DONALD AND ALFRED LIPPINCOTT ORAL HISTORY

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HUFFA FROBES-CROSS: My name is Huffa Frobes-Cross. I am the project manager of the Tom Wesselmann Digital Catalogue Raisonné project at the Wildenstein Plattner Institute, and I'm here with Alfred and Donald Lippincott to do an oral history for our ongoing oral history project. So thank you very much, both of you, for doing this. This is really wonderful and for inviting us to your home, which is where we are. I should set the scene for our oral history. And yeah, I want to start off more generally. We'll get to Wesselmann stuff, but I'd like to kind of start off more generally. And can you just tell us a little bit about how the Lippincott studio got started and how this project, how the work that you now do started and where it came from? Yeah, give us a bit of background.

ALFRED LIPPINCOTT: Don?

DONALD LIPPINCOTT: Well, the company was started in 1966, about three miles away from here in a factory that's on Sackett Point Road and began in a smaller way. But right away, I was working with artists. And we essentially began with an old shed of a building and a stack of materials, a cutting torch and a welder — and the desire to put things together, and it grew from there. And one of the things that made all this happen was the willingness to do things in partnership with artists, where we provided the labor and materials to build the piece, and together worked at building it. And then when it was sold, if it was sold, the money would first pay for the cost of the building and then get divided between the artists and sometimes the gallery and us, as the fabricator. And that allowed artists at that time that really, really either couldn't afford to build pieces, or didn't have the space to do them, to accomplish these works and have them available for people to see, rather than

trying to sell something from a sketch or model. And with good fortune, it happened at a time when there was a burgeoning real interest in public outdoor larger work. So a lot of that was just good fortune that it was all pieced together at that moment.

HFC: And then I'm curious, you know, to go back — what led to the idea to do this in the first place? Because, as I understand it, when you started, it was a fairly unusual venture to start a business that was entirely about fabricating large works by artists. So what led to the notion that this would be something to do in the first place?[1]

DL: Well, again, our family in a way, has been involved in the arts from a number of different approaches. My father, Gordon, was an industrial designer and one of his clients was U.S. Steel, who was interested in seeing their product, COR-TEN steel being used in different ways than, you know, they were using it, building bridges and so on. So the notion of that being used as sculpture was of interest to them. And he persuaded them that it was a contribution of steel to start playing with. And — in that vein. So, it was dad, and then just sort of talking back and forth — Roxanne Everett, who was involved early in the company, had been working a little bit with my father. And, you know, the discussions back and forth like that was something to give a try to. And we had the space. The space was a piece of property that I had purchased from a company that went bankrupt that made [pre-cast stone?]. And they — the job that made them go bankrupt was the Pan Am façade. And the two guys that were the beginning employees that worked on the sculpture, had worked with that company and had worked with me doing the renovation for the

[1] See: https://www.lippincottsculpture.com/history.

building and so on. So that was a combination of those seemingly different influences that got it to begin. And once it began, then it more and more became clear that there was definite interest. And you know, artists talk to each other. Roxanne had lived in New York, was good at meeting with them and talking about things. So, you know, pretty quickly, Barney [Barnett] Newman and [Robert] Murray and [James] Rosati and the people that we began with were all —

AL: As well as artists right here in our neck of the woods. You know, David von Schlegell and James Rosati.

DL: Yeah. And Rosati taught at Yale. So it was all good connections to the museum side of the thing as well.

AL: But Roxanne, you know, was astute and insightful in terms of the art market and the art scene in New York. And it was in good measure — it was her ability to make those kind of connections and introduce people to the factory that really got things going, don't you think, Don?

DL: Yes, for sure.

HFC: Oh, interesting. Yeah. And I'm really interested in that aspect of it in kind of this — and I'm asking this question knowing that it's more complicated than one side or the other, but this kind of like chicken or the egg aspect of the beginning of artists starting to do these projects. Because I understand a lot of these artists at the time didn't have, really, access to the things that they would need to make the projects they ended up making with you. And so, to what degree were you kind of pitching, "Hey, we can do this," to artists that don't

necessarily have projects already? And to what degree were artists looking for a space to do these things? Like, I'm curious — you know, in one way I'm kind of curious the degree to which your presence actually may have ended up affecting what people actually did.

AL: I think it did.

DL: Oh yeah, it definitely did. But it did it differently for different — but many of the beginning works we did, for example, with Ellsworth Kelly, you know, who basically was a painter. And, you know, those beginning forms that we did, in effect, were — many of them were paintings, but obviously three-dimensional. So, you know, that was an example, really of a, you know, distinct [step?] there. And Barney Newman, essentially the same way he had done some casting for smaller pieces, but the *Broken Obelisk* was, you know, a giant step away from what he generally was known for then. And other ones like, you know, Bob Murray had done larger pieces and worked basically three-dimensionally with metal in addition to watercolors and so on. But he — it was [the] scale that he liked and was the reason that he got involved with us, where he could do larger works and make that step from thinking to accomplishing in the studio.

AL: But just working on artwork was a big draw that served to bring in more and more people, because there were places like Segre's Iron Works in Waterbury where Alexander Calder would have his things built. But they also built a variety of other other industrial components. And there were other places artists would have things made. But you know, a shop where it's — art is the sole focus, it's a bit different. Not only is it a place where artists will see each other and each other's works when

they come up, and sometimes share a lunch together and so on. So there was a salon aspect to it. But it was — it was a place where people understood the aesthetic considerations, right off the bat, didn't have to be explained. And we had an engineer who also understood those things, who was, you know, specialized in structural engineering. And so, it was a place where people didn't get told no. Things got figured out. And I think that was one of the key things that made it a unique space.

HFC: I'm curious to follow up on that. Was there a degree to which sometimes you would say, you know, you're talking about the scale of Bob Murray's stuff or also, like, how Barnett Newman was working on something fundamentally different when he ended up working with you. Were there times when you would say — or someone would say, or maybe Roxanne Everett would say, like, I see this potential in something that you might be interested in doing and we can do this, and what do you think? And like, have a kind of back and forth? Would you sometimes bring ideas on the basis of what you could do, to — did artists see that?

AL: Absolutely. I mean, I'm thinking of [Claes] Oldenburg in particular, right? You know, maybe more so than other artists. You know, he was available to ideas and, you know, how are we going to make this and there'd be some brainstorming. And, you know, you'd set to following up options for fabrication and different things and see what resonated, what he responded to. And things got worked out on that kind of a basis.

HFC: Yeah. And I'm also curious — I mean, this idea, this salon idea that you brought up. So tell me a little bit more. Was there a bit of a sort of scene that would develop here where

people — because artists were coming up to do their work, that you're spending time up here and things like that?

DL: Well, it kind of grew. In the beginning, we pretty deliberately had one artist at a time working. And as we got bigger, three years after we started, or four years, we built another new building with overhead cranes and 20,000 square feet. So quite a different thing than the shed we started in. And then there was more work happening at once. And you know, there was some overlap with artists. But the kind of more salon feel, that happened really in that building, when it was — and then, you know, in the beginning, we more [had been?] isolating, I think, because artists wanted to, in a way, a little bit keep the secret of what they were doing. But it seemed to grow and fit together over time, and they actually had a pretty good time getting a peek at what other people were up to and talking with each other.

AL: Oh, there was a funny anecdote with that — remember Louise Nevelson, who would make her sculptures through a process of addition. You know, she didn't come with drawings. She didn't come with models. And she'd be grabbing stuff, and we would take her to the local metal recycling center, big regional one. Drive her through the labyrinth of paths, and she'd point to what she wanted and we'd tag it with spray paint, have it trucked back to the shop, and she'd use these as building blocks for pieces. But there was one time when she wanted to take the bristles from Oldenburg's *Eraser [Typewriter Eraser, Scale X]* and put them on top of her piece. And she was starting to take bits and pieces of other people's sculptures and that was [laughs] kind of interesting.

DL: Yeah, you had to control her.

HFC: [laughs] And did they end up on her piece?

DL: Well, a lot of the scrap from cutting other pieces, we would spread out on the floor for her to choose from. And she'd edit things, you know, she'd throw out — if she wanted parts cut off. But it was recognizable to —

AL: Yeah. I mean, when we go to Storm King, for example, we can see [George] Sugarman's pieces in Nevelson's sculptures.

HFC: Really. That's actually — somehow adds this whole new element to her work that's really fascinating.

DL: And our brother Steven's piece that he had made way in the beginning with railroad spikes is on it, too.

AL: [UNCLEAR?]

HFC: Yeah, that's amazing.

DL: Yeah, you gotta be careful.

AL: Well, she cannibalized her own works. In fact, I remember Arnold Glimcher at Pace had to have things carefully catalogued and sort of taken away or sequestered. Otherwise they'd be gobbled up into something else.

HFC: [laughs] Turned into something new. When you bring up this idea of like, going and searching for, you know, metal and bringing it back, it brings up an idea that I want to come back

to a little bit specifically with Wesselmann. But before we get there, like, I've been talking — I've been asking these questions about how sort of the resources that you provided impacted what artists would do. But I'm also curious about situations where artists came to you wanting to do something, and it might — and I would imagine there were times when it led to you developing new ways of working or new things, perhaps, that you hadn't done before. Were there situations like that where a project was brought to you and you were like — and you ended up having to think like, Oh, okay, well now we have to do something that is new. We have to develop a new technique in response to something.

AL: Yeah, lots and lots like that.

HFC: Yeah.

AL: I'm thinking of — I mean, even little things, like, remember *The Soap at Baton Rouge* that Oldenburg had us do. It was part of a book. And these little soaps that started out the size of a barge up at — were up the Mississippi River. By the time it got to Baton Rouge, in the shallows of the mudflats there, it was only the size of a bar of soap. And we had to have those things cast in urethane, which was a big learning curve. So, you know, you chase these things down and figure them out. Same with building things in fiberglass for the Noguchi Museum. You know, we helped figure out how to make the *Octetra* pieces that had been cast in concrete before, in fiberglass. Which Noguchi had explored during his lifetime, but had sidelined, because it wasn't as developed [of] a technology as it is now. And so, now it was actually a better solution to making these parts. But all of that had to get figured out and how to make a

collapsible sphere in the center of the forming that could break away. We pulled out of these portholes and all of those kind of things need to be figured out.

So, there's lots of examples like that, to show how either the technologies have changed and new technologies have emerged or, you know, we're asked to figure something else out. I mean, even with the Judd boxes, the hundred mill aluminum boxes that we built for Marfa, Texas. You know, they were — they used mill aluminum. But Judd wanted the mill aluminum that was, you know, completely pristine, like you might find in one square foot panel out of a whole raft of it. So we figured out — you know, we went to the Reynolds mill. 75 acres under one roof that they produced, yeah, produced aluminum sheet and plate from these giant billets of material. And — a perfectly medieval place with lots of opportunity for the material to get scratched or dented or, you know, messed up in a way that Judd would not have liked.

So we, you know, went through the whole process, identified 15 or so different areas where when they run our order of 75,000 pounds, you know, all of these things have to be tended to in advance. So when a piece of material is going down along [a] raceway, you know, make sure all of the rollers are working, so it's not scratched over one roller that's fixed. When it's got to be transferred on a fabric belt, make sure the belt is clean, you know, not covered in oil and stuff. So it was on and on like that. A lot of times, typically what they'll do to flatten the plate is stretch or stress relieve it. So they have this equipment that grabs it from both sides and pulls it and elongates it. And that's what makes it flat again, because after the rolling, it's sort of wavy. And so after that, they typically cut those ends off because they have the grab marks.

Don't cut the ends up. Ship them to us with the grab marks on there. So it was a series of decisions that when they ran that plate, you know, it came as pristinely as possible. And we still had, I think, figured 10% [addition?].

DL: I think we had a third.

AL: Did we have that much?

DL: Yeah, it was a big amount.

AL: Yeah. We had figured a lot of — well, waste, or ability to choose the best plates for the best situations. And, yeah, we were building stuff out of the leftover material for years. [laughter]

HFC: And I'm interested, as you're developing these new techniques, you mentioned the initial investment of COR-TEN steel, which is interesting that they actually saw that as — they saw you as potential advertising? What was their interest in you doing —

AL: I think Dad had — Dad talked to them. Yeah.

DL: Yeah, they were persuaded.

AL: Lippincott & Margulies was his firm and they did corporate identity programs, as well as early on doing a lot of industrial design. But yeah, Pop, I think persuaded them to give a couple of truckloads of steel. And, you know, we'd weld things up and take pictures. And indeed, that's what happened. And they used

that in their advertising, including, I think, all the way up to [Robert] Indiana's *LOVE*, right?

DL: Yeah.

AL: Yeah, it was —

HFC: And they used it in their advertising?

AL: Advertising, yeah.

HFC: And were there other partnerships like that throughout the years? Did you have other industrial manufacturers or materials or anyone that was like, Oh, I'd really like you to do something?

DL: No, that was the only one.

HFC: Yeah, it just — it reminds me, you know, it does — like this, the mid-60's, right? The art and technology era. It's definitely, you know, there was also — it's an interesting parallel with Wesselmann at that era. He didn't have a hard time getting billboard material for his work because the companies that were advertising on these billboards saw his work as advertisements. So they were like, sure, take a — you know, take an entire billboard print from us, put it in your painting. It's great. And it seemed very much of that era that companies were seeing — and probably integral to what Pop Art did, to some degree — these companies were seeing the art world as a potential space of advertising. But it's really interesting to see how it manifested here, too.

AL: Yep. Art and technology intersection is fascinating and it's one that Tony Smith also was part of, and a number of the early artists. What was it, the Osaka World's Fair or something? That happened — that was the big art and technology interface. But yeah, Tony Smith, I think teamed up with the — United Cardboard? United Packaging? Who was it, that group that —

DL: Yeah, I forget the —

AL: United Packaging of America? What was it — it was a stock that's still around, I think. Packing Corporation of America?[2] Or something like that. Anyway, they teamed up with him to make *Bat Cave*, which is one of his sculptures that got built for Osaka. Partially built for Osaka and partially built again at LACMA, if not wholly built. I've not seen the picture of the whole thing at LACMA. But then entirely built more recently down in Porto Alegre in a bank that's part of an art exhibition of the region down there. And so anyway, a fascinating intersection.

HFC: Yeah.

AL: And in a way, that is what this kind of technology of the laser-cutting for Wesselmann is, is an intersection of technology and providing a new vocabulary.

HFC: Yeah. So let's talk about Wesselmann. So first, just how did you meet Wesselmann first? How did that first happen?

DL: Well, it happened in 1980, and I think I tried looking back in our written records, which didn't reveal, but I'm quite certain that Roxanne must've talked with Tom. And I remember

[2] Container Corporation of America.

vaguely going to see him at his studio. And we started out with the first pieces, which were basically, you know, they were three-dimensional and essentially blowing up a maquette that he had done in paperboard. So the approach was similar to what we would do with Sugarman and some of the other artists that liked to work with the models that way. And the laser-cutting happened five years later. But in that interim first part — and again, it began with [a] partnership piece with Tom.

But you know, right away, talking back and forth and meeting with him at the studio. You know, it was not only a lot of fun. I mean, he was definitely involved and quite interested in the idea of, you know, something a little bigger in terms of scale and so on with the pieces. And I think Sidney Janis had that first one in the show that maybe was in '81? And they sold, and the partnership pieces sold. So Janis and Tom and of course ourselves were all pleased with that beginning. So it kind of grew from — over that five-year period to the beginning of the laser cut. And there were even larger pieces done during that, you know, next 20-odd years of time. But the majority of the jobs that were done were the laser-cut ones.

AL: And what did you say, they accounted for — you did the math. They accounted for —

DL: Well, when I look back, there were 602 jobs, individual jobs that we did. And of course, some of them were a single piece. The other ones were editions of [forty?] [coughs] or whatever. So —

AL: A lot of jobs, because —

DL: At least three times bigger, or maybe four, than any other artists in terms of the number of —

AL: About a sixth of — we're on job #3600 and something now. And so that, you know, 600 is obviously, like, a sixth of the whole job numbers were for Wesselmann.

HFC: In the entire span of Lippincott.

AL: Yeah.

HFC: That's — I had no idea. That's incredible.

DL: We didn't either. I knew it was long, because his file cabinet is big, [laughter] but —

HFC: That's incredible. So, yeah. And so just the sheer quantity of what he did far exceeded anyone's — that's incredible.

DL: And I didn't add up the invoices. That'd be quite a job. But it's millions of dollars. It's a lot.

HFC: I'm sure.

DL: And that's the cost side of it. So it's just an incredible amount of work.

HFC: So I want to go back to the beginning again, and a couple of questions. So first, you said the initial pieces were partnership pieces. And as I understand, that means initially you had done these pieces where it's kind of — it was like a kind of profit-sharing, in a sense?

AL: Yeah. So, the partnership concept is very well-articulated on our website, if you want to refer to that at some point. But in a nutshell, it was a — it was an arrangement where we would put up the cost of the materials and labor in exchange for partial ownership in the work. And it allowed us to even out our production schedule, as well as to, you know, anticipate people's trajectories and participate in the development of new work. And for a long time in the early years, we had — I guess up until the late '80s, Don, we had a — quite a sculpture display in our yard in North Haven. And people would come and look at that as well.

DL: And then, also, other dealers were aware of it. So for example, one of the early sales of Tom's pieces, Margo Leavin in California sold. And that was because of our relationship that she knew about it, because of our relationship with her, with Oldenburg and other people that were in her gallery or that she worked with a lot. So it helped to sell things. And the feel of displaying galleries would send interested buyers up to look at X, Y and Z, what they could end up buying. Some they weren't sent to look at it all. So it — having them on display was definitely helpful, to not only be able to store them free, but to have them be where you could see them.

AL: So in a kind of an important way, we were participating in many respects, like a gallery would, in terms of promoting and investing in different artists' work.

HFC: Right. So you would actually — the work would actually be for sale on the property, even when it didn't get consigned to a gallery.

AL: Or exhibited out.

DL: Or exhibited outdoors in different shows around the country.

AL: So a number of pieces went to the first Newport Outdoor Sculpture show. What year was that, Don? '68, '69? Something like that. Jonathan was just talking about that.

DL: Yeah, I have that right here.

HFC: So sometimes — so just to kind of parse this sort of institutional relationship, sometimes you would have that partnership agreement. The gallery would definitely — would have to be involved, right? Even from the beginning, but the work —

DL: And the galleries were open to that because they didn't have to put up the money and they didn't have to store the piece. I think there were 50 artists in that show, which was pretty unusual. It was just the 50th anniversary. So that's —

AL: Did Jonathan print this?

DL: I don't know if he printed it; he gave them all the pictures there.

AL: I'm talking about Don's son Jonathan Lippincott, who wrote the *Large Scale [: Fabricating Sculpture in the 1960s and 1970s]* book.[3]

[3] See: https://www.lippincottbookdesign.com/large-scale/reviews.

HFC: Oh, right, right, right. And yeah. And I was just thinking, okay, so you have the partnership agreement, but this is a little bit different than it — they're not necessarily consigned to the gallery. They're — it's just if the work sells, you split the profit. So that. Yeah, no, it's just — it's an interesting — so it remains in your possession. You split the profit when you sell it, but it's still here or it maybe travels around. But again, it's not necessarily in the possession of the gallery. It's just —

AL: Right.

HFC: Yeah. Yeah.

DL: And the gallery, when they were involved, normally got 20% of the profit. And sometimes it would be a higher percentage if they were doing the, you know, that they normally would get with works they were doing directly with their artists. But again, everybody seemed to realize the fairness of it. If you're interested in getting work done and out in the world, the fairness of the partnership thing was helpful.

HFC: Are there other companies now that do similar partnerships, or was this a pretty — is it still a pretty new thing?

AL: I think UAP [Urban Art Projects] may do some of that. They were very interested in the fact that we did that early on. We've gotten to know them a little bit. They've bought out the — Dick Polich's business. And we've gone up there and talked with them and consult with them from time to time. We consult for them from time to time. And they were pretty interested in that

concept. And I think they are probably trying to figure out ways to implement that.

HFC: But it sounds like with Wesselmann, at a certain point, you stopped doing that. You had a different relationship.

AL: Well, when did we do the *Black Belt* edition? That was a bit later.

DL: That was quite a bit later.

AL: And that was a fun piece because he said he said, I love this piece, but nobody — but I can't get anybody to be interested in it. And so, we loved it also. And we said, Well, let's do — let's do a partnership edition of them, which we did. And they turned out to be beautiful little pieces that eventually sold, but they were unusual. *My Black Belt*, black and sort of a bit of a three-dimensional piece, but with a definite frontal side. But I know Tom was delighted to be able to have that be made.

HFC: Yeah.

DL: And they got sold by different people. James Goodman sold one, I forget the other ones, but over time, they found their homes.

HFC: Yeah. If you can remember anything, I'm curious if you can — to go back to this initial meeting. If you can talk a little bit about like, yeah, like the kind of initial contact with Wesselmann and how you experienced him as a person, your first impressions, your impressions of working with him, you know,

what it was like to be in the studio. Anything that stood out about him compared to other people that you worked with? Yeah.

AL: Go first?

DL: Well, it's of course a long time ago, and I don't totally remember, but I remember, you know, that he was interested in music. So you could often — and in the beginning, I don't remember assistants being there. It was quiet in the studio. And he'd lower the key down with —

AL: The fishing pole. [laughs]

HFC: I've seen the pictures. [laughs]

AL: That was great.

DL: And, you know, he would talk about those beginning pieces — I remember carrying the maquette home on the train. And Tom was willing to come to New Haven, but he didn't like making that trip any more than he could help. So, I think maybe more than other artists, we made more trips and sent things, particularly the laser-cut things, down to New York, to the studio. So we worked out the transportation itself pretty efficiently. To [feed them?] back down there for — well, with the laser-cut ones, he'd work on a surface that was primed, but all the painting, that happened in the studio.

AL: Yeah, we primed them with epoxy primer before sending them back.

HFC: Oh, you did? Oh, interesting.

AL: So it had a little tooth to it and so on. But I remember — I remember assistants at the shop there. Music would almost invariably be playing. Monica was often there, painting, painting things.

DL: Yeah, that seemed to happen —

AL: Two other assistants, whose names I can’t remember.

DL: — more, as we went along.

AL: But I remember Tom as a, you know, focused and serious person. Really down to earth, you know, good sense of humor, not affected and didn't have a pretense about him. Just a real down-to-earth, nice person. And that was — that was really fun. And always very friendly. And it was really fun going down to the studio, and you'd see funny things. Like, I guess they used little cotton things to wipe up paint or something, and they'd pile them up and you'd see these little pagodas of painted wads of, you know, cotton or something. But, and lots of work in production, you know, at all different scales. And sometimes they'd be painting the small laser-cut things, sometimes big, big pieces that took up a good part of the wall. But so lots going on, and a real focused and centered environment like that.

DL: Yeah. And that's what grew from that quieter time. I mean, I agree with everything Al was saying there, that the first five years [in the] beginning, parts of those things, you know, we did more things in North Haven and he was coming up. And then it phased so where we tried to feed as much as we could down there. But I think Tom, that whole period, Tom, I think he really

enjoyed that studio humming and, you know, the whole thing happening the way it did. And I forget when they moved from.

HFC: Yeah, I think it was early ‘90s, early ‘90s, they moved to Cooper Union. You know, the building is now part of Cooper Union campus.

AL: And I think that's when I began to see Claire there more often than — I don’t remember her at the other studio. But it was just the times I was there.

HFC: Yeah. Yeah. And so, when you would work together, how — to what degree would you sort of send drafts or look at drafts? What kind of revision and collaboration process developed? I know — so you mentioned, you would get a maquette, you know, these early pieces, you got a maquette and you took it back, you made something. To what extent did Wesselmann see and intervene between maquette and final product?

DL: Well, in the beginning, he came when the piece was cut out and formed and loosely together. And probably again — I’m guessing here, I would think maybe again — before it was painted?

AL: Yeah.

DL: And then when it was finished. And what transitioned slowly there was, when we get into the laser-cutting things, was trying to figure out — and we’d get to know exactly what needed to be done ahead of time. So he didn't have to look at it here, and we went to New York. And if something was wrong, we of course would bring it back. And that happened occasionally.

AL: And sometimes we'd make an intermediate scale model, didn't we? On — like on the *Seattle Tulip*?

DL: Uh, yes.

AL: So sometimes those things could get worked at an intermediate scale, and then you'd move on to the large scale. But it's almost invariable with all the artists that fine-tuning and development happens, you know, even with the best of — trying to know ahead of time what you're doing.

HFC: Yeah, no, and I'm just curious about that process. Like, I don't know if you recall anything, but the kinds of things that Wesselmann would be like, Oh, could you change this, or this isn't what I expected, or what — you know, what kinds of things would come up like that?

DL: Well, I think sort of — ones you've, in a way, mentioned there. You know, some things — when you start from a model and get to the end, the other things may need to get the proportions changed a little bit or edges treated a little differently, or the way one joins another.

AL: There are just subtle things. You know, the curve of a leaf, the — where a point is relative to, you know, something else. Especially when things are all coming down to the stem where it's bolted down to the ground or something, making sure that there's air where he wants it and so on. And so there could be any number of little adjustments that you wouldn't think of necessarily ahead of time until he focused on it.

HFC: Yeah, because I just — I'm just thinking about with Wesselmann in particular, the early works, when he started working with you. This — he'd never seen something like this that he'd made, right, that he'd been involved in making. So you got to imagine that for him, it would be a learning process. When you first see something, you know, this is gonna be the first time that he's seen something like this. And so —

DL: Yeah, I'm sure we've made changes there, and —

AL: I think had a very good sense of scale, though, and also probably from working on his larger paintings and things. But it seemed like he really understood that he always gave us, you know, very nicely made flat patterns. That he didn't, you know, they were — you didn't have to wonder, is this gonna go together alright or not? And so I think he had a pretty good grasp of that.

HFC: That makes sense. And having spent a lot of time with his maquettes, yeah, they have — they are very precisely constructed. And have, you know, a lot of attention to structural integrity. The maquettes that obviously sometimes you would be working directly from. Because sometimes those became their own works later on.

AL: And Tom had this, had the good sense to reinforce some of these things. So you might see a model that not only showed the tulip, for example, but underneath the curving leaves, he had put — he had cut out little cardboard pieces that would keep it at that, in [UNCLEAR?]. You know? Just as a fun anecdote, there's a sculpture we made for George Sugarman, who also worked in cotton board. And George made a model one time, an elaborate

outdoor sculpture with the seating and everything else. And we had built it all according to the model. And George came up and the arch was, you know, a certain way based on the model. And George said, “That's not how it goes. It goes like this.” And he took his model and shoved both sides, [laughter] and then the arch went way up high, and then we were like, Oh, okay. Let the cardboard settle.

HFC: [laughs] That’s so funny. Yeah. And then you remade it, I assume.

AL: We remade it. That didn't happen with Tom’s pieces, because he had the wherewithal to have thought to put stiffeners under the —

DL: I think with George, we started putting some sticks in where they were needed lift, and —

AL: We learned from that.

HFC: That's — yeah, that's very funny. So then I do want to talk a little bit about the laser — a bit about the laser-cut works, because that's such a kind of significant piece of your work together. And of course, there was — this is really a case where technology was developed to do this work, right? I mean, I know it was, you know, ongoing independently, but Wesselmann was really pushing a technological development to do this work. So just wondering if you can kind of like take me through the process of Wesselmann thinking about what these would be, the digital technology that was necessary, your own involvement, how this all kind of came together from your perspective.

AL: Yeah, this has been written about of course in some of the catalogs and things that you — the one you sent me, for example, talked a lot about that. And then, I looked in our files and I — at the request — at Claire's request, I had written the whole summary of how that whole process went.

HFC: Oh, wow.

AL: And I have a letter back from her thanking us for doing that. So that's all pretty well-articulated in that writing. And a lot of that — a lot of the back and forth is a little hard to remember. But essentially, you know, Tom wanted to isolate his brushstrokes. His, you know, gestural artistic, gestural movements, you know, with his paints or with his drawing implements, from the background. And, you know, this was a chance to do that. And so, the challenge in a nutshell was how to get that to accurately reflect, you know, the subtleties of Tom's drawings. And early on, you know, there was the ability to follow a line drawing, and then Tom would have to take his sketches and then laboriously make line drawings of all of that, which was — sort of removed at one step from the immediacy of his gestural work. So we started on that way.

And then, you know, there were developments for trying to photograph the pieces and then enter that information into a system that controlled — numerically controlled the movement of the machine. And an operator had to sit there with a cursor and go over the drawing and click, you know, each time the line changed a little bit. And as you might imagine, that ended up with a reasonable, you know, facsimile of the drawing. But not good enough, because it was — it could be jumpy. It could have little facets. It could — it didn't, you know, represent the

subtleties of the edges of those things. So [we] worked with different companies. One in New Haven, people down in Atlanta, Georgia, and, you know, developed techniques for photographing Tom's sketches carefully and then putting it through different kinds of software to, you know, read the edges of those things. And then translate that information into line segments and curves, and then software to smooth those things. So eventually, the process got developed enough to be able to deal with drawings that had a myriad of openings in them, so very complex crosshatch drawings with all kinds of things going on. You know, it could identify all of those places and quite accurately cut according to the edges.

And so, that in a nutshell is a — sort of the five-year trajectory with multiple other businesses, you know, involved trying to get to the place where we could work from his — directly from his drawings and end up with accurately-enough cut pieces that edges looked like they did in the drawings.

DL: And that was the information side of allowing that to happen. But while that was going on, the development of laser machines and controlling their motion better and the materials they could cut — in the beginning, you could cut cold-rolled steel, but not stainless well. And so they got the machines perfected as this ability to provide information that the machines could accept to do the more accurate cutting. And Laser Cut, the company we were working with, was very interested in helping and working with us to get this done because they saw that as a way of making all the other things that were going on in their company more possible, too. So it — and the change, with Tom, at the end, we were mostly cutting stainless, right?

AL: Yeah, stainless. And occasionally, I think they might have done some aluminum ones, but they couldn't cut aluminum in the beginning. Now they can cut aluminum.

HFC: Was the reason to shift to aluminum purely weight? Was there — yeah.

AL: Yeah, that would have been for the — some of the larger ones.

HFC: Yeah. And so that — and so there's nothing — and the reason to shift to stainless was because it's — it lasts longer? What was the advantage to stainless steel?

DL: Well, some of the stainless was left stainless, right?

AL: Yeah. Sometimes the material wasn't painted.

HFC: Right.

AL: And so you want something that's not going to rust, oxidize.

DL: Yeah, and the not rusting part is very nice to have. You know, when you've got something on a wall, you don't want to be taking it down. [laughs] Yeah.

HFC: Of course. Yeah. I'm also curious if you remember at all when Wesselmann pitched this idea to you, how he described what he wanted out of this. What he — why he wanted to do this project. What he said about his ambitions here.

DL: That's one of the things we've been pondering.

AL: Yeah, see, that's probably better understood from his diaries and things. I noticed when I read through the pamphlet that I guess you sent us.

HFC: I think we collectively sent over, yeah. [laughs]

AL: Yeah. That it quoted from his own diary. So I think that's — I would probably defer to that. I don't have a direct memory of that.

DL: Because we were cutting some things and were using the company, the laser-cut things. But really, Tom was the one that got that push started in that direction.

AL: Yeah, I mean, we might have told him about it because we'd been — we had been making folded meters for Donald Judd. Which were, you know, difficult to fabricate pieces that involved 180 degree bends back and forth on a long strip of sheet metal without misaligning anything. And we worked with a shop, I think, up in Wallingford to help us with that. And they were laser-cutting panels there for computer cabinets and we were pretty intrigued by all of that. And we might have, you know, told Tom about [that] and piqued his interest or something.

DL: I was just — before you came out, I was just trying to remember if we ever saw things that Tom himself had cut out, you know, just to get a feel of what that was like. But we couldn't remember.

AL: Well, he made the *Scribbled Tulip*. That's the only thing I can think of. He cut those out, and —

DL: Yeah. They were, you know, deliberately wider lines than just of his marker or the things that he —

AL: True, but some of the laser-cut ones were pretty wide lines also.

DL: Yeah, that's — we were — the first one, the laser-cuts we did, we don't have images of. Because originally we had a file of every one of the pieces, which was the black and white artwork that —

AL: I think it was copies, mostly. [UNCLEAR] and a few real artworks in there. But —

DL: No, I mean, they were copies, but they were the ones that resulted from the — that they scanned, right?

AL: Yes.

DL: But that all — was getting back to the —

HFC: Oh, you end up giving them — yeah.

DL: So there's a file you could go pull out and look at the original ones.

HFC: Yeah, that is — yeah, I should pester them about that. But yes.

DL: Well, it'd be fun to see them. I just —

HFC: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. It would be. No, I'm very curious about that. I wanted — yeah. Is there anything else about the — before we move on from the laser-cut works because it was so significant. Is there anything else — is that — oh, actually, this is one question. Are the laser-cut works, when you talk about just the sheer quantity of things, is that what accounts for most of the number of pieces? Is it mostly the laser-cut work?

DL: Oh, my gosh, yes.

HFC: Yeah. Yeah. [laughter] Okay.

DL: By miles.

AL: Sculptures are, what, like, 12?

DL: Maybe 12 or 15?

HFC: Yeah. Okay.

DL: Well, of course, the *Black Belts*, you know, if you count literally all of them, maybe there's 25. But —

HFC: Yeah. The laser-cut works were really —

DL: Yeah.

HFC: And that is in part, I assume, because some of these, you know, some of these he considers unique works. Some of these

were editions, and the editions would sometimes be, you know, produced in pretty large quantities.

AL: Right. But an edition of 25 would still be one of our job numbers.

HFC: Oh, wow.

DL: But sometimes an edition of six would get done as they were sold, you know. It depended.

AL: Yeah, it depended.

HFC: It depended. Okay. Yeah. So —

DL: And one could add up all the number of pieces if you wanted to know. But —

HFC: And that would probably be in the thousands, many thousands. Right.

DL: Well, yeah, at least the thousands.

HFC: Yeah. Yeah. So did you have any involvement in the abstract works? The abstract steel, the metal works in — his later three-dimensional abstract metal works? The ones that would hang on the wall and have three-dimensional elements. Did you fabricate any of those?

AL: I think — didn't Versteeg do a bunch of them?

HFC: They did, yeah.

AL: I think if we did, it wasn't many.

HFC: It wasn't many. Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Just curious. Yeah. Then I guess one of the last things I want to ask about is just sort of you have a unique perspective on the work that Wesselmann did in metal, in the work that he commissioned with all of you, in — to be able to put in the history of all of the work that you worked on, kind of having a front-row seat to all these artists working in large scale and metal and everything. And so I'm interested what you both see as — either in terms of the way he worked or in terms of the work itself — as distinctive about Wesselmann's approach to these kinds of projects. If you set him against some of the artists that you work on, like, what stands out about Wesselmann in particular?

DL: Well, I guess one thing I would think I'd have to say is the amount of work that got done in his studio.

HFC: Oh, in the studio.

DL: Yeah.

HFC: Yeah, tell me more about that.

DL: Because I'm just thinking back, I don't know anyone that had that much going on in their studio. You know, with people and —

AL: It was a busy place.

DL: Yeah.

HFC: When you say that, do you mean that — the amount of works that were being made?

DL: Well, the amount of works that were being made and the amount of work they did on each work, you know? That was a significant amount of time and skill involved in helping with all of that aspects of painting and handling and so on.

HFC: Right. Because all of the — all of those metal works that were painted were of course painted in the studio. So they would come back from you, and then, you know, and we —

DL: We made especially nice boxes for them. So once they were through painting, they went back into that same case for storage or handling or moving. But it was a lot of — it was a lot of work.

AL: It was fun to read in the pamphlet about how Tom was talking about when it came time to paint these things, you know, having to kind of discover his way back in into what is what in the drawing and how much he liked the landscape paintings, because, you know, seemed especially to enjoy discovering the the sky and the building and parts of it like that. But I gathered sometimes the image — imagery could be so — a bit confounding to try to pick out of this.

HFC: The scribble, yeah. [laughs]

AL: It’s fairly detailed. Yeah. Quickly scribbled drawing.

HFC: I mean, it's a really interesting thing about those works and that their whole — to some degree, what I understand was

Wesselmann's ambitions, capturing the freshness and looseness of a very quick drawing. Right? Because these were drawings that were done very quickly. But making it this scale and this material that you would never expect to see something that is done with that looseness and quickness.

DL: Right, Right.

HFC: But when you go through the process of how these were created, there's an enormous amount of effort and care and precision going into making something that looks, you know, it gives the illusion of having just been tossed off. Right?

AL: I thought it was particularly interesting the way that he straddled the objective and the abstract approaches that were going on during that time. But mainly the counterpoint to the abstract art that was largely being made during that certain trajectory of Tom's career. But then, also how he would go back and forth, and indeed, how some of these scribbled landscapes and things really were kind of both, you know? And in this really interesting way. So I continue to find that kind of inspiring and fun to think about.

HFC: Yeah, I mean, I agree. And it's something that a lot of people have brought up. It's something that Wesselmann talks about, you know, in his own — in his Slim Stealingworth autobiography, he talks a lot about how he kind of thought of himself as fundamentally throughout his career as an abstract painter, who just happened to use other materials to achieve those ends. And I think it's really interesting that throughout his work, even when it gets very figurative, as you're pointing out, there is this sense of an attention to the form as

abstract, even if it's representing something. And you're right, also, when you look at some of these laser-cut works, sometimes at first you have no idea what you're looking at. You know, they are really abstract forms on a wall.

AL: Yeah.

HFC: Yeah.

AL: And that — some of the East Hampton sketches were pretty basic.

HFC: Pretty basic. And also — but they work. But they work in ways that don't necessarily relate to understanding what you're seeing, you know? Yeah. So I think that's — that is a really interesting aspect of his work as well. And the other thing that you had mentioned that I kind of wanted to highlight, too, is when you talked about some of his sculptural work, how they were both three-dimensional and very distinctively frontal. They had a view.

AL: Yeah.

HFC: Right?

AL: Right. Almost invariably. I mean, some of the *Standing Tulips*, well, were three-dimensional. And you could — didn't necessarily have that feeling. I mean, they mainly had several sides. But if you looked at it just from the stem end, I mean, it — so maybe those were more in the round. But other ones, you know, there was a — the *Standing Tulip* that we made most recently for Texas. That had a frontal aspect. The *Black Belts*

had a frontal aspect. You know, a lot of his maquettes were made that way, sort of in a certain limited depth of space and sculpturally arranged within that, but still mainly to be seen from one side or a quadrant.

HFC: Yeah. You know, it's really interesting to me because if you look at — you know, we're doing this interview at — during the time that the Fondation Louis Vuitton retrospective of Wesselmann is up. I just got back from seeing it. And you know, in that show they have, for example, for the first time, all the *Standing Still Lives* installed in the same room at the same time. Those are three-dimensional. But they are entirely frontal.

AL: Right.

HFC: And so, it's — it is interesting, also in the works that you did with him, often, it's almost like he's composing in three dimensions in order to achieve an effect in two.

AL: Yeah. It's almost bas-relief in a certain [laughter] extrapolated way.

HFC: Yeah, exactly. Which is so different than some other artists that you were working with, you know, I mean, someone like Donald Judd. Really the antipode of that, right? [laughs] Yeah. So. Well, is there anything else? Is there anything else that comes to mind with Wesselmann that you would like to bring up? Any other things that I may have missed or any other things, and also, if you have any thoughts. Yeah. Josie. [laughs] Just for the recording.

DL: Really my only thought is that we wish we had him there when these pieces that we recently have been involved with were happening. So, we did our best to —

AL: Yeah, we wish he had — we wish he had lived longer. I mean, that was it. I mean, he was gone very quickly, and it was a surprise to everybody. But it was a great joy working with him. And, you know, one of our — one of our favorite clients over the years.

HFC: Yeah, and you really worked with him right up until the end of his life.

AL: Yeah.

HFC: I mean, even in 2004, right, you had done some project with him, right?

AL: I think so.

HFC: Yeah.

AL: I don't remember very well, all of that going down.

HFC: Well, thank you both so much. This is wonderful, and I think it gives some real insight into an aspect of — or several aspects as to how Wesselmann worked, and also I'm glad we got, you know, a little bit of background on your own project and how your business has developed. And anyway, thank you very much for this. This has really been a pleasure.

AL: You're very welcome. Our pleasure, too.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]