested in his work. And I brought him some of my drawings, and he said, "These are wonderful, Howard. But I can't buy them. You know what will happen. They'll just disappear in the whole mess that's here. So I must tell you, they're very beautiful designs, but I can't take them on. It's too responsible a position." So at least he knew that I was an artist besides just an assistant.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And who were some of those dealers who came to the house?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, Richard Feigen and—who else? I think Eleanor Ward paid him one visit. And Robert Schoelkopf definitely came out to the house to see what he was working on. And what is the name of that other dealer which I cannot think of? Jane Wade, yeah. She was very interested in his work, and I had to bring a box back to her because the blue sand was running out. And she was speaking to the collector of the work, and she said, "The blue sand will be replaced, and she said, 'The cost of the box is \$5,500 and I'll let you know when it's ready.'" So when I got the box back to Cornell's house, I said, "If—this box is going to be bought by Mr. Daniel Varenne, and he's very concerned about having the blue sand replaced. And he doesn't mind paying \$5,500 for the box. He said it's well worth it." And he got furious! He practically hit the ceiling, and when I went to change my clothes into work clothes, he got on the phone and he gave Jane Wade a real—a real talking to. He said, "How dare you discuss my private business with my assistants?" And she said, "Joseph, if he's working for you, what do you expect me to do? What do you expect he's going to do?" So this outrage continued for a while, and I stopped him one day—one afternoon, and I said, "Listen, Joe, what do you expect me to do with this information? I'm not an art dealer. I'm not selling your boxes for you. You know, you can at least have a little trust. I've been working for you now almost four years. You wouldn't keep me here if I wasn't someone who you could rely on." So after that, he was very different towards me.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Why do you think he was so interested in keeping all these different aspects of his activities and the people around him separate?

HOWARD HUSSEY: He didn't want people to have insights. He was very paranoid, thinking that if they knew too much, certain things would happen. He was also making friends with young girls, and one of them [Joyce Hunter -MA] stole boxes from him. It was in the newspapers. And he said, "I'm not pressing charges. I just want the work back." And then a few days later, he found out she was part of a drug circle. And then a short time after that, they found her with her throat cut. And he asked Willem de Kooning to help him bury her and find a decent grave. And so I was amazed by the intrigue and the interconnections that were going on between him and all these other artists. And de Kooning was very obliging, and Allan Stone gave Cornell a show that he shared with de Kooning. So I went to see it and I asked for a catalog. And he gave me several of them. And when I got back to the house, Cornell said, "I'm sorry I agreed to have that exhibition because Allan Stone has a warehouse. He doesn't have a gallery. He's interested in everything. He'll sell anything just to make a buck. He's a collector more than anything. He's not even a dealer yet. But I'm so glad to share a show with de Kooning."

MATTHEW AFFRON: Are there other artists who—in New York at that time who he cared about, was connected to, talked about?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I can't be sure who he really was interested in, but he certainly kept abreast of the season—who was showing and who wasn't, and going to special occasions—meetings of the groups, and bringing his

projector and films and supplying entertainment for them, 75 cents for one person and a dollar for two people to attend a film showing. So he was very astute about how to go about always making his efforts pay.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Where did he keep his collection of films?

HOWARD HUSSEY: In the back of the basement, where it wasn't so damp and it wasn't so bad for the films. Yeah, there were about 250 films, which he finally gave to the archive—Anthology Film Archives with P. Adams Sitney and Jonas Mekas. And I would go there and made—I made a catalog of the films that they were holding for him. And after a while, the estate reclaimed his films and said, "You can keep everything else, but you have to return Cornell's films because we're going to market them and you're not allowed to do that."

MATTHEW AFFRON: You're speaking of the collage films that Cornell made?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, *Rose Hobart* and the special visits to the islands and to the Dutch country and how children behaved in foreign lands, again, of interest to his brother.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did he show any of these films and did he look at them in the house or work on them in those years?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, occasionally he would make an evening. If it was too late, he said, "It's no use for you going home on a late train. You may as well sleep over." And so he would—I'd take out the projector and show me some of the films that were his favorites. *The Automatic Moving Company* [by Émile Cohl, 1910 -MA], very early films made in France by the Méliès brothers and films of the factory and the factory workers [Louis Lumière, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon*, 1895 -MA]. And Lumière, whom he adored. Lumière's films were great inspirations to him, and he had over 3,000 film stills, which disappeared after he died. Nobody knows what happened to those film stills.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Why do you think he cared about those very early films so much?

HOWARD HUSSEY: It was the idea that people could have the depth of imagination—an interest to enjoy what they were seeing projected on a screen. It was very magical. You know, when you think about it, it's a magical thing. We have this slide projector as a result. You know, you could watch the progress from a movie screen to a projector to a TV, you know, and see the whole progress of visual art taking place right before your eyes. He made it a point to give film showings during the holiday season, telling certain artists who had lofts that he will give them a series of films to show, \$1.00 a head admission. And that's where I first saw a good—a sound representation of the films he was holding on to. He was very good friends with Francis Doublier, who was part of the French group and came to America.

MATTHEW AFFRON: He was a cameraman.

HOWARD HUSSEY: He was a cameraman, right, exactly.

MATTHEW AFFRON: In the early French films.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Do you remember where that screening in the loft that you just referred to took place or whose loft it was?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I wish I could remember the names of them, but it was—where were those lofts? It was very, very Cornelian because everything was very bare. There were benches to sit on, and they were fairly well-attended, not really well-attended, but attended. People did pay attention. Great Jones Street was where one of the lofts was, and I cannot think of the person who lived there.

MATTHEW AFFRON: But essentially, we're talking about lofts in Greenwich Village.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And so the—so there was a screening organized and announced.

HOWARD HUSSEY: If somebody was having a birthday, he would send films and a projector and a projectionist, and that would be part of the entertainment. And I would deliver goods. And so the matron of the house said, "Don't go away, Howard. Stay and enjoy some of this party for my daughters." She had three daughters. One of them was acting as a fortuneteller, and so I stayed on. And sure enough, Cornell appeared and was very angry and very upset that I was still there. And she said, "Joseph, I invited him to stay. He didn't make up his mind just to be here. He wanted to see you too." So Cornell wasn't sure how to treat me after that, how much I knew and how much I could know and what he could trust me with.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And you described the rooms of the house and little bit of the—of the way it appeared. Can you say something about what daily life was like at the house on Utopia Parkway?

HOWARD HUSSEY: It was very ordinary. There was nothing that looked special or seemed special. I would do shopping and then I would insist that he had lunch. And he would say, "I can't eat this and I can't eat that." And I said, "If you don't eat it, the food will be thrown away." Then, he would eat it. So we would have a French lunch with ham and cheese and French bread, but he wasn't a drinker. The only thing he drank was coffee, tea, or children's party punch.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And what else do you remember about daily life in the house?

HOWARD HUSSEY: A man would come to pick up the laundry. He had his laundry sent out. And another man appeared from a charity organization with these great big brown bags, and Cornell knew exactly what to do with them. So I helped him fill the bags. He would empty out his closets of clothes he didn't want anymore and Robert's clothes and his mother's clothes. And little by little, there appeared on the bed a mountain of coins that were still in the pockets of his clothes. There was at least \$250 in coins on the bed, and I was very amused. I said, "Do you mind if I ask you if I can have one of the shirts which I like so much?" And he said, "I'm reserving it for a special gift." It was a wonderful royal purple velvet shirt that came from a place called Clyde's Clothes for Men Without Inhibitions. Yeah. It was a wonderful thing and a wonderful shirt, and he wore it when he went to Central Park to see the seals being fed. And it was a very good friend of Donald Wyndham. The writer. The writer.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Clyde? Who was the friend of Donald Wyndham?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Cornell was a good friend of Donald Wyndham.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Oh, yes.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Because Wyndham had a studio right across the hall from the School of American Ballet, and he produced the magazine called *Dance Index*. And Cornell would go there, suggesting what issues to make and get all the material for the issues. You know, all about the ballerinas and circus and the history of ballet during the Victorian Age, you know, with [Marie] Taglioni and [Fanny] Cerrito and [Carlotta] Grisi and the famous ballet—the *Les Quatre [Pas de quatre -MA]*. [Benjamin] Lumley, who was in charge of one of the major theaters in London, decided to show all four ballerinas and attract a sell-out audience. And they left Taglioni to dance the last because she was the queen of the ballet at the time. And Cornell made the box with the ice cubes in honor of her, Taglioni's jewel case, and that was one of the first of what is called the object biographies. And he kept up a whole line of this for several others, including Cleopatra and—Richard Feigen liked that box very much, with Cléo de Mérode, which is one of the—what would you call her at the time? One of the fashionable ladies.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Courtesan?

HOWARD HUSSEY: A courtesan. Right, he still has that box now. I think—I'm not sure where it's going to go, but I'm sure he has the place in mind, where to leave his Cornell collection. And he had quite a few, and he would drive out in a limousine to see Cornell and wind up going home with two or three boxes, which he would purchase. And Cornell would allow him to do that, and he said, "He doesn't have to act like a snob and take a limousine. The train is good enough." You know, so I would say, "Well, when you have money, you—there are lots of things you can do with it, including buying your work." And he said, "I don't know how much work he has of mine at this point, but I'm very angry with Edwin Bergman because he has cornered the market on my work and he has agents who go around galleries looking at the work that the galleries have and picking out the best boxes and buying them for my collection." And Cornell was very, very, very unhappy about this. "He doesn't want my work to be hoarded and shut away where no one can see it. I'm making this work so that people will see it, and he's hiding it in his wonderful apartment in Chicago." Yeah, at the Palatin house, and he had renovated the rooms. And one doorway he closed up with glass shelves and put the boxes on view there, and they were very well seen and honored. And he wrote to Cornell and told him that he was doing this, that he shouldn't think he's just hoarding the work and nobody's seeing it. But they were seeing it.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you would have lunch. You would work in the garden.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: You would—you would—Cornell would send you—send you on various kinds of errands to help him in various ways.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Errands, yeah, sometimes just to take the boxes from the dealers who were ready to change off and wanted other boxes to show. They had had certain boxes long enough, and people didn't seem very interested in those boxes. It's too bad I never met Julien Levy at the time, but I did meet him when I did the

Cornell memorial at the Metropolitan. And he was one of the—he gave a testimonial, along with Allegra Kent and Donald Wyndham and John Ashbery and Henry Geldzahler was the—what do you call them? The leaders of the program—what's the name of the person who does that? Yeah, they have a title. And the house was packed, and I liked designing the invitation to the memorial. A lot of people showed up.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Where did it take place?

HOWARD HUSSEY: At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium. It was packed. You couldn't get another person in. And I was sorry that I didn't think about getting a stenographer or a tape recorder to take down all the testimonials. Fairfield Porter gave a wonderful testimonial, and it appeared later in number 8 of *Art and Literature*. Cornell gave him a box because he wrote that article.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Can you say something about Cornell's working habits or his—?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, he slept very little, at most about two hours. He was like a cat who would jump on the bed and cover himself with a shawl that was given to him by the Lighthouse for the Blind because he would make donations of all the records he didn't want any more—the vinyl records. And I would take them and they were very happy with his interest in the Lighthouse. He was a good patron. He gave money as well. Nobody knew how generous he had—he was, and you could tell how wealthy he was by the amounts of money he would give and the gifts he would make to charitable institutions.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And can you name some other ones? You know where else he—

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, the Good Friends was the alliance in New York City on Lower Broadway. The Educational Alliance and they were also very happy to have him as a patron. And he'd often take an envelope with a check in it that he was getting—a year. And it just followed through that way, with all the charitable institutions.

MATTHEW AFFRON:

So when—we were talking about his working routine.

HOWARD HUSSEY: His working routine would begin at 5: 00 or 6: 00 in the morning and go on throughout the whole day, and he wouldn't quit sometimes until sundown. And then he would go outside with his binoculars and his Adirondack chair and sit and look up at the sky, first at the clouds, then at the sky, then at the stars. And right over his house, I think, was Cassiopeia. It was amazing connections, a coincidence, a very lucky coincidence that he could do—he could have all that. He was definitely working under some kind of destiny, and I was very impressed to see how connected he was and to what.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So he worked all day?

HOWARD HUSSEY: He did, indeed. I used to call him to lunch. Otherwise he wouldn't come; or call in to tea at 4 o'clock, which was like a ritual. And my job then seemed a little lighter for me, and not just work, but also sharing a social sense with Cornell, which was very hard to encourage him to give forth.

MATTHEW AFFRON: You mean during teatime?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, right. Otherwise, he was strictly a working artist with no time for anyone or anything [coughs]. I think I need some water.

MATTHEW AFFRON: In the—in the period when you were spending time at the house, Howard, which is in the second half of the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s—

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —would you say Cornell was working more on boxes or on collages?

HOWARD HUSSEY: He was working more on collages because the boxes were so demanding. He had kept several boxes back, quite a few that he knew were not to his liking or finishing. They weren't finished in a way that he wanted them to be, so he would hold them back. So most of the boxes in the house at that time were unfinished. And he would put a note in the box and write on the glass with white paint the day he abandoned work on the work and what's missing and put the note in the box. And I had to explain to dealers when I went to see exhibitions of his work, "You know, this work is not finished. And it shouldn't be on the wall because Cornell never showed a work that had notes in it that said, 'This work is not finished. This is what it needs. This is when I stopped work on it.'" And the word got back to the lawyers, and they said, "You mustn't do this, Mr. Hussey, because you're devaluing the estate." I said, "I get the message, and I won't talk anymore about the background of the work, but, you know, how do you feel about buying a work of art that isn't finished?" They had nothing to say at that point. They couldn't criticize me. But the Pace Gallery had a good time with his work and

showed it to advantage. They painted the walls blue and put constellations on the walls, and then they hung the boxes around the room. And I would say it was one of the best exhibitions of Cornell's work that I had seen.

MATTHEW AFFRON: When do you think this was?

HOWARD HUSSEY: This was 1970—close to 1980. Yeah, it was pretty close to 1980. I was still wanting to do my own work, so I was glad that it was only two nights and three days, and then I would go back to the—my apartment and continue doing what I was doing in keeping up my circle of friends, staying in touch with everyone and not just disappearing. And then one day, in the middle of work, I had a load of collages in my arms, about 22 or 23 collages that had been unframed. And he said, "What do you make out of the fact that Nijinsky masturbated?" And if I wasn't holding those collages, God knows what would have happened. I would have collapsed; I was so unprepared to hear this language coming from him. And I said, "You know, Joe, it was an answer to a solution." And I'm not making a double entendre. The answer to a solution. It was easier for him to masturbate than go out searching for prostitutes. Diaghilev didn't like that, and Nijinsky kept—held him back and kept a chain or a leash on him, never let him have freedom, never gave him his salary, always kept him on tow. It was amazing, the history that would connect one thing with another. Little by little, I was gaining a history that spanned almost a century.

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MATTHEW AFFRON: This is Matthew Affron interviewing Howard Hussey at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on July 30, 2016 for the Archives of American Arts Smithsonian Institution, card number two. Well, hello again, Howard.

HOWARD HUSSEY: How do you do, Matthew?

MATTHEW AFFRON: How do you do?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I'm glad to see you again.

MATTHEW AFFRON: It's a pleasure. I'm going to try to pick up on some of the things we were talking about when we—when we spoke last time. I wanted to ask you a couple of things about Cornell's routine during the years in the—in the '60s when you were working closely with him and spending time part of the week in his house.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: It's well known that Cornell was an avid collector of all sorts of things from—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative].

MATTHEW AFFRON: —recordings, and books, and ordinary objects—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Objects, yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —of all kinds.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And that habit seems to have begun very early—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Early—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —for him.

HOWARD HUSSEY: —yeah, for him.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And I'm wondering if it continued in the middle 60s when you were with him and if there was any change in the way he collected, or the things he collected.

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, he didn't go into New York as frequently as he used to. He slowed down somewhat and he was still doing some new boxes. He hadn't stopped making boxes and he hadn't stopped making collages either. So, I was instrumental in finding things, also for him because he couldn't go. He didn't want to go out to the city anymore. And I knew the places where I could obtain the dyes that he used—the alcohol and water dyes at a place called Bhelen Brothers, B-H-E-L-E-N Brothers [*sic* Bahlen Brothers -MA]. And it was a curious thing when Cornell died, they closed up and moved to upper New York state and it's a—I had the impression that

places were kept open by him because he gave them a lot of business.

MATTHEW AFFRON: You said alcohol and water dyes. What were they for?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Both for the collages and the boxes. Sometimes they made a different color on the back of the collages. He could dye a collage from a grey to a nice blue or, you know, a nice, warm, deep rose red and his inscriptions—I mean, the backs were sometimes just as important as the front.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And so you would go get his alcohol and water dyes. Were there other kinds of materials that were very, very important then—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, he was also—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —that you went and got?

HOWARD HUSSEY: —interested if I could find any antique velvets, he was interested in having them just in case he wanted to work on something, and there were kinds of paper he used, besides marbled paper. Some rag paper and things that would work successfully on the backs of the boxes. And old prints—I mean, old books written in Latin with a nice print—like a 12-point print on the page. And he would use the pages to paste up the backs of the boxes with them.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Where did you find the antique velvets?

HOWARD HUSSEY: In the thrift shops. There were many more then than there are now. The thrift shops in the west 40s—

MATTHEW AFFRON: And the papers?

HOWARD HUSSEY: —on the Eighth and Ninth Avenue.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And the papers, also? In the same places? Or—

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, the paper came from different art shops who were having sales and trying to reduce inventory. It would—

MATTHEW AFFRON: And the books?

HOWARD HUSSEY: The books all were on Fourth Avenue, as usual, in Book Row—also on sale—if you could find the ones that might interest him. Yeah, it was an interesting thing if you found a book with good engravings in it, or a book about birds that was colored by hand. The images of the birds were very vivid. The colors they used didn't fade, and sometimes he cut out the images in order to begin work on a new piece, a new variation with a bird theme in it. I think some of the ingredients for the Juan Gris boxes came out of some of these books in the background. The Philadelphia Museum has the best Juan Gris box though with the white cockatoo [*Homage to Juan Gris*, ca. 1953-1954. -MA]. Yeah, and there are about six, maybe seven—and maybe there's a hidden eighth one somewhere that has to be discovered. [. . . -MA]

Why Cornell called him the most spiritual of the Cubists and that was because Juan Gris was Spanish. And the Spanish are realists and his work had a realism in it that was very surprising to use with a Cubist style; very wonderful work and very remarkable color combinations. And some of the canvases were large, too. I don't know how many there are, but I do have the catalogue resume and two volumes by Douglas Cooper and they're reproduced very beautifully.

So, I think it was a happy relationship because I didn't make any demands on him. And I think I mentioned in our first interview that he was very unhappy that I would sometimes sleep until nine o'clock in the morning. He would wake up at five or six and by the time I came down for breakfast, he had done a full day's work, you know. But, we did get along very well and I think I mentioned in the first interview the things I observed about him that was so unusual. And that I always felt that the house was still occupied by his brother Robert's spirit. Robert was watching over him, the way Cornell watched over Robert when he was alive.

MATTHEW AFFRON: I think it's very interesting this discussion of the—of the help that you gave him in finding materials for his works. What about the materials for his collages?

HOWARD HUSSEY: He was more particular about those from the magazines he collected, *US Photography*, and mostly the best photography magazines that had color reproductions which he would use—especially when they wonderful nudes in them. The nudes were not what I would call *Playboy*-type magazines. They didn't cater to any sexual stimulation. They were very calm and the nudes didn't look neurotic. They looked very sane and happy to be who they were.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Well, there are two big differences between his early collages in the 1930s—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, the engravings—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —the engravings—

HOWARD HUSSEY: —yes, right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —and later ones of this—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Max Ernst.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Right.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right, yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And the later ones of the 60s and one big difference, of course, is that he used color so abundantly—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, yeah—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —in the later collages—

HOWARD HUSSEY: —yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —and the other is the—

HOWARD HUSSEY: They're so full.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —and the other is the appearance of nude figures.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So can you say a little—do you have anything more to say about either of those two aspects?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, I don't think he was doing the type of—using the type of nude that he couldn't show to his brother. I think he worked with a certain—I would call it quiet morale behind the work. Nobody could say that they were vulgar or too stimulating, but they were quite beautiful and—with his work, it was always amazing. He had a special gift. Mathematically, he had a high rate of intelligence and he could place the figures on the collages perfectly. And they always looked seamless, like they were all—always one piece. I always amazed by that.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And the color? The color is—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —remarkable in those collages.

HOWARD HUSSEY: —the color is wonderful. Sometimes you would go around the edges with a pale blue or on a daytime collage with a pale yellow. And he always changing the frames because he wasn't satisfied with the way they looked—some of them framed. And I don't want repeat myself from session number one, but he unframed about 25 collages because he didn't care for them—the way they looked. He wanted them to vintage, so he gave me this armload of collages and as I was going up the steps, he said to me, "What do you make out of the fact that Nijinsky masturbated?" I think I mentioned this—

MATTHEW AFFRON: You did.

HOWARD HUSSEY: —and I said, "Well, Joe, it was a solution." I wasn't making a double entendre. I said, "It was easier for Nijinsky to do that than to go out on the street." Diaghilev wouldn't let him—looking for prostitutes.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Why do you think Cornell was interested in that—in that issue?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I think it was very important to him because, as everybody found out gradually, he died a virgin. He never had any sexual relationships with anyone. And his female helpers were always very nice to him, and he was very nice to them. So, I think it was a balanced program that he set up at his house. And I was glad to see that he had more than two or three other helpers. I didn't want to be there when they were there and I asked him to change my hours so that I could be there with him alone and feel free to talk to him about subjects

that would interest him. He thought—he said to me, "Are you a writer?" And I said, "No, Joe, I'm not a writer, but I'm interested in what you have to say."

And I started keeping a journal and I kept—I kept a note of the details in the house that interested me, like the books finally overflowed from the shelves onto the floor, and made stacks up the—halfway up the stairs and there were books in his bedroom, and books in the living room, and books in the sitting room. It was wonderful. I always said to him, "You know, I'd like to catalogue these books for you. In the future, it'll be very important to see what you were reading and what you had access to that gave you ideas for collages." So he would do these little imprints by himself—print little excerpts from some of the books by Nathaniel Parker Willis, the "Bel Canto Pet," and the one up by "Maria" of Elise Polko—musical sketches. And he would send these very specially enveloped to the people he wanted to have them. I was very happy to get a copy of the "Bel Canto Pet" and it was signed on tissue paper in the back. So, I still have that as a wonderful memento.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Would you say that he thought of those small additions—of writings he cared about—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Would you say that they—that they were of a piece with his creative work? Or were they separate?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, yeah—yeah, they were very separate—they were much as part of—they were not separate. They were very much a part of his mystique and his mystique was a very—or a true one. I couldn't figure out where—you know, how they had originated, but I know he was inspired a great deal by Duchamp and that was later. And he would go to Duchamp's studio and pick up things that were on the floor. And one day, Frederick Kiesler was visiting Duchamp on 14th Street and he saw Duchamp put these things down on the floor. And he said, "What are you doing, Marcel?" And Marcel said, "These are for Cornell. He's coming later to help me with one of my valises." And Cornell would pick up everything on the floor and keep it as mementos. And kept a box called, you know, "Marcel Duchamp." And that was used for the show called—in—what was the name of that show that they did together in—?

MATTHEW AFFRON: *In Resonance [Marcel Duchamp Joseph Cornell . . . In Resonance, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998 -MA].*

HOWARD HUSSEY: *In Resonance*, right. And they opened up this box and showed what was in it, and it was very interesting, including a tube of glue they don't make anymore and the byline of the tube was, "Give me strength." Give me strength—yeah, so I always got a kick out of that.

[Hussey is referring to an element in Cornell's *Duchamp Dossier* (c. 1942-53), Philadelphia Museum of Art. The element is an empty carton for LePage glue. The carton is marked with the slogan "strength." Duchamp hand wrote the word "gimme" to create the phrase "gimme strength." He signed it and gave it to Cornell for Christmas in 1942. -MA]

MATTHEW AFFRON: Let me ask you again about the way he was making boxes in the mid '60s.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So—

HOWARD HUSSEY: He could still operate the power tools, the circular saw, and the bandsaw to cut down and make things fit. But he never wanted the corners to be perfect like they were machine-made. They were really—they looked like—everything looked like handmade and that was the wonderful thing about them. They had a very personal touch that a machine couldn't give them. And finally, he contacted a lumber yard in Flushing and gave them the proportions of the boxes and, like, every three months they would bring him a box that needed his work. They would give—bring him an empty shell and he would begin to work on the new piece—a new box. So I was very happy to see that.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And what—and what were the themes that he was using in these—in those new boxes in those days?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, they had to do with infinity. They had to do with the cycles of the year. They had to do with the fact that objects are also symbols for other things in life that we don't realize. A cordial glass could be the container for our whole life, but he would put a blue marble in it and the marble would look like a wonderful—it had a special quality. The whole thing suddenly took on another level. It rose up some. It took on a higher superior quality. But he loved to that. And he had his own—a vast collection of things that he had from the World's Fair of 1933 [1939 New York World's Fair -MA], I think, in Flushing when he went around to the different booths and collected things from them, including the clay pipes that he used. Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So he continued some of the themes that he'd been working on since—really the '50s—

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right, yeah. Yeah, there were certain things—

MATTHEW AFFRON: And he used the sand—

HOWARD HUSSEY: —that he was—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —use the sand—

HOWARD HUSSEY: —favorite.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —for example.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And where did the sand come from?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Oh, the sand came from a—the garden that he—the garden—Central Garden or Garden Central, 1944 [Garden Centre in Bayside, New York -MA]. And he stocked up on colored sand: the blue, the yellow, the brown, the black, the rose-colored and the pink. And he would use these in the small boxes, four by five, with lids on them—specimen cases—and looked like they were covered with artificial leather. But I would polish them sometimes and keep them clean. And he would make people's portraits, and when he had an exhibition, he often asked people if they were interested in having their portrait in a little specimen box. And he would put glass plates in them and mirrors and cut out part of the mirror that would show the head as though it was reflected on glass—on the glass mirror. And he would put in special contents, like fish scales, and bb's, and sometimes, he would put some sand—a nice colored sand in.

But it was also his worry that the boxes would soon lose their sand, and he showed me—he left a box sitting on a table in the living room, and he didn't touch it. It was on a piece of newsprint, and a week later, he lifted the box up and there was the outline of the box with all the sand that has escaped electromagnetically from the box. So he knew there would be problems in the future. And even Richard Feigen asked me to restore the sand in some of the works that had lost their sand. And Feigen had a nice collection of Cornell's work and so did Mr. Bergman in Chicago.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Well, the question of the sand is interesting because it takes us to the question of the needing to refurbish these boxes—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —not so long after they were made.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, well, I said, "Teach me restoration," and he was very surprised when I said that to him. And I was trying my own work at the same time. And it was around this time, shortly before I began to work for him, that I did this play, "The Tidings Brought to Mary," by Paul Claudel—and Wallace Fowlie translated it. I did the costumes for it—for the Maison Française in NYU. And through that venue, I met someone who invited me to the Twentieth Century West Galleries at 1018 Madison Avenue to show some of my paintings. But my work was too radical for the group that was showing there. They were showing traditional work: landscapes, still lifes, figure pieces. And I was there just about—close to a year—and they—I never sold anything because my work was too different, too almost surreal, and by comparison with the works that were on the wall. So I wasn't invited back for another six months and I knew that they couldn't show my work because it really didn't belong in their gallery.

Around this time, after doing the play which perform—which is performed in a church on Fifth Avenue and 11 Street. There were three performances of it and very well attended. And then, a good friend of mine opened up his own gallery called the Carlton Gallery at 127 East 69th Street just across the street from Hunter College. We were between Park and Lexington. And he gave me four one-man shows of paper weavings and it attracted collectors. I always sold half of his—the—each exhibit, but kept back the pieces that were too special to sell. The sizes varied from 9 by 12, to 14 by 18. I got this idea about doing paper weaving from looking through a screened window. The screen with its crosses, horizontal and vertical made me think if I cut up paper this way and use two sheets with the same image, they would come out a very vibrating image.

So I showed those for some time, but I continued to do restoration work for Julien Levy. He moved to a new house almost every year, so artwork got damaged during the move. And there was water damage to pieces by Duchamp, and Man Ray, and Max Ernst, Cornell, and de Chirico. And Julien asked me to try to restore them and

get the wrinkles out of them, and dry them out, and make sure they were perfectly flat again, so I was able to do the restoration work on these pieces. And after Cornell's estate was settled, I was in continual demand to fix things in the boxes. He always feared that the boxes with the sand in them would eventually need sand replacements.

I met the French art dealer, Daniel Varenne and he was interested in having me work on the pieces that had been damaged. So he invited me—he paid for my passage to come to Paris and stay at a hotel, and work on the Cornell work in his gallery. We became very good friends and it, sort of, allowed me to understand that though Cornell didn't look it, he looked like a tramp. He was really a millionaire by then. He had sold and taken part in many, many, many exhibits.

And Julien Levy did help him, you know, share the ground with the surrealists, and the Neo-Romantics. And Tchelitchew was a good friend of Cornell's and when Tchelitchew died, he wrote Charles Henri Ford a wonderful letter of condolence. Tchelitchew died in 1957. They were in Italy at the time. It was a very, I would call it, sophisticated circle of people that I was meeting because of Cornell's work and everyone was very happy that I was able to do the restoration work. But he, most of all, was astonished when I asked him to show me how to do restoration. So he reached in behind this blue curtain and took out a box and said, "Unscrew the lid and put a piece—two pieces of newsprint on the floor and dump out everything that's in the box."

So, that's exactly what I did and the box was finally—I could see that in the blue sand, there were pieces of white flakes from the background that he painted in the box. And he gave me this brush with a very fine point, and he showed me how to wet it with my saliva, and pick out the white specs in the blue sand, and make it look fresh again. And that was the first lesson in restoration. He said, "I'll give you something more difficult to do later on." So we put the box back together again and oiled the holes for the screws in the top lid. And I was very interested in continuing this work with him. No one before had said to him, "Teach me restoration." I was the first assistant that he had who showed that deeper interest in his work. He seemed relieved on one hand. And then he also worried how I would continue to do this if people didn't really know about me. Because he never spoke about the fact that I was assisting him for those 60 years from 1966 to 1972 when he died. And I think I spoke about the Cornell Memorial at the Met which was very well attended. And then in January 1973, it was absolutely packed. You couldn't get another person in. Diane Waldman and Thomas Hess advised me how to do this memorial.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you get a second lesson in restoration after the first lesson—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Not—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —about picking out those specs?

HOWARD HUSSEY: —not quite. No, no. Somehow there were always projects that had to be seen. Projects that had to be looked after, but I was amazed and so was his friend, R.J. that I could continue even for six years to work for him. She was head of the picture collection in The New York Public Library and he was one of the first people to use the picture collection for his own work to find images. He was always asking how to find him things and one of those searches, she found a rowboat that belonged to Herman Melville and it was called Taglioni, one of Cornell's favorite Victorian ballerinas. Part of a group of four with Fanny Cerrito, and Carlotta Grisi, and Giulia Grisi—her sister. And it was a very interesting history that he kept alive. How they all performed together once in London. One of the English theatre directors decided that he would make a grand performance of the four great ballerinas to perform all together on stage and Taglioni was the—you might say the queen of the group.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you know the librarian at the picture collection personally?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, I knew her very well. I made very good friends with her. Carlton who opened his gallery had been her secretary for several years and Cornell was always amazed [laughs] that R.J. [Romana Javitz -MA] had a male secretary working for her. But she would keep his work on view from time-to-time, he would bring in work to show her and she let the public see it. In the meantime, she was collecting photographs and making a huge and wonderful photographic collection which is now very, very, very extraordinary at the library. You have to have special permission to see it. But she was always collecting photographs because she knew they would be very, very important in the future.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you say that she displayed Cornell's work in the—in the picture collection at the library?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, sometimes she had it on the front desk where she worked and kept track of the people coming, and going, and looking in the different bins for the different subjects from the picture collection. And she always supported his work, and finally she bought a box from him for \$75, and later it went for \$27,000 at Parke-Bernet or at Sotheby's. When she died, the box was sold so her investment was really an extraordinary thing. She had gotten quite ill as she aged, and finally she couldn't keep the important things. But she had a wonderful correspondence from him in a file which went—while she was in the hospital, her neighbor let me in and let me see all these letters and notes that Cornell had sent her over the years. I was always happy to see what it was

that he was sending her and what it was he was talking about, and keeping her informed about what he was working on.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Do you remember any of the things that he let her know about, apart from what he was working on?

HOWARD HUSSEY: I can't now, no. My memory has gotten very bad. I really can't say what it was that kept the fires going there, but they had a close relationship. And afterwards, I would go to see her and we would go out to supper afterwards. And she would say, "I'm so happy that you're working for Cornell. I didn't think you would last this long," and I began to tell her about what I thought was the spirit of Robert in the house, and she was amazed that I picked up on it. But she remained a staunch friend of Cornell's and a great supporter of his work. In the children's room, in the library in those days, the children's room—the picture collection and the music division—were altogether on the same level. One room lead into the next one, and the whole thing changed. Everything got separated. The music got separated, the children's room got moved to another part of the building, and the picture collection had stayed where it was. She had about 10 or 12 people—women—helping her going through books and taking out the important images that were in these books. They were old books.

MATTHEW AFFRON: I believe that he inscribed one of his *Monsieur Phot* [*Monsieur Phot (Seen Through the Stereoscope)*, 1933 -MA] portfolios to her.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, he did. He did give her one, right. And she promised to show it to me, so one afternoon, she invited me to lunch and out came *Monsieur Phot* and I was very amazed to see that he had written the scenario and used the images from stereopticon views. He used—each one had about five images to relate the story about Monsieur Phot who was a photographer.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Apart from the sand and the—making sure that you had the sand kept up, what were the other major issues that he worried about in keeping the boxes fresh?

HOWARD HUSSEY: That they were not becoming dehydrated and that some of the papers in them had to be re-glued and re-affixed to the back and the front. Yeah, it was a full-time—you know, constantly investigating which boxes were drying up and which boxes were well taken care of. I used to polish them, waterproof some of them with waterproof spray so that water wouldn't affect them if they got sold. And he wanted to have these works exhibited and Richard Feigen, at that time, I think was his dealer, Eleanor Ward had been before Richard Feigen. And she showed his hotel boxes, which were a completely different character—completely different format from the bird boxes and the sand boxes and the universe boxes. It was very interesting how he kept things going.

But he managed to get the Wadsworth Atheneum to buy his piece about the moon [*Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*, 1936 -MA] and it had the doll's head, and an egg, and a pipe, and these white cylinders hanging from the top that looked like tiny drinking mugs. There were four of them. And it gave the box a great character. They still have that, but all that they did—all the velvet that was once a kind of brown has turned a strange gray-green after all these years since 1934 [*sic* 1938 -MA], I think, when they purchased it.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Are there changes in colors or other changes that tend to happen with his materials that would make the impression quite different today from the time when he made—made the boxes or collages?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Not really, not. In character, they—they never really varied their character. Their character was always—had a great security because he really knew what he was doing. And I repeat, he had a remarkable sense of mathematics.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Another thing that happened in the mid 60s when you were working with him was that he had his first two retrospective exhibitions.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right. At—

MATTHEW AFFRON: The first one—

HOWARD HUSSEY: —the Museum of Modern Art.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —well at Pasadena in 1967 [*sic* 1966 -MA].

HOWARD HUSSEY: And the one in Pasadena, right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And the Guggenheim Museum—

HOWARD HUSSEY: But he lent—

MATTHEW AFFRON: —1968.

HOWARD HUSSEY: —half of the exhibit to Pasadena because they didn't have enough work, so he may—he lent half of the exhibit to them and there was a wonderful little catalogue, which one of the wives of the dealers bought half the edition, and now she wants \$250 for one of those little blue catalogues from Pasadena. Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Who—were—did—were you around for any of the preparations of that exhibition?

HOWARD HUSSEY: No, I wasn't aware that he was doing them. But he was very secretive. He didn't really talk much about what he was doing or what—what he was planning or who had invited him to have a show. By then he was so well-known and I didn't realize how really famous he was at the time.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Do you think these exhibitions change the character of his reputation, or he was already so famous that it—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah. Yeah, he really was quite famous. I never realized how famous he was and that he had been through so many, many, many different dealers and exhibitions after Julien Levy had discovered him.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Did you see the exhibition at the Guggenheim in—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —'68 [*sic* '67 -MA]?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yes, yes. It was a perfect place to show his work. Everything was white, and all those levels had pedestals with a work on each pedestal in the—what do you call it—the bins that—or the—there's a word for it. What is that word that used a separate—oh, yeah. They were called bays and I was very impressed with how well, you know, his work adapted to the place as radical as the Guggenheim. But it was very, very, very well done, and Waldman did the catalogue for it. And then, again, it's another rare—another rare example of—I began to collect all the catalogues and announcements and put together a fairly good collection. I don't have everything, but I have all—a pretty good collection of the things that—the exhibitions he had and the designs that he made for them. You know, there was a very good writer, Parker Tyler, who did the notes for his exhibition of toys for adults and that was at the Julien Levy Gallery. I don't remember what year. I think it was 1945 or '47 or thereabouts [*Exhibition of Objects by Joseph Cornell*, Julien Levy Gallery, New York, December 1939. Text by Parker Tyler. -MA].

MATTHEW AFFRON: You just made a remark about the quality of the architecture in—at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and its radical quality, its modernity, and—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —the way which Cornell's work fit into it.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah, very easily.

MATTHEW AFFRON: It reminds me of something that I read in something you wrote. Who—you said that Cornell's art belongs both to constructivism and symbolism—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —incompatible traditions.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you see it as a paradox, I guess.

HOWARD HUSSEY: I do.

MATTHEW AFFRON: What does it mean to you?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, he had brought together this need for his own kind of security, which was construction. And then, he was naturally a symbolist, so he managed to get these two to work together. The formats of the boxes, their sizes and contents, you know, were very, very complete. The boxes were very, very—they had a very wholesome look to them, you know? What you saw was something really, really complete. The construction part of it was overshadowed by the symbolism of the baubles, and the cordial glasses, and the cork balls, and the rings—the rings hanging from steel rods, and the soap bubble variations, and then the sun boxes where he had taken the face off a can of Italian oil—Italian olive oil. The face is a sun face smiling, and he managed to get together quite a few of these, cut them out—cut them out of the can that they were in and I think I see him when I was buying up all these cans of Italian olive oil just to get this face and giving the oil to people who

wanted it. Yeah, putting it in jars and bottles. He had it all worked out, more or less, what he really needed and where it was to come from. In those days, as I said, he didn't find it difficult to come and go from New York—from Flushing to New York. In those days, he could find things very easily and very cheaply.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Do you think—what did—what did you think of the time of his connections to the New York art world, if any?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, everybody always invited him and he was always accepted. He had never been—he never met with any—no inverse response to what he was doing. He always contributed something that wouldn't have been there otherwise. So, you know, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and all the others, they sort of took the hint from Cornell and took a great deal from him, including the image that's repeated—but it isn't repetition—and used it in their own work and the large format of their collages and objects, you know, that Leo Castelli was very interested in. Leo Castelli was a great fancier of objects and Jasper Johns had quite a few that he—Leo Castelli was interested in at the time, including a flashlight which he cast in led and other objects. And Rauschenberg was doing a whole series based on the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. I remember that. And he came to the collage exhibition and he was looking in the cases at the memorabilia that I had brought and he was very touched to see—

MATTHEW AFFRON: Is this the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition at MoMA?

HOWARD HUSSEY: The—right. That's right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And then—and Rauschenberg came and was looking at memorabilia that you assembled—or Cornell?

HOWARD HUSSEY: More or less, yes.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Rauschen—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative].

MATTHEW AFFRON: Were you—were you—

HOWARD HUSSEY: Yeah.

MATTHEW AFFRON: —speaking of Rauschenberg?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Right.

MATTHEW AFFRON: And what was this memorabilia?

HOWARD HUSSEY: It was, again, a repeated image of a head, of a face, and there were several boxes of this kind, and then the box with the white cubes in it, and the—another one with yellow cork balls in it, and this repetitive image—each cube—each cubical was always different. The cork ball or the white cube—little wooden white cube always occupied a different position in the box and gave it variation. It was almost like a film. And I think he had the idea from looking at 35mm film and seeing the repetition of the faces and it occurred to him, since he was interested in film, to get involved, himself, in making historic films about places in Flushing that were going to disappear.

There was one old, old house—an enormous house with wonderful gingerbread trimming, and he went up to the observatory and he called it *Centuries of June*, and it was really a portrait of the—of the—a whole, complete portrait of this house before it was torn down. Then, when it was torn down, he took some of the lumber that was there to use in the making of some of his boxes. It was—it was truly vintaged antique lumber from the 1880s or from the 1890s, and he liked the crack—cracked surfaces to use on the outside on some of his vertical-type boxes that had figures in them from—I cannot think of the name of the painter at this point, but he did a painting called "La Bella" and—half the box was stained with blue and half the box was stained with yellow, making it a daytime/nighttime experience.

And then there were little staves of wood that divided up the interior space around La Bella, and it was very imposing, it was very hypnotic to look at these pieces and to see them. They were roughly about 15 to 16 inches high and the width was about 8 or 9 inches and the depth was about 4 inches, so they were really very prominent objects. And people looked at them, but they couldn't figure out what Cornell was deeply involved in, in his own symbolism. And what he was doing was keeping the spirit of the image up-to-date and brought it into modern times from the 17th century or the 16th century.

MATTHEW AFFRON: I think that's an interesting point. You've said somewhere that Cornell's work moves backwards and forwards in time.

HOWARD HUSSEY: That's right. That's what it was all about. There was a continuum, and he worked with that sense of, "These images are not dated and dead, and they're very much alive," and he used them in a way that brought them—very much animated them, made them alive again. And the Medici Prince and the Medici Princess and a whole group of—excuse me—characters that he found in the terms of childhood, the youthfulness of the images—you always felt that those boxes were for children. And he did a very special exhibition at the Cooper Union that was just for children, themselves. No adults were allowed, just children, to come in and see his work.[*A Joseph Cornell Exhibition for Children*, Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture, New York, 1972 -MA]

MATTHEW AFFRON: So you think he's an artist who remembers for us, in a way?

HOWARD HUSSEY: He does. He keeps the past very much alive in his life, since it inspired him to do the most extraordinary things with his memories. He had a photographic memory and he could tell you every building on the street that was next to every other building. He knew New York like the lines in his own hand. He could see—he really did know New York and all about it, every area, uptown and downtown and midtown, and he liked going around the 42nd Street area to see the teenage prostitutes that were walking or looking to find clients, and if a piece of Marabou blew off one of their scarves he would go into the gutter and get it and keep it as a memento of that day.

And his record collection was vast. I often had to search for records for him of Satie and Debussy and Ravel and Schuman and Schubert and the ballets by Tchaikovsky. And when he finally had an overflow, I would take the overflow to a place on 59th Street, the Lighthouse School for the Blind—the music school, particularly, would receive all these extras from Cornell. So they knitted a shawl for him one year, for Christmas. It was his Christmas present—a shawl knitted in very beautiful colors and very perfect by blind people and he always kept this show on the daybed. After Robert died, he moved down to the daybed and would stay there. That was his place of refuge after Robert died and he always had his shawl available and wrap himself up in it and take a nap.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Music was very important to him.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, he had the sense that—the people at Music Masters, the man there—his first name was Will; I can't think of his last name—he said, "Cornell has the intelligence of a musician. When he buys a recording from me, it isn't just an ordinary purchase. He really knows a great deal about the composer and the style of the music and the technique that went into it." He said he was very impressed with Cornell, making purchases of all these classical recordings.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Would you say that music was important for his art?

HOWARD HUSSEY: He always had music going when he was working. It seemed to be the friendliest environment he could create to keep his theme and all the variations active. So he was always at work and as I said, there were times when I was still sleeping that I could smell the toast burning down below at six o'clock in the morning, or five o'clock, sometimes. He would try to have a little breakfast while he was working, and he would forget that the bread—the toast was still going and suddenly he had to run up and take the burnt toast and scrape it. And he wouldn't throw it away, he would scrape it and re-butter it and have it along with his morning tea. He was a great tea drinker and the—very often, four o'clock everything would stop and we would have an afternoon tea and he had his sweets and his accompaniments for the tea. It was always an interesting time because then I got him to talk more about his personal history and his history of New York and what he was doing there, and he just knew everything. It was amazing.

He loved, particularly, a great entertainment house called the Hippodrome on 6th Avenue and 44th Street. And he often went there and it had a huge auditorium. It literally held thousands and thousands of people and had the most remarkable effects on stage. They would have waterfalls and stones. And it was just amazing how they could create what they did on that stage. It was vast—a vast house, and always full. And they gave all of a week of performances. Everything was sold out and here she was, this little tiny figure in white on this vast stage dancing the Dying Swan to thousands and thousands of people who had never otherwise have seen her. It was a remarkable event.

He remembers Pavlova coming from the Metropolitan Opera House, where she had performed, and getting into her limousine and looking out the back oval window at the crowd that was still cheering her and wanting her autograph. And it was a very vivid image. Every time Cornell chose to speak about these things, it was always as if he turned a film on—he had filmed it. Not only seen it, but he had filmed it in his memory, and all the details were always vivid, down to the last detail, including the one of Pavlova looking out the back window, the oval window at her audience, her fans.

He had been an opera lover for many years and whenever he had the time, he would buy standing room and go to all the operas. He was the great opera aficionado. He had seen great, great stars, including Caruso.

MATTHEW AFFRON: How would you describe, finally, Cornell's personality?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, essentially, he was a miss—a mystic. He was definitely a mystic, and he really lived in the fourth dimension, and that's why his work is so finished. It's a psychological agreement that he made with himself, and in my book and journals, it was the idea of a post-Eden-like innocence coupled with a psychic into destruction of fractured glasses and tattered walls and peeling wallpaper. He had the newborn and those that were passing out of life together in the same work. It was new and old at the same time, which is like completing a circle—a cycle, really.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Howard, let me ask you about the writing and any other projects that you did in relation to Cornell after his death.

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, it was a very complicated time. It was wintertime, and one of the worst snowfalls in New York City when he died. His nephew discovered him and had to—called him and called him and no response, so he climbed in through the basement window, and there he discovered Cornell on the daybed with the shawl, and he had had a heart attack. It was about three or four in the afternoon, and by then I had had to give up my apartment, which was literally freezing from the cold and move to a friend's guest bedroom—which was [laughs] just as cold, but I was happy to be away from what I thought was going to be real wreckage at this point. It was too cold to cook, it was too cold to do anything, and I thought for sure that the pipes in the walls were going to burst. And sure enough, they did, and that's when I had to leave the house. So when Cornell died, they probably tried to reach me by phone, but I wasn't—no longer in my apartment and I couldn't respond to the fact.

So here I was, washing breakfast dishes at my friend's rescue house and he said to me, "Howard, did you say you were going out to Cornell's this afternoon?" And I had three shopping bags full of material for him. And I said, "Yes, there are the bags. They're just waiting." He said, "Well when you get finished with the dishes, come and sit down with me because there's an interesting thing here that I think you should see." So I did, and he showed me the obit for Joseph Cornell, New York Times. And I was so overwhelmed. I just sort of kind of broke down. I didn't know what to think, I didn't know what to say. I was completely dumbfounded by the fact that in the meantime he had died on a Friday and it was now a Sunday. And my friend said, "You don't have to worry. I mean, if ever you need money or anything else and you got any other kind of work, you can always count on me." So I was very curious to see what would happen since Cornell's death. There was no news at all and I couldn't get in touch with the family. I remember they really didn't want anyone nosing around in their business while they were settling his estate. They didn't expect that he was a millionaire. They never knew that he had made so much money from his work.

And then I started—as the winter passed, I continued writing the journals and observations, and then it became a third volume called Apt Agenda. All the articles about him—that were written about him—should've been published—republished. They never were, so I thought they would make an interesting book, including a lecture by Juan Gris that he had put on my bed one night when I was going to sleep at Cornell's house. Juan Gris was a true intellectual, but his work was, as a result, the most spiritual of all the—of all the Cubists. And then I understood why Cornell was so fascinated by him, because he sort of had the same attitude towards art that Cornell did. It was something that was happening, not premeditated. It was something that was happening just then and there, just in the moment, and had the time—the time sense of the modern world as opposed to the antique world. But that's why Cornell included so many historic figures in his work.

So now, I have continued working on these pieces called "Hallucinations," and I learned how to make my own frames, and I think I was inspired to do that by Cornell making his own boxes. And then I started making columns, 24 inches high and about three and a half inches wide, four sides with triangles of color, which I call the Silence of Vision, and they would make an interesting show, I think. And then I did four masks. These masks were made ahead of time. They were blank when I bought them, but I decorated them and called them Oracles of the Strawberry Moon. So, I repeat, I'm still working. I intend to [laughs] continue working until I can't work anymore. The ideas keep coming all the time [coughs]—pardon me.

I think the life of an artist is certainly a very interesting one because one never knows from day-to-day what something is—when something is going to appear extra-special or not having considered it before as material to make art from. So all these works have—are using Japanese gold foil to finish them and make them look a little bit more up-to-date. They're very symbolic and very intricate pieces cut out of paper and paste symmetrically, sometimes asymmetrically on the panels that go into the frames, and then a glass is put on top. And I seal the glass in with the gold foil.

So, I haven't had a chance to make a show, yet, of these, but it might happen soon that a dealer in Philadelphia might get interested in what I'm doing and maybe I could have a show then. I don't know where it would—what people would make of this work because nobody is working this way in Philadelphia or New York, for that matter. No one is working in a symbolic sense with geometrical forms that go to make a harmonious composition and always looking very light-reflected because of all the gold that's used in them, and going down to details, very

tiny details—an eighth of an inch up to three inches or four inches of striped gold paper and blue backgrounds and blue labels on the back that tell what they are with my signature. I found some nice paper that was published several years ago now, impossible to get, so I use it very sparingly—of the—of the sky with white cloud—blue sky with the white clouds and the black signature of Hussey as very complementary to the whole thing in the back. I think I can continue to work on this indefinitely and started to order the wood to continue making the "Hallucinations." Maybe there'll be a total of 50 when I'm through, if I get to—if I get to work that much. I hope I do.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Okay, Howard. How would you like to wrap up this conversation?

HOWARD HUSSEY: Well, I think I've said all that I can about Cornell. I wonder if the archives have interviewed him. It's something I would not know about it, he is—he being so secretive about everything that happened, and I was hoping there would be something like a special exhibition of the work that is not finished—that was left unfinished in the studio so that people could understand that the work that's being sold isn't necessarily finished. And when I said something about it, the lawyers from the estate said, "You can't talk about that to anyone because you're devaluating the estate."

So I realized, well, that already is a drawback for Cornell because he would never show a work that had pieces of paper in it with notes and dates of when the work was started and when it was abandoned, and the pieces that he needed for it to make sure that he wouldn't forget why he abandoned work on a certain box at a certain time. And that has always interested me. What would the public think of an exhibition and will these works ever be seen, aside from the fact that they're in the archive that Cornell—Robert and Joseph Cornell Foundation Archive in Washington [Joseph Cornell Study Center, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC -MA]. I think they can be seen there, but I think it would be—make an interesting exhibition to be able to see these works because he wasn't always able to finish a work that he had started. And this is something that very few people realize about it. He would be—you know, he could keep a work going for quite a number of years, hoping that he would find the things that would finally complete it when he wasn't satisfied and that's something—I hope there will be some kind of project that will, in some way, account for the fact that there are so many works in Washington that are not finished.

As for my own work, I just will continue to work as long as I can on these pieces. And some of them have what I would call suggestive titles because if you look at the front and then you see the title on the back, some pieces will be called apostrophe and echolocation and pandemonium and—what were some of the others that—cantata and the enigma of space and another one, this happened before, and—I want to go down the whole list if I can remember them. There are 22 of them now, and I'm just going to keep working and see how they stack up and whether I can have a show of them or not. But Cornell has been a great inspiration in my life, and I must say, I miss him tremendously and I miss not going out there.

The house is now occupied by a man who arranges parties for children, and I think that's a [laughs] very interesting connection with Cornell. It's like—it's as if fate has decided that this house will be occupied by people who are doing special things, just as Cornell occupied it. And I do miss going out there and seeing him, and helping him, and spending the day and seeing how the day goes with Cornell. So I have him always in memory in the work that I'm doing because I wouldn't have had the idea of making frames, myself, if I hadn't learned that Cornell was making his own boxes and doing a lot for himself. And from time to time, I do come across a magazine that has a reproduction of something that he used in his collage—the nature collages, and "Eine kleine Nachmosik," a little snow music from Mozart—and there it is. That, I think, is the full story, or as much of it as I can give at the present time. Thank you, Matthew.

MATTHEW AFFRON: Thank you very much, Howard.

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