Oral history interview with Leonard Perlson, October 25, 2013

Perlson, Leonard
Gallerist

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum interviewing Leonard Perlson on Friday, October 25, 2013. And this can be an informal conversation.

LEONARD: Is it okay if I stand up?

MARGARET: Okay. So I have a list of questions, but I do want to start. Leonard, if you could tell me when your gallery opened at 430 West 14th Street.

LEONARD: It opened in October of 1983.

MARGARET: Okay. And so in October of 1983, so when did you first meet Rob Jones?

LEONARD: Oh, I’d say probably ten months before his show.

MARGARET: Okay. And did you first meet him after seeing his installation at Pier 34?

LEONARD: Yes, I tracked him down.

MARGARET: Okay. And so you saw his installation. You must have seen some of the other art projects that were happening at Pier 34. Can you tell me a bit about that scene? It was—
LEONARD: Oh, sure. There were several artists. I remember George Trakas and graffiti artist Keith Haring had work there. [Inaudible] was an abandoned pier, you know the old kind of pier—[inaudible] pier, which was a nineteenth century pier—all wooden. And it was just another area in lower Manhattan where there was artists taking to the streets, creating. You know, there were public spaces. There was Art on the Beach at the time, which was a landfill which was exhausted from the building of the World Trade Center.

MARGARET: And Art on the Beach was created by Creative Time?

LEONARD: Creative Time, right.

MARGARET: So really, taking advantage of these vacant or abandoned structures along the Hudson River. Okay.

LEONARD: I’d say one of the key people would be George Trakas, who is still currently doing a lot of interesting work involving piers and the connection between water and land. He has a piece he did on Newton Creek—an industrial site—as well as a piece up by Beacon.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: Actually, he was one of my teachers at School of Visual Arts.

MARGARET: Okay. Interesting.

LEONARD: Yeah, his work is—I find his work very interesting. I search it out now.

MARGARET: Yeah. So, do you know—what I was kind of curious about was whether or not these are multiple artists kind of finding each other in these spaces like Pier 34, or if this was a community of artists who had joined together and were looking for—how that kind of all came together.

LEONARD: These were all independent artists. New York at the time—these types of installations abounded all over the city. I would say it’s a genre now that’s like—Banksy would be—

MARGARET: Kind of comparable.

LEONARD: Well, we wouldn’t have a Banksy without Rob Jones and Keith Harings in the subways, and even some of the graffiti artists.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: But this was a step above graffiti because these were really trained artists looking for space. They weren’t trying to revolt against the establishment. They wanted to become part of the establishment.
MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: But the spaces—most of the galleries were in the East Village at the time, and most of them were little ramshackle spaces, and they didn’t have the—there was no venue for large work.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: On that kind of scale—it wasn’t like now where every gallery is 5,000 square feet. You had to go outside the gallery to create large-scale sculpture, and outside of the funding. So most of these artists were transparent—well, now transparent because the materials are gone and the spaces are gone.

MARGARET: What about site specificity as opposed to a site for large work? I know that could be a little bit of both.

LEONARD: It was a little bit of both. It was both. My thesis was with Christo, with the first iteration of Gates in Central Park, which was 1980 or 1981 he did the proposal to do the Gates in Central Park. That was nixed because of my panel that I set up with an anthologist and art critics and things. So that was like the only monumental thing that was in the public space.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: So, I can remember—other than Creative Time downtown—sites where—down from the World Trade Center. Whether they’re site specific—they weren’t. I don’t recall anything being that bad like Christo’s Gates, which was blueprinted. They were more renegade, but with artists who were trained rather than graffiti artists. And that was evidenced by Rob Jones with his schooling background.

MARGARET: Right.

LEONARD: Ask a question.

MARGARET: Okay. So you saw Rob’s work at Pier 34. He showed—his installation was in September 1983, and I have so many materials here. The way I even—the way I was able to come across this was at the Pier.

LEONARD: Right.

MARGARET: It’s great. East Village Eye has been archiving all their past publications online, and this—I just decided I should just scroll through, particularly because I was just looking for some connections between Wilmington and the East Village scene. There were some connections between the Delaware Art Museum and Gracie Mansion at this time, and we were showing some of the artists that she represented. And so I came across this, which was interesting because this was—Rob was advertising, promoting his installation, which—I don’t get the sense that other artists were doing that for the work they were showing at Pier 34.
LEONARD: No, I don’t think so.

MARGARET: I haven’t been able to find other publications like this, and this is how I was able to come across Ellen Skye. So it’s interesting that he was promoting his installation, and it’s just this image, the information for the installation, and a phone number.

LEONARD: Right.

MARGARET: Which is just—so I have to show you some of things, and this is why we’re not even—you don’t worry about time going by on that. Let’s see, so that led me to Andreas Sterzing.

LEONARD: Wow. Yeah. Somebody took that.

MARGARET: This is Andreas Sterzing. So he documented the Pier 34 installations and then the demolition, actually of the Pier as well.

LEONARD: Right.

MARGARET: So—and he did not know Rob Jones. He was interested in the work, but he wasn’t able to identify the artist.

LEONARD: This is a Japanese artist, right?

MARGARET: Some of these he doesn’t know. If he doesn’t have the artist name, he doesn’t know who the artist is.

LEONARD: I think he’s Japanese. If you hold that up, you’ll find a piece engraved in the stone here in the meat market.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s interesting. So this photographer’s going by and trying—going back and trying to identify these works.

LEONARD: Of course David Finn is famous. David Fin had work all over the city. Luis Frangella, I remember his work.

MARGARET: Okay. And Ronda Zwilling?

LEONARD: Right. She showed in a number of galleries now in town.

MARGARET: I know. It’s interesting. She showed at Gracie Mansion, the Museum had an exhibition of her work. Unfortunately, she says she doesn’t recall the time or the project or the other artists who were involved. So in seeing this group of artists, it made me wonder if Rob had these connections with these individuals or if he was just taking advantage of the space.

LEONARD: No, just taking advantage of the space.
MARGARET: Just taking advantage of the space.

LEONARD: Yes.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: Yeah, just for the space. I don’t see George Trakas. You can see the George Trakas piece.

MARGARET: Let me see if I can find that other image.

LEONARD: Oh, wow.

MARGARET: I know. See this. With that incredible train.

LEONARD: How they did it—almost like renegade, but almost wanted to be a part of the art world. It wasn’t like rebellion against the art world. You know what I’m saying? It was like an entrée into it.

MARGARET: Now what’s also interesting is that there has been some work done more recently. Maybe you saw this show. I wish I’d known about it, and I should have when I was doing this research, but I hadn’t made the connection that Rob was showing here, unfortunately, so there’s been some work done about this period to document some of the activities that were happening on the Pier.

LEONARD: April 4 to July.

MARGARET: Yeah, and it happened last year. I’m very disappointed that I missed it.

LEONARD: Where was the show? Oh, okay.

MARGARET: I think it was—was it Jonathon—who was the curator?

LEONARD: Willoughby Sharp, I know him. He curated a show at my gallery. You know Willoughby Sharp?

MARGARET: Yes, I got to see him speak, actually.

LEONARD: When?

MARGARET: He came up to—I went to SUNY Purchase and did my MA there, and he came in to speak at our graduate seminar.

LEONARD: You got this online?

MARGARET: I did. Yes.
LEONARD: Peter Share, John Louissarie.

MARGARET: So they were taking advantage of some of those other piers.

LEONARD: Gordon Matta Clark. Presenting George Trakas.

MARGARET: No, he’s not included in here. But I think the challenge has really been in identifying some of these projects. I don’t think they were accurately identified at the time they were being documented.

LEONARD: I think the Village Voice did something on it.

MARGARET: Oh, Jonathan Weinberg was the curator for this exhibition, so it’s interesting—

LEONARD: Where was that at?

MARGARET: So this was at the [inaudible]. So interesting that some of this work is starting to be done now, which is good.

LEONARD: Well, it’s just like outdoor space. There’s a guy that was doing black shadows. Do you remember that? All the gas stations?

MARGARET: No.

LEONARD: I have to give it some thought, you know, continue the conversation. I always—there’s a lot there—it’s not about me, it’s about Rob, but Rob was an outgrowth of that whole movement.

MARGARET: And you were right there in the midst of it.

LEONARD: Yeah, I was right there in the space here. I was away from the East Village Galleries. I was the first gallery in this area.

MARGARET: You were? That’s interesting. Okay.

LEONARD: And I put on—I mean, the limos were around the block when I was selling.

MARGARET: Just so I know a time frame, the gallery opened in October 1983, and you were open until—how long were you open?

LEONARD: 1989 because I moved to a larger space. I moved to a larger space on 14th Street.

MARGARET: Okay. So you were at 430 West Fourteenth until ’89?

LEONARD: No, until ’87.

MARGARET: Until ’87. And then where did you move to?
LEONARD: I think it was 415. Right now there’s this very high-end fashion.

MARGARET: It’s all—yeah. Interesting.

LEONARD: It’s got a lot of soul. Yeah, it was quite something, yeah.

MARGARET: So you saw Rob’s work, and you sought him out.

LEONARD: I thought it’d be a great installation on the awning outside the meat market. At the time, I thought I had access to the awning, which was wrapped around the building, and I thought it’d be great to have it brought into the gallery and have the gallery being brought out. So for his show—the first show—there was nothing in the gallery space except his name. There was no drawings, nothing. The space was completely empty. I had a small space. My first gallery was maybe the size of this living room.

MARGARET: And you were on the second floor?

LEONARD: Second floor, right.

MARGARET: Second floor. Okay. So the gallery was empty.

LEONARD: Except for his name on the wall.

MARGARET: Except for his name on the wall.

LEONARD: So the only way that people could see his work was from the street, or by climbing out the window onto the—I mean, I didn’t want people climbing out the window, but there were a lot of people wanting to get close that way. They were positioned so you could see them illuminated outside the windows and then there was a back staircase so people could go to the street and look at the building.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: Which was quite—I mean, people were amazed.

MARGARET: Oh, it must have been so dramatic.

LEONARD: Yeah, it was very quiet streets—the brick streets. It wasn’t like—and he positioned each of the shrouds where the light under a lamppost, so they were lit by the lamp posts.

MARGARET: Okay. And it was kind of this first—so this must have been for the 1984 show. The first show.

LEONARD: No, this is the one. Is this—this is sculpture and drawings. That was 1985.

MARGARET: That was ’85.
LEONARD: I used the drawings, and then I used this as the invitation because there’s no way—this was after his first show.

MARGARET: That was the second show, so May to June 1985.

LEONARD: Right. That was when we showed his drawings.

MARGARET: Okay, so this first show, I have—

LEONARD: And for this show, we had just one shroud in the gallery which was that shroud, with the drawings.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: Now, his drawings came about from going to all the clubs around here—afterhours clubs and all that. So he would sit and sketch the performers and the drag queens, the go-go. All the crazy people that were in the ‘80s here.

MARGARET: Yeah.

LEONARD: He would just sit there with his sketchpad and just do that.

MARGARET: So he’s drawing those figures, okay. I have photographs from the first show. And they’re contact sheets so they’re fairly small. What’s interesting is to see the difference in the installation of the shroud. So for this first exhibition, they really look like they’re in a precession on the awning. Here there are two here.

LEONARD: Oh my God.

MARGARET: And I—

LEONARD: These were from—oh gosh.

MARGARET: These are dated—

LEONARD: You can see how it was like being true to the art by keeping on the street.

MARGARET: Yes.

LEONARD: But at the same time, kicking it up a little bit so it was more—without it becoming too, yeah—

MARGARET: Was that you?

LEONARD: Yeah, that was me.

MARGARET: It says these are dated May 3, 1984.
LEONARD: So that was the first show.

MARGARET: This was the first show.

LEONARD: The second show, right. So then we used this picture. We used the photograph by Eric Kroll. He was a photographer. He documented a lot of art at the time. Actually, he might be the one if you can Google him.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: I don’t know when—I think he shot at the pier also.

MARGARET: Oh really? Okay.

LEONARD: Yeah. I’m not going to go on the computer now.

MARGARET: Yeah, no. I’ll take a look. Okay.

LEONARD: Yeah, I would search that.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: Oh wow. That’s a great photograph. See, I always thought this was sort of like the acropolis, the way that, you know—

MARGARET: Oh, that’s interesting.

LEONARD: Right.

MARGARET: Oh yeah, and so these are images from the opening. I wasn’t able to identify anyone that I recognized from other images from Delaware.

LEONARD: Right. You’re from Delaware?

MARGARET: Not originally. No, I’m a transplant, but I’ve fallen in love with it.

LEONARD: Really?

MARGARET: All the things that people talk about, all the advantages of being in close proximity to New York and DC.

LEONARD: And Philadelphia.

MARGARET: And Philadelphia.

LEONARD: And of course DuPont.
MARGARET: It’s a beautiful area.

LEONARD: I’m not happy with these pictures of me.

MARGARET: Those are all the ones I—yeah.

LEONARD: So Eric Kroll would be the person.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: But you have to let me give some thought to the interplay between the public—do you call this public if it’s non-sponsored? Just where I was—you just have to give me some thought. I’ll write you.

MARGARET: Okay. See, there’s a—

LEONARD: But there’s a lot there. There’s a lot there. You want to keep this Wilmington artists?

MARGARET: I do. I can’t help being slightly obsessed with the work that Rob’s doing up here. I think this here is a particularly—so when I stop to see the space, I took a photograph from this angle, and seeing this precession around the corner of the awning is just spectacular.

LEONARD: Right. Well this is just an example of art bringing people into an abandoned neighborhood. I mean, the neighborhood was abandoned, and this is what happens. The galleries become—this is the most expensive area in the city to rent. More than Sutton Place—more than Madison Avenue. These spaces are going for—I don’t mean to attract—the way it is here, it just shows you when a gallery moves in, how artist—it becomes—like this, the highline and all that.

MARGARET: And that’s what Rob was doing in downtown Wilmington, as well. Certainly. So I think it’s interesting to think about some of those connections and how he came up to New York and immediately tried to connect with those similar activities that he had seen happening.

LEONARD: Well, he was living down there, also—he was living downtown.

MARGARET: That’s another question I had, too, actually. I was wondering if you knew where he was living and if he maintained a studio or if he worked in his home or apartment?

LEONARD: I don’t think he had a studio. He shared an apartment with somebody.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: God, all the images of the opening—there was somebody who I was close with who died—they had his funeral bouquet at the opening.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s interesting. I wonder who that was.
LEONARD: Yeah.

MARGARET: Someone from Delaware.

LEONARD: Yeah. And there were these people from Delaware who were working to sell a piece—they were selling the Morgan estate up on the Hudson—it’s the Morgan estate.

MARGARET: Well, yes, but I wonder who that would have been. That’s interesting. I know—

LEONARD: I think Trey saw this, and I have—we traced the names from the guestbook and we can put together—we have time to do that.

MARGARET: Okay. Oh, certainly. There was—

LEONARD: I like to just really think about the relationship, continue the conversation, but specifically where the street art, if you want to call it that, and the interconnectedness it had with the galleries at the time, the commercialism—what I was trying to do with Rob in promoting him. Those facets I’d like to just think about and put together.

MARGARET: Right. Of course, of course. Let me pause this. Okay. So I’d like to ask you about the reception to Rob’s work and the general response that you saw at the shows and how people responded in terms of requiring purchasing his work.

LEONARD: Everyone was in awe.

MARGARET: Okay. The street was filled with people at all times of day wanting the work, and Rob did not make any commissions for the work. The pieces that Mr. [Frolic] Wyeth bought were from the show. They were sort of souvenirs of the show more than aesthetic. He wanted a piece of that show.

LEONARD: So I had people that just wanted to own what was on the street.

MARGARET: Yeah. That’s such a good way of describing it. As souvenirs. It is. It’s a souvenir. That’s a good way to think about street art, for lack of a better descriptor. As souvenirs of that installation or that experience.

LEONARD: Right. I wasn’t trying to sell any work. I had nothing in the gallery. I was not going after commissions. It was not that type of artist that I wanted to push that with.

MARGARET: Right.

LEONARD: There’s an artist called Muriel Castanzas who did plaster casts of—have you heard of her?

MARGARET: Yes.
LEONARD: Okay, so they were confusing her work with his work at the time, and she was at Castelli and getting all the commissions in San Francisco doing the top of buildings, almost—they weren’t shrouds. So I wanted to distinguish what Rob was about and what she was about because she was making commissions with architects, not street art.

MARGARET: Right.

LEONARD: Hers was very academic. Rob was really about shrouds and a very religious kind of—it was spiritual the way he was doing his things.

MARGARET: Did he talk about the work much?

LEONARD: He referred to each piece as a shroud, which I would imagine put people off because he died very early. He had a very untimely death, and I believe he knew he was sick at the time.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: And working with his materials, inhaling his materials was even harder on him than his health. It was like Eva Hesse who died of a respiratory thing.

MARGARET: Oh, and he’d been doing this since undergraduate. The same kind of—working with all these harsh chemicals.

LEONARD: Right, and he never used a mask or anything. And the most important thing to him was the mannequin that he was using. So the interplay, and of course the AIDS epidemic was reaching its peak at that time, so death was on everybody’s mind. So the whole concept of shrouds was something I wouldn’t imagine anybody’d want in their home.

MARGARET: Right.

LEONARD: Because they were referred to as shrouds.

MARGARET: But people had what seems like a very strong emotional response to that work.

LEONARD: Right. To look at the interplay between what a shroud is supposed to do without a person in it and how a shroud encompasses a figure, you know.

MARGARET: A body.

LEONARD: It brings the concept of a shroud into this outdoor—which is very tense.

MARGARET: It is.

LEONARD: You don’t see that too often with artists.
MARGARET: No.

LEONARD: So you had Muriel, who I knew, doing these very formal tableaus of fabric that she did a play of the drapery—very aesthetic, and then you had Rob at the same time doing shrouds, and you had people confusing the two of them. Because she was doing it on buildings. So I wanted to make the show not about a commission but a statement about who Rob was and then follow up a year or two later with his drawings, which I thought were really interesting.

MARGARET: Right. So were any of the drawings he was doing related to any of the work he was doing with the shrouds?

LEONARD: No.

MARGARET: Not at all?

LEONARD: Not at all. They were all about life and entertainers, and—

MARGARET: And capturing that activity and that movement and—that’s interesting.

LEONARD: Because the shrouds to me were temporary. It wasn’t something that was going to hold up, especially if they were outdoors.

MARGARET: Right. And it’s interesting that he seemed to struggle with this desire to use sort of interesting industrial materials, but kind of the struggle to identify materials that were permanent. The materials—the industrial materials that he used, kind of by nature, began to decompose.

LEONARD: Right.

MARGARET: He had an installation at the University of Delaware with the kind of large board forums. One was stolen, and one was vandalized to the point where the sculpture was completely destroyed. And then in an article, in an interview, he was talking about his kind of search to identify some materials that would last. So it was interesting that he had this kind of touch in between that.

LEONARD: Well, in the studio, where he created this was in the elevator shaft in the building.

MARGARET: Oh, really?

LEONARD: Oh the top floor when she was sleeping overnight. It was sort of like a shrine with this—it was really tense. I hope that—but it was like a shrine. Very private, created environment in the elevator shaft, which he would sleep overnight in.

MARGARET: Interesting.

LEONARD: Curl up with the fabric before he would paint it.
MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: And the mannequin was there. So it was like—he probably knew he was sick.

MARGARET: So there seemed to be this kind of—I don’t know if ritual is the right word, but some sort of an intense process to the art making process for him.

LEONARD: And with death.

MARGARET: And with death.

LEONARD: With his own.

MARGARET: Right.

LEONARD: Which was lurking around the corner.

MARGARET: Right.

LEONARD: So he had no sense of permanence either, you know. Some of the drawings from lipstick of some of the characters in there, and he was with the vagabonds of New York.

MARGARET: So interesting. I have just one other specific kind of detail question. And if you don’t feel comfortable answering this, you can let me know. In his obituary, it lists that at his time of death, he was living in the Independence Plaza. This is at 80 North Morse Street.

LEONARD: Right.

MARGARET: And it has—it lists a friend with whom he lived. Do you know—and this would have been—this was in 1989. Do you know if he had a significant partner later in his life?

LEONARD: I don’t think so, no.

MARGARET: Okay. And in some ways this is my kind of hope to be able to reach out to other people to tell them about the project.

LEONARD: Yeah, well, I’ll put the word—I mean, you’ve inspired me to give it some thought and put it together.

MARGARET: Okay.

LEONARD: Like this guy here—Tokishito—he was another street artists who was from Japan. Homeless and lived in the subway. I gave him money to—I gave Rob money to buy the materials, I mean—as well as with Tokishito. He came to New York not knowing any English, and I had these drawings, some amazing drawings from him, and he was just infatuated with
New York, and at that time, he could be in New York. Really, not having an apartment and still get by, so I always saw that—I wanted to develop that piece of artists, you know?

MARGARET: Well you had your support for them and being in that space at that time.

LEONARD: Yeah, it took a lot of energy of me. I was 30 years old, it was my money and articles—I advertised in America—I had some really—I had to leave it, and I’m coming back to it now from a different place. And I—as that kind of attitude toward art was drying up and being sucked up by real estate and what’s happening now in Chelsea, I saw less creativity.

MARGARET: Interesting.

LEONARD: Like even Banksy now. I mean, it’s all about money, and although he’s a street artist, it’s—I don’t see it connected.

MARGARET: There are different motivations.

LEONARD: And I saw that drying up—that spontaneity—and being able to just walk around the city and find interesting art. I mean, many studio visits, but the imagery was like all over the place.

MARGARET: Interesting. And that’s really at the late—that’s at the end of the ‘80s, early ‘90s?

LEONARD: Yeah. Well, Creative Time was the first formalized—you see pictures of that, photographs of that? That was very interesting. I don’t see that happening anymore.

MARGARET: Yeah, interesting. Did you have any other shows of Rob’s work after 1985?

LEONARD: Probably the group show.

MARGARET: Group show. Okay.

LEONARD: I’m trying to visualize. It’s very personal because I’m visualizing coming up on the morning and seeing Rob sleeping in the elevator shaft with the mannequin.

MARGARET: I’m going to stop this.

[End of audio]
[38 minutes]