

STORM KING ART CENTER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

JOHN KNIGHT
December 2, 2017

Interviewed by Sarah Dzedzic
Storm King Oral History 005
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Thank you!

Interview with John Knight
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic
December 2, 2017

Storm King Art Center Museum Building
Video with 5 audio files
Open for research use

Audio File 1

Knight: My name's John Knight, and my work is just [01:00] out the window. The title is *87°* (1997–99).

Dziedzic: Well, I'd like to start by hearing how the proposal came about, and the invitation from Bea Stern. So, feel free to start at whatever point you think is significant and just lay out how that came to be.

[Portion removed]

Knight: It was Bea's idea [04:00] to approach three artists who have had this, let's say, reputation as a tripartite—Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, and John Knight—although we never participated in that myth. In a way, it is one now, three fairly original founders of a body of practice, thought of as artwork in situ, post-studio. Which, coming from a completely different perspective, has now been referred to, as institutional critique. A post-avant-garde practice that [05:00] people like Benjamin Buchloh and others have taken up in their scholarship. Bea locked onto that, and consciously invited the three of us to consider special projects for the site, knowing how we all work. So, it wasn't so much that we were tied together collectively, but that the connection at the hip was more our histories. Actually, it was quite clever on her part to ask all three of us to do independent projects in a relatively similar timeframe.

The nature of how we approach things is very different. [06:00] I could be much quicker than, usually, Michael who can be—could be—forever, but the waiting was worth it, usually. And Daniel is one who would map something out on an airplane, either on his way to or, immediately after visiting a site. Very thoughtfully. Unfortunately, we can't speak to Michael.

I think it was six months to a year into it when I made my proposal, which you have. It's the first thing I do when someone approaches me—which is a way this kind of post-studio operation works, which is also very rare for an artist. In fact, some art historians, like Buchloh, [07:00] find it to be—how does he speak about it? He still quite can't understand the position, because what is usually considered precious for the situation of the artist is the autonomous moment, the moment where they decide when and where and how they'll work, what they produce in their studio, and then they put it out to the world. So, working like I do, or Daniel or Michael did, is more like a commission as an architect for something. You have to wait—and it's a strange position to put oneself into. I don't think I ever really so consciously thought about that,

but leaving the studio is a very conscious gesture. It just made no sense to me at all, to work in this kind of rarified site time and again.

Anyway, I make proposals, and those proposals can be accepted or rejected. [08:00] Pretty much everything's put out front at the get-go. And then, of course, things open up and evolve—and I call them “rants.” Unlike people like Dan Graham, or Buren, I've never been an artist that writes. It's really a struggle for me. So, these rants have become a kind of abbreviated literature for me. I work for weeks or months on them, and they're usually a page or two. It's quite embarrassing, how stunted I am about them. So, I proposed it, and there was a lot of talk. I think that out of the three proposals, mine and Michael's were pretty hard to chew on. It was like—[09:00] they were a stretch, I think. And I mean that in all modesty. It just was, “Where is the object?” Daniel's is more conventional, and he offered them something that was very material, and you've probably seen them out in the park, scattered about.

But for Michael and I, I can imagine—his was even more, I think, demanding in a certain way. And I believe they're still working on trying to realize it. Bea is. She would love to try and realize that project. But mine became a long conversation with people because there was nothing really material to be had. And there were the difficulties—I don't know if we want to go into this now—

Dziedzic: Yes, go ahead.

Knight: And there were difficulties negotiating offsite, which I found to be an interesting problem to deal with. But it was probably the lack of an object that [10:00] pushed the limits. I must say, it's very impressive to—for someone to say, “Okay, fine, we'll do it.” Given the history of the place, which is really on the other side of the spectrum: large, industrial, male production. I'm opening it up like that.

[Portion removed]

What I found to be interesting was that it's one of—and still remains probably—the only public sculpture parks in the United States. I could be wrong about that, but certainly then it was. As I know from David [Collens] and Peter Stern, it was initiated by their interest in places like the Kröller-Müller in the Netherlands, and places—you know, that are really pretty traditional. Most interesting was the idea of how these things become—who initiates [12:00] the funds, who initiates the energy? There's usually somebody like Ralph Ogden, with a factory, a company, a corporation. And especially in this country, more so than old wealth, it's new wealth. It's industrial wealth, and there's a patriarchy to it. It was extremely interesting to me to know that that money, that energy, was just outside the park. And unbeknownst to me, when I discussed the proposal and showed interest in the water tower as an element in my work, [13:00] I was told that's considered by both Ralph Ogden and Peter Stern to be what they

would consider their first aesthetic purchase. Apparently, they had purchased or ordered a very standard, abject-looking water tower, and somewhere in the brochures or somewhere, they saw this very sleek, minimal, highly aestheticized tower, canceled the one and paid something like twice as much for the other. They felt it was their first real aesthetic leap into the abyss, right? But I didn't know that when I proposed it. I recognized the characteristics of it, of course, as being highly aestheticized, and found myself interested because of that.

I also was very interested because of the notion of the park being developed around [14:00] large-scale, muscular production, as I said. And the irony to have chosen something that really is the biggest piece in the collection, a bit of a play with Mark [di Suvero] and [Richard] Serra and some of these people because my position—and along with the other two—is that I have no interest whatsoever in sculpture. I'm not genre-specific driven—or my practice isn't genre-specific driven. So, it was ironic and interesting to take something that was so very sculptural and draw it into my proposal, in juxtaposition to the park's work. And also, the philanthropic aspect. What is the philanthropic relationship to things? So that, I think, operates as a sign of [15:00] the site of the philanthropic gesture.

Another reason is where this place is—let's say outside of the urban mainstream—in the so-called “outback,” or the countryside. Or if you would travel across the country, as Le Corbusier did and was so taken by the water towers and the grain towers that he would see across the country, where their scale, their industrial texture and character—we know that he was stunned by these things.

[Portion removed]

As well is the fact that these were used to advertise or brand places. Going across country, you see large names printed across up on the—you know, “Dayton, The Heartland for Wheat.” There are these beautiful pop signs. You see this coming into the discourse of urban, or suburban, or country ecology when you read Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, as well. I think they're very aware of these things. So, I read this tower in that kind of consciousness. [17:00] The factory building, as well, has super graphics across the front of it, Star Industries, the four big, red stars, and it's right on the expressway. And all of this to me is extremely interesting, that that industrially-developed architecture is just adjacent to this industrially-developed art.

My critical reflection on what I consider to be some of the problems of that earlier generation of sculpture production, vis-à-vis my personal artistic, reflective vision—there seems to be a complete lack of understanding of scale. They're [18:00] big, but they miss on scale. This massive difference between the kind of consciousness and sophistication, or lack thereof, in the work, points to this—of a particular work here in relationship to the extraordinary work of, let's say, [Claes] Oldenburg—literacy of the idea of scale.

I think the best work in the collection is the piece right out here [Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Wayside Drainpipe*, 1979]. And they had it on loan for many years, and I think now they own it. The *Drainpipe* is just an absolutely extraordinary work. It's not about big—and this is where the masculine, I think, muscular conversation comes in—it's about relationship or reference, relativity to something else, right? Scale. [19:00] So I've always been fascinated by that reflection from architecture to sculpture, but no interest myself to build it or make it.

Beyond that, there is—and always has been here, and other places—a strong urgency to control those things in the larger mise-en-scène in the field, the visual field. They even have a term for it that I had never heard before: viewshed. I know watershed, but I heard that term—I think it was in a conversation with David—used often. “What's viewshed? I don't know understand.” He said, “Well, we would like to control the gaze from the park all the way out.” “All the way out to how far?” “Well, [20:00] across the mountains, it's extraordinary here.” This was fascinating to me. This notion of the idea of the theater of gardens and parks dates all the way back to eighteenth-century follies in Europe—how you frame a folly and stage it so that you see nothing but that gaze from the chateau to the lawn, the perspective, to the folly. So, here's this kind of inside-out notion of that—we're in the center and it's like a gaze out. And yet, there's a control—there's a means to try and control that viewshed. [21:00] So that was also fascinating.

And so, from here, the house on the hill [Museum Building], which was consciously built on this hill—it was moved here¹—you can look down across the horizons. Very spectacular and very picturesque, you know. And there's an allée right here—right out this window, which Ralph Ogden planted, and is just slightly askew of the gaze to the tower. It wasn't literally back to, “That's my empire,” but it was an allée that you would find in these kinds of gardens in Europe, these massive gardens, Versailles and places. And apparently, he loved the notion of an allée—it goes to a certain degree, and then it stops. And these are beautiful, interesting kinds of things to me. I had considered [22:00] somehow attaching myself to that allée, but I couldn't quite figure out how to move it, critically, in a way, but keep it intact.

So, the tower offered that. It simply was immovable, immobile. And from here to there, the philanthropic connection can be made through sign value, and through the gaze. We spoke about what do they really own—what they own, so to speak, is the gaze. So that apparently immaterial element, is extremely material when you think about what that gaze is. [23:00] The materiality is the ability to have the means to create this other thing—and that's a material connection between the two things, or one of them, right? What comes out of that are problems like, “It's off the park proper. It's on other property.” And you would have to check this, but my recollection is that when we initiated this, they owned the factories, but there

¹ The granite used in the construction of the Museum Building, as well as the Ionic columns on display on Museum Hill, were salvaged from Danskammer, the 1834 Edward Armstrong mansion located north of Newburgh that stood overlooking the Hudson River for almost 100 years.

was even then talk about, well, they won't own them forever.² For me, that's not a problem, but for, I think, Storm King, it was a serious consideration at the time. My response was—and this is another relationship to a certain kind of, say, [24:00] philosophical position about production in generations before mine, and some within my generation and after—my position is: things don't last forever.

I've had many conversations with artists like Hans Haacke, who insist things must be created and recreated in the same way precisely forever, and I completely disagree with that. This is a position he can have, of course, and he does it very well. But mine is to say I work in situ. When I'm invited, I make a project. The work is done then. And this I share with Michael and Daniel very strongly: after that, what someone has is a souvenir, or a fragment of the original project. The whole point of working in situ is to bring—conflate the notion of site [25:00] of production and site of reception, simply stated. After that, it may go through another process, an exchange process that we know happens in the art world and every other world. What the person has, or the institution has, however, is a reminder of something that had taken place somewhere else. Now, when it's a situation like this, and it's fixed in this material way, it's a different can of worms, in a way. I still stand by that notion, that that [87°], in a way, is a souvenir to the initial engagement that took place between myself and the invitation of the Storm King Art Center to do a work in situ. In order to initiate the engagement materially, the idea was to connect—or how to bring the audience to the work, so to speak, or they're conscious that [26:00] there is a work—to utilize the binoculars that are sitting right down here in the park. In order to see that as my work—you really can only see the ball atop the tower—they had to move the binoculars about 30 feet across the lawn over here.

That also initiated the ability to see a couple of other new projects going in, as well, the Serra and things that were further to the left that you didn't see before. So, the identification of my work is on the plaque with, I think, three or four other works. *Schunnemunk Fork* (1990–91), for example, by Serra. And the title of my work is, in fact, the literal degrees on the compass that you turn to see it, 87°. And you see the top of the tower only because there had to be some pruning done on the trees, [27:00] which we all knew. Now, there's Mountainville and the factory. The factory's private; Mountainville is a public-private enclave. And there's the park. And in Mountainville, there are four or five houses, and I think all of them have been in three, four, or five generations of local people living here. So, everybody here knew each other for a very long time. One of the initial and important things in order to execute this work was to negotiate with the neighbors, which I was aware of and I found that to be a very interesting problem to solve in creating a work of art. So, David and I and Bea and others made appointments, and went over, and we had lunch, and we sat down—neighborly conversations and—seriously—sat [28:00] on the porch, and we walked around and talked about the hunting season, and, this and that. Within that, “This tree, it's like if we could prune these trees a little bit, like this—” So, they agreed—“Oh, you know [indicating agreement]”—that

² Pending further research on date of sale.

Storm King would have a pruning schedule, and periodically maintain and prune their trees. And that has taken place. In fact, I think right now they need to do it again.

It's also a mercurial relationship, because although there've been two or three generations, the younger ones are starting to sell their houses. These long-term relationships up here are coming to an end. So, the negotiations are now going to be with strangers, so to speak. We already know the negotiation [29:00] and we will look more closely later, where the factory has become radically different. And again, that idea was discussed, too: What happens if and when their factory changes ownership? Well, I don't know. What happens? The tower is a water source for fire, right? And it also serves the enclave of Mountainville. So, it's tied to something else besides just the factory, which is interesting. But I, again, said, "Well, maybe they'll take it down someday. I don't know." "And what would that mean, John?" I said, "Well, I guess that would mean it's done. The work's over. Now you have a document of it, it's in your archive. Nothing lasts forever."

Dziedzic: So, would you mind if that tower came [30:00] down, then the binoculars³ would go, and—

[Side conversation]

Audio File 2

Dziedzic: So, we were just talking about what would happen if the water tower came down, the implications for your work.

Knight: Technically, it can't until the whole thing goes down because by code that tower is essential for fire. However—and this was part of the initial conversations between myself and David and Peter—when they asked, "Well, what would that mean, JK?", and I said, "I guess it would mean the work's over." The documentation is here, the photography's here, the notes and archives are here. [01:00] It's a memory. And I'm fine with that. I actually think it's interesting to be able to let go, in a way, like that. And it is consistent with my notion of working in situ. If a work has transferred ownership, I might say then what's left—what material elements of the work are left—go to that place. For example, the Stedelijk Museum. It's very natural for the institutions to ask, "How would you like us to present this installation?" And I always say, "I made the original installation," for, let's say, Greene Naftali Gallery. "I'm done. I welcome your interpretation of how you will deal with it in your [02:00] institution." Because a gallery in Chelsea, New York, is very different than an institution in Amsterdam, and they have your programs, and they have their aesthetics, and I'm very interested to see what they would do with that. I would be happy—if they

³ All references to the viewing mechanism related to John Knight's 87° have been corrected in the transcript to "binoculars," Knight's preferred term

asked me my druthers, I would give some input. You know, I'd say, "Well, I don't know, maybe like this, or like that." I don't know if you know my work or not, but it's a work with many parts. I said to the Stedelijk, "I wouldn't just show one piece. That would be a misrepresentation, I think, of the intention of the work. But other than that, I welcome what you will do." And it's been installed there twice, and it's interesting to see. One installation I think is quite dreadful.

But, in thinking about that, it's interesting to see if this work can hold up to that kind of a presentation. So, I guess the loss of the tower, [03:00] so to speak, and the loss of the primary material connector, would be something similar to that. Yes. I can think of a lot of work that should probably not last forever.

[Portion removed]

Dziedzic: You had mentioned something, when you were talking about if the tower were to come down, and what would [04:00] the institution do with your work. You'd mentioned something, I think, in that conversation that artists face, about your work functioning on a number of different levels. So, if one of those levels fails there's still something for it to fall back on. I think I see that very clearly with this work in a few different ways. So, maybe this is asking you to do this sort of thing that you don't like to do, but if you could speculate on if the tower comes down, how does the—do the binoculars stay, and how do they gain a new function within Storm King?

Knight: Well, let me ask you: How would you see it? You suggest that you would see, could see, several scenarios in this case.

Dziedzic: Well, for instance, you had said that in a sense there is no object. [05:00] But also you do, in another sense, bring in materiality because you're pointing to this, very large structure. If that structure is gone, then what are the other ways in which this work functions? How do you draw a connection to the kind of economic foundations, or the philanthropic foundations of the Art Center? Thinking most simplistically about it, as binoculars, the way that those things are advertised, zooming in on different sculptures at the Art Center would not be the right function for your work, if I'm understanding it correctly.

Knight: I would agree with that.

Dziedzic: So—yes. Is there a way to continue to bring in the economic foundations and the labor—to have your work draw that in without the tower? And is there also a way to subvert the authority of some of the sculptures here—the kind of [06:00] industrial, masculine, large work—if the binoculars are what remain? Are you [laughs] able to think about some of those ways that it could have a new—

Knight: A new life?

Dziedzic: —a new view? Yes.

Knight: Yes. First of all, I think I would continue to insist that it doesn't really have a material element now, although you can see something. But let's just say, one would argue, yes, it does—there's a material element, and we lose that material, right? Okay. When a viewer looks through the binoculars to 87°, they're not looking at a philanthropic sign. They're gazing. They're looking at the view. And the binoculars aren't fixed on my work, so they naturally move them around and look at all kinds of things. [07:00] And that moves the work into the registers of the idea of viewshed, and gaze, and the spectacular landscape, and the bucolic sensibility of the whole place. For those who know the other elements to this, or the other thoughts to it, or the initial relationships between the elements, the loss would be—I'm not sure it would be about a loss. I think it would be—let's say an evolution in the process of the work. Let's put the burden onto the work. How can it still function? That question is as interesting and open for me as it would be for you. Can it hold up? And [08:00] can it move to other registers? It doesn't lose its initial, let's say, casual viewer sense, because they still see the gaze. They don't see a ball, but no one tells them to look for a ball. They still look and gaze at the other work. The initial question was under these circumstances: Do we remove the title, the label from the binoculars? That's still an open question in my mind. Would we still specify 87° for a viewer? I think I would keep it, because I think by removing the title, or the label, in essence, is when the work gets removed, [09:00] completely—there's an erasure that takes place. And I don't think that's necessary when—if—the tower goes down.

Dziedzic: So, in a sense it could still point towards this place with a particular history?

Knight: It still points toward that place for the initial viewer, or the innocent viewer, or the first viewer, or the first viewing. It's still there, whatever's there. Some would say, "If the tower's gone, there's no there there." This is one of these kind of cockamamie comments that I heard one time from a New York architect. It's always stuck in my mind. "Would there still be a there there, or is there [10:00] no there?" And this sounds like a Mohammed Ali wordplay—who also I'm deeply influenced by—but the fact is it's an open question. Once again, most people don't know there's a there there, a conscious there there now. This a critique that has been laid onto the work. Well, how do they know what they're looking at? How do they know what they're looking at when they look at a Serra? What should they know? This becomes kind of a class-conscious thing. You're either aware or in the loop, or you're not in the loop, right? Well, this is a public park, so people of all cuts and class and color of life [11:00] come here and do all kinds of things: picnic, walk, love affairs, and view objects, aesthetic objects. So, I think that the aesthetic object, the specific work of art and, from my perspective, the engagement with the park—the work has to share it all, at least in some way.

It's interesting and can make for a richer work if it allows for the other things that take place, like gazing at another person in the park with the binoculars. That's what I do when I look around—I look at the art, but I look at people, too. I look at the security guards. There's a lot of things going on in the gaze. Those things are actuated [12:00]—or animated—by normal social human behavior. So, I think that these binoculars are interesting from the point of view of triggering those things, a necessity for not just my work but for several other pieces to be seen from here. But they, in a way, are different from viewing in a more interesting possible way of taking a walk, getting next to the Serra, or whoever it is, and walking around it—hopefully they do that, as well. This, I think, is more like a peep-show, which is a completely different way of operating or experiencing this park. A pleasure garden is for peep shows. This is a pleasure garden in a way, I think—hopefully. I don't know if I've answered your question, per se.

Dziedzic: Yes.

Knight: I've maybe gone all around it, but [13:00] let me go by another perspective. What's more problematic for me from the very beginning is the catalog—there was a mistake made, both in the way the work's been documented, in general media, and by myself when the catalog was designed. It was a slip of mind, so to say, to utilize the binoculars in the oculus of the catalog as an image on the cover. It was very misleading, and I got caught in my own trap, in a way. That's not the site of the work.

When they've been rezoning or re-planning the park, the Venturi, Scott Brown firm worked on a complete communications redesign, from the graphics to the pathways, and there's been a lot of conversation about my work when they made the map [14:00]. “How will we identify the site of the work?” And initially they identified it at the binoculars, and I learned one bad lesson about it, which I share with you—but it's tricky, you know. You slip sometimes. That lesson has to be learned to say, “That's not the site of the work.” That's a very tricky relationship, which I've communicated, and I've, let's say, participated in kind of misleading that in a way. Now, the general viewer doesn't have to deal with that faux pas, so to speak. They deal with it in a naturalized way.

Dziedzic: Because they see the image of your work as the view instead of—

Knight: Because they go to it in a naturalized way without all of this preconceived understanding [15:00] and intentionality—as viewers can be, and should be in a way, they have the ability to be naïve, no matter how much they know about things, a nice problem that some of us can't share because we're so experienced it's hard to see it naturally. That's something to practice, I think. I try to practice that. You know, to keep myself not too distracted by literacy.

It also doesn't go away in the winter. For practicality reasons, [16:00] they have to cover and remove much of the work. There's a lot of labor-intensive practice by the staff here. I think about that when I work, I try to—it's a fundamental philosophical position of mine to try and work with an economy of means, in every way an economy of means. My works are never very expensive, cost-wise. And the construction is usually not very labor-intensive, I think. And that's very conscious on my part. I don't think it's necessary in order to make a potentially rich contribution to something. Quite the contrary: if you think in terms of economy of means, it can liberate you to not get caught in a certain kind of [17:00] trap. And so, in this case, nothing needs to be—there's the pruning of the trees. And so that labor I find to be a very different kind of labor than the labor of painting, covering, removing, storing. For me, that labor's more naturalized to where we are in this bucolic area, in relation to a very self-consciously constructed environment. These are not natural structures, art parks and museums and things, so they have to be maintained for their appearance. And mine is the same. I found that interesting, too, to say my work falls into the pattern of maintenance that is a part of the [18:00] global design of the entire enterprise. These trees need to be pruned. Those trees need to be pruned. They pruned certain trees for the viewshed across Schunnemunk Mountain. They trim those trees for another view to something else, in this case part of a work of art. And I find—I like that. I find that kind of sweet. It's all part of the way that this *mise-en-scène* is maintained.

Dziedzic: Wasn't Michael Asher's proposal related to that?

Knight: Yes. Michael and I were extremely close friends and compadres, in a way. I think we saved each other's souls—because we were living in Los Angeles, which is not an easy task in certain ways for this world. And so, we shared many—all things. [19:00] What I know about the proposal was the idea to catalog all of the botanical elements within the grounds of the park by species, and then to build a maintenance schedule, I think, around that. And then, of course, to document that, which was very consistent with Michael's late work, and, when you know the practice, more and more where Michael was going. I hope they do it because I think it's an extraordinary work in relationship to the park, he also being very conscious of postwar sculpture production. I think he thought of these trees as [20:00] bigger, in many cases more impressive, older structures. I hope they do it, yes, and I think they will. [laughs] And it's interesting you asked that, because there was a certain kind of impossible crossover, or will be—his more literally, maybe—that you're standing on—mine more conceptually. It drove my intention for decision. It is the material character of his work. So, they play out differently, which is maybe, in a way, how our work plays out differently, if one knows the longer story. [21:00] They come like this, and then they turn and go like that, more so than with Daniel, I think. To bring it all back to that kind of confluence.

Dziedzic: Well, let's talk a little more about the catalog. You've mentioned the decision to use the binoculars as the representation of the work. But let's maybe talk about the other—the aspects of how the work lives within that catalog, in a sense, or travels through that.

Knight: Travels away from here?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Knight: Yes. Well, this catalog is connected to a now 30-year trajectory of making a document each and every time I make a project. Same format, different content. [22:00] The registers of change are the writers. It has to do with a lot of things, but for me it's primarily the notion of how I've tried to draw into my work those secondary elements that are conventions within art—catalog, announcement, press release, etc.—into what I would consider to be part of the primary site of the work. So, it's not just what's literally at this place, but it's these other forms of conceptual and intellectual and practical communication that I consider to be not at all secondary textual work, but primary textual work. And so, the catalog became probably a more visible driver of that, although I also always use postcards for my mailers. At this point in time, it's pretty clear [23:00] to those who are aware of the practice, they'll be receiving a postcard.

Dziedzic: Yes. I'd like to kind of lay out how the October File came into being. So maybe you can lead into talking about that, kind of bringing about an examination, or bringing together an examination of your work.

Knight: Yes, yes. Well, first of all, I have done my own catalogs. I'm hyper-visually charged as a person, and super-conscious of design aesthetics and things like that. I say that quite modestly, just—it's in my practice. [24:00] To some degree because of that, I have no real interest to design things. In fact, I'm very critical of design as an institutional problem, as I consider it to be a larger driver of desire and consumption. Someone thinks of design, they think of graphic design, or product design; I think of design as an ideological, global structure. And I have no interest to engage in graphic design. To me, I don't care. So, the game, in a way, was to say, okay, what I need to do here is lay down the initial format, which I think does the trick, and come back to it each time, and bring the file on the computer, and the new information is dropped in. Perfectly fine, done deal. [25:00]

Why should there be a different object, a different shape to the catalog? An archive is what it is. It just keeps going along as an archive. Postcards are the same. I do strongly argue it in the work, in the elements of the work and in the conversation, that they expand the site of the work, and particularly when you work in certain ways. In many cases, there's no residual, leftover material, so these become that archive that goes out. I also—going off here, but I'll come back—I also consider the notion of [26:00] in situ to be only the beginning of the conversation. And this is a discussion Daniel Buren and I have had for many years. I say ex situ. In situ gives the instigation of the work that then goes out to a larger site. And I

utilize that site as a discourse to go out—I think all cultural production works that way, but I don't think all cultural production discusses that, the dispersion of things.

The October File—I'm sure people who are involved in it would vigorously argue against this, but it's designed around certain [27:00] notions that have been designed by artists before, in a way. It spins off of *October* journal and it's only, I think, 12 or 15 years old. The idea of it is to take not the artist's work but writings about the artist's work and bring them together under one cover. And that I find very interesting, actually. It's a series that's somewhat narrow in its scope of interest, but all things are, I think, because there's a certain group of thought—a very, very well thought out group of thought—and, fine, someone else can do another body of thought. Within that, it's a very well-regulated and exercised thing. I feel [28:00] lucky to be part of it. I look around to the other subjects, and a lot of them are enormously important people to me, like Claes and others.

Dziedzic: How was it that Benjamin Buchloh wrote about your work here?

Knight: Well, everything seems to have a longer story to it. I did work in a gallery in New York in 1998 with Colin de Land. The gallery was American Fine Arts, Co., which had its extraordinary history. And the work [29:00] had a delayed execution. It had been proposed to another gallery in 1988, and that particular gallerist listened carefully, and didn't say anything. So, I put it, so to speak, in my pocket and kept it. And for all those years—10-year period—off and on, Colin would approach me and say, “You know that project you proposed for the Marian Goodman Gallery in 1988, I always liked that. Have you ever considered the possibility of doing that?” “Maybe.” So, one day around 1997, he approached me, and he said something like that. He said, “You know what? Why don't we do that. Let's do that. Let's try it.” And I said, “Okay.” So, we set out like two missionaries proselytizing, Colin with—for those people who know Colin, or those who don't—Colin with a briefcase and a seersucker suit and [30:00] me, making appointments with restaurants in SoHo and Chelsea, places like that.

[Side conversation]

Audio File 3

Dziedzic: So, we were talking about how the catalog came about for *87°*, and you were mentioning your relationship with Benjamin Buchloh.

Knight: Which is a relationship we've had for many years prior. His thesis, as we know well, really does engage—and it's very important, I think, historically for this generation of work—the post-avant-garde, if you want to call it that. For this exhibition in New York, I approached Colin, the gallerist, with the same

notion. [01:00] “I’d like to have a catalog, if we can do it.” “Oh, yes, I want to do that.” So, we worked along on this project and we produced the show. Along the way, we discussed who we might ask to write the essay, agreeing that Benjamin would be appropriate and could do a really interesting job, and is aware of the history of the idea, and this and that. So, we approached Benjamin and his response was something along the lines of, “Oh, you old conceptual artist, you really think they’re going to fall for this now, ten years later?” We went along and [02:00] got the work going and, in fact, we had an exhibition in October of ’98. And when Benjamin had initially said that, we both turned to him and said, “Well, if we do succeed, will you write an essay?” He goes, “Of course, I’ll write the essay, but good luck!” It’s like, “No one’s going to fall for those shenanigans now.”

So, we proceeded. We had wonderful meetings with the restaurant people and so, we succeeded. Benjamin was there at the opening of the exhibition and we approached him, and said, [03:00] “You remember our conversation earlier?” “What conversation?” “Well, if we could pull it off, you would write an essay for the catalog.” “I said that?” “You said that. But it’s okay because we’ve already asked somebody else, Alex Alberro.” He seemed very interested. He wanted to write about the work in general, and this seemed like a very appropriate time. “You did?” he said, “Fine. It’s okay. You know, no problem.” But we didn’t do the catalog because of personal things around the time.

And so, when this work [87⁹] happened, a catalog was proposed and agreed upon. [04:00] We asked Alex again and then I had the interest of Benjamin to also contribute. So that’s why there are two authors. One was initiated before —reading the essays, it’s quite interesting to see how the subject interests in the pages of the essays are allocated to this project, or, in certain cases, to the project at American Fine Arts, Co. One of the essays spent a lot of time on that, [05:00] which was making up for something else. And actually, there was a little conversation here about how much time was allocated toward that instead of here, but it all worked out fine. Alex wrote a broad-ranging, global art historical essay on that. That’s how Benjamin got involved. We had worked together numerous times before. I don’t mean to be vague, but, I mean, it’s kind of a cryptic story.

Dziedzic: And then he had—he instigated eventually the October File?

Knight: He invited me, formally, let’s say. And initially he was going to be the editor. We talked about it, as I recall, and then thought, well, maybe it should be offered to someone younger. [06:00] We both thought that’d be a good idea, so we ended up inviting André Rottmann, who was a young German art historian, lives in Berlin. And I think it was an excellent decision. It gave him an opportunity to put the thing together, and he’s very engaged in my work anyway. And so, Benjamin handed it over. But Benjamin was the one who saw through the meetings at *October* and all that. He probably kneaded them.

Dziedzic: Kneaded them? [distinguishing from “needed”]

Knight: Yes. Exactly. Kneaded them, yes. [laughter]

Dziedzic: Right. Well, there’s something that you were [07:00] talking about with design, just going back to the future of this work.

Knight: Future of this work?

Dziedzic: Yes. And that, for instance, anything that was to write about—or I should say it this way: how would you feel about something that described your work as it was originally proposed? So maybe as opposed to keeping it going, to kind of close it, in a sense, and say, “In 1996, John Knight proposed this work, and this is where someone was once able to stand and see it.” It’s a kind of thing that in my mind keeps sounding like an elegy to your work. Does that fall into the category of a design, a kind of manipulative design? Or would that [08:00] be an acceptable kind of closure?

Knight: You mean design as a manipulatory driver of desire for—

Dziedzic: Yes.

Knight: —as I speak about it as the instigator of neoliberal capital, etc.?

Dziedzic: Yes. Would a formal closure or formal elegy to the way that work as it was proposed fall—be guilty of this?

Knight: Yes, it would be guilty of that. I think it would depend on how it was initiated. If it were consciously initiated to further enhance the value of the condition, or to save the product, or to recuperate something that [09:00] one might fear that there’s a loss there now, yes. However, I would find it very interesting for someone to do that. So, for me, I would invite that, but I can’t consciously invite it, because then we’re back to this problem, this manipulation. In a way, that’s a preconception of how to build value, assign value. But I would wait to hope that someone might try it. In my case, historically, I’ve had very few opportunities, relatively—somewhat because of the way I work—I have to wait to be invited. And many of those were never realized. It’s a relatively unique position. [10:00]

[Portion removed]

In my case, there are people who are interested to write about unrealized, half-realized, amputated possibilities. Because it does play a relatively significant role in the chronology of my practice and experiences. So [11:00] you would see that it would play itself out differently. It wouldn't even be a problem of trying to recoup, or save, or something else. This project would probably fall into line with many others that for one reason or another weren't realized. And it would be, in a way, interesting to see someone write about the differences between why and how. That would be fascinating to me. In fact, there's someone writing an essay right now for the next catalog of this sort, around an exhibition in London that took place a year ago. And his approach is something very near to that. And this catalog should be realized by the end of the year or beginning of next year. But as I've said before, I'm not concerned with things living forever. [12:00] I'm not terribly tied up in that Western Greco-Roman classical notion that the value lies in the object. There's no value to a brick, necessarily, that you keep that brick forever no matter what. I think you could reproduce it, and it has the same value, or similar value. Or you can lose it.

Dziedzic: Or you can write about the history of the idea of the brick.

Knight: Absolutely. And I think that allows flexibility both in the practice and the work. I don't think it's loss as much as it's an opening for another way of speaking about something. These unrealized projects have been spoken about before and there are some of those unrealized projects in those October File essays, Anne Rorimer and people like that talk about unrealized projects. It's also very important, I think, for an artist, and all culture producers, to take authorship of that notion, in a way. I often think we see in archives, or catalogue raisonnés, the realized work, not so much unrealized work. And the realized work really represents the choices, the whims, and the decisions of curators, collectors, directors, and not the global practice—history of the practice. Oftentimes, as we know, super projects were unfortunately unrealized. And these should be open to [14:00] historical reflection, I think, because they're as important to me, and I think to others, as all the rest of them, because it's part of the thread that ties it all together. And it's not about loss. Really, I think it's about a gain. For me, I can think of projects that've been realized that are far less interesting within my own oeuvre than some that weren't realized. It's just my own, personal inner discourse.

It also liberates the work from this tight, narrow, decision-making process—institutional, professionalized—which becomes, in many cases, the sole driver of a person's life. And I think that's unfortunate to the audience. Some of the work of the artists that are most [15:00] important to me—I'm sure glad someone wrote about them, because I would have never known. Some of Oldenburg's unrealized projects are mindboggling. The gravedigger behind the Metropolitan Museum—if you know that performance—it's extraordinary.

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: Do you know the work that he had proposed for here?

[Portion removed]

Knight: I'd have to [16:00] think about it, but I do know it. As I recall, what I do remember, it's tragic that it didn't happen. And I'm very happy that they have the work they have outside—that they have something of Claes. From my perspective, he's one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, and certainly one of the great draftsmen in the history of art. His drawings are stunning and executed conceptually beautifully—mechanical drawings like that.

Dziedzic: It would be helpful to hear you talk more about *Wayside Drainpipe* and what it is about it that you like.

Knight: It's the kind of [17:00] object subject, and the humor. Irony is never done better than with Oldenburg. When it's good, it's brilliant, and it's always almost brilliant. And this free-standing object—this architectural relic with such a quotidian use value, but the utilitarian value of it, what it does, takes something from one place and brings it down to somewhere else. When you displace it and free-stand it—the irony in that and the way he scaled it is just so elegant and modest. [18:00] Work like that, I look at it and never find myself never trying to analyze or deconstruct it as much as just look at and just think: “This is extraordinary.” You look at it and just go, that's good. I can say the same about some other artists like that. Stanley Brouwn's *This Way Brouwn*, that great project. [19:00] Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, when they're on their game, things like that.

Dziedzic: Something that you'd brought up in a lot of different—well, two things that you've brought up in a lot of different ways are relationship and site. And so, I wonder if it would be useful to talk about—maybe with regard to relationships, it seems like, when you work with institutions, there's a different kind of relationship maybe than a typical commission, in particular because of the way in which your work—in this case, at least—pushes the bounds of the space, moves off the map, so to speak. So, I'm maybe wondering if you could talk about that in general, whether you feel like you have a sense of relationships being maybe more significant to your practice [20:00] than if you had a studio practice, and people could come through and look at what you're working on, and this kind of revolving door. And then I think site, too, you've used in a lot of different ways, maybe kind of originating from your study of architecture, that site is not just the location where something is, but the kind of the vehicle for it to exist, in a sense. It's actually moving, and the site, in terms of in situ and ex situ, it's present in both, in a sense. So, I'm

curious about how that moves and how that word has different definitions and utilities for you. So, if either of those questions strike you as useful to answer.

Knight: Well, coming from the pedagogy of architecture—although I never completed school— [21:00] my great interest in it is from the perspective of a social practice—which is also my great problem with postwar architecture, that it seems to, for the better part, lose that notion in its hyper professionalized obsession with the fetishization of the object. It was one of the reasons why I decided to move away from it. This notion of—also in the visual arts—the studio never made sense to me based on its lack of social relationships from the point of inception of work. How can one work in an isolated, autonomous place in every way—psychologically, physiologically, environmentally—[22:00] in order to produce a social site of production? It's absurd to me. So, it wasn't difficult at all for me to follow to some degree the lead of others who are slightly ahead of the curve—older than myself—to follow that course of thinking as a practice, because the other was nonsensical.

Beyond that, this brings up the conversation of language. A practice is, I think, only one that has a social register from the beginning to the end. So, I think there's a certain kind of professionalized, exclusionary [23:00] notion to the studio. And it doesn't open the opportunity for practice. Practice is being in the position of exchange from the beginning of thinking of the work all the way through to the opening. And then beyond that, there's a whole other set of kinds of practices separate from that.

I may very well not answer your question in the way you're thinking, but I—

Dziedzic: You're saying studio practice shuts down the opportunity for discourse.

Knight: Absolutely. This is an interesting and contradictory issue for me, all laid out, because it's very important to let the cat out of the bag, so to speak, along the way. As most people do, but they may not recognize it or [24:00] admit to it, I want to hear what people have to say about things, use the situations to further think through my project. And I've taught for many years on and off, and I've also utilized the site of teaching for that. And I tell students, "I'm here to crack your head, get something from you. So, don't think this is some kind of a laudatory practice on my part. I'm going to take from you, you better take from me, and that's what we're doing here."

The contradiction lies in this: at the same time, I profoundly disagree with the notion of collaboration as stated, as an institutionalized formal notion. This kind of social democratic idea of "We all do it together." I don't believe in that at all, and I think, in fact, [25:00] it's disrespectful to individual practice. For example, what's going on right here. For me, it's not a collaboration. It's individual people having individual practices, exercising their practices, and at the end there's a finished product. But that's not the same

thing to me as sitting in a room and having to have all 18 people agree on every aspect of the situation, and openly say that they don't have any particular role. We are the role. I think that's a counterintuitive notion to a certain kind of creative production. And I've watched it—it's been something that I've looked to and thought about. I'll give an example—I think in social democratic countries, in Scandinavia and places like that, one rarely sees bad work [26:00] or good work, but what they often see is an amalgam of a kind of middle-of-the-road set of decisions, because it takes all the people to agree, and that doesn't allow for the opportunity for awful decisions. It doesn't allow for a terrible decision to be made that will see its way through to reality.

[Portion removed]

Without taking enormous risk, nothing interesting can really happen. And so, I think there's this lack of the ability to take risk, or to, let's say, go out to the edge of the playing field. You kind of go out to the edge and you think to yourself—or I think to myself, "Can I get away with that, or is it really awful?" And then you kind of come around, and you decide, and sometimes it ends up awful, and sometimes you go, "Mm, I need to back it up a little bit, and [28:00] then I can get away with it." That's the kind of language I use in my own head when I'm working.

[Side conversation]

Audio File 4

Dziedzic: All right. So, you were talking about relationships, and collaboration within the context of that, and I'd love for you to continue. I'd also like you to get around to thinking about your relationship with Storm King. And your work, of course, has a relationship with it as an institution, but you, as a person who has an artwork in its collection, what that relationship is like and how it's evolved, as illustrated by the changing ownership of the water tower.

Knight: Yes. Let me say something about your question. [01:00] I, as well as the other artists who have opportunities to work in a number of different scales—and typologies of opportunities: museums, galleries, public spaces, etc., these kinds of spaces—I don't think I ever change my approach because of that. I don't scale myself to the place, either conceptually or in thinking.

[Portion removed]

And this to me is very problematic thinking, that I never consider. I approach every institution in the same way.

I've told students, you have to learn to say no to things, or other people, and I tell myself that all the time. I would say no to the Museum of Modern Art if I had to. I don't want to, because the only time I get to work is when I'm asked. Young people don't believe that. And I say, "It doesn't matter. It's not easy, but it doesn't matter." Alternative space or MoMA. They're all wonderful to work in, but you have to keep these scales—you have to keep them under control. To me, I have to keep my relationship to some place like MoMA under control: mine. "Okay, it's the Museum of Modern Art." Yes, and [03:00] it's another project. So, in the way of scales and relationship relative to things and places, it's the same. Work in situ. I ask for an artist fee. We haven't talked about that. I ask for an artist fee every place I go. Here was no exception. Small place, big place. And if it's X number of dollars for alternative space, it's not X number of dollars plus for MoMA. Again, it's the same thing. The value of the work is the value of the work. Some situations offer more meat to chew on. But that doesn't necessarily create a different scale of potential.

Now, to go from that to [04:00] here, I've worked in a couple places like this before. Do you—when you say what my relationship to [Storm King] is, do you mean that in a personal way, or how I read this situation in the typological way?

Dziedzic: I think both. I think there are a lot of personal relationships here with artists, so it's something that's come up in other interviews, as well as the institutional relationship, the context of the commission, the way that's played out.

Knight: I haven't had a lot of experience in terms of personal relationships. I guess that many artists have had many opportunities like that. And in some cases, it drives whole careers. It's not necessarily been that. And I must say that when it does [05:00] arrive—and this case is probably the most obvious—I'm nervous about it. The person who invites me knows that because they know me well enough anyway. I have a pang that it looks like insider trading, which is absurd. But this one was a personal relationship. I probably think that more so than the person who invited me, who was part of the organization.

I think she was acutely interested in shifting the discourse, or beginning to shift the focus [06:00] of the program, and thinking this is a generational and a methodological example that really could do that, more maybe than some other artists of my generation who would do some conventions of sculpture, more contemporaneous examples, or certainly something like that. But this might have been the opportunity for this person to—in a rather one fell swoop—introduce that into the discourse. I think she's very objective about things, and I think that I fit the bill as much as the others. And she came to know those two people on her own terms. It wasn't as long a personal relationship, but certainly she is one of those [07:00] kinds of people who develop a relationship with what she's going to do, which is not so common. And I think when people do that, we have the opportunity for a richer result, because they're kind of the real deal.

They do it because they really want to do it. There's no other venture or professional reason. And Bea Stern is really that kind of person.

[Portion removed]

This could be a different kind of value formation for Storm King. And some of the more contemporary—recent contemporaneous, I should say—acquisitions here, I think are, without value judging about the work necessarily, rather the type [09:00] of work, are a throwback, in a way. If we think about the total package of practice—not better or worse, but in the continuum of things—I would call the studio practice conservative. It's not a one-way street. I've developed relationships with the people here that have become closer, but this is all part of not the premeditated desire to work in situ, but what comes out of working in situ, I think. I can't imagine not becoming very engaged with the other participants, [10:00] and the director, and the staff, and the installers. And this may sound like a kind of sappy, Marxist comment, but maybe it is. I guess you could call me a sappy Marxist, but it's not a dedicatedly political position. You know, it's not meant to be righteous. It's like, it's important. Like I said earlier, I'll ask someone off the cuff, "What do you think about whether it should be on the floor or—?" I get from people because that's what we all do anyway.

[Portion removed]

Dziedzic: I was looking at my notes because I couldn't remember exactly the term that you used, but when you were describing the kind of network of people that would be part of your work, that you'd be involving in the relationship, it reminded me of something. And you'd called this an "eco-cultural view" [in your original proposal for a project at Storm King Art Center]. So that may not have been the way that you intended that term, but in the sense that it is engaging [15:00] many people within a kind of ecosystem of the way in which this space operates, a kind of economic ecosystem, and then also—you could take it in many different ways.

Knight: Yes. I very consciously use the term to take it in the large—the holistic sense, an ecological means to production: financially, practically, structurally. And in relation to the situation culturally, contextually. I don't mean it to ever minimize the possible potential reaches. On the contrary. But I think it's absolutely essential to—what's it? Talk the talk, walk the walk, right? I'm not an activist on the ground, but I think there's other ways to produce, promote, or engage in [16:00] that idea.

I proposed something two years ago at Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea, which was to give the ground floor space over to the Bernie Sanders campaign to use it as they choose, for the duration of my scheduled exhibition.

[Portion removed]

I've done it before, things like this, giving—and it's not just straightaway kind of altruistic idea, because I also have a vested interest in making a work of art. But how can you engage politics in the work without [17:00] it being armchair politics, which is an enormous problem in art production. So, my work would have been a result of how the Bernie Sanders campaign decided to utilize that space.

At the same time, it's really not the material of my work. If you're going to be square with it, ecological about it, it's their work, but the time and space and place and everything else, and advertising, [18:00] and the context of Art World and everything else, rationalizes an exhibition. And it was very risky for me, because what is it then? What is the work? It's not photographs of Yemen on the wall, like—it's very ephemeral. We would only know if we realized work, and we didn't because actually their campaign grew revolutionary messaging. The people who did all the media work, who I had many conversations with. We think they just couldn't figure out how to get around the idea that it's an art gallery. And they kept wanting to kind of—"Do we make posters?" I said, "Well, utilize it the best way, a campaign headquarters or whatsoever." If I were to direct it, I would have what they would do be certainly as far away from art as possible, but I couldn't possibly do that, [19:00] couldn't step into it. So, it finally just lost energy.

[Portion removed]

Knight: In fact, what's so interesting to me is to get to the margins of almost—not almost nothing, not almost evacuated space physically, but almost not art. I have a real problem with art. I think when we continue to move and develop the discourse of this practice—these practices, this subject, art—it doesn't need to look so much like art. And that's a really interesting challenge for me and really where I want to go. [21:00]

Dziedzic: But it also can't be looking at other people as art, as you were saying with documentaries and, kind of pointing a finger at, another, "No, not me, but here."

Knight: Yes. Pointing the finger thing is—you better point back and then bring it back through somehow.

Dziedzic: But in a sense that example that you gave about the Bernie Sanders campaign, it also becomes something that's very difficult to trace. So that aspect of it is quite different than, "Here is the final product, look here."

Knight: Absolutely. I hope to say—I never point in that way.

Dziedzic: Right. Exactly.

Knight: I kind of point over there or around. Now, what would have been the work? Well, it was at Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea. Chelsea's the context of what we know, a very special context, a very expensive context, right? It's a timeframe of art shows. It has all kinds of connective, conventional [22:00] signifiers. A difficult problem for me was would I make a mailer. Why would I do that? A mailer in art—as an art form? Would we? Should we give it to them, too? It brings up a lot of things that I find extremely interesting, that can change all these conventions.

I've spent years working with people and saying to these organizations, all these different contexts, "I don't think we should do a press release." "Oh, but you always should." "I don't want to do it. Why should we do a press release? What is the value in it besides what we know the convention of one is?" Now, more times than not, they're not doing them anymore. [23:00] But to me it was part of the context of the larger field of the conventions of the world I'm working in. Question that one and that one and that one and that one. Why? What? An ad? Why? We had an ad for the Colin de Land show. It was a rant by Colin de Land about the institutions—the curators taking over the role of the artist—the meta artist subject of the curators becoming the artists, directing. He did a rant on the top of the page of *Artforum* where our ad was going to be. He said, "Where should I—I want to print this, and I'm really upset. I'm pissed. I want this to go out." And I looked at him and I said, "We're going to an ad in *Artforum*. Put it there." So, there's pictures of sculpture on the half page, and then there's Colin's rant against the institutions. It's not supposed to be avant-garde [24:00] to use that site. It was just—came out of this kind of natural development of thinking about it. "Yes, use it. We're paying for it. It's a great site. Everybody looks at it, right? That's what it's for." You have to demystify those things. "Oh, ad in *Artforum*." What do we care?

[Side conversation]

Audio File 5

Dziedzic: I'd love to hear your thoughts on the binoculars and how that choice came about, and the kind of connection that you drew to it.

Knight: Well, the binoculars were already there in place to view some of the work that's out in the south field. I was aware that they were there, and one of the first thoughts I had was to stay with the binoculars and develop something around the idea of spectacle, gaze, as [01:00] you know it in tourism, in monuments, sites, bridges of ships or decks of buildings, and carry that through here, and in doing so, be a tourist. And the other work would become the material elements, through their user, because they are

playing something out that is played out all the time in these kinds of situations. I thought about it a great deal and then thought that it's a bit—or maybe very—too thin, in a way. It didn't open up for me enough. [02:00]

[Portion removed]

But it did make me think about how to connect to the work. When we had a brief—an in-person comment—you mentioned kitsch. Kitsch of the festival, the show place, the [03:00] tourism where these things are found normally? Is that what you mean by it?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Knight: That would have been the problem for me if the work began and ended there. It takes us around to that kind of kitsch spectacle. I prefer that the apparatus is used in its most flatfooted, utilitarian way to view something in particular. You need it to get to the subject. You can see *Schunnemunk Fork* in some of these other projects, and you can also go to them, but in this case, we knew there were problems with all of that with this project. [04:00] You really do need to see it, go through that. You need to see it kind of glow in the divot of the trees, look like a golf ball sitting on a—

And then we also could have done more pruning, but we thought what's really the spectacle aspect of the tower, or let's call it the phallic aspect of the tower, is the ball on the top, right? And by the way, the phallic aspect of the tower is very important in the production, the thinking of using it in the work, because of the subject of large scale, industrial production. And it was—it's like, "Wait a minute, this is too good." One might say [05:00] there was a phallic part on the decision-making for that tower. It's pretty loaded and, it's pretty reduced. That was a really kind of fortunate readymade aspect to it. Not only is it highly aestheticized, it's highly sexualized. I think of a lot of certain kinds of postwar production certainly fall into a gender specificity, a gender preference, a gender opportunity. I'm very aware of that. We're all very aware of it, but in the sense very aware of who gets to make art, who gets the contracts and things like that.

We talked about how we could [06:00] make it available more—the entire object. I think, now, in the literature, there's directions that go up to the parking lot across the Thruway from the factory, where you can get a full monty view, of the tower and the buildings, right? [laughs] And so that if someone wanted to see another perspective of it, they would go off-park—and this was something I tried to urge very strongly: well, they should be able to tell if they go there they can see more of it because—there's a problem in the work, I think, of how it's rarified, in a way. It seemed like a game, kind of can see it, but you can't. And that wasn't meant to be, but it was very difficult to figure out how to otherwise [07:00] solve that

problem. I'm aware of that, and that's troublesome to me. I started to think, well, how can we supplement that? And I thought, well, that would be interesting because you can see the factory buildings, too, flat-footedly right there, Star Industries. Yes. And I think it's in the literature now. When they were remaking the maps—Venturi, Scott Brown Associates, I think, were involved in this—it was easier to talk with someone and say, “Those islands that you drop into a map when there are islands, how can we do that, so we understand it's really there?—from across the Thruway, you can—” Because that's also land that is connected to all this. All this land is connected to this enterprise, Schunemunk Mountain, [08:00] owned by Ralph Ogden—he gave it in perpetuity to the world. Enormous—hundreds of acres, a thousand acres—all of that. And now it's all open for people, so they park, and they hike. But there are also some houses in there that they want to plant trees in. Some houses are owned by [Storm King Art Center] in order to [protect the] viewshed. This isn't unique. We know this historically. This is a very complex idea, I think.

Dziedzic: And in a sense, you're offering that people could exit the Art Center, travel on the Thruway, park off on the side of the road, and look at this factory as part of—as an alternate view—as another suggestion for controlling the gaze. But the gaze includes all of these things that have been—

Knight: Absolutely. [09:00] I can imagine that certain people would have it be edited out of the conversation. “We don't want people to go and know that that's a factory. We'd rather not include it.” On the contrary, you know, it's industrial production. It goes back to Le Corbusier, that kind of thing, identifying people and places, branding. And we go back and see the factory with four big, red stars—advertising—which is very deeply engaged in my work, as I'm engaged with it. The tower brands. A lot of big artwork brands itself in the artist. [10:00]

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: Okay. Yes, so just as kind of a concluding question, I think it would be useful to hear about how your thoughts have evolved about the work in general, and maybe even especially your thoughts on how the work is maintained, now and into the future.

Knight: I think that the notion of maintenance in this project is deeply embedded in the center of the work. [12:00] It's not on the periphery, like it usually is. It's not the first time for me in these kind of conditions, but probably the most overt and demanding on the part of the institution. What we consider should be maintained is an interesting question. There have been conversations about keeping the tower painted periodically. The new owner would maybe agree or disagree, or doesn't care. We don't know. But just from an artist's perspective, those conversations have been had, and I've said, “I don't know. It's what it is. Yes. Before, was it painted on a regular basis?” [13:00] “Well, once or twice since we've had it, or

three. You can ask David.” And I said, “Well, if this is not something you do on a regular basis, it’s certainly not something I would do for the aesthetic character or nature or value of the work. It is what it is, operates where it does, in the elements where it is. We certainly wouldn’t take it down in the winter like you would other work, right?” “No.” “We can’t take it away?” “No.” “So, no, I wouldn’t paint it.”

As far as the other maintenance, it’s a very delicate and important part to keep the trees trimmed. It hasn’t been done on as regular a basis probably as maybe it should. As I’ve said before, it’s [14:00] an interesting kind of negotiation with your own contractors, or your own staff. It’s with the private party, the neighbors. This is a shared maintenance with the binoculars. It wasn’t my intention to move them. It was their intention to move. I think they were moved more for the other work, because *Schunnemunk Fork*, I think, was just about the same time as mine, and then there was another one over in the fields, further around.

Dziedzic: *Pyramidian* (1987/1998), right?

Knight: Yes. And then even another.

Dziedzic: As the certain elements that are a part [15:00] of the work grow, age, change, does that bring about a new understanding of what the work is really about for you?

Knight: It could. It sure gives experience to what happens and what you might think about another time. All of it, I think, is organically, literally and figuratively, built into the original proposal of the work. You’re going to have these issues, these changes, these evolutions. I have consciously not pushed and haggled and argued and demanded things about the pruning schedule, because I think that is similar to—if it were a painting in a museum, well, I wouldn’t haggle and go, “So how is the work? Is the work clean?” For me, the responsibility goes over to the new place and time and people. [16:00] Releasing, to a degree, similar to what I said about the project in the Stedelijk where they now—and also other places—have the responsibility to decide how they want to install this work when it comes. It’s a reflection of the context that the work’s in. So that’s also a maintenance thing. Yes. As far as the evolution of this work, or the devolution, or whatever, is—I don’t think it devolves—no matter what happens to it. It gets documented and there’s an archive of it.

Dziedzic: And it changes. Things change, as you said.

Knight: It’s very, I think, [17:00] ecological in that way. Things change. You have certain engagement and control over things; you have certain—no control over things.

[Portion removed]

It's an organic process. All the way from the invitation. It's not like the mystery of the studio where genius takes place. And I've often thought, well, that would be a very difficult space to design to begin with. What does a space like that look like? Because it must be a very special kind of space if genius comes out of this place, right? And every time the same genius—you go back to it and then you come back out with something, you know. It sounds silly, and it is, [18:00] but it's truth. I think it's maintenance, too, by the way. Maintenance from the moment that I get invited, maintaining a developed relationship. I think the language, "maintenance," is much more complex than is often considered. Literally maintaining the work is pretty much the limits of that, with the exception of certain artists. There's maintenance all the way through it, maintaining the negotiations. That's how I would answer: from the beginning to the end.

And it's released to somebody else.

Dziedzic: [19:00] I think that's very helpful. And I think maybe we're done here and off to the next round.
[laughs]

Knight: Thank you.

Dziedzic: Thank you.

Knight: My pleasure.

John Knight and David Collens
In conversation with Sarah Dziedzic
December 2, 2017

Water Tower at 87°
Video with 2 audio files
Open for research use

Audio File 1

Collens: Well, we're standing at the former Star Expansion Company manufacturing building and warehouse building, which was constructed, these two buildings, in the early 1950s. And when the New York Thruway went in, Ted Ogden moved the company from Bayonne, New Jersey to this location, and constructed one building that had been added onto, added a warehouse building. The water tower is 153 feet high, I believe, and is from 1958. They needed to have water protection, fire protection, so one could have gone out and gotten a regular, standard water tower, but Ted Ogden and Peter Stern, who were business partners [01:00] at Star Expansion Company, came up with the idea they wanted something more creative instead of a water tower on the four legs. And they found this tower that was very architectural and sculptural, and spent more money commissioning it and acquiring it and shipping it from Chicago and putting it in this location, where it's been seen for years at great distances, and particularly from Storm King Art Center. Everyone's lived with it in the Mountainville-Cornwall area. And it's certainly a landmark as you go north or south on the Thruway.

And then we commissioned John Knight through Bea Stern to do a project at the Art Center, and John came up with [02:00] including this idea of using the water tower from the Storm King property. He'd come to Mountainville—and John can tell it better than I can, but a synopsis would be: came to Mountainville, he's known Bea and Kurt for years, and has walked around and hiked around, and has known Storm King and has known the Stern family, and came up with this idea of including the water tower into a conceptual project for Storm King Art Center.

Dziedzic: And what was your—what was your reaction when you got that proposal?

Collens: "What?" [laughter]

Knight: What was Peter's reaction? Do you remember?

Collens: "Oy." [laughter]

Knight: "Oy."

Collens: We were openminded, and we thought it was very different, and Bea was really shepherding the project. And she had this fabulous idea of three different artists—[03:00] John Knight, known as JK; and Daniel Buren; and Michael Asher—was her original thought of three artists to commission for Storm King. And we were able to do two out of three.

Knight: What's the status on Michael's? Is there any status on Michael?

Collens: I don't think so, JK. I think it'd be hard to revive, and I don't know who one would go to at this point in time.

Knight: Ah. There's a foundation.

Collens: He died several years ago.

Dziedzic: Yes.

Knight: There's a foundation in Los Angeles—

Collens: Oh, there is?

Knight: —but I don't know whether they would be prepared to do that. I don't know.

Collens: No. Interesting idea, though.

Knight: Yes.

Dziedzic: Well, something that came up in our interview was the aspect of maintenance with this work, and that that's very multi-layered in a lot of ways in terms of maintaining relationships with property owners, maintaining whatever [04:00] this relationship is that we're standing in the midst of right now; and then the kind of physical maintenance, in terms of trees and this water tower. So, since we're at the water tower, I guess, maybe there's a way for you both to kind of just talk through some of the kind of maintenance aspects that—maybe some of the more practical stuff that comes up, just looking at the way this is right now, December 2017.

Collens: I think it has to be pointed out it hasn't been used as a functioning water tower with fire protection for the factory buildings for many years down here from what I understand. I don't know when that stopped and why it did. So, we have the water tower not as a functioning unit the way it was

designed, and the exterior maintenance hasn't [05:00] taken place so—of painting, and keeping it in good shape, aesthetically. It's a beautiful form, and that would certainly have to be done—you can see the undercoat of paint on the ball on top starting to show through and being very dull, the silver paint wearing off.

Dziedzic: Has Storm King painted that before, or has someone else?

Collens: It's been maintained by Star when they were an operating company—business until 1997. So, it was maintained through all the years of Star, and it was put in, I think, about 1958. So, it had extensive maintenance, and all the buildings and landscape were in excellent shape in—during those years. [06:00]

Collens: So, I think our challenge now, which we've been discussing for at least a year, is to see if we can—what we can do to get maybe an easement to buy the water tower, concerned that it might be taken down if it's certainly not functioning and becomes a danger, and to preserve it so we see it through the binoculars at Storm King two miles to the south.

Knight: We also, I think, talked about the idea of it—because of Mountainville being a historic situation—but we'd have to get an easement to come in and tie it to Mountainville, right?

Collens: Yes, definitely, because we're on private property here, [07:00] and Star was sold years ago.

Knight: You didn't maintain it after Star was sold, did you?

Collens: No.

Knight: And I didn't go to it with the sense of it having to be fetishistically maintained. We spoke about that to some degree. The primary physical maintenance are the trees, I would say, no?

Collens: I think the trees on our property, which certainly are easier because we can control what happens with our staff, pruning, or get a company in to get up on platform lifts and do the pruning. So that's easier to control than [08:00] off our site. And when we were working with JK years ago, we went to all the landowners, going in a straight line from Storm King that we could see through the binoculars, and went to each landowner that we identified, and knocked on their door, and did an introduction. And most of them didn't know us, and we didn't have a connection into the different families before. And they were on board for taking down trees, pruning trees, and we did some extra pruning for folks that they wanted at the same time while we were there with the professional tree service, and neatly stacking the wood for

them and so forth, and removing it. And that's how we accomplished the site line in the very beginning from Storm King all the way to the south, to the water tower.

We had a good view of it, and it was [09:00] also brighter in color, being silver, and would shine in the sunshine. And you can still see it, depending on the weather conditions at Storm King, without the binoculars. But we have it set at 87 degrees, and that's where the title comes from for John's work, setting the binoculars to 87 degrees. And also, I might add, including the other sculptures you can see at Storm King through the binoculars, as well. But I think as it evolves, as the continuing discussion—and we're, quietly looking into what's happening with the various entities that own the different factory and storage buildings at this point in time, and following what the possibilities are and haven't come up with anything definitive yet. [10:00]

Dziedzic: Well, I kind of want to go a little closer [to the base of the water tower].

Collens: I think it's an ongoing discussion.

Knight: I presume.

Collens: How do you feel about leaving it this way—if we can't improve the situation?

Knight: In this physical shape?

Collens: Yes.

Knight: I don't have a problem with that. It's a natural evolution of the work. It does change the nature of how it reflects in the lights—experientially. But we discussed this morning the idea of what happens if it goes down. I have a perspective on it, as the artist, but I'm curious about the perspective that you, or Storm King, would have—what that would mean for you and its status. [11:00]

Collens: I think it's a gamechanger then. Really changes absolutely everything, I think.

Knight: Yes.

Collens: Unless we could do—through VR have another water tower. [laughter]

Knight: But are you serious? You could put one on the front of the binoculars.

Collens: Yes.

Knight: The only trouble with that is Serra would be upset.

Collens: Yes. [laughter]

Knight: What do you mean by a gamechanger?

Collens: Well, I think if there's no water tower, I mean, we'd have to figure out what to say in the *raison d'être* of your project, and have a description, and how we'd carry forward, and how understandable that would be.

Knight: We had all these conversations initially.

Collens: Right. And we were going to come up, I think, with a basic addition to the label [12:00] to help explain the concept.

Knight: Would you—?

Collens: Which we still should do.

Knight: Yes. Maybe. And we've talked—this is a conversation we've had about whether it should be a greater explanation or a more explicit understanding of what the hell 87° means. I've told them my thoughts about that. Certain casual visitors have no idea, necessarily, about the aspects of the work.

Collens: Right.

Knight: But they still have a view and a gaze, and they move the telescope or the binoculars around and enjoy themselves, like they would as a tourist anywhere, right?

Collens: Oh, yes. Absolutely. They're looking at—yes—people's houses up the mountain, and—

Knight: Yes. Right. So that wouldn't change.

Collens: See what they're having for dinner and—

Knight: That wouldn't change. And I'm not telling you; I'm thinking out loud. If and when, because I'm sure this is inevitable—I'm suggesting it's inevitable probably because of safety, liability [13:00] probably at some point in time. I don't know when that would be.

Collens: Could well be.

Knight: Yes. Would you, as Storm King, think that the label should be taken off of the binoculars, or another label put on?

Collens: I think another label.

Knight: Oh. That's what you mean by an explanation.

Collens: I think we need one maybe at this point in time because we—I think it was left last time you were at Storm King, we were going to draft a label and send it—send you the copy for your approval to see if we were—

Knight: And I'm waiting.

Collens: —all on the same—

Knight: And I'm waiting for that. Did you—do you have my email? I can't remember. [laughter]

Collens: No, well, I changed my email address. That's why I didn't get it.

Dziedzic: Nora [Lawrence] said to say that it's on its way.

[Side conversation]

Collens: But I think what would be good—and I just thought of this, standing here, looking at the tower—because it was, what, a year ago you were here?

Knight: Basically, yes. Yes.

Collens: Maybe a little more. I think we should get some good photographs of it, not just—

Knight: Don't we have good photographs of it, no?

Collens: I think close up, from this perspective, just doing 360 degrees close up, showing the condition of it today, and just good photographs that we could potentially use for the future.

Knight: Yes, I agree with that, for the archive, if nothing else. Yes, yes.

Collens: Because no, I don't think we—Jerry Thompson took some that you wanted from the other side of the New York Thruway, the west side, the Thruway looking east to it, and different vantage points. But I think we should just circle around and get some photographs that we don't [15:00] have more close up, and distance shots, as well.

Knight: But we have shots from over there.

Collens: We do.

Knight: Yes. Have you seen—

Collens: For the catalog, yes.

Knight: Yes. With the big pop graphics, and, the pop stars?

Dziedzic: Oh, of the factory?

Knight: Yes.

Dziedzic: I haven't seen those.

Knight: We should go over there—we should, if we have time.

Collens: Look at the stars? Yes.

Knight: Yes.

Dziedzic: Yes. Yes, you mentioned them in your interview.

Knight: They also built an office building.

Collens: Right. We could drive by that.

Knight: Which was a quite nice. Is that from—?

Collens: Joyce Rutherford? No. Pre-Joyce.

Knight: Pre-Joyce. Nice, modern—if it's intact.

Collens: Oh, it is. Oh, they've actually done a lot of restoration on it. I haven't been inside, but exterior is in good shape. I think they changed the color of the panels or something.

Knight: Which is an aside, in a way, in relation to me, but it's—there's a general overriding aesthetic sensibility that was going on with [16:00] Ralph Ogden, clearly, to pick a person who built a little modern building with aluminum panels and interiors, had all the—you have them, too, I think—but the interiors had all this Eames furniture and—

Collens: Yes, it was—

Knight: So, there's an aesthetic underlying kind of sensibility.

Collens: Railings, yes. [laughs] It's so interesting.

Knight: Yes. The railings and everything else, yes. Yes.

Collens: And actually, the stars that JK's referring to were another landmark besides the water tower. People always knew going north or south on the Thruway, "Oh, yes, we have another hour to New York. We just saw the four stars lit up at night." It was—I think they were lit up so they were blue, weren't they?

Knight: I think so. Blue or red. And there's a Star sign there, which completely—

Collens: Yes. Is it still there? I guess that's part of it, right?

Knight: Yes.

Collens: Probably said "Star Mountainville." This is the back of it over here.

Dziedzic: Oh yes, I can see where it is.

Collens: I think “Mountainville” is the lower word, and “Star” is gone.

Knight: So [18:00] Mountainville was actually a town that Ralph Ogden—I mean an enclave that he constructed, right? With a train station and post office?

Collens: Well, and library. Don't forget the public library.

Knight: And the library, yes. Yes, that's right.

Collens: And he built the—yes—post office and fire station for them. But it was a little hamlet, part of the town of Cornwall. In the early '50s, the New York Thruway sliced right through Mountainville, which is just off to the left over here. And the roadbed went right through and, I think, Ted Ogden was trying to get the Thruway Authority to move the road, so it didn't go through downtown Mountainville. And that's exactly what it did. And it went right through his farm fields. He had a dairy farm, and some of the dairy farm fields are on our side of the Thruway, are a part of Storm King property. The other properties are—some of them being preserved, some have been sold off. [18:00]

Knight: Is that around Taylor Ranch, right?

Collens: Going over like from Pleasant Hill Road to Taylor Road.

Knight: Yes, yes, yes.

Collens: And a lot of the property—the mountain and the base to the mountain is property that's being preserved, either a state park, which Schunemunk Mountain is, off to the left, or other properties at the base are still owned by the Stern family and being preserved.

[Side conversation]

Collens: Look at the size of the bolts and everything here.

Knight: I know.

Collens: It's fascinating.

Knight: I know. It must go on further. Do you think this thing's just bolted down? That's insane. There must be a tube or something—structural tube.

Collens: Yes, has to be heavy concrete, of course, and it goes way down there, for sure.

Knight: When did you come on board?

Collens: October—

[19:43]

Audio File 2

Knight: Did you know him?

Collens: Not well, no. I met him the one summer I worked up here, at Storm King, pouring concrete, mowing lawns.

Knight: Oh, yes.

Collens: For my predecessor.

Knight: How old were you?

Collens: I think 28.

Knight: Oh, wow. Super young.

Collens: Yes. I was a young'un.

Knight: Yes. And this is your career, right? This has been your—?

Collens: Pretty much. One summer at the Guggenheim Museum, and the curator said, "If you're interested in David Smith, go to the Storm King Art Center."

Knight: So, you did?

Collens: Hard to find, but I did.

Knight: Storm King was hard to find?

Collens: Yes, oh, yes. People in the area didn't even know about it.

[Side conversation]

Knight: There's an interesting label on this, for archival reasons, on the door right there.

Collens: Oh, good reason. Yes.

Knight: Good—interesting—just --

Collens: Good thought.

Knight: —for archival purposes, right?

Collens: Are you going to open the door, JK?

Knight: I'm going to get in, so if all of you don't mind.

Collens: Yes. Step in.

Knight: This is actually where I live when I come up here. But this tells you the—I mean, if people are archeologists or, paleontologists, or— [cleans off dust from metal labeling on base of water tower]

Collens: "Seal treated by..." [02:00] It's really fading fast on all this. "Chicago Bridge and Iron Company."

Knight: Did they ever have a sign painted on this tower, like a "Welcome to Mountainville," sign or anything like that?

Collens: No.

[End of interview]