

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: SOL LEWITT (SL)

INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Tell me where and when you were born and just a little bit about your background.

SL: I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1928, September 9. My father was a doctor, my mother was a nurse.

SZ: Pretty middle-class background.

SL: Yes. I was born in '28, and in '29 everything was wiped out. My father died shortly after. We went to live in the adjoining city of New Britain with my aunt, who had a grocery store. During the Depression things were fairly rocky, but eventually my mother got a job as a school nurse. She had a certain number of schools that she had to attend to every day. It helped us out and we moved out of my aunt's house to an apartment. I went to school at New Britain High School and went to Syracuse University, studied art.

SZ: You as a kid were interested in things that you saw?

SL: No more than most kids, I think. I used to like to draw. I remember in my aunt's grocery store I used to rip off a big sheet of paper and draw.

SZ: So you were good at that.

SL: What kid isn't?

SZ: My son [laughter], which we get good laughs about. New Britain is what? I don't know where it is. Isn't that on the coast?

SL: No. It's industrial, a small city, which has lost all its industry, but at that time it was in hardware, making hardware, locks, tools, pots and pans and things of that sort.

SZ: I think Connecticut was really--I guess every place was, but I think I know this from somewhere--particularly hard hit during the Depression.

SL: During that depression and the other depression now, too, but then the war started and everyone got work. I remember that as a kid, too.

SZ: Because you were still in school.

SL: I was about twelve or so.

SZ: You were in school throughout the whole war?

SL: Yes. I was about sixteen or so when I graduated.

SZ: And you went to public school?

SL: Yes.

SZ: Good student?

SL: If I wanted to be, but I didn't always want to be. I just made a decision that I wanted to

be an artist...in high school. I think my last year in high school I decided that's what I wanted to do.

SZ: How does that happen?

SL: I don't know. In a way it was rebellious, because my family was middle-class, as you say, and my mother really wanted me to be a doctor, and one thing I didn't want to do was to chop open people and look inside of them.... I didn't think that that was any good. I didn't want to be in business; it was a boring kind of a life, it seemed. This was a way of asserting my independence, in a way. It was something I could do. I wasn't precocious at all; I was a normal kid. When I went to school, there were a lot of students who were better than I was, who had more talent and really did better than I did.

SZ: Was Syracuse known for its art program?

SL: It was a school where I could get a degree and study art at the same time. An uncle of mine had gone there, so there was a family connection.

SZ: As a school known for its art program it was not any...?

SL: It was fairly well known--not as well known as Yale, for instance, but I didn't want to go to Yale even if I could get in (which I probably couldn't have) because it was too close to home.

SZ: That makes sense. The idea of being an artist obviously was not daunting to you.

SL: No, it was liberating. When I got out of the army (I was drafted) I went to Japan and Korea those two years, then came back and spent about a week at home, and then wanted to go to New York and see what that was like. So I came.... I had a certain amount of unemployment insurance, which I ran to the hilt, and then I had to get a

job. I got a job at Seventeen magazine, working on the photostat machine, which I thought was a wonderful job. I did that for about a year, and then they offered me a job in the art department, so I took it. There was more money--and I learned paste-up mechanicals and production. I worked there for a while, and then I did some other work in that line after that. Then I spent a year working at I. M. Pei's office in the graphic department. Then at one point, I think I was about thirty or getting close to thirty, I said, "I really don't want to do this, I don't like it." So I just quit, went back on unemployment and started painting. My unemployment ran out. I had a cousin who worked at the Museum here. She said why don't you go to the employment office here and maybe you can get a job.

SZ: Who was your cousin?

SL: Her name was Pell LeWitt. She worked with Liz Shaw in the publicity department. I got a job at the book counter. At that time there were Dan Flavin and Bob Ryman, Lucy Lippard, Scott Burton, John Button, and Michael Venezia. So I met all these people. Is Richard Palmer still working here?

SZ: Yes.

SL: He was working at the book counter at that time. I think it was 1960 when I started here. What I do remember is that it was the day after [Jean] Tinguely's machine [Homage to New York] destroyed itself in the garden [on March 18], and I saw the remains of it when I first came to work. That's how I can date my arrival.

SZ: At the time of your arrival--and it was 1960--were you painting in a studio yourself?

SL: Yes. At that time I had a loft on Montgomery Street, which is deep in the Lower East Side; it was the floor above an old synagogue, and I paid something like \$23.50 a month. At that rent, what I made at the Modern could just about eke it out. Eventually, after about a year or so, a job fell open in the evenings at the 21 West 53rd Street

entrance. I asked for the job and I got it. That was great. I wouldn't have to come to work until 5:30 p.m. and I'd work until about 10-10:30 p.m.. I had all day to work and I made enough money, living very frugally, to live fairly well....

SZ: Was this a place that young artists wanted to work in, be associated with?

SL: At that time it seemed there were quite a few. Bob Mangold worked here. Sonja Flavin, who was Dan's first wife, was working here. She was doing weaving and she still is. Elita Agee...was working in the library at that time. So there were a lot of people involved in the art world.

SZ: What was the Museum like then for you?

SL: I really didn't know, because I wasn't involved in the real functioning of the Museum.... First I was selling books, and then I was working after Museum hours. I got to know the people who worked here, but I wasn't involved in the actual mechanism of the Museum. I didn't know really how it worked. I do remember one incident. I was working at the "21" desk on the evening during the time of the Cuban missile crisis. They were taking paintings out, the Picassos, Matisses, Schwitters--all the great masterpieces--and substituting a sort of the second string. Alfred Barr was coming through and I said, "Excuse me, Mr. Barr, where these paintings are going, that's where I want to go, too" [laughter]. In fact, at one time I told Mr. Barr that I was getting tired of the sculpture they had down there, and I said, "Couldn't you change it for me?"...They first had a Raymond Duchamp-Villon, then a Raoul Hague sculpture, which I thought were pretty good. Then they changed it and they put something by Minna Harkavy called the Coal Miner.... (Actually, it was more complicated. They had had the Horse of Raymond Duchamp-Villon, which they removed in favor of the Hague. I complained about the change and they put up the Harkavy.) I said, "Mr. Barr, bring back the Raoul Hague..." [laughing]. Frank O'Hara was working there at the time, and Alicia [Legg]. Mr. [René] d'Harnoncourt was the director.

SZ: Did you get to know any of them?

SL: No, not really, except for Alicia.

SZ: At that time you got to know her to some degree?

SL: Better later. I didn't know any of the people, really, very well. I knew them to say hello to them. Except for the guards and other people of my ilk. That was where I had the more lasting friendships.

SZ: How did you see the Museum at that time? You were in one position then, and that's obviously changed; but in terms of reputation or what it meant to a person such as yourself at that time?

SL: Well, of course, it was the citadel of modern art. There was nothing that could come near it. The Guggenheim at the time wasn't even built--the Frank Lloyd Wright Guggenheim--and that was the only other museum. Well, the Whitney, but the Whitney was only involved in American art. Even though the modern was late in coming around to the Abstract Expressionists, they were very upfront with Pop art and later trends. It was just before my time when they had the Sixteen Americans show that Dorothy Miller [did].... I know I saw the show, but I can't remember if I was working here. But that was probably the most influential show of the decade, or for many decades, because it was the opening of many new ideas. It made a big impression on me. Of course I saw the shows and the film shows.... It was really, for me, very important educationally, just knowing all these works and to be able to see them. And the shows they did were really important at the time, too.

SZ: So you would spend a lot of time in the galleries while you were here?

SL: No, actually I didn't spend a lot of time, but I spent enough time to...see every show. But I didn't hang around because when I wasn't working here, I was home working.

SZ: And Alfred Barr? You say you didn't really know him very well.

SL: No, but I would say hello.

SZ: But in terms of his reputation?

SL: He had a very lofty reputation; Dorothy Miller, also. People like Arthur Drexler were here. There were very top people. [Peter] Selz was here, and [William] Seitz and O'Hara. They were important people at the time.

SZ: But you didn't have enough contact with them to be able to....

SL: Not really, no.

SZ: Or have a sense of what might have been going on, let's say?

SL: That you'd feel. I used to go to the commercial galleries as well, but I did see the shows at MoMA. The special shows, the temporary shows, were very good, well done, interesting.

SZ: Then you had one other thing that you did here, right, at that time?

SL: Eventually, I started teaching in the school, because when I worked at the "21" desk the main tenant of the building, after hours, was the school run by Mr. [Victor] D'Amico. He knew that I was an artist. By that time (1964) I had been in some group shows. He knew...what I was doing, and he asked me if I wanted to teach drawing. So I taught a class in drawing for, I think, about one year.

SZ: What was he like?

SL: D'Amico? He was a man who always seemed worried, but he seemed to have things pretty well organized. Working for him, there was no interference, there was no feeling that I was being watched. I just did whatever I wanted to do. That was the best thing that could happen to a teacher, so that was very nice.

SZ: What about the school? I really know very little about the school.

SL: There were mainly suburban housewives there....

SZ: And Bill Rubin went there, too, at some point, did he not?

SL: Did he? I don't know....

SZ: I think he went to the kids' school.

SL: There were a lot of...people who wanted to learn about art.... There was a young-kid division and an older, adult division. I was in the adult division; I never taught children.

SZ: That's where I think he was at one time. But whether it was for young people or older people, it had the same basic mission?

SL: I don't know, because I don't know what the mission was for the children. But the children seemed to enjoy it; from what I heard it was very popular.

SZ: But for the adults it was....

SL: It was popular, too.

SZ: I don't mean that. It was just an art school?

SL: Yes.

SZ: It could have been anywhere?

SL: It could have been anywhere, yes. In fact, the people who went to it hadn't the foggiest idea what was going on at the Museum--very few of them.

SZ: So you came the day after the [self-destruction of the Tinguely piece], and you stayed, what? Through '65 is my understanding. Did you have much of a social life here? Were these people your friends that you've mentioned?

SL: I was very friendly with Dan Flavin at the time. Bob Ryman and Lucy Lippard were married right around that time, and they lived quite close to where I lived, which at that time was on Hester Street; they lived on the Bowery. So I got to know them very well. Bob Mangold I knew as well, and found he and his wife, Sylvia, an apartment, on Grand and Forsythe Street around that time. But I remained friends with most of them.

SZ: Did you have a sense of identifying with the institution at all in that way?

SL: It was an important little cell of art at that time. The ideas that were talked about amongst ourselves turned out to be of some significance, because at that time art was changing a great deal, and some of the more important people of that generation happened to be here at that time.

SZ: There was the whole expansion in '64. Did that affect you at all? Do you remember anything about that?

SL: What happened at that time with this space? It didn't affect my end. They took over the two houses, the Rockefeller sisters', and expanded eastward. The education department was in a very beautiful building next door; it would be no. 19. Do you

know that building at all?

SZ: Was it a big Beaux-Arts building?

SL: It was Beaux-Arts (now that I think about it). It was...big and dark, with large staircases; it was very nice. That's where the offices of the education department were. The expansion at that time didn't go in that direction; it went the other way. At the time it expanded westward I was gone.

SZ: You mentioned the fact that the Museum was slow on the uptake in terms of Abstract Expressionism. Those were the kinds of things that were talked about, right?

SL: Somewhat, yes, although I think around that time they had a [Mark] Rothko show. What year was that?

SZ: Nineteen-sixty-one.

SL: I do remember that, but by that time, it was late [laughing]. But especially Dorothy Miller, picked up on a lot of the newer ideas. It was more important for me to see these new things than to see Abstract Expressionist painting, which I had seen in the galleries anyway.

SZ: What about in terms of your work? You said you had had a couple of group shows, and I think your first one-person show was 1965? It must have been around the time you left.

SL: Yes. Dan Flavin organized a group show, I think around '64, at the Kaymar Gallery. It was a very important show of the time. It had many of the better people in it, including [Donald] Judd, Jo Baer, Agnes Martin, Ryman.... There were other group shows even previous to that. My conversations, especially with Flavin, were important to the development of my thinking. He was a very verbal person. Through him I got to know

- Judd, but I didn't know Judd nearly as well as I knew Flavin. And then, of course, Lucy Lippard was very verbal, and Bob Ryman was totally unverbal [laughing]. But we got to know each other socially through our working together here.
- SZ: Once your career started to become something, how did that happen? What was it, 1968, I think, was the first time that something of yours was here? You had a show here.
- SL: Did I have something here?
- SZ: Yes, in The Art of the Real [1968].
- SL: Yes. Just after '66 or so, there was a general acceptance of the new kind of work, and there were many shows, including the one that Kynaston [McShine] organized at the Jewish Museum. What was it called...? [Primary Structures] That was about '65. That was really the turning point. At that time Kynaston, I think, had been working here; I think he was an assistant curator....
- SZ: He had been here and then he went there.
- SL: What was it called? Primary Structures [laughing]. I should know that. But I did know Kynaston through working at the desk. I used to see him when he worked here....
- SZ: But that was a very important show for a lot of reasons?
- SL: Yes, it was a very important show, and helped me a lot. Then after that I started to have one-person shows pretty much annually, starting in '65 or so....
- SZ: How does that feel when that finally happens?
- SL: Good [laughter]. It was nice. People would be very nice to you when they didn't have

to be. But there was always a struggle.... You always have to believe that there's something better to do. You never feel that comfortable, but it's much better to be noticed than to be ignored.

SZ: Of course. But it doesn't happen to very many artists.

SL: No, that's true. There are many artists around who are not so fortunate, but I was lucky to be just the right person at the right place at the right time. If I hadn't been working here and if I hadn't known Flavin and Ryman and Lippard and some other people, it may not have clicked. You never know; it may have or it may not. But it did. So that was crucial. The policy that they had of employing artists as guards and as people doing lesser jobs was, I think, a very good policy.

SZ: You seem to have a fairly fond feeling for the place.

SL: Well, then of course I had the show later on, in '78, and I was always friendly with Alicia and some of the people in Painting and Sculpture and in the drawing department, Bernice Rose especially. I got to know a lot of very nice people.

SZ: Did you have any feeling about, I guess it was in the late '60s and early '70s, when there were a lot of these artists' protests?

SL: I was involved in the PASTA/MoMA [Professional and Administrative Staff Association of The Museum of Modern Art] protest because I had still many people as friends who worked at the Museum and I knew their problems, so I was involved in the picketing. Also, there were other artists' protests, at the Whitney and the Guggenheim.

SZ: What about the complaint that the Museum didn't show enough work by minority artists?

SL: I think that perhaps they did as well as they could. They should have shown more black artists as a matter of principle. There weren't many minority artists shown, unless you want to think of women as a minority, which they're not.

SZ: No [laughter].

SL: But I had a lot of women friends, Eva Hesse especially, and Jo Baer, Lee Lozano, Adrian Piper.... I thought that it was too bad that some of the big shows that later showed some of the work weren't here but were somewhere else.... They didn't pick up on very many of the women artists very early or very well.

SZ: Why do you suppose that was?

SL: I don't know. It would seem to me that the curators were mainly men.... It was a leftover, perhaps, from the Abstract Expressionist idea; the machismo feeling still had its remnants. Of course, women were accepted as artists, but not as really important artists, even though people like Lee Bontecou, Agnes Martin, Jo Baer, and Eva Hesse were doing extraordinary work. Few of them got a lot of help from the Museum.... Many of the shows that featured their work were not here at MoMA and should have been.

SZ: I think there were also protests in the early '70s, late '60s, by mainly black groups.

SL: That's true, but I didn't know very many black artists, except Adrian Piper, at the time. I could sympathize abstractly with them.... In fact, I knew more Asian artists than black artists. I always thought there must be something there, but I didn't what know for sure. So I wasn't involved in that except as a general political idea.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1

SZ: What place do you think an institution like this should have...?

SL: I've always thought that the great flaw of The Museum of Modern Art is, the longer it exists, the less it becomes a museum of "modern" art, unless you think of modern art as a specific era. Just as there is a musical era in Florence of 1400 called ars nova; it's still called ars nova, but it's not new art at all. The longer that The Museum of Modern Art exists, the more stretched-out it becomes. It has its roots in the nineteenth century and stretches out now almost to the twenty-first, and in another hundred years or so it will stretch to the breaking point, perhaps. I always thought it would be the best thing if a fifty-year limit was put on it and everything else would go to the Metropolitan Museum.

SZ: They tried that, you know.

SL: They did?

SZ: They had an agreement with the Met from '47 to '52.

SL: It didn't work out.

SZ: No.

SL: That would have solved the problem. Why didn't it work, do you know? They wouldn't want to give up these great masterpieces [laughing]?

SZ: It didn't work out [laughing]. Actually, the Whitney was originally involved also. It was going to be three-museum agreement.

SL: I do remember something like that. That would be a way of selling at auction great masterpieces of early modern art to buy new work, to show new work and to become

a truly modern museum, or else it's just another museum of a past era.

SZ: One of the original thoughts was that the Museum wouldn't even have a collection. It brings up the issue of what role a museum, this Museum, should play versus the galleries in, say, presenting new work.

SL: I think that the function should be not to replace the galleries, but to make coherence out of what the galleries are doing by selecting work from them or by having shows that explore different tendencies that could exist across many galleries, maybe as an extension of...the Projects space.... They should be doing that on a larger scale. To make a coherent statement out of what's happening at the time or to make historical shows to define different past eras.... And to have a collection; I think that's important, too....

SZ: Just take me up to '78, when you had your big show here. I think you were in Kynaston's show in 1970 show here, right, the Information show?

SL: Yes. There was an attempt at that time to pin down what was happening in the art world. It was an interesting show. I thought it was a good show. They should do things like that at MoMA.

SZ: Tell me about your retrospective here [in 1978], how it came about.

SL: At that time Mr. Rubin was the director, and he called me and asked me if I would do it. He said, "Either you do it now, or the Museum is closing in '79 or so for renovation and then it would be years and years," so I said I might as well do it. And I did it. Alicia was the curator who I worked with.

SZ: I was here then. I remember it.

SL: You were here then. Where were you working?

SZ: In Public Information. Was that a big thing for you, to have that?

SL: Of course.... It showed my work up to that point, I thought, very well. Working with the crew on all levels was really a great experience. On the curatorial level it was very well done, and on the physical level, if you wanted a wall it was there tomorrow--and perfect. Everything was done just as it should be, and that doesn't always happen in large institutions. But everything was really done very well. I did what I wanted, I had no interference, and they actually bought a large piece from the show--I wish they would show more often.

SZ: We'll keep that in [laughing]. And Alicia--how was it working with her?

SL: She was wonderful. She was very precise and very understanding and very knowledgeable. She was very good to work with. Everything got done. The catalogue got done.

SZ: Which isn't always so easy around here.

SL: It doesn't always happen. One thing about this Museum is that at every level it's always very professional. After working with museums all over the Western world, really, they're still the best.

SZ: You're still working and you're still showing all over the place.

SL: As usual, yes.

SZ: And I think you just gave a gift to the Wadsworth? Your collection?

SL: No, actually we have a collection. I've been collecting art all along, and...offered it on extended loan, to the Wadsworth, and perhaps will end up giving them a lot of it, if

not most of it. It covers certain areas that they're not very strong in, like early Conceptual art, photography, and contemporary European sculpture. There are certain pieces which I won't give, they're rather personal to me and these I would like to keep. But I think art has to be made for the people to see.... The Wadsworth is in Hartford, where I was born. It's large enough to take care of work but small enough so that the work would have an impact on the collection, and near enough, between Boston and New York, to be free of both but in a chain of museums, like the Yale University Art Gallery and Smith College, Williams, The [Francine and Sterling] Clark Collection, and other major institutions that are in the area, so it's not totally isolated.

SZ: I can't think of anything else, can you?

SL: No.

SZ: Thank you.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1

END INTERVIEW