

Oral History with Roberta Bernstein

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CAITLIN SWEENEY: My name is Caitlin Sweeney, and I am the director of digital publications at the Wildenstein Plattner Institute. Today is December 17th, 2020, and I'm recording this oral history with Roberta Bernstein for the WPI. Roberta Bernstein is the author of the *Jasper Johns Catalogue Raisonné of Painting and Sculpture*, which was published by the WPI in 2017. I met Roberta in 2011, when I started working as her research assistant. The experience was formative for me. I learned so much about working on catalogue raisonnés, and I know that's true for you too, Roberta. I'm hoping that we can delve into some of the insights that you've gained working with a living artist on such a critically important publication. So, first of all, thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I've really been looking forward to having this conversation.

ROBERTA BERNSTEIN: Well, it's a pleasure.

CS: Yeah. To start, I'd like to talk about your history with Jasper Johns, and how you came to be regarded as an expert on his work. You first heard about Jasper Johns from John Cage -- is that correct?

RB: Yes, it is. Although I did have a professor at UMass Amherst, where I was an undergraduate, who knew about what was going on in contemporary art. His name was Carl Belz, and that was influential as well. But the main impetus was having met John Cage after he gave a concert at UMass. And I talked to him about my interest in contemporary art and contemporary culture, and he suggested that I go to see the Jasper Johns show at the Jewish Museum in New York. And even though that wasn't something I would do at the drop of a hat, because John Cage recommended

it, I made sure I got there. And I did see that show, which was a ten-year retrospective of his work, and it just kind of blew me away, as they say. It just --

CS: Yeah.

RB: (phone chimes) had a tremendous influence on me, and that has stayed with me for decades. So, that's how I first made the connection.

CS: Can you talk about how you met the artist himself? That was a few years later, but yeah, I'd love to hear about your first encounter with Jasper Johns.

RB: I moved to New York in the summer of 1966 to begin graduate school that fall at Columbia University. And because of my interest in contemporary art, I was going to galleries all the time and I met a lot of artists. That whole fall was just a very exciting period of immersing myself in the contemporary art world. But it wasn't until April of 1967 that I ended up meeting Jasper Johns. I walked into the Leo Castelli Gallery one day, and there he was, standing at the top of the staircase. And he was talking to Kay Bearman, who worked there at the time, and Roy Lichtenstein. And I was just flabbergasted, and he could not have been --

CS: (laughs)

RB: -- more welcoming and friendly. After we talked for a while, he invited me to come visit him at his Riverside Drive apartment. He said, "Well, that's really near Columbia, and you should just drop by one day." I had asked him if he would sign a

poster for me, for friends who were coming to New York from England. A flag, which he -- I wanted him to sign it "welcome to the United States." But he said, "I won't do that, but I'll --

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

RB: -- and why don't you just come to my apartment." So, a couple of weeks later, I got my courage up and called him, thinking he'll probably not even remember who I am or that he said it. And the first words out of his mouth were, "Well, I've been expecting you to call." And I said, "Oh, me?"

CS: Oh. (laughs)

RB: And I said, "Well, when can I come visit?" And he said, "Well, what are you doing right now?" And so, I said, "Oh. (laughs) Okay."

CS: Wow.

RB: And I remember walking down from Columbia, and I stopped at a flower shop, because one of the things I remembered from John Cage's essay on Johns was that he loves all flowers. So, I thought, Well, I'll bring him a bouquet, and I picked out a bouquet of red, yellow, and blue flowers to bring him. So, I think that made a good impression. But I had a lovely visit that afternoon and he signed my posters. You know, I was there for hours, and in the meantime, Richard Hamilton came to visit. Merce Cunningham came to visit. And I kept saying --

CS: Wow.

RB: -- "Should I go now?" And he said, "Well, you're welcome to stay. If you want to go, you can." So, I ended up staying for several hours and it was just thrilling. And that was how we met and developed a friendship after that.

CS: That's such a remarkable story, to be thrust into this situation where you're talking with one of your -- one of the artists you admire the most and this circle of real luminaries. And I think one of the things that was a joy working with you is that you had this really (pauses) kind of first-hand experience, going to these shows, knowing these individuals. And that was really also reflected in your journal. If you could speak a little bit about how your relationship with Johns evolved from friendship to actually working in the studio, and how you kept track of that information, I think that would be a really interesting topic to hear about.

RB: Right. Well, you know, I realized at a certain point while I was studying at Columbia that I loved art history and I loved digging into earlier periods of history, but what I really loved was the first-hand contact with the artists of our time.

CS: Mm-hm.

RB: And so, that kind of gave me a different perspective on what I wanted to do in terms of my work at Columbia. And after -- I guess it was after the summer, I think Johns was away for the summer -- in the fall, he needed someone to help him work on some project. And at the time, I had been working part-time at Andy Warhol's Factory. I wasn't getting paid. I was just doing things.

CS: (laughs)

RB: But Johns was offering me a real job. And so, I ended up taking that job, and I remember when I told Andy Warhol, he said, "Well, I knew you would leave me for Jasper. He really likes intellectual Jewish women." (laughter) But he understood, and that it was a real job. And so, I started seeing Johns. At the time, he hadn't yet moved to his Houston Street studio. He was working at David Whitney's loft on Canal Street when I first started. And at the time, I was keeping a personal journal. It wasn't a journal, like, Oh, I want to be an art historian and so I have to write down everything. It was really about my life. But a big part of my life at the time was being around these artists, so the journal is full of those kind of -- bits of information that wove into other aspects of my life.

So, you know, while I was working for Johns -- and that was a good couple of years, I was there pretty regularly -- I did keep track of what he was working on and what he was doing and things he said. And so, when it came time for me to choose a topic for my dissertation, I was hopeful that my advisor, Theodore Reff, who was the main modernist there at the time, would be open to my doing a dissertation on a living artist. This was an unheard-of thing at Columbia at the time.

CS: Right.

RB: So, fortunately, the two artists he would agree to were Rauschenberg and Johns, and I ended up doing a master's paper on Rauschenberg and then did the dissertation on Johns. And he was supportive of that, which I'm very grateful for. Because it was

the first dissertation (phone chimes) that Columbia had allowed on a living artist. So, that's how the dissertation got started.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

CS: So, Roberta, you were saying that you wrote your master's on Rauschenberg and then your dissertation on Johns. I'm curious, what was it that led Theodore Reff to agree to let you write your dissertation on a living artist? Since it was a feat in and of itself to be the first dissertation at Columbia on a living artist.

RB: Right, well, I think -- I think he, at the time, thought, Okay, of this generation of artists, living artists at the time, he thought that Rauschenberg and Johns had the most potential to remain historically important. The others, he wasn't so sure. And I think that he -- he had such an interest in the artists he worked on and their psychological condition. I always had a sense he wished he knew Cézanne and he wished he knew Degas personally.

CS: Yeah.

RB: So, I think on some level, he understood why I was so interested in that kind of personal connection.

CS: Yes. As a brief aside, the Wildenstein Plattner Institute just published Theodore Reff's compilation of letters by Edgar Degas, and you really do get a sense of his commitment to, you know, the perspective of the artist. It's really a tremendous publication, but I'm also thinking back to your journal. I remember one time we were going through it, you actually came

across a passage where you were reading a book by John Rewald on the subway and you ran into Jasper Johns.

RB: Right.

CS: I love that coincidence, because John Rewald wrote the catalogue raisonné of Cézanne, so it seems like a -- a lovely coincidence in hindsight. (laughs)

RB: Well, it was. I mean, this was very shortly after I met him. I had been to his apartment and got on the subway. It was a crowded car. I sat down, started reading Rewald's *Cézanne* -- it was an assignment -- and then, looked up, and who was sitting next to me but Jasper Johns, who was reading the *New York Times*. So, you know, I thought, Oh my God, I'm reading about Cézanne, here's Jasper Johns, this is such a coincidence. It was one of those magic moments.

CS: Yeah, absolutely.

RB: It was really quite incredible, yeah.

CS: Once you were working in his studio, can you describe any of the projects that you were working on?

RB: Well, actually, when I first started, he was working on -- excuse me -- the set for Merce Cunningham's *Walkaround Time*.

CS: Oh, wow.

RB: Which used these sculptural elements that were based on Duchamp's *Large Glass*. And this was an idea that Johns had, he

was artistic director for Cunningham's dance company at the time. And Duchamp had given permission for him to do a set based on the *Large Glass*. I don't know what I was doing about that, but that's what I remember when I was at David Whitney's loft. I remember him working on that project. And that was very exciting, because the day that Jasper went to get Duchamp to show him what he had done, he invited me to come along.

CS: Oh, wow.

RB: And that was one of the most amazing experiences. Seeing the two of them together, interacting; seeing Duchamp's reaction to the set. I mean, Johns never considered that a work of art of his.

CS: Right.

RB: He just saw himself as a facilitator and, you know, doing -- scenery (laughs) for Merce Cunningham, basically. But it was very, very exciting to see Duchamp and Johns together, interacting. It was those kinds of things that kept inspiring me more and more to want to do a dissertation and do my research on Jasper Johns, because every situation revealed to me how extraordinary he was and how extraordinary his art was.

CS: Yeah, with -- (sighs) I'm so tempted to launch into topics other than the catalogue raisonné, but I know that you've written extensively on his artistic influences, Cézanne and Duchamp being primary among them. And you see him as an artist that really operates within the context of an art historical legacy.

RB: Right, well -- interestingly, I mean, that was Ted Reff's, Theodore Reff's approach. As a matter of fact, one course he taught was "Modern Art and Tradition." And he was very much interested in how artists looked at their artistic predecessors and what they got from that activity. And so, when I went to formulate my dissertation, I incorporated that approach, and much of the dissertation -- and my future work -- is about how Johns related to his artistic predecessors. And it's been a very rewarding endeavor, because that's such an important part of his work.

CS: Absolutely. That's actually an interesting segue into how you came to be involved with establishing his legacy through a publication like a catalogue raisonné. And so, maybe that's a good place to launch from. How did you become involved with the catalogue raisonné project with the Wildenstein Institute?

RB: Well, at the time -- this all was generated around 2000 -- I'm trying to remember now, could it have been like 2004, that early? I think so. I was working on a second book on Johns, which I had always planned to do, because the dissertation, which I had revised and was published as a book, covered the first 20 years of his work. And then, there were 20 more years. And I wanted to do a second book, and Johns was very supportive of that. And then, the idea came up, which was generated by Wildenstein, to do a catalogue raisonné. And Johns was somewhat hesitant, but he asked me if I would be interested and -- well, actually, it didn't quite happen that way, because there was another art historian, Frances Naumann, who was involved in generating the idea. That didn't work out, but because of my work on Johns and my previous work, and because I was working on the book, Johns thought, Well, maybe I would be the right

person. As long as I didn't abandon the idea of working on the book.

CS: (laughs)

RB: And that's how the whole idea of the catalogue raisonné and the book going together, but the book always remaining a separate entity, was evolved. And at the time, Wildenstein was involved with Pace. You know, there was the Pace/Wildenstein Gallery.

CS: Mm-hm.

RB: But Wildenstein, as well as his Old Masters gallery, was involved with contemporary art. And he was working with Joachim Pissarro, who was very interested in Jasper Johns's work, and I think put the idea in his ear to support a catalogue raisonné on Jasper Johns. And he was also very enthusiastic about Jasper's work, and so it all came together. I remember we had a few lunches and somehow, the idea evolved and the commitment to doing the project evolved out of that process.

CS: And I remember you telling me that it was really important to Johns that a not-for-profit, which the Wildenstein Institute was -- it was independent from the gallery -- but that it was not a gallery that was doing the catalogue raisonné.

RB: Yes, this was very important to Johns. He really didn't want a commercial enterprise to be involved. And before it got off the ground, he had to be sure that the Wildenstein Institute, which had a long history of doing catalogue

raisonnés, was the entity that was supporting it and that that was a not-for-profit entity. That was very important to him.

CS: Um -- that is so interesting. And so, we're lucky that -- that the Wildensteins were interested in bringing their own history of doing Impressionist catalogues kind of into the 21st century, into an American context. I think Jasper Johns was the first contemporary artist that they had decided to work with, is that correct?

RB: Yes, that is correct, and it -- you know, he wasn't involved with the Pace/Wildenstein Gallery in any way, and that was also important. And Jasper may have liked the idea that he was in the company of these European artists that Wildenstein had previously supported in terms of their work on -- their scholarly work on catalogue raisonnés.

CS: So, a catalogue raisonné is an immense project. You are setting out to identify and locate and record all of the works within the artist's oeuvre, and I wanted you to talk about how you started. Where was your starting point? You had the artist to consult, but there's a lot of information that they don't necessarily know about what happened to their work once it goes out into the world. So, yeah, I was hoping you could speak about just the initial steps, laying the foundation for the project.

RB: Right, well, fortunately, Johns had kept fairly good records on his work. And we decided at the beginning that this was a painting and sculpture --

CS: Okay.

RB: -- catalogue; that we weren't dealing with the works on paper. And he had very good records of the work, and they turned out to be -- while they were incomplete and sometimes inaccurate in various ways -- it was a good starting point. And so, the first thing was to transfer his database to ours. But that was a big issue, because we didn't really have a good working database. That had to be created, and that took a while, and a lot of the energy of the beginning of the project went into designing the right database. So, the first step was to transfer the records. Also, I hired Heidi Colzman-Freyberger -- or Wildenstein hired her, but I searched for someone who had experience working on catalogue raisonnés, and Heidi Colzman-Freyberger came very highly recommended. She had just recently worked on the Barnett Newman catalogue raisonné and had a lot of experience working with art publishers as a researcher and editor.

So, she came onboard. And we both were working part-time. I was still teaching at the university at Albany. We didn't have the hugest budget. So, Heidi was working with us part-time. But it was definitely a very good way to start. And Heidi also, while we were waiting for our database to get designed and giving input into that, she worked at the Museum of Modern Art -- the 1996 retrospective that the Museum of Modern Art put on was an occasion where a huge amount of data was gathered. Bibliographical data, data about exhibitions. A huge amount of research had gone into that. I actually wrote an essay for that catalogue. But Heidi started to go through all of the bibliographic material and enter it, so that we had that archive to start with as well.

CS: Yeah. I remember seeing those boxes from MoMA, and just -- I think there were eight or nine or ten boxes just filled with, yeah, bibliographic exhibition research. It was an incredible resource.

RB: Right. Because we ended up going over it later as well. Remember when we all went out to Queens and --

CS: Yes. (laughs)

RB: -- spent days going through those boxes, just as part of our checking process. So, that's where Heidi started. And whatever information she could input at that stage, she did. So, that was really our starting point.

CS: Yeah. When you started doing more follow-up, like, after the MoMA, I'm curious -- you were able to look at Johns's administrative records, but you weren't necessarily looking at personal correspondence or personal photos. You were really focusing on the objects and what it -- where they had traveled or, like, their provenance, for example. Yeah.

RB: Right. Well, we didn't have one hundred percent cleared access to Johns's records. He was still somewhat guarded about any personal material. He was very generous about his time and his staff's time, but it wasn't like he said, Here are the records, go through them. I worked through his office manager, Sarah Taggart -- do you remember her last name at the time?

CS: I only knew her as Sarah Taggart, really, unfortunately.

RB: Alright. His office manager, Sarah Taggart. And I worked with her, going through a lot of the records. Because there was information he didn't want shown about, you know, I think how much work sold for. You know, he was a guarded person and he --

CS: Sure.

RB: -- as generous as he was with me, he just wanted to give the information that I needed for the cataloguing of the work.

CS: Absolutely, yeah. I remember -- I think it was around the same time I started working, maybe a little bit before -- you discovered that David Whitney, who had been a curator at the Whitney Museum, had worked for Leo Castelli, had actually compiled a list that was almost like a proto-catalogue raisonné and that those files were at the Menil. And --

RB: Right, David Whitney had worked with Johns on the Whitney Museum retrospective in the mid-'70s, and for his work on that exhibition, he had compiled a huge amount of information about provenance and, you know, other notes that were invaluable to our cataloguing process. So, that resource came along. And then, of course, there are the records of the Leo Castelli Gallery.

CS: Right.

RB: But what happened is right in the middle of our research, when we were ready to look at those records, they had been given by Barbara Castelli, Leo's widow, to the Archives of American Art. And we didn't have access to them until the archives processed those records. But in fact, at a certain point, it all worked out. We did get to spend a lot of time in Washington,

going through those materials. So, I would say the main archival materials were MoMA's files from the 1996 retrospective, the David Whitney papers, the Castelli papers at the Archives of American Art, and then Johns's own studio records.

CS: Right. Yeah, sort of collating so many different sources. And amongst that, it's maybe a good time to turn to the artist himself. You're gathering so much information about the works of art from a cataloguing perspective, but then, I was hoping that you could talk about working with him. Not only how you established what works belonged in the catalogue raisonné, but I understand that establishing their chronological order was very important.

RB: Right. That was a very big part of the project. And from the beginning, it was the part that Johns was most skeptical about. He said, "I'm not going to remember. You're not going to get it right. You have to put --" -- can I just stop for a second?

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

CS: Alright.

RB: Okay, where were we, Caitlin? I was talking about --

CS: Yeah, you were --

RB: -- working with Jasper.

CS: Yeah, working with Jasper. Chronological order.

RB: Right, right. Okay. One of the most important things, of course, is the order in which the works are lined up. And who better to discuss that with, of course, than the artist? Although from the get-go, Johns knew that he wouldn't remember exactly. And it's interesting, because he wanted to get things right, but when he knew things couldn't be reconstructed to be right, quote unquote, he was very concerned about that. And you know, I assured him that there was a -- always a caveat (laughs) when things weren't verifiable. Where the user of the catalogue could be told, This is the -- according to the artist's memory, the author's research, this is the closest we can come to the chronological order. So, I think he felt okay about it after a while, because he was assured that this wouldn't be presented as the absolute truth, but the best we could do according to the research that we had and his memory.

So, we spent a lot of time going through the order. And Viki Sand, who was helping me work on mostly the administration of the project, made up these cards that I could bring when I visited him. So we could lay out the order that I had, and then he could switch it around as he remembered things differently. So, we spent a lot of time doing that. And in the meantime, you know, I asked him any questions I had about the works that bore upon the cataloguing. You know, a big issue was with the very earliest work, the first *Flag* and the first *Targets*, getting that straight. So, we spent a lot of time reconstructing that period of 1954 to early '55. And I remember --

CS: Do you mind if I ask -- oh, yeah, do you mind if I ask, were you ever bringing him new pieces of information that would spark a memory? Or were there -- were some periods of time

clearer than others for him? How would he go about this process of remembering?

RB: You know, sometimes, it was interesting. I think sometimes he would just say, "I don't remember," and it was like he didn't want to remember, necessarily, or give me that information. Other times, it was like his memory was so sharp. He was right there, and really did remember things very clearly. So, it really varied, and maybe it had to do with his mood sometimes, or his attitude toward the project. Because I think it is a very tricky thing, because I also observed as Ellsworth Kelly was working with the researcher, Yve-Alain Bois, who was working on his catalogue. You know, artists are so focused on what they're doing now, in the moment, that to think back 50 years can sometimes be interesting, but at other times, it seems irrelevant. So, I remember a couple of times, I'd be talking to Jasper and have all these questions, and he'd go, "You know, this is so boring." And I would go, "Boring? These are --"

CS: (laughs)

RB: "-- the most important questions about your work." But, you know, I understood what he meant, because it was like he's chomping at the bit. I want to get back to what I'm doing now. I did that then.

CS: Totally.

RB: And then, you know, sometimes I'd think, How is he going to remember 50 years ago?

CS: Right.

RB: If someone asked me what I was doing 20 years ago, and did you do this the day before that. You know, so --

CS: (laughs)

RB: -- I was trying to understand how he must be feeling. And we ended up working very well together. I mean, I have to say, he was so generous with his time. And I really tried very hard to use the time very wisely, because I didn't want to interfere with the work he was doing now. In the present moment.

CS: Right.

RB: So, but it all worked out. And I think he had the input into the catalogue that I think makes it a very exciting document. I mean, this is what is great about working with a living artist. You get --

CS: Right.

RB: -- their voice, their input. I mean, there are pros and cons. But fortunately, and I've always found this with Jasper, he's not a controlling person in the sense that he would never interfere with an idea or try to change something that I thought was important. You know, I wanted his input into things, but if I argued convincingly that something should be done a certain way, he would go along with it. On the other hand, I would also listen to his point of view, and I have to say that -- you know, his conclusions were always very brilliant. And finally, really made a difference in making the catalogue as special as I think it is, finally in the outcome.

CS: I want to ask what you think, or if you could share what some of those decisions were?

RB: Well, um, I'm just thinking. There were so many. I mean, we did bring him in whenever it was relevant to do that. You know, even one thing where we disagreed -- I thought that the works -- we rephotographed almost every single work. Mostly with one photographer. And that was something --

CS: Which I should say is very unusual for a catalogue raisonné, I'm finding. (laughs)

RB: Yes, it is.

CS: It's an incredible, incredible feat, because you traveled all over the world to see these works in person.

RB: Right. Yeah, well I saw all the works, almost every single one, in person, to examine them and measure them and look at the materials and all of that. But there was also the question of photography, because we wanted consistency. And we were able to, fortunately, hire one photographer, Jamie Stukenberg, to do almost all of the photography. I mean, some of it, like in Japan, we hired a photographer in Japan. Sometimes museums wanted their photographer to shoot the work. You know, so there are some cases where other photographers did shoot the work. But the issue I'm talking about has to do with whether the work was reproduced in its frame when it was framed or not. And Jasper very clearly decided that he didn't want the works reproduced with frames. And I thought they should be, because it made them look more like objects.

CS: Right.

RB: It kind of was more authentically connecting them to their surroundings. And so, we talked a lot about that. But finally, he wouldn't give in. Except, of course, when the frame was integral to the work. And there are several examples, especially in the later work, where that's the case. But finally, I believe he was right. Even though some of the frames were original frames that he had put on, he really doesn't consider the frame to be his work. You know. Once someone owns the work, they can frame it any way they want.

CS: Right.

RB: And there are some cases where I think no collector would take off the frame because it is integral. But you never know. And from his point of view, once it's out of his hands, it's out of his hands. And so, I think the catalogue raisonné is true to that conception, that we're looking at the work as he did it, not as how it might have a life beyond his studio. So, I think that that -- that's an example of how his thinking was sort of way ahead of mine in that sense. But on the other hand, he wants his objects described in terms of materials in a very concise way. And I totally respected that from the beginning, but I realized that we needed more information about materials than that kind of description offered. So, we came up with the solution of notes that would go into more detail about materials and objects.

CS: Right. So, he was interested in having something like the painting *Fool's House*, which has a broom and a teacup attached

to it and a rag, I think -- he was interested in documenting it as oil painting, or oil on canvas with objects. And yet, there's another perspective, where you're coming from, which might want to say, it's a broom, it's a teacup. That this all has --

RB: Right.

CS: -- relevance and needs to be documented.

RB: Right. I mean, to him, it was like, Well, they can look at the photograph and they can see.

CS: (laughs)

RB: But finally, he understood that people don't always see everything when they look at a photograph, and that there had to be some information --

CS: Mm-hm.

RB: -- in the catalogue that was accurate about what these objects were. And even -- *Fool's House* is a good example because it was also the issue of charcoal.

CS: Mm.

RB: Because he used charcoal a lot, and particularly in works where he wrote words, like in *Fool's House*. And in earlier descriptions, the charcoal reference had been left out. So, there were certain works we determined together, at my suggestion, where charcoal should be put in because it is one of the primary materials.

CS: Right.

RB: So, *Fool's House* is an example of that because there are words written with charcoal. So, you know, there were things like that that you would think would be kind of obvious on materials. Some artists, it's just oil on canvas. But with Johns, the way the materials were described and catalogued had its own unique set of issues.

CS: It's so interesting getting to go through this reevaluation with Johns. And I'd love if you could talk about determining the titles, because I know that as you were examining works, you were getting to see the verso and how he might have referred to titles when he originally made -- or referred to the work when he originally made it, versus how it's been recorded in the history since. If you could speak about, like, how you guys --

RB: Right, right. It was interesting, because he hadn't looked at the versos since they went out of the studio. And, you know, sometimes he would feel very strongly that the title on the verso should now be the title, versus sometimes saying, Well, the work has been under this title. Like, for example, *The Drawer* --

CS: Right.

RB: -- which, on the back, says *The Drawer*. But it had only been called *Drawer*.

CS: Right.

RB: For many, many years, and in many, many catalogues. So, and publications. So, he decided, Let's not call it *The Drawer*, let's just keep it *Drawer*. But, you know, there were others where he insisted that, Yes, this should be changed now to what's on the back. And there wasn't necessarily consistency about that, but from my point of view, it was his decision what the work should be called.

CS: Right.

RB: And so, you know, we did record the current title, the inscription on the reverse. We also captured how the work had been titled in various publications. So, the user of the catalogue gets an idea of the history of how the titles had been used.

CS: Yeah. That's so interesting. I'm thinking also in terms of both the chronology and the artist's input -- is the way the sequence of sculptures worked, or were established. And how -- like, the first three sculptures are the *Flashlights*. And the first two were, I think, cast in '58, but then the third was '88, maybe. Not a hundred percent sure. And you think it's a chronological sequence for the sculpture catalogue, but he's really invested in this idea of the concept -- chronologically, the concept came in 1958.

RB: Right, exactly. First of all, it was very important to him that the sculpture be a separate catalogue.

CS: Oh, really?

RB: Because we talked about that, and I had said, "Well, what if the sculpture were integrated?" He said, "Absolutely not." And I think it was partly because the sculptures were done in editions.

CS: Right.

RB: But we decided from the get-go that every sculpture would be illustrated and given its own page in the sculpture catalogue. Because in others, for example, when things are editioned, the whole edition is considered one work.

CS: Right, yep.

RB: So, you know, every single sculpture is in there. But he was very much committed to the idea that when he first conceived of the sculpture, that it was its date. And that the casts from that original were to be put together in one group. So, which is unusual, and could have been done differently. But finally, I understood and respected that decision.

CS: Yeah, I think it's really interesting. Maybe you could speak even to how you determined with him what was considered a painting and a sculpture and what wasn't. And there's two ways this can go. On the one hand, you mentioned the set for *Walkaround Time* earlier, that he made while working --

RB: Right.

CS: -- as the director for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. And those sets are at the Walker in Minneapolis. And he does not consider those to be sculpture. And I was wondering, what was it

like to make those determinations with him? Did he have sort of a criteria that he was working with?

RB: Right, I mean, he was very clear that any of the work he did for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as artistic advisor was a separate entity in his mind. You know, all the costumes, all the -- any work he did on sets. Including *Walkaround Time*. Something else, you know. And he felt that while there were a few examples of, very few, of things that could have been -- like he and Rauschenberg worked on something for a Happening early on together. And that work, which I think is owned now or may have been given to the Met Museum by Lucas Samaras, is listed as something by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. But to him, that's not an artwork. And he really didn't want any -- there were some things he did in Japan where other artists were involved with doing a little funny thing. He doesn't consider that his work. And you know, I remember that --

CS: And also -- sorry to interrupt you.

RB: No, go ahead.

CS: Yeah, I also am thinking about work before 1954. He was also pretty adamant about a start date --

RB: Yes.

CS: -- for the catalogue.

RB: Yes. Now, we didn't go looking around for earlier works, but there really weren't sculptures or paintings. There were drawings, and that was an issue for the drawing catalogue

raisonné. But, you know, it is a tricky issue. But fortunately, we didn't really have to deal with it, because we didn't know of things earlier. But I also respect -- for him, there is a date when he becomes an artist. And, you know, I think that's -- as long as that's known, then earlier works will come up. Maybe even a painting that he did when he was in college or something like that. But we didn't go looking for those things.

CS: I understand, yeah. You mentioned the drawing catalogue, and that also leads to another way that I know that Johns was involved in determining what was in the painting and sculpture catalogue. So many of his works sort of test the limits of the categories of medium, like, what's a painting, what's a flag, what's a sculpture. And I know that there were some works that ended up in one catalogue or another that could arguably have been -- like, *Liar*, for instance, I know --

RB: Right.

CS: -- that is a work that is in the painting and sculpture catalogue, but is on paper.

RB: Right. Right. We really couldn't come up with a hard and fast definition. So, we actually -- Kate Ganz and I probably spent at least three sessions with him deciding. And some things went back and forth, but finally, a decision was made based on what he thought the works were. So, one idea was if something on paper was mounted on canvas, it was a painting. But in the case of *Liar*, it wasn't mounted on canvas, but it's mostly done in encaustic, and he considers it a painting. So, it really came down to each instance being decided upon finally by Johns. But after very careful scrutiny by --

CS: Right.

RB: -- Kate Ganz, who was working on the drawings, and myself, working from the perspective of paintings, and really thinking everything through. So, we all felt very satisfied with the final decisions about that.

CS: When you said scrutinize, I think another element of this catalogue, and I think a good catalogue raisonné in general is -- I remember we were very careful not to include speculation.

RB: Yes.

CS: And that was very important to Johns, that it was -- even if there was 99% likelihood that what we thought was true, he really only wanted things that you could -- one hundred percent certain of to be included, especially in the cataloguing.

RB: Right, right. That's why he didn't want essays on the page. I mean, that's another way to do a catalogue raisonné, which has its merits. But for Johns, he wanted the catalogue just to be about the work in a very specific way that had to do with things that could be verified. And --

CS: Right.

RB: -- so, you know, it ended up -- and I think what was interesting was the decision that we made not to include the literature references on the cataloguing page, and that had to do somewhat with the design, but also the way we wanted the information presented. We didn't want to use abbreviations. We

wanted the catalogue user to -- if they were looking at exhibitions, they would see the full information about the exhibitions. Whereas if we had had literature references on the page, that would have been impossible to do with many of the works. So --

CS: Right.

RB: -- but also, it was interesting because at the beginning of this, Johns said, "Why do we need the literature references?" And I think, in thinking about it, because I said, "Well, that's standard practice and it shows how the work gets known in the world." But to him, a lot of that was about speculative information. And in many cases, you know, interpretations that were speculation. Or even information that may not be correct, you know, whatever.

CS: Right.

RB: I think finally it was very wise of him to suggest -- because it was his suggestion -- that maybe those references could go elsewhere. And that solved our design problem and also somewhat his concern that everything on that page was something that could be verified.

CS: It's a great equalizer, because if we'd included the literature references, a work like *Flag*, already so laden with historical reputation -- it would have appeared that way in the catalogue raisonné. The way you two came to this solution, every work can kind of be considered on its own, and that seems in the spirit of what he wanted to have happen.

RB: Right, he did. And I think it works. I think, you know, you go through and you kind of look at the body of work, and you don't make judgments about what's more important or not. I mean, certainly, some things are exhibited more frequently, et cetera, and that's obvious. But I think he wanted it to be kind of a -- something where if you want to know the work, here it is, and here's the basic information. And the book was important to him. I think originally, he might have been thinking the catalogue could exist even without the book. But he certainly was amenable to the book being its own volume in the catalogue.

CS: Mm-hm.

RB: And then, he also -- and I was, you know, wanted this too -- he wanted the book to be available independently. Because the catalogue really is --

CS: Right.

RB: -- it's five volumes, it's expensive, et cetera, et cetera. And he wanted the book, as I did, to be more widely available to scholars and students and the general public. So, it all worked out. And really, because WPI was -- really, under Elizabeth and with you there -- you know, was so amazing in terms of getting the catalogue published and then getting the book published almost immediately thereafter. And for that, I am hugely grateful.

CS: (laughs) Thank you.

RB: Yes.

CS: Yeah, no, I think -- I think it worked so well for Johns especially because he works so often in series that you're able to address the big picture, rather than having lots and lots of small essays on individual flags. Which sort of would lead to this imbalance, because certain -- I mean, some flags are perhaps more historically significant, or how would you choose where to include information about flags when it's a lifelong interest. You're able to really talk about it as something that has evolved over the course of his entire career.

RB: Right, I mean, I think -- because of the way I approach the work as an art historian, I think it works well with the catalogue. Because I am trying to show how the work evolves over time, how it -- you know. And also, the allusions that he makes to his artistic predecessors, et cetera. He didn't want that on the catalogue page.

CS: Right, right.

RB: That would have been an easy thing to include. You know, well, here's the reference. But then, he might have ten works with the same reference. So --

CS: Right, right.

RB: -- they might come at different times. So, I think the solutions we came up with, the design solutions -- and Porter was amenable to -- Porter Gillespie, the designer -- to input from me and from Jasper and worked very closely with us to come up with a design that really worked. Because every catalogue raisonné, as we always -- Heidi and I would talk about this, and you, and whoever then joined the team, including Betsy Stepina

Zinn, who I haven't mentioned, who came in toward the end to edit it all and bring it together.

CS: Yeah.

RB: You know, it -- well first of all, it is really a team effort. There's no question. But -- oy, I forgot what I was going to say.

CS: Uh, the design, the solution of the design. Porter was amenable to incorporating your feedback.

RB: Right, well, anyway. Yes, it was a team effort. Jasper, I mean, right from the beginning, I wanted the artist's voice to be central to this enterprise. And I think that's finally how it worked. You know, everyone ended up being very pleased about it.

CS: I have one final question, and that is really -- do you know how Jasper Johns felt about having a catalogue raisonné completed on him? In a -- how did he feel about having his work classified in real time, I guess? (laughs)

RB: Right. Well, you know, I do think -- I think it was and I do think probably most artists feel this way -- I mean, they want their work to be documented well, on the one hand. On the other, the creative process isn't one that is reasoned, you know, like a catalogue raisonné.

CS: Right. (laughs)

RB: You know, it's about jumps and starts and stepping backwards and then forward. And so, the very idea of being

catalogued in this reasoned way kind of goes against the grain of the creative process. And I think Johns definitely felt that as the whole thing was going on. But you know, I think he did understand that this was a valuable document. First of all, he wanted me to do the second book for so long that I think he was happy that that got done. But I think he realizes what a valuable document this is, and that hopefully, the body of work he's done since then, which has been quite extensive, will be documented in some kind of supplement. I think it makes sense to do something online. You and I have talked about correcting things, the few things are relatively --

CS: (laughter)

RB: -- that need to be corrected from the original catalogue. But it may also be possible to create an online edition, or maybe a publication, too, in the future.

CS: I hope you don't mind me bringing up this story, but I can't help it, because it's such a good line. I vaguely remember someone in Johns's studio caught him changing a signature. And I don't want to ascribe any sort of (laughs) bad intention to it, but changing a signature after you'd examined the painting.

RB: Right. He actually --

CS: And that sort of motivates my question about how he felt about having a catalogue raisonné done. But I remember he had a really delightful response to you. What was it?

RB: Yeah, well, I saw him signing and dating something I'd already examined that was already signed, sealed, and delivered for the catalogue.

CS: (laughs)

RB: And I saw him writing -- I think it was a signature and a date, it was at least a date -- and I said, "Jasper, you can't do that! I've already recorded the reverse." And he said, "Well, you can't get everything right." It was almost like this mischievous twinkle in his eye, like, I'm going to do something so that everything you did wasn't right. Of course, now, when he finds something wrong, he's like, upset about it. You know, little things that you and I have talked about. But there was this mischievous twinkle. I thought that was kind of sweet, but I didn't appreciate it totally.

CS: I think we must have seemed so serious to him. (laughs)

RB: On the other hand, you know, I'd always talk about the backs and I'd show him the pictures I took. He'd kind of go, Oh, ho hum, who cares about the backs. And then, he started doing a series of sculptures and he started using the reverse as an image --

CS: Oh, wow.

RB: -- in these relief sculptures. And I remember when I saw it the first time, I said, "Jasper, the back is also an artwork." And he said, "Well, I guess you have finally influenced me about the back." (laughter)

CS: Oh, my goodness.

RB: So I thought that was very sweet, too. Because he did get involved in the process, I have to say. And as I said, was extremely generous with his time.

CS: Yeah. Yeah.

RB: To help make the project what we all wanted it to be. So, it was really an amazing experience, and working with Heidi and you and Betsy and all the others -- you know, Kate and Lauren and Katie -- all along the way was just a wonderful, wonderful experience for me, personally. And I have to give a shout out to Viki, who played a big role --

CS: Yeah, of course.

RB: -- when she was able to help out. So, it was an amazing experience all around.

CS: This seems like a great place to wrap up. But thank you so much for sharing these stories. You said it yourself, what an amazing experience getting to work with Jasper Johns on this project. It's something I'm also immensely grateful for.

RB: Well, it was very special. And our friendship was -- coming out of it -- was very special to me and to Viki, so, that's something. Once this virus is finally conquered, we have to come see you and Natalie and little Arden.

CS: I know, yes. Absolutely. Alright.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]