

Jeffrey Sturges Oral History [01:27:54]

HUFFA FROBES-CROSS: My name is Huffa Frobess-Cross. I'm interviewing Jeffrey Sturges with the Wesselmann Estate today on November 12th, 2020, and -- I think that's all we need for the intro. So, Jeffrey, I think what I would like to start off by talking about is kind of your initial engagement with the studio and with Wesselmann, and sort of what you were doing around that time. So, I guess, the first thing I would ask is, what were you doing kind of professionally, artistically, around the time that you came to work at the studio? And what was your background leading up to that moment?

JEFFREY STURGES: I had just -- actually, had I finished? I think I had just finished undergraduate art school and had moved to New York. The school that I was in in Baltimore had sort of an exchange program where you could go to New York City for a semester, work in a studio, and there was like a seminar class that you went to. And I had just finished that and met someone and was able sort of move to New York, I realized I wanted to be in New York City. And while I was there in this program, I noticed there was somebody else in the program that was writing all of these letters to artists, to work as an artist's assistant. And I thought, Well, that's a great idea. So, I got out the phone book and I got out the *Art in America* guide that listed all of the artists that were represented by galleries that were listed in this *Art in America* gallery guide. And I picked out the names that had the most numbers next to their name, because it meant that they were represented by the most number of galleries, and obviously had some kind of a thriving studio, and probably needed studio assistants. And then, once I got that list of names, I went to the phone book, got their

address, and I sent out about a hundred letters to different artists, asking for a job as a studio assistant.

And I got a number of responses. They didn't all turn into offers. But I did get a call from Wesselmann. And he basically just said, "I'm looking for somebody. Do you want to sort of -- come on in, and we'll meet, and we'll just sort of see how it goes?" So, there was no -- I didn't select him in particular. He was one of many. I knew about the work. I mean, he was mentioned in the art history class that I had in undergraduate school. And I remembered the *Great American Nude*. And I can remember getting there the first day, and now I know what the painting was. But I sort of, I saw it and I recognized it. And it was -- now I know that the painting was one of these NGANs, one of those paintings. And what it was -- I think it was called -- oh no, it was like *Great American Nude 8 + 23*, or something like that. And it was one of these paintings where he was remaking one of his earlier paintings, but in a sort of newer, updated style. And we can go and figure out exactly which work it was. But it was funny, because it was a work that I remembered, but it wasn't really the work that I was remembering. But because it was a recreation, I recognized it. So, that was sort of my first viewing of the work coming into the studio.

HFC: One just quick question. What -- the dates, in general. When --

JS: So, I wrote to him -- so let's see, I was in New York -- I first got there in January of '88. And then, I met him in -- I think it was in January of '89, I started writing those letters. And I ended up meeting him around March '89, was when we

actually sort of settled on a date and I went into the studio and it just kind of went from there.

HFC: And who -- who was at the studio at that time, when you --

JS: So, Monica Serra was at the studio. Allen Rubin was at the studio. Candy Spilner was at the studio. Uh -- and there were two other assistants. Kevin Kelly was there. He started just about the same time, just a bit before I did. And then, also, Cindy Tower was at the studio. And I think that's everybody.

HFC: So yeah, so actually quite a few people.

JS: Should I say what was going on at the studio -- right at that point in the studio?

HFC: Absolutely, I was -- very similar to what I was going to ask. So, yeah, yeah, please do, yeah.

JS: So, at that point, he was getting ready for two exhibitions. Within the -- it would have been coming up in the next year or so. Of laser-cut metal works, and they were all landscapes. And so, he was planning to do a show at Janis Gallery of color works, and I think it was color works at Janis, and then at OK Harris was a parallel exhibition. Those were going to be black ones, black and gray. So, he was working towards those two exhibitions. The other thing that was going on in the studio was that he was making small editions, and they were hand-painted in the studio. So, I was hired along with a couple of the other assistants to be a part of that production. So, obviously the large-scale works were painted by him, but these small editions, where there would be 25 copies, those he

would paint the first one as a guide, and then the copies were painted by the assistants. So, we were there, a couple of us were there, to do that work. Do you want me to tell you just a bit about what people were doing?

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. And actually, I -- this is actually going back a little bit to the very beginning, but this just raised a question I had for you. So, if you were doing the painting, we haven't talked about this yet, but as I understand, like, now, you work primarily in photography. But this gives me the sense that you had a background in other visual arts prior to the studio.

JS: Yes. So, I was a painter. So, I studied painting in undergraduate and also continued that into graduate school later. And everybody in the studio that was an assistant was a painter and pursuing their own work. I mean, the schedule for the studio was such that everybody worked three days. And when I was there at that point, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, Candy and Allen would be in on those three days. And then, I was working along with Kevin and Cindy and Monica on Friday. So, I was working -- there was a point there, I think, where I was working Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Because -- just to keep the production up of these editions. But my schedule changed as things changed within my life, but that was kind of what was going on.

I mean, Allen was pretty much managing the sort of logistics of the studio, dealing with things shipping in and out. And Candy was helping out with Tom in terms of preparing stuff for the paintings, Monica was doing that as well. And Kevin and Cindy and I were painting these sort of small editions. And we had a

pretty regimented day. I mean, we'd get there at -- I think we started at -- we went from like ten to six. We had an hour for lunch, and we had an afternoon break for 20 minutes. Tom was always there before we got there and would usually -- he would always leave after we left as well. We would all go out to lunch together; he would stay in the studio. Sometimes we would bring him his lunch back. Like, we'd go out and have lunch and then we'd pick something up for him and bring it back and give it to him. It was a really nice sort of working atmosphere. It was very friendly. He would even sometimes share, in terms of the music -- there was always music going on in the studio. Sometimes we would get to pick, you know, what we were listening to.

HFC: So, that's really interesting. So, with the workday, yeah, it sounds like -- so, he never left the studio during the day. He would get there before you got there. You would go out to lunch. He would be there all day. And then, he wouldn't leave --

JS: Yeah.

HFC: -- until you left. Yeah. And that was -- and the hours were, for you all, it was nine to five? Ten to s--

JS: Ten to six, ten to six we worked then. I mean, things have changed now. But yeah, at the time, it was like ten to six. It seemed like a long day. But we got a lot done, and we would be talking as we were working, because it would be three of us sitting around the table, working on these editions. And either we were listening to something or we were sort of chatting as we were painting. But like I said, he would make the sort of -- the first finished one, and then we would be copying it. And they

would require several coats of paint, and you have to wait for the paint to dry, so there was -- it took some time to get these things produced.

But things were going well with them, and I mean, he was successful selling these small editions. And I can remember as we were making them, sometimes the gallery would send somebody down in the morning to sort of pick up what had been finished, because they were being sent off to collectors. That was actually when I met Brian, the first time, I think. He would come down from Janis Gallery to pick up these finished editions to take them back up to the gallery. So, Brian Kenny who works with us now worked at the gallery at the time.

HFC: Ah.

JS: So, I was there at the studio -- I worked in the studio with Tom from that sort of February, March '89 through -- it would have been -- I think I stopped in January of like, '92. Something like that. Because what had happened was, I mean, the work that I was doing, working on these editions, it was successful for a period and there was a stock market crash around '89, '90, something like that. And then, the art market sort of shifted a few years later. And that work dried up really fast. It was actually kind of amazing, because it was one spring, like I was saying, we couldn't paint them fast enough. And we would go away for the summer, come back in September, and we came back in September and the whole -- that sort of business was just sort of stopped. So, he had to lay off a couple of us, because the work we were doing, it just wasn't paying. So, I left -- I think it was in January '92. I can't quite remember

the exact dates, but something like that. And then, I went and worked at Nancy Hoffman Gallery.

I mean, we kept up. I kept up with Monica and I started -- I was showing a bit then, later. And Tom would come around. He came by the gallery at Nancy Hoffman Gallery and said hello a few times. And he actually helped me get that job. And he would come and see my exhibitions, I'd see him at openings. We kept up over the years.

HFC: But you -- but how long was it between '92 and the next time you were involved with Wesselmann?

JS: I started working for him again, it was around 2002. Something like that. Because by then, I started doing a lot of freelance photography, so I started that up while I was working at Nancy Hoffman Gallery. I started doing freelance photography and did that for several years. And at one point, Tom was looking for someone to come in and shoot some work. He had a regular guy, but it was a special job and he asked me to come and do it. And I did it, and then, things weren't working out with his regular guy, and so he asked me to come in and start shooting for him. And so, I started shooting for him around 2002, something like that. And I would come in, I don't know, every couple of months I guess, and shoot paintings. I was photographing eight-by-ten transparencies at the time for him.

And then, I guess it was around 2003 or so, Allen approached me and said he and Candy were thinking of retiring, and that he wanted to be able to go to Tom and say, Look, Candy and I are going to be leaving, but look, Jeffrey would be happy to come back to the studio and work. And so, he told that to Tom, and

then Tom approached me and asked me if I would want to come back to the studio. And I can remember the discussion was that two assistants were leaving, he was going to be losing Candy and Allen, and he wanted two replacements. And so, he came to me and I know he talked to Brian, I think. I mean, I got the sense that he was in the position where he needed two people. He didn't want anybody he didn't know. He wanted it to be a smooth and sort of easy transition, and so, it wasn't like he was interviewing all over the place. He had two people that he knew well and liked and thought that would be an easy transition for the studio, and especially for him. And so, we came back to work -- that would have been September of 2004.

And then, November he went into the hospital for his heart. He had been having a lot of health problems over the summer. And so, he was going to go in to have this valve repaired. He'd had a bypass years before, and they were going to go in and fix that. I think there was a problem with the stent. But then, he didn't come out of the hospital after that. He was in for -- it was over a month, and then he died, I think it was December 17th that year. So, that second stint of working in the studio with him didn't really last (laughs) all that long.

HFC: Right.

JS: And then, in January, after Christmas, we all came back into the studio and Claire came back. And we kind of got to work, because we had things, projects coming up. There was an exhibition that was planned, so that would've been December of 2004, and we had an exhibition coming up in June of 2005 that had been already planned. So, the checklist was done. It was ready to go, basically. It was just doing all the logistics of,

you know, packing and crating and shipping and dealing with the museum and preparing the catalogue. So, that was the work we had to do from January through February. We were kind of just thrown into this project with a whole new dynamic in the studio. So, I mean, I ended up focusing on that exhibition with Claire, finalizing the checklist and preparing the catalogue and things like that. So, that was kind of our start.

HFC: Oh, wow. Yeah, so you -- in essence, you kind of immediately went into the role that you have now, almost, working on exhibitions.

JS: Exactly. I mean, I think that -- it's kind of funny. I mean, (pauses) this is something that came up in the discussion we were having the other day about this transition from a working studio to an estate. And the focus changes very fast. And in some sense, I almost think I was fortunate in that I didn't get into that -- that working mode of just sort of helping Tom make work. We were sort of thrown quickly into this new mode of, Well, okay, what does this kind of business look like? And you know, we were all kind of figuring it out together. Like, what do we do? How do we operate, and what's our main goal? So, updating the computer system happened fairly quickly, and dealing with all of the sort of financial issues of the estate transfer from Tom to Claire, and dealing with the evaluation. There was a lot of that kind of stuff to deal with.

HFC: Yeah, I'd actually be curious to hear more about that, how -- what it meant, the transition, since I think you have a relatively unusual position as someone who was right there for this transition. What it meant to transition from a working studio to an estate. Like, what that means.

JS: I guess I always think about the sort of nuts and bolts of it. It's like, Okay, what's your goal in the studio? It's just to facilitate the production. And then, once you shift over, that's completely gone, and it's just a -- you're in this mode of -- basically of preservation. Like, making sure everything's in good order. Dealing with conservators. It's a much more -- also I get -- the other big thing about it is this recognition that now you're dealing with somebody that's a part of art history. There's no longer so much of a focus on that person, but as on the sort of art historical persona of that person. It's all about telling stories about this person, about even like -- going back to the beginning of the career, and sort of trying to reestablish the importance of, Well, how did this whole career begin? Because that's kind of where the importance is. I mean, the longevity's really important, but there's a moment where there's a recognition that the things that this person is making are important and need to be preserved. And so, you're constantly going back to that moment. Even though I didn't live in the '60s, we're going back to that moment to sort of reinvestigate the origin of the value of this work.

HFC: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And in doing that, was that your first exhibition that you organized?

JS: Yeah, it was. That was the first one, and like I said, it was something that was sort of already in progress. So, both Tom and Claire had worked with the curator at the -- the museum was the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome. And it was Danilo Ecker. And he had been to the studio and visited Tom, but I wasn't part of any of those discussions. I had sort of picked it up and gotten involved with Claire sort of after all of that had been

done. And now it was just deal with all the nuts and bolts of, Okay, now how do we get this done? It's already been conceived; now how do we get this finished? Who are we going to get to crate it, and negotiating with the museum about getting that done? Working on the catalogue. Oh, we have to prepare all the photographs for the catalogue, re-photograph things, negotiate all those expenses out with the museum. Things like that.

I guess I was fortunate in that I came with experience of having worked in a gallery. So, I had worked on all of the logistics of exhibitions before, in another setting, within a gallery setting, where we were doing obviously all of the in-house exhibitions. But then, also working on museum exhibitions. And I had all the experience of dealing with sort of photography and publications, again, because of all the experience that I had at the gallery. So, even though -- I can remember having this conversation with Tom when he hired me, because he knew me from working in the studio and painting those small editions. He knew that I was a photographer, he knew that I worked in the gallery. And I can remember saying to him, "Tom, do you want me to tell you what I've been doing and the kinds of things I can do?" Like basically, this is what I can offer as I'm coming to you now. That was like almost ten years ago (laughs) when I worked for you before and you knew me then. And he was like, "Oh, no, no, that's okay, I kind of know what you can do, that's okay."

(laughs) And so, it was almost like it didn't really matter, it was kind of funny. But I did -- I was able to sort of come with all of this, which is why I think I was able to sort of jump into that role so sort of quickly. Because I wasn't thinking -- when I showed up and started working -- I wasn't thinking back ten years ago, Okay, I'm going to be painting on editions. I was

like, Okay, I've been doing all this other stuff. This is the kind of stuff I can bring to this job and stuff that I can do. So, it was -- I think it was beneficial, having been outside and worked in other places and being able to sort of bring that experience back into the studio.

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And the other thing that I'm curious about, when -- because one of the things we were talking about in terms of sort of telling stories about Wesselmann's career, organizing the exhibitions, seems to be very much related to conceptualizing, thinking about how exhibitions are going to be put together. As a Director of Exhibitions at an estate, rather than a curator at an institution, what is your -- what is often your experience of your role in doing that? Like, obviously it changes from exhibition to exhibition, and it sounds like the first exhibition that you worked on was sort of already done by the time you got there. But I guess this brings me to maybe something like *Beyond Pop*, right? Where it seemed like you had a much more active role in not just facilitating it logistically, but actually thinking about what the exhibition would be.

JS: I mean, in most of these exhibitions, the curator comes with an idea of what they want to do. I think my role ends up being almost as an editor of, okay, they've sort of conceived this idea, and what can I do to sort of direct that a little bit so that it stays more closely to what Tom would have intended, or how he would have seen the work, or how he would have wanted the work to be presented.

And sometimes it's little things. Like, I can remember working on the exhibition in Montreal, and the curator had sort of laid

out the checklist and how that would be presented. And one of the things that came up -- they worked with an exhibition designer about the exhibition would look, and what they wanted to do was present a lot of the work on these brightly colored walls. And I had several conversations with the curator, with [Stefan?], and also with the exhibition designer. And basically, my point was, you know, you can't take these brightly colored works and put them on a really brightly colored wall. So, if you have a painting like that *Still Life* that's at the Albright-Knox, I think it's *Still Life #21*, which is a red painting, and you put it on a yellow wall, it's almost like you're making a whole new painting. And it completely sort of interferes with the painting. And it took a little while to negotiate that out, because they were really sort of fixed on how they wanted to enhance the paintings, and it felt like -- from my point of view, and I think how Tom would've seen the paintings, he would've felt the same. It would've been too much; it would've just been something that really fights with the painting.

So, there are things like that. And then, it comes down to the same thing with the exhibition catalogue; it's like going through the essays and seeing, is there something here that really misreads or misrepresents the work? And then, also sort of talking Claire through these different essays and through these decisions. I can remember at one point, I was having a conversation with Claire about the word -- are these anecdotes, should I continue like this?

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. In fact, actually, continue, and I have a follow-up question for this. But yes, definitely.

JS: So, this is just an anecdote about the -- sort of content or dealing with essays. And I remember there was -- John Ravenal had written some wall text about the *Sunset Nudes*, and he was talking about how the white in the *Sunset Nude* functions as a highlight. And Claire and I talked about that word, "highlight," for about a half an hour. And I was trying -- because in her -- she was conceiving this area of white as the white wall. So, Tom always talks about the metal works and the white wall that sort of invades the linear image. And we were -- I was trying to sort of convey that it could function as both, that it's both -- yes, it is that, it is the white wall on the canvas, but it's also -- it does sort of function as a highlight within the painting, or a sort of bright area.

And I remember getting down to Richmond and talking to John Ravenal and saying like, "We had a really hard time with this way of sort of thinking about the works." And I said to John, "You know, Claire and I had like a half an hour conversation about this, trying to sort of come to terms with it and to basically to make her comfortable with this idea." And he said, "Wow, that must have been a fascinating conversation." And it's true, it's like -- like the conversations that you and I have had, Huffa, I mean, sort of dealing with these things that seem like minutiae, but it really does get to the heart of what the work is about and about thinking closely and looking closely at these objects.

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. And it -- hearing you talk about all of these examples, it makes me wonder, would you describe -- in doing that, the way you kind of conceptualize your role as a kind of advocate for both Wesselmann as an artist but also a kind of advocate for his legacy?

JS: I think that's a good word, because I do think that that ends up being my role. Obviously, he can't speak at this point, and so much of this job has also been about learning and understanding the career. Because, I mean, he's really clear in the writings about his intention, but sometimes, some of the things that he intends are so big he doesn't talk about them, because they're just so obvious. I mean, one of the things that has become so clear to me is about the role of dimensionality, and how important that is as a concept within the work. And he talks about how the third dimension is meant to intensify the two-dimensional image, and it's so easy to sort of go straight past that statement.

But within the work, if you look at what he did, you see how important it is. I mean, you see the way that a type of image is conceived. So, you have these collage works that then develop into these assemblage works. And you see the same thing in the canvas work, you have flat ones that then become these dimensional, standing still life works that come away from the wall. And he does the same thing with the metal work. You know, it goes flat to three-dimensional. And to have that as an idea, it seems so strategic and so deliberate, to take an idea and develop it from flat to three dimensions. But there's no place where I've actually seen him actually say this is what he was doing. But there's such an obvious insistence in the way that he's doing. That's what I mean by some things are so important, but they don't even get talked about; he doesn't talk about them because they're so -- they seem so obvious. But those seem to me -- I see my role, then, as sort of seeing those things that don't get talked about and trying to bring them up to show how important they are.

HFC: Yeah, that's great. That makes a lot of sense to me and is very much sort of how I had sort of understood, from our conversations, often your thinking about his work. The other thing that anecdote reminded me of that I hadn't asked about yet was your relationship with Claire, both in your first initial time at the studio and then immediately after you'd began working again, and sort of her role at the studio when you were there.

JS: Yeah, when I worked at the studio the first time, I saw her at the studio, but not very often. She was not there very often. But I would see her at openings. And she was very friendly. I mean, she was interested in all the people that were working with Tom in the studio, and very cordial. And then, when I left, when I stopped working in the studio, I remember Tom called me up and said, "Hey, look, Claire wants to paint the apartment but she doesn't want any of the guys to come -- (laughs) she doesn't want any workmen in there. Will you come paint the apartment?" And I was like, "Yeah, sure, I'll do that." So, I came and painted their apartment a couple of times. And so, we chatted. And I can remember, I'd come in in the morning -- I'd work the same day, (laughs) like I'd work the same hours -- I'd come in, Tom had just left to go to the studio, I'd be painting in the apartment. And then, Tom would come back to the apartment, we'd sit and have soup together, we'd have lunch, and then he (laughs) would go back to the studio and I would sort of finish up my day. I only did it a couple of times.

But so, Claire and I had spent time together then. And then, coming into the studio when she came back, we worked closely together on these projects. And we had a good working

relationship. We ended up traveling to these retrospectives together, and with the retrospectives, there would always be some kind of a talk that we would do. I would join her on those to sort of support her there on stage. And then, also just sort of taking her out to the openings and sort of escorting her around.

HFC: Because it seems to me, it's interesting thinking about her involvement in Slim Stealingworth, the monograph that Wesselmann wrote in 1980 about himself. And then, her later involvement in some of these exhibitions. And she also sometimes took on a role that kind of paralleled the role that you have of advocating for his work and for his legacy. So, I'm interested in how your approaches and your thinking about his work kind of influenced - - kind of reflected off one another.

JS: I mean, quite a bit. You're right, because her involvement was so -- (pauses) it was so important. And she was very involved in the studio. I mean, there are those editions, in the '70s, obviously with the Slim Stealingworth book, she was very involved in that, that she designed the book and was working on that with Tom. And then, also working in the studio, working on editions. There were a couple of those early collage editions that she -- did I lose you?

HFC: Nope, I'm still here.

JS: There were -- that she was working on that as well. And you know, obviously, she was very involved in that. So, it was kind of natural for her to sort of step in, and she was so familiar with the work, so familiar with what his intentions were. There are a couple of -- I know there's an interview with Sam Hunter,

I think, between Sam Hunter and Tom, and Claire is there as well and is a part of that interview. So, she was so integral to that, to the career.

HFC: And --

JS: So, she could tell me so much. I mean, we would be talking about the work or about the exhibition and we had sort of many conversations about that. About what he -- either anecdotes about what they had done together, or also just what he had said about the work. I can remember, there's one story that she told that was really sort of interesting that talked about their time and their sort of experience of the art scene in the '60s. And it had to do with, you know, the parties and what was going on then. And how much all of the artists basically just sort of talked about how much they worked, the days they worked, how many hours they put into the studio, and things like that.

HFC: And yeah, and as I -- and of course, as we both know and as I understand it, Wesselmann worked extremely hard throughout his entire life and during that period, was very much not -- I mean, this is sort of a side issue, but was not as involved in the social scene of the Pop Art world. As a lot of other artists -- he was much more sort of focused on his own work at that time.

JS: Exactly. No, I get that sense as well. I mean, from the early -- in the early part of his career, they were sort of involved in terms of participating in happenings and parties and things like that. But you know, I think from that generation, they all sort of separated and spent more time working on their own work in their own studios and their families, and focused

more on that, rather than the sort of social aspect of being a part of the art world.

HFC: Yeah, so coming back again to his family, the other question I wanted to ask was how his children were involved at the studio. Both, again, both in your first time there and then in your second time more recently.

JS: Well, the first time, none of the children were there. They were much younger. I mean, I think Kate was probably in her teens then when I was there. And we would -- I met them at openings. They didn't really come to the studio while we were working, but we would see them at the openings, because Tom's whole family would be there. And then, when I came back the second time, Kate had started working at the studio. I think she started sometime around 2000 -- something like that. 2001, somewhere in there. And so, obviously I met her then and we were working together when I came back to work in the studio. And then, Lane came to work at the studio -- I don't remember what year, but it would've been several years later, after I started. He came back and started working in the studio as well.

HFC: And their roles at the studio that are -- could you just describe that a bit, their role?

JS: Sure. I mean, there was always sort of like retouching -- you know, things would go out to exhibitions and come back and Kate was very involved in that kind of restoration work. And Lane was helping us -- we had a lot of things going out to exhibitions at that time, which is -- he came back to help us with that. So, we were packing up quite a bit of work for the retrospective. We had two of them; there was a drawing

retrospective that was going out and traveling, and then we did a big career survey retrospective that was going out. And he was really helping us with all of this activity, it was really important to have another hand working on that.

HFC: Yeah, I guess I didn't realize that Kate had done retouching. So, that's interesting. Is she also a painter?

JS: Yes. So, she studied painting. I think she was at Kenyon College, I'm not sure. But yeah, she had studied painting, and then came into work in the studio and help Tom. And she was obviously working very closely with Tom in those years on -- helping him out in terms of the production of the work. And then, after his death, you know, would be working on -- you know, what happened with a lot of these metal works, they would go out to exhibition and come back. And because they were hung on the wall with nails that actually touched the metal, the edges of that paint could get scratched. So, she would work on things like that.

HFC: Got it. Interesting, yeah. Okay, so I have -- I have sort of a second section to move onto, but before I do, some more things about the studio and the estate. One question that I'm very curious about is sort of -- I've heard through conversations with you previously and conversations with Monica that there were critiques at the studio that were --

JS: Oh right, yeah, yeah, yeah.

HFC: -- and you all showed your work. And I'd really like to hear what those were like, and how those took place and yeah, just a bit about that.

JS: It was actually a really sort of generous thing that Tom did. I don't even remember how it started. I don't even remember Allen -- so, we would all take slides of our work. So, after you took your slides, you'd get them back, and you'd want to sort of share them with everybody. And Tom sort of -- he would sit with us as well, and we would all sort of sit around and one of us would show our slide that we had got back of the work that we were doing. And, you know, make comments. Encourage each other about what we were doing. But I can remember I showed -- I was making these abstract paintings, these sort of gestural paintings. And I had made one, and it had a -- like this -- it had a mark that actually went straight down. And I can remember Tom saying, "What if you turn that 90 degrees? I think it would be better." So, he would make very sort of pragmatic suggestions about things. And he would be really encouraging, and it was actually a lot of fun.

HFC: And I assume also something that was impactful to your work and other people who were in the critiques?

JS: Absolutely, it was. I mean, in terms of being -- yes, it was. I would listen to what he had to say, and I was really appreciative to get his response. I can remember, though, the thing that made more of an impact on me really was just seeing his work, seeing how the studio was run, and kind of getting sort of tips based upon, Oh, that really works. And I can remember, because at the time -- this would have been a memory, actually. Because after I switched from painting to photography, I was making these sort of landscape photographs. But I always remember looking at the *Seascape* image of his and sort of seeing how he had simplified things in that, you know, if a color

appeared in the painting, there was only one example of it. So, he wouldn't have like, two greens. Because if he had two greens, one looked more dull than the other. But if you only had one green, it didn't matter how dull it was, it looked intense. And when I was shooting, I was shooting on film, and the color's not super saturated. I mean, what you can do with digital photography today, you can really sort of oversaturate or really up saturation. And so, I realized in photography, it worked. That if there was only one blue, it looked really bright. Or if there was only one red, it looked really bright, even if it wasn't super bright. So, that was something I learned and understood visually just by looking at the work, not from something he had said to me.

HFC: Yeah, that's really fascinating. And yeah, I completely see that in his work, actually. When you mention that, it is absolutely consistent that he does that so often, where, yeah, you have a painting where he does not have any kind of colors that -- there are two examples in the same general family. It's like, there's a blue, there's a green, there's a yellow. Yeah, yeah.

JS: Which sort of speaks, I guess, also to a little bit what I was saying before about sort of recognizing how he communicates with the work. And there's a lot there that's said without being said.

HFC: Absolutely. So, this actually brings me to the last question I wanted to ask in this section, and then we can talk about something else. But one of the things that you mentioned that I think is really interesting is that you -- when you first started working there, you actually didn't know his work

particularly well. Obviously, at this point, you know his work extremely well. So, I'm curious if you could describe some of the ways in which -- and maybe some moments that had a particular impact on the ways in which you understood his work and how it changed over all of that time.

JS: Like, the one thing that I was mentioning about dimensionality, I think it's been interesting to come up -- I guess they're generalizations, but they're also -- it's also trying to understand these kind of core ideas. And the formal things that he communicates, I find really fascinating, because it helps me understand the thing that I'm looking at. I remember -- there aren't that many conversations I really had with him about work. But there are a couple that I remember. And the other one I remember that was really interesting, because it told me something about how he thinks, it had to do with the beginnings of the abstract work.

So, in the very early '90s, he had done a couple of works that were really, really strange. And they were metal works where one image was overlaid over another. And I think there are only -- there are fewer than five major works that were done like this, but they're really odd. And in each case, he took an image, like, one of them is called *Nude over Still Life, Color over Black*. So, there's an image of one of the metal dimensional nudes that he had been doing, actually bolted on top of a dimensional still life like one of the ones he had been doing at the time. And then, one image was painted in color and one was in black. And the thing that was made was really strange, because you could see both images at the same time. You could recognize them. But it just looked like this very strange mashup. And I can remember getting ready to leave the studio

that day, and I was looking at them, and he was standing there, and I said, "Tom, what are you doing?" Like, (laughs) what is this thing? And he said, "Well, you know, I've started making these abstract paintings and everybody knows me as a representational painter. And I'm trying to make an in-between step, so that they understand, like, this transition."

And it's like, the most kind of absurd way to communicate this idea of this transition from representational to abstract. But the fact that he felt that he had to make this in-between step, because it's not really how it happened, anyway. That's not really an explanation. It's a sort of visual -- it's almost like it's a visual example of what the transition is, even if that's not really how it happened. It's like a symbol for transition, even if it isn't a transition in and of itself. It's actually a really kind of absurd explanation. But there are so many -- I'm going to have to think about it a bit -- but there are things within the way the work is conceived that are kind of absurd that then lead to interesting visual manifestations, and I think this is one of them. Like, the idea is crazy. But the thing is actually kind of interesting, in and of itself.

HFC: Yeah, that's really interesting. The idea that he would think that he had to create this kind of -- almost, right, fictional sort of transition. Right, because as you say --

JS: Yeah, exactly.

HFC: -- it has nothing to do with how that work actually came about, it's just a way of kind of -- well actually, and this is something we'll get to in our next conversation, but it's like

he was imagining someone looking at his body of work as a whole
--

JS: Yes.

HFC: -- and wanting that person to be able to say, Oh, well,
there was this work, and then it slowly transformed --

JS: Exactly.

HFC: -- and then it became this. (laughs)

JS: Yeah. Because there are places where these transitions happen that are more like, plausible, or they really feel like they're a part of the work. So, like the laser-cut work. So, when you look at the sort of dropouts, and they're like, for example, there are dropouts where there's like two dropout shapes. And then, you see he makes a drawing where there's a line that connects the two dropout shapes, and then he makes these works that include both the dropout shape and these metal lines. So, there are examples, especially in the *Bedroom Painting* series, where you can see the sort of development from one image to the next. And say, "Oh, yeah, I see how he got there."

But this one -- this one is really sort of absurd. But right, it's like, why would you need to explain? But he obviously -- one felt the need to justify it, and I guess the justification is a way of making it his own, too, right? Because you can do anything you want. Nobody's going to say you can't do that. But if you are going to do that and if what you're after is to make a sort of an overall story, like your career is this overall

story, you don't want holes in there where the viewer's going, "Well, that doesn't make sense how you got from there to there." They are important. And I guess what it points to is what you were just saying, is that he wants a consistent overall story for -- what's going on here? What am I doing? How am I going from this place to the next place, and does it all make sense, and is it all thought through? Is it all considered? I think that is the thing he's trying to communicate, is that you know, this is important to me and this has all been considered. Everything is there because I wanted it to be there, it's not an accident, it's not just something I found. I really do have something to say.

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. But I think there is -- and he's obviously not the only artist to think about this, but I do think, yeah, there's something very particular about the way he structured his work to be able to be read, as you're describing, as a kind of intelligible narrative. Right?

JS: I think that's a good word to use, intelligible. In that it's something that you can understand from the outside. It's not all just personal and private and, you know, you can't know what's going on here. It's almost as though someone else could sort of step in, understand the logic, and sort of continue it along after him, right?

HFC: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And this actually -- I think this transitions really well into the next couple of things I was going to talk about. I mean, one is that one of the things that's directly related to this that's particular to Wesselmann's work is the fact that he worked consistently in series. That he would produce particular series, think about

them together, and work with them as conceptually and visually related. So, I'm curious if you could sort of talk a bit about how you understand the way he works with artworks in series?

JS: Mm. I guess it seems to me that it's a way of conveying intention and being organized about the thinking of the pictures. In some sense, it's also, it's like, I know where I'm going next. I mean, there is that statement in the Stealingworth where he says, you know, "Well, I know where I'm going to be in the next five years." That's a tremendous amount of planning going on. Almost like, automatically. But yeah, I think the series idea is really important. I guess it also makes it intelligible, it's easier for other people to sort of understand and see the intention.

I guess the thing that I always find interesting -- I mean, that seems to be the consistent thing, is to stay within the series and then sort of work through the idea, so there's the possibility of working through all these different variations. But the part that I always find interesting about it are the repetitions and the sort of deliberate recreations. Because they seem to point to a -- well, they are self-reflexive, I mean, it's about looking at himself and trying to sort of understand where he's gone. So, like, even with these sort of big series, with the metal work versus the canvas work or the very first collage work. To do works within that metal series that recreate previous paintings, or even canvas paintings from the '90s that recreate previous paintings. This idea of trying to understand, what was I doing then and how is it -- what does that look like today when I work in this new way? I think there are several examples of that, but those works, I find the most fascinating

and kind of the most illuminating, sometimes even more than the ones that are the -- sort of the core works within the series.

HFC: Right, because -- yeah, as you're saying again, it speaks to this desire to work in relation to one's own body of work constantly. And as a way of understanding [again?].

JS: And that idea of working against the relationship to something, there's this review about the early assemblage works. So, they're reviewing one of these Green Gallery shows with those assemblage *Great American Nudes*. And the -- I can't remember who wrote it, but they're making this comparison to Marisol and saying that the -- sort of the importance or the added value or what's good about the Wesselmann works is this constant reference to the picture frame. And I mean, it's also part of this dimensional work, that even though they're dimensional, they're always sort of referred to as images, and the sort of tension that comes from that. But that -- where was I going with that -- that whole idea of the frame and having something to work against is related to that same idea of recreating an old work and sort of updating it. It's like having something to work against, and having that as a part of the image itself seems to be a really important way for -- I don't know if it's -- it's not necessarily just a support, but it's important to have that reference, to sort of understand the thing that you're looking at.

HFC: Right, exactly. No, that --

JS: You need a point of comparison, I guess, is what it is. And it's the difference between the two that is the point of the picture, not just the picture itself.

HFC: That's a really interesting way of putting it, actually. I think that's -- it is really interesting to think about a lot of his works as works that are made specifically with the idea that you are going to look at them with the knowledge of another work.

JS: Yeah, exactly. Right, it's a little bit like fan fiction, right? (laughs)

HFC: (laughter) Yeah, that's totally true. It is a very funny way of putting it, but yes, absolutely. And actually, it's really interesting, right, because in a way, as an artist who has worked so much as you've been talking about with collage, whether it's within his own work or then also in relation to some of these key artists, like Matisse, you know, that he's always working in relation to. His works -- even both self-referentially and externally referentially, have this kind of relationship where there is something you're supposed to be looking at with a knowledge of something else.

JS: Exactly. I mean, just as you were continuing, I was thinking about that. I mean, the whole series of *Great American Nudes* is essentially fan fiction, right? It's both a kind of continuation of a history, but it's also in opposition to that history, or in -- I don't know -- it's not just a continuation. There's also a challenge to that history. But there are, as we talk about, there are so many examples of that kind of opposition, just like you were pointing out about having the image, the Matisse painting within the painting. But then, also working in a style that looks like Matisse. So much of it is -- like, these paintings refer so much to the outside world. Not

just, you know, soup can labels and things like that, but it's embedded in so many parts of these pictures. And to the point where he's doing it there, again, sort of outside references; then, he's doing it to references within his own work as well. It does seem to be such an important part of the motivation. Like, he gets pleasure out of making these references.

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. And in a certain way, I mean, I'm trying to think, there are moments when he sort of -- there are moments, right, where he has literally collaged previous works into subsequent works. And then, there are moments when he's sort of repainted or redone. But again, I think, yeah, that pleasure seems core to this idea of someone working in collage. Right? He's looking --

JS: Yes.

HFC: -- it's like he's building up a body of work that is also a resource to draw from and for reference, and to -- well, in the case, for example, of those images you were describing where he laid one on top of the other, like actually remixed, recombined mash-up.

JS: Yeah, the original impulse in the beginning almost seems like it's expedient, right? It's faster, it's easier, it's -- and then, the sort of secondary impulse seems to be, Oh, this is also something I recognize. It came from somewhere else, and it sort of brings with it all of that -- that whole other narrative, that's now in this whole new context, where it doesn't make the same sense.

HFC: Yeah, absolutely.

JS: You know, the other thing that came to mind as we were just talking about this idea of references, you know that comedian, Dennis Miller?

HFC: I do, yeah.

JS: So that idea, like -- I remember him from the '90s as somebody -- I think that's when he was around -- but as someone whose style was all about making these very quick references within his sort of monologue, right? Like, talking about something and constantly bringing up just this little snippet of something, and then that's what was funny, was that you would make this very quick, Oh, that's what he's referring to. And that whole idea of reference and also of abbreviation and of this kind of shortcut to an idea seems to be something that's also a part of the paintings.

I thought about that with the *Sunset Nudes*. And that, you know, you see just the tiniest part of something, but then you recognize it. So, you only see the tiniest part of the leopard skin, and immediately you think back to the *Great American Nude* painting that had this whole expanse of leopard skin pattern or something like that. But that kind of -- how can I abbreviate it to the point where you'll still recognize it, but it's almost like, at first, you won't recognize it, and then you'll immediately recognize it. And it's the speed of that recognition that brings this sort of jolt of intellectual pleasure.

HFC: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And because you're right that in the way that he references his work also sort of later in his career, it's like he's always doing this thing that is like, I

think, kind of a core modernist impulse. Where he's thinking about, as you're describing, How much can I pare this down? How brief can I make this reference? As you're describing. And still make it, Oh, I see that. Oh, I can understand that. It might be almost abstract and beyond recognition, but he's distilled it to the core thing that allows you to understand the reference.

JS: I mean, as we're talking, it's becoming so sort of clear how important that idea of reference is. I mean, even the whole sort of working through all the genres is a repetition of -- is something everyone is familiar with, in terms of academic painting. But then to sort of do it in a way where there's information, you know, there's the story that you already know, but here it is in a different form.

HFC: Yeah, yeah, it's really -- and the other thing that's kind of interesting to me about this is how it's both very in line with the kind of history and legacy and art historical understanding of Pop, in the sense that Pop Art is so innately embedded in collage and external reference, and usually pop cultural references, as it's conceptually thought of.

JS: Right.

HFC: And yet, at the same time, Wesselmann is often doing it in a way that is much more grounded, as you're saying, both in reference to his own works and then also -- not that other Pop artists didn't do this. But also in reference to not necessarily Pop Art, but the art historical -- like, the core art historical genres he wanted to pull from.

JS: Yeah. Again, I guess it comes back to -- it was just like what I was saying about the picture frame. Like, these are the limits. This is the stuff that I -- I want to keep this as the sort of skeleton of what it means to make this kind of painting, so that you will always be able to refer back to that, but then I'm going to pull you away from that as well. And there's a tension, right? Because you want to refer to the model, but then at the same time, make something that's different from that original model.

HFC: Yeah, exactly. But I --

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

JS: It seems to be like the core strategy of, How am I going to generate some kind of pictorial tension for the viewer? What am I going to do? And his strategy seems to be, there is something that you know, and I'm going to show you something that looks like that, but it's different. And you're going to be going back and forth between those two things.

HFC: Yeah, I think that's a really good way of putting it. That makes a lot of sense. And totally -- and you can kind of take that same idea and look at all sorts of aspects of his work. Because one way that that resonates with things that I've noticed in his work is like, when you think about his early *Great American Nudes*, right, where in a certain sense, a lot of them, the figure is almost abstract. But because of the way in which the painting is composed and also the title, you immediately recognize it for what it is, i.e. a nude figure. But then, also have this tension of if you try to recognize it visually, you try to put it together and say, like, Where is

this human body, how do I make sense of it? It is almost not possible to recreate, right. So it's simultaneously the most recognizable thing that is pushed to the limits of being able to be seen for what it is.

JS: Yeah, absolutely, and you notice it just by this abbreviated sort of representation, whether it's pink, you're given that -- okay, so it's a nude, because it's pink. But you're not really given much more than that. Or you're given that it's pink and there's a general shape, but there are lips. Or the nipples are there. Like, there's just like a couple of key pieces of information, but you're not going to get all of the information. And you're right, like, the contrast between it, which is obviously the subject, but not presented in a very clear way, against a background that is very clear and specifically with a lot of detail described. I mean, down to photographic representations of the thing within the space around the nude.

HFC: Right. But interestingly, often with those photographic representations, they're not the easily recognizable thing, right? They're the other things. Sometimes they are. Sometimes he does use a billboard. He often seems to kind of flip back and forth between that, because I was thinking, he does occasionally use a billboard cutout for the actual figure.

JS: Right.

HFC: But it usually -- if he's doing that, then something else will fall on the far opposite end, right, of the [visibility?].

JS: Exactly.

HFC: So, before -- because I don't want to go too long in this one, so before we finish, I do want to talk about one other thing that I think will tie into also directly our next conversation. But of course, one of the things that you and I have worked on so much and will continue to -- and it's directly related to the Digital Corpus -- that is also fairly unique about Tom Wesselmann's career is his recordkeeping and his ledger books. So, I did just want to kind of introduce this idea. So, first of all, we both know how careful and meticulous he was about his records. But could you talk a bit about the sort of origin of his recordkeeping, particularly what we describe as his ledger books, and how he developed this way of very carefully tracking and organizing his work?

JS: Sure, I mean, there are two ledger books for all the major works, and I think most of the editions are listed in there as well. And also, the oil studies are in those two ledger books. And so, there was an old ledger book and a new ledger book. And from what I can see in the books, it looks as though they were began sometime around '62, '63, maybe something like that. So, it would have been related to the Green Gallery exhibitions. I don't think that they were already in existence by the -- the Tanager show. So, there's a point in there where you can see where he starts recording months, and so I would sort of assume that that's about the point when he would have actually had the books and then gone back and put in previous works. So, for example, one of the questions that we had about that GAN25, GAN26 stuff, it's all very clear in the ledger book. So, that means that the book happened after there was this confusion about what the number of the work was, like we've seen on the back of the actual painting.

And then, there were these books for drawings, he called them the sort of "D-books," so the drawings were in there as well, starting from the '60s and all the way through. And I think there's also an early one and a late one as well. But the books were something -- that was something that he kept. I mean, I think there were points where assistants might have put stuff in there with dimensions, you know, stuff like that. But it's pretty much something that he kept. I can remember when I started working there again in 2004, most of the -- actually, all of the work had been put into the computer. He had had another assistant, Drew, who was typing in all the information from the ledger books. And I can remember going through and updating some things.

And I had a question for him about the *Portrait Collage* series and the *Small Nudes* series, because within the ledger book, it's very obvious that the works were titled with series and numbers. So like, with *Portrait Collage*, there's no descriptive title, it's just *Portrait Collage #1*, #2, all the way through. But with the *Small Nudes*, they had been given SN numbers, so SN1, #2, #3. But they were also descriptive titles. And I can remember asking him, I said, "Well, should these, in the computer, be listed as *Small Nude #1*, #2, #3?" And he said, "No, no, no," he said, "I think I want to keep those descriptive titles."

So, there was obviously -- it was such an important thing for him to make this sort of differentiation between works that had the sort of series and number, just like with the *Great American Nudes*, and then this sort of transition point sometime in the -- it would have been in like the late '70s or early '80s, when there were works that were being made that now had descriptive

titles. Especially, obviously, with all of the metal work. They were all given descriptive titles; even the abstract works all have descriptive titles, not like, *Abstract #1, #2, #3, #4*. And that's a really -- I think a really kind of an interesting point in the career, is making that sort of shift in decision about how the works will be titled. And so basically, how should they be read?

HFC: And that's really interesting that -- and I hadn't thought about this before, that way that that transition happens around that period of time and around the time -- it sounds like -- around the time when the computer records were starting to be used as well, right? There was --

JS: No, the computer records weren't started until -- that would've been the late '90s.

HFC: Oh, the late '90s, oh, okay.

JS: Yeah, late '90s. I don't remember the actual -- I mean, I wasn't in the studio at that time. Or maybe it would have been maybe around 2000. Could have been right around --

HFC: Oh, okay.

JS: -- 2000, something like that. And he had someone that basically wrote a sort of FileMaker program for them to do. And then, after he died, we transferred all that information into an ArtBase database that we sort of kept up and updated since then.

HFC: And yeah, I guess even if that was later than the thing that I was sort of thinking about that this is bringing me to,

is that the numeric -- the repeated kind of titles with numeric identifiers strongly echo this other aspect of his recordkeeping, which is his registration numbers. So --

JS: Right.

HFC: -- right? So like, *Great American Nude #1* is also included, recorded in your records and his records as GAN1, right, as a registration number.

JS: Yes.

HFC: And it's interesting to think how -- and also, the works with descriptive titles that you're mentioning, obviously, as we know, also have registration numbers that are not immediately reflected in the title. So, it's interesting to think how the purpose of those registration numbers kind of underlying and defining connections between these works maybe also facilitated having titles that didn't directly reflect the registration numbers. But I just actually -- but since that's a kind of secondary point before we get there, could you talk a little bit about the registration numbers as well?

JS: Sure. I mean, trying to sort of tease out the history of the relationship between registration numbers and titles is a bit hard. I really get the sense that all of this is something that sort of develops, you know, over the career. I mean, the thing about -- as a concept, it's obviously very clear and was adopted early on with these sort of D-numbers. And those were used from very early on and are there on -- most of the time, it's actually written on the work, he wrote on the work as well

as an identifier. It was a sort of shorthand way of being able to be specific about the work itself.

But the registration numbers don't always appear on the earlier works. And even on -- I don't know that they're early on, in the beginning, on all of the metal works. It does seem that the computer really sort of emphasizes the need for them and the usage of them. Not that they weren't there before, but it really -- it almost sort of forces you to be clear about their usage in a way that before, you could have just written the title of the work on the back and that would have been enough. But somehow, the computer makes it important to really sort of have both. In some cases, because sometimes the titles are very close or sometimes even the same.

HFC: Yeah, so that was my -- that's interesting, because that was another thing I was curious about. It does seem like these registration numbers, which are (pauses) echoed occasionally in the ledger books, but are not in any way formalized, if I'm correct, at any point in the ledger books. Then become much more, as you're saying, formalized once the computer records are developed. And you can kind of take this pre-existing system and really try to make it a formal system of registration numbers.

JS: Right. Like even what we were saying before about the -- we had talked about the difference between the sort of SL numbers and these CSL numbers. Because it was a way of distinguishing the metal still lifes from the canvas still lifes. And you know, with the GAN, obviously, it's just a shorthand version of *Great American Nude*. But then when you get to other things, it's not necessarily related to the title, just like with the CSL, doesn't necessarily mean that the title is *Canvas Still Life*. It

just means that that's a way of distinguishing it from the SL numbers for the metal still lifes, which did have descriptive titles.

HFC: Right. And then you have categories which did seem to be developed relatively late. I don't know if it was during the computer records period, or just before, but like, the *Not Great American Nudes*, which are abbreviated NGAN in the registration numbers. Which does not, if I recall correctly, is a description that does not appear at all in the ledger books.

JS: Right.

HFC: And that was truly -- seems to be developed in order to find a category and a number to assign to these works, right?

JS: Right. Because the way that they appear in the record book, I mean, he's writing in all the *Great American Nudes* and then gets to #100, and then goes to the next page to list another nude painting that does have a descriptive title and doesn't want that to be GAN101. And so, this NGAN is a way of distinguishing it from the GAN images. And I -- the other place where these registration numbers appear sometimes are on the gallery labels. And it's difficult to really sort of pinpoint, was there a year when, okay, now everything has to have the registration number on there.

That's why I keep coming to the computer, because the computer has them all there and has to use them. Whereas if you don't have the computer, you don't have to use it. You could put something else on there to identify the work. You can just put the title. But sometimes, the gallery labels have a registration

number, especially if it's a drawing. It may have a D-number. But the gallery also had its own set of registration numbers when they entered things. And many times, the gallery label would have the gallery's registration number. So, the only time it seems to be consistent and used in a -- really early on are with these D-numbers, less so with the numbers for the major works.

HFC: That's interesting. Yeah, and so, the D-numbers do actually appear in the ledger books, right?

JS: Yeah, there's a separate book for drawings, two separate books for the D-books, for the drawing ledger books. And they're sort of listed the same way. I mean, there's a section for each year, so 1966, it starts D-661, and then it goes all the way through. And every time a new work is entered, you know, he just used this -- the next number in the sequence until he gets through the end of 66. But with the drawings, many times, they wouldn't necessarily be entered into the book the same year that they were made. Not always. Sometimes, they would be entered into the book when they went to an exhibition or they left the studio. And it may be that those were drawings that hadn't been entered into the ledger book, so it would have been a drawing that he made in '66 that left the studio in 1970. [And when he hit?] 1970, he would go back and maybe put it in the ledger book. That's a possibility. And that would have happened, could have happened throughout the career.

HFC: Right. And yeah, but I think broadly, as we're just getting to the end of our time for this one, I think it's interesting to think about how his interest in a lot of these things that we were talking about -- with self-referentiality and thinking

about his work as part of a body of work that is related to one another and should be comprehensible together -- is perhaps also tied into this particular interest in organizing and tracking his work, and having a record of it that was also actually -- and this is something, of course, that working on the Digital Corpus and the catalogue raisonné, I have very close experience with, that is intelligible in a way that a lot of other artists' records aren't, necessarily. That he actually did try to produce a kind of -- even if it was evolving, even if it was changing, and even if it was revised at different times, coherent system for organizing and tracking his work, that does seem to be part of a broader way of him thinking about his body of work.

JS: It's true, I think there is this sort of idea of clarity, right? Intelligibility. I mean, it seems to be really important. It's a part of all of the pictures as well, the way that they're sort of composed and conceived. And it's no accident, I think, that he kept his records this way and wanted to present the work this way. Even the sort of narratives that -- these little stories that he tells. There aren't really that many, probably fewer than -- in the neighborhood of 15 or so -- stories about where the billboards come from, the dream about the color, and there are these stories that he's kept and sort of refined over the decades, and then they appear in the Stealingworth book or they appear in interviews. They're narratives that are sort of repeated and re-edited and sort of refined, but they're the sort of core ideas that help you understand what he was doing and what was important to him.

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. And they give kind of keys to looking at his work, entryways into his work, that otherwise wouldn't be there.

JS: There's a parallel -- I mean, it makes me think about what he said about, you know, these assemblage pieces and his use of objects. And just as another one of these sort of points of comparison, he talks about how -- he's comparing his assemblage works to Rauschenberg, and he was -- so, Rauschenberg has a clock, but then it's put into this field of gestural brush marks. And Wesselmann describes this as a sort of poetic space. Meaning there's no reason for that clock to be there other than some sort of musing about how interesting it looks in this out of context place. And then, he's going to take the clock and put it back where it belongs, so it's going to go back on the wall and it's going to function as a clock. And it's a bit deceiving, because it's presenting as though -- that guy's going to use a clock, but he's going to use it in some mysterious, sort of poetic way, that you may or may not understand. And I'm going to use a clock in a very obvious and easy to understand way, a clock's going to hang on the wall like it does.

But then, when you actually look at the work and you think about what he's doing, it's a bit more subtle and maybe -- not as easy to understand, but it almost seems more profound. Because it ends up being about, Okay, there is a clock, and it is on the wall. And I'm looking at this clock, and it's telling me what time it is now, because it's a working clock. But the problem is, that clock is actually acting as a clock in my world. I can see the time, but it's also in that picture. And where is that picture? Like, is that a picture -- it's sort of -- the clock is both here and now and there at the same time, and you start thinking about that clock as both a functioning clock, but also a representation of a clock. And because they're so close, you know, between the representation and the thing itself, you have

-- it feels like a very unstable situation, and you really start to think about that idea of sort of artifice and reality. And kind of locked into that kind of a conundrum in a way that makes the Rauschenberg use of it seem almost trite. Like, okay, yeah, it's not where it should be. This seems actually more engaging, and also more engaging to me as a viewer, about how do I -- what's my relationship to this thing and to this place that this picture is representing?

HFC: Yeah, right, that is such a great quote. And it's true, because he is so committed to integrating something like a clock into what is a formal arrangement, and often, something that's conceptualized almost as a two-dimensional painting, even if the materials that make it up hardly resemble that. It does create this tension that -- it can kind of break down in other assemblage works, between, as you're saying, looking at something as the object and looking at something as something that exists as an element within a pictorial relationship. And that tension never really stops with those works. But the thing that that quote adds that I think is also so great is the way that on top of that, he's saying that the way that I'm doing that is ostensibly making these things look untransformed and very obvious. Because it's just a clock. I'm not doing anything, right? It's exactly where you'd expect it to be.

JS: Yes.

HFC: But it's the formal interventions that he's making that's turning it into this thing that's in between these faces, right?

JS: I know, I think he's presenting himself as being so plain and matter of fact, but it's actually very disingenuous. Because

it's (laughs) not as plain or as matter of fact as he wants to -
- as he sort of pretends it to be, right? Which is what you were
saying about this whole idea of transformation. It's like, he's
going to present the clock and say, Well, I didn't do anything.
Look, it's just a clock. And yet, underneath it actually has
been transformed maybe even in an even more profound way than in
the Rauschenberg sense.

HFC: Right, and it wouldn't -- and interestingly, I think you
could even go so far as to say it wouldn't work quite as well if
he didn't present the clock in such a straightforward way,
ostensibly, right?

JS: Right, yep, yep.

HFC: The tension is greater because when you first look at it,
when you look at that telephone on the wall or you look at the
clock on the wall, you're like, Well, that's exactly where it
should be. And then, there's this tension because -- oh, but
it's actually also a picture.

JS: Yeah. But there is that -- that desire to sort of move away
from this maybe sort of metaphorical and sort of poetic way of
seeing the world. And trying to pretend as though everything is
just what it is. And that makes me a good guy, (laughs) because
I'm being straight with you. Right?

HFC: (laughter) Right. Yeah, that is really interesting. And I
think in that sense, also, a very interesting -- this is not
something we've talked about at all, but it is very interesting
to think about how that relates to his moving on from his early
relationship with abstract expressionism and a totally different

way of conceptualizing what it would mean to read an artwork or make an artwork.

JS: Mh-hm.

HFC: It's very different to be like, I'm just going to be straightforward. I'm not going -- this is nothing about, like, my -- this is not my interior, psychic being that you have to --

JS: Right.

HFC: -- understand to see what's going on here or some secret code. It's just -- it is what it is. You see what you see.

JS: Right.

HFC: Great, well I think this is a perfect place to leave it for now, and we will talk -- we can talk about doing a second round and when that makes sense. And yeah.

JS: Perfect.

HFC: Yeah, thank you so much for doing this.

JS: Thank you, Huffa.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]