

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **ROBERT RYMAN (RR)**

INTERVIEWER: **ROBERT STORR (RS)**

LOCATION:

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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

RS: Maybe the best thing to do is to begin at the beginning. What was your first actual encounter with the Modern? Did you know about it before you came to New York?

RR: Oh, no, I didn't know about it before I came to New York, but I went just as a tourist when I first came just to see the Museum. I'd never been to a museum at all, and that was my first experience with things. I was a musician at the time, when I first came, and... who was it? I think Betsy Jones was someone who worked at the Museum, and she was a friend of a singing group called the Heather Tones, which a friend of mine was involved with, and she—I can't remember how I happened to meet her—but she suggested that maybe there would be an opening at the Museum as a guard. I had been working at different kind of flunky jobs at the time, and I was beginning to paint, actually, but I was still involved with the music. And so I went to the Museum to inquire about an opening, and there was one for a guard position, and I thought that was great. That was the beginning.

RS: Did you know any of the people who were working there already, or just this one person sort of had a tip?

RR: Oh, no. I didn't know anyone there at all. No, Betsy Jones just suggested that I should go and see if there was something there. And it was the perfect kind of solution for me because the Museum didn't open until 11:00 at that time—it was 11:00 to 6:00—and of course, it was a much smaller museum then than it is now. Although to me at that time, it was quite big. So, the hours were very good because I

could sleep in the morning and practice at night. Actually at that time, they were open every day of the year, except Christmas Day was the only day they closed.

RS: What year was this, by the way? Do you recall?

RR: It must have been '53 or '54. I'm not sure, but I was only 23 or 24 years old at the time, and I needed some kind of a job just to pay the rent. Of course, it was ideal because I got to look at the paintings, and as I said, I was beginning painting, and so I could learn a lot from being there.

RS: What were the paintings that most struck you at that time? Were there exhibitions up at that time?

RR: Oh, yes. Well, I remember mostly the permanent collection, of course, and that was... well, you know, the [Paul] Cezannes, and the [Henri] Matisses that they had, and of course, that was my first experience in seeing a [Mark] Rothko. They had one yellow and blue Rothko painting that they still have, I think. I can't remember the title of it, but...

RS: I think it's the one from Philip Johnson's collection, actually [[No. 10, MoMA #38.1952](#)].

RR: Oh. I had never seen anything like the Rothko before, and they had a little room toward the end of the Collection where they had the Rothko, and a [Arshile] Gorky, and some... Oh, I think there was a [Robert] Motherwell and a [Richard] Pousette-Dart. That was the, I guess, the cutting edge of the day [laughing slightly]. Then, of course, there were special shows that they... Alfred Barr was there, and Dorothy Miller. And who else? Alicia Legg, Sara Mazo—actually, I didn't know what they did. I mean I knew what Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller did, but I wasn't sure what Sara Mazo did. And there were others that I can't remember at the moment. And I did all kinds of things there. I mean, I was in the galleries, but also, I worked at the movies for about two years. And so I saw all the movies. Mr. [Arthur] Kleiner played the piano for the silent films, and I can't remember the name of the projectionist [Arthur

Steiger] [laughs slightly], but I knew him quite well. Anyway, I was able to see a lot of the movies that the Museum owned in depth because I would see them more than once [laughing]. And that was terrific. I also took tickets sometimes. I would even run the elevators on occasion, and I knew all of the carpenters, of course, and the painters. That was interesting, also, for me because I picked up some tips sometimes from them as to, about paint and various technical things, aspects of building things.

RS: How many of the people who were working there as carpenters, or preparators, or guards, or whatever, were also artists?

RR: Well, there were quite a few, actually, because I think at that time, the Museum liked to hire people like that because for the most part, they were reliable and they cared for the paintings. Of course, Dan Flavin was there, and Sol LeWitt, and many others. Michael Venezia, he was working in the stock room, I think. He wasn't a guard. And also... I can't remember their names. A number of people that worked as preparators, and there were other guards, too, other artists.

RS: Were either Ronnie Bladen or Al Held there then?

RR: No, no, they weren't there.

RS: I know they worked there at some time, but...

RR: Yeah, I don't remember them working there. Maybe Al Held was a preparator for a time, but I don't remember him as being a guard. There was... he's involved with flying saucers now. I can't remember his name [Budd Hopkins].

RS: Oh, I know.

RR: He worked there.

RS: I know him very well.

RR: He was a painter at that time, and in fact, I think he had a show at Martha Jackson. And then, he got involved with flying saucers. I don't know what he does now. I haven't seen him in many years. But anyway, there were a number of people that worked at the front desk who were involved with art... Oh, and John Button. He was there.

RS: Oh, really?

RR: Yeah. And... others also.

RS: It would be curious if you could remember any of them, just because one of the things is the records are not complete on this. So if anybody comes to mind, it can be useful.

RR: Oh, yes. Well, there's someone, there's a painter, too... he has a brother. They had a gallery on 10th Street.

RS: Oh, the Krushenicks [John and Nicholas].

RR: Krushenicks, yeah. The Krushenicks were there, or at least one.

RS: There was Nick Krushenick... He was the one who did the kind of abstract, Pop Art paintings with chevrons.

RR: That's right. I haven't seen him in years, either. I don't know if he's still around and working.

RS: I know the guy [Budd Hopkins]. April Kingsley, he was married to April Kingsley.

RR: Oh, yes, that's right. April Kingsley. I don't know why that slipped my mind. Well, in fact, he lived on 16th Street. I guess they're still there. I don't know if he's still painting, but it doesn't matter.

RS: He is actually. I don't know what he's doing, but he is, because I saw him in Cape Cod maybe two weeks ago, three weeks ago, and they told me about his UFO stuff.

RR: Yeah [laughing]. Yeah, and the UFOs sucking people up for information and all. I don't see how he could be involved with this, but anyway [laughing]. Yeah, the Museum was a smaller place.

RS: Did the members of the staff who were artists make friendships through the Museum, or did they just sort of keep to their own? How did that happen?

RR: Well, I think so. You mean with...?

RS: I mean, did you meet people at the Museum who became part of your circle of artist acquaintances and friends?

RR: Oh yes. Sure. Sol and Dan Flavin, of course, yeah. We became close friends. Oh, someone else that worked there—well, I don't know if he worked there—Bill Scharf. He was a painter. Maybe he worked there just briefly, but he had a studio on 57th, or 53rd Street, across the street in a brownstone on the top floor, and I used to visit him quite often. He was always hanging around the Museum, and he was a friend of Rothko's. I guess he's still around. I haven't seen him in years. Yeah, sure, there were a lot of friendships made there. It's funny, there's another painter that, I can't remember his name...

RS: What did the paintings look like?

RR: Well, I never really saw his paintings, actually. He lived in Brooklyn. I think he was a representational painter, but I never really saw his paintings. Ben... Dennis or something. Anyway, Dan [Flavin] was always drawing little things on a pad in the galleries, and Sol—I don't think Sol was there very long, maybe a year or so.

RS: Lucy Lippard worked in some capacity at the Museum.

RR: Well, I don't know if she actually worked there, but she was in the Library a lot, she was doing research there. Maybe she was an intern or something like that. I met her there, but I didn't really get to know her until later at the Public Library on the [inaudible] where I was for a while, and that's where I really got to talk to her and meet her. I saw her at the Museum occasionally, but not so much there.

RS: So, this was at the Public Library on 42nd Street?

RR: Yeah, on 42nd Street. When I left the Museum, I worked there at the Public Library for a year as a page supervisor. And that was very good, too, because I had access to all the books. And, although I didn't read so many of them, I had a lot of pictures to look at and things that I wanted to read later [laughing]. Anyway, Lucy would come in there. She was always doing an article or something. That's where I really got to know her, but first I saw her at the Modern.

RS: Were there any other writers or critics or people who became curators, anybody like that that you can remember?

RR: I don't remember any writers. There probably were. Particularly at the desk that sold the books. I also worked occasionally in the checkroom, and that was nice because they weren't allowed to tip, but a lot of people did tip anyway, and so in a day you maybe got a couple of dollars [laughing]. Anyway, yeah, there were probably writers. I didn't really know them. But a lot of artists would come in, and sometimes we would talk... Jim Rosenquist would be there quite often. He didn't work there, but he was painting his billboards, and everybody was jealous of him because he made so much money painting the billboards. I mean, he would get \$100.00 a day, which at that time was a lot of money. Anyway, there was Jim Rosenquist, and there was... he does symbol paintings, symbols. He had the show at Dia. Bright colors, symbolist. I can't remember. He had a show at Martha Jackson.

RS: Oh, Jensen.

RR: Jensen, yeah. Alfred Jensen. He was there quite often, and we would have lunch together.

RS: What was he like?

RR: Well, he was older. I was only 24 or 25 or so, and he was, I don't know, he must have been in his forties at that time. And he had shown at Martha Jackson, so he was... well, a successful painter, for me. I remember him saying one time that he had gotten \$30,000.00 for selling some paintings and he said, "That's all I need for the rest of my life." He said, "I don't need really to sell anymore." Of course, that was a lot of money at that time. It was a lot of money. He was always hanging around the Museum. There were others also that I can't remember. Occasionally Rothko would come in.

RS: Did you have any contact with [Rothko] at all?

RR: Yeah. Actually, I [sat] with him in the restaurant one time. I didn't know him. He was with...it may have been Bill Scharf, who was a friend of his and was a painter, and someone else. I don't remember how I happened to be sitting with them, but, you know, we'd just pass the time of the day. That was the only time I really saw him. He was talking about fire. He was concerned that, if his studio burned down, that he would lose all of his paintings, and how it would be nice to have a fire-proof studio, or something to that effect. Anyway, it didn't amount to anything. We were just talking in general.

RS: Was he easily approachable?

RR: Yes, actually he was. Sure. Although I was very shy, and I didn't feel like I was a painter at all yet and so, how could I talk to him? [laughing] No, he was [approachable]. You could talk to him. But he wasn't there very much. Occasionally I would see him. And other painters would be there—I can't remember all of them.

RS: Were other people of his generation there?

RR: I can't remember now.

RS: Did [Franz] Kline, or [Willem] de Kooning, or...?

RR: No, it's funny, I never saw Kline or de Kooning that I remember. They must have come in on occasion, but I don't remember them. But of course—particularly Kline was my hero at the time. I really liked his paintings a lot. And de Kooning also. But I don't remember seeing them in the Museum.

RS: Other than Rosenquist, did any of the Pop generation, the big Pop generation, like Larry Rivers, or [Jasper] Johns, or [Robert] Rauschenberg, any of those guys, were they visible at all?

RR: No. Well, I never knew them. That was later, I think probably in the '60s, and I left there in '58 or '57. Somewhere in there, I left. Oh, I remember the fire. Although I wasn't there at the time of the fire, I remember...

RS: You were working there, but you weren't physically...

RR: Yeah. I was off that day or something, and I went in... I was shocked, actually, about the fire because I just couldn't believe that such a thing could happen. And I remember seeing Jean Volkmer, I think. Volkmer was the conservator, and I remember the Whitney Museum was next door at that time.

RS: Yep.

RR: And I remember seeing [The City Rises \[MoMA #507.1951\]](#) on the floor in the Whitney. They used the Whitney as kind of a hospital [laughter] for the paintings. [long pause] Yeah, that was a terrible thing. I think I left closely after that. I left the Museum. When I left, I didn't have another job. I just thought one day I'd just been there quite a while, and I thought it was time to leave [laughter].

RS: It happens.

RR: And I left without even having another job. Then I went to the Public Library after that.

RS: When you were there did you see any of the sort of greats of modern art that were having exhibitions there from Europe or elsewhere?

RR: Oh, yes. I remember the gold show from South America¹...

RS: Pre-Columbian gold?

RR: Yes, Pre-Columbian... oh, what's his name?

RS: [René] d'Harnoncourt?

RR: d'Harnoncourt, yes. I remember him installing that show. And I remember many times seeing Nelson Rockefeller. He would be kind of in and out sometimes, looking at paintings, or with other people. And I remember also Alfred Barr installing many shows in a wheelchair [laughing], moving around. I mean, not that he needed a wheelchair to walk, but just installing, you were on your feet all the time... I remember him, and Dorothy Miller. I remember the shows that she would put on, the American shows. I remember seeing two of those, at least. I don't remember when that was, but...

RS: Well, the one in '59² was the one that had [Frank] Stella in it. As a young artist, how did those shows strike you?

RS: I liked them. And I liked the Stella paintings. I had never seen them before, and I thought they were very interesting. I mean, I was not involved in that kind of painting. But I remember most of the artists there didn't like them. I think Flavin didn't like

¹ [Ancient Arts of the Andes](#) [MoMA Exh. #550, January 25–March 21, 1954]

them at all, and... [pause] anyway, those were the first Stellas that I ever saw, and then there was another painter who died quite young. Did kind of—well, gee, I don't remember his name either—but, yeah, they were always good, those shows.

RS: Was there anything distinctive about the way Dorothy Miller worked, since she was working with contemporary artists? Did she have artists with her on the floor when she installed, or did she do it all herself?

RR: You know, I don't remember that. I don't think I ever really saw her installing. It was either after they were installed or before, when she was going around in the space. But I never really actually saw the paintings being installed, that I remember. I don't know why. Maybe it was done when I wasn't there ... but I do remember Alfred Barr installing paintings.

RS: What was that like?

RR: Well, he was very thoughtful and very... he would take a lot of time moving the paintings around, and moving them up and down, and changing things back and forth. Also, the height. I remember him at one point hanging things one on top of another, in one instance—it wasn't always like that—which I thought was kind of odd at the time [laughing].

RS: Was this like a salon hang, where you just climb the wall with images?

RR: Yeah, yeah, but it was just with two paintings he did that. One was above the other one. They were smaller paintings. I can't remember what the paintings were. They had frames. It might have been a Matisse...

RS: Did he work from clear maps or models or things like this, or did he just do it sort of free on the floor?

² [16 Americans](#) [MoMA Exh. #656, December 16, 1959–February 17, 1960]

RR: Oh, I don't know about that. I think he was just, it was a free thing. I don't think he had a map or anything, but he might have. I just remember him moving things quite a lot.

RS: Did he move them himself? Did he actually pick them up and move them around?

RR: Oh, no. He had people moving them. And he would go from one room through the other, into another room, and then back and forth. He was very conscious of how things were going together. It was quite good, the way he worked.

RS: Did it have any impact on the way you've installed your exhibitions? Did you think about this?

RR: Oh, no. No, I never thought about that. At that time, of course, I was just beginning painting. Installing something was far in the future [laughing], if ever. I would never even have thought of installing my paintings.

RS: Yeah. Who else was around at that time? Was Kynaston McShine there at all?

RR: Oh yes, Kynaston was there. He had just come there, I think, fairly recently. And oh, the architecture...

RS: Arthur Drexler?

RR: Arthur Drexler, yeah. He was there, and I remember him. He seemed to be always there. I remember seeing him a lot. I don't know why [laughing], but he was always around. Yeah, and Kynaston had just begun there. In fact, I knew Kynaston—well, Lucy [Lippard] knew Kynaston, I guess from her research and from working in the Library. And later, after I had left the Museum, Kynaston would come to my studio on occasion. Mostly to see Lucy, but you know, to see my painting. Actually, Kynaston was, I think, instrumental in the Museum buying a painting—this was much later, of course. I don't remember when it was—'66 or '67 or somewhere in there.

RS: That's the small painting on unstretched canvas that the Museum has?

RR: No, no. It's a bigger painting, I think. Yeah, [Twin \[MoMA #691.1971\]](#). Actually, I remember, there was a meeting of the Board or something, and they had to decide on the paintings, what they were going to accept. And I said, well, I was willing to give the Museum anything that they would want, but the best painting that I felt that I had, I didn't have. I don't remember where it was. It must have been '68 or '69, because the painting was in Europe. But they couldn't wait. They wanted and so I guess it was *Twin* that they got, which I just happened to have here. But there were, I thought, some better paintings [laughing] available, but anyway. It's okay. It doesn't matter, but... no, we're talking much later now. Yeah, while I was there, I saw Kynaston on occasion, but I didn't really know him.

RS: Was Frank O'Hara around at all?

RR: Yes, I remember seeing him. Not very often, but sometimes he would be around. I didn't really know what he was doing there. I don't think he worked there, but maybe he did. Maybe he was doing something there, but I remember...

RS: He worked there for a long time.

RR: Oh, he did?

RS: Yeah, he worked there for years as essentially the curator of contemporary art. I forget what his title was, but that's what it boiled down to. And he did the Motherwell show³, and he did a show of Spanish modernism⁴.

RR: Was this later? Or, when was this?

³ [Robert Motherwell](#) [MoMA Exh. #776, October 1–November 28, 1965]

⁴ [New Spanish Painting and Sculpture](#) [MoMA Exh. #668, July 20–September 28, 1960]

RS: Well, let's see. He died in—it was in the '60s, but I can't remember. '64 or '65, something like that [1966]. But he was there for altogether about twelve years, or ten years.

RR: My goodness. Well, I remember seeing him a couple of times, but I didn't see him very often. And I didn't know what he did. [pause] There was someone that was head of the... publicity, I guess. And she was always escorting people around.

RS: Luisa Kreisberg?

RR: Well, I don't know [laughing].

RS: Mildred Constantine?

RR: Oh, yeah, that name is familiar. Anyway, it doesn't matter, but I remember seeing her a lot. They would come through with artists, sometimes, or with, I guess, collectors or... I don't know who they were. Maybe people giving money to the Museum or whatever. But it was a much smaller museum than it is today, of course...

RS: What was it like, or how did people think about those of you who worked at the Museum? I mean, you had your whole downtown community or friends in the art world. Actually, you were living at this time up around Bloomingdale's, weren't you? Initially?

RR: Oh, that's right. At first, I had a rooming house. It was a room across from Bloomingdale's department store, across from their loading zone, actually. But then, I moved—which was very convenient—I had another rooming house at 53rd Street and Lexington [laughing], so I could just walk across to the Museum. It was very convenient for me, but I was only there for a year or so. I was never in one place very long. And then I moved to 6th Street, down on the East side. Then I was on Avenue A for a while. I was various places. But anyway, that doesn't matter.

RS: Did working at the Museum have any kind of cache? Were people interested in the fact that you worked at the Museum, or was it just a job, as far as they were concerned?

RR: Oh, no, I don't think so. I didn't know that many people. Most of the people I knew were from the Museum, or worked at the Museum, or were somehow involved in the Museum there. I knew some musicians, of course, because I... mostly I knew musicians who were not interested in the Museum at all. So the Museum was not anything. It was just a job, as far as other people... well, it was for me, too. But of course, it was a very educational experience for me, seeing the installation of shows and paintings, the interaction with people who would come in.

RS: What was your sense about how the public reacted? For example, you said there was this room with Rothko, and Gorky, and Pousette-Dart, and so on, that was by museum standards, and maybe even by the larger context, fairly cutting-edge stuff. Did you see the Modern at that time as a museum of current modern or contemporary art, or was it mostly a museum of historical modernism at that point?

RR: I think mostly historical modernism. Although, they had shows, but as far as the permanent collection was concerned, it was mostly... well, they had a little of everything, of Matisse, and van Gogh, and Paul Klee, and on and on. It was a terrific collection. I think of the Lippold, the *Moon*. Do they still have that?

RS: Richard Lippold?

RR: Yeah, the *Moon*, I think that's the title of it. [[Variation Number 7: Full Moon, MoMA #241.1950](#)]

RS: I don't know the title, but they have things of his, for sure.

RR: That used to be in the permanent collection when I was there, made out of silver wire. And then, of course, the Metropolitan has the *Sun* [laughter]. But, I don't know, I just thought of that because that was toward that last room. It wasn't in the last room,

but it was the second to the last room in the permanent collection. And [René] Magritte, you know, they had that. It was in the same area.

RS: Peter Selz was working there when you were there, if I'm not mistaken.

RR: Oh, yes. I forgot about him. Well, I didn't really know much about him at all, and I didn't seem to see him much either. But yeah, he was there. I forgot about that for quite a while. I remember seeing the Rothko show⁵, which was kind of a small show, actually. It was on the first floor. It wasn't a big show. When was that?

RS: It was, I think, late '50s, very early '60s.

RR: It's funny, I don't remember much about that show, but I remember seeing it. Well, there were a number of shows that were there that I can't remember now.

RS: Do you remember the [New Images of Man](#) [MoMA Exh. #651, September 30–November 29, 1959] show?

RR: What was that? No, I don't.

RS: It was a show that Selz did where he tried to sort of make a case for the figurative aspect of Expressionism, so he showed [Francis] Bacon and [Jean] Dubuffet and [Alberto] Giacometti with [Jackson] Pollock and de Kooning and [Tristan] Tzara.

RR: No, I don't remember that.

RS: It was a very controversial exhibition, very controversial.

⁵ [Mark Rothko](#) [MoMA Exh. #679, January 18–March 12, 1961]

RR: I don't remember that at all. I don't know why. Maybe I never saw that, or maybe it was later. I remember—this is a totally different thing—but I remember the [Jean] Tinguely in the garden when it caught fire.⁶

RS: You're one of about 100 people who ever saw that.

RR: Yeah, that was quite an extravaganza. Well, [Tinguely] built it at the end of the garden, and then it was moved for the show. I remember everyone was standing around for quite a while and nothing was really happening [laughing] until this balloon was blowing up. And then this fire started, and they had it put out with fire extinguishers for a while, but then it flared up again, and the fire department came. And I remember seeing Tinguely sitting in the lobby [laughing] while all this was going on. The firemen were coming in. He was just kind of exasperated. It was like, well, there was nothing for him to do. He didn't know what to do. He was just sitting in the lobby with somebody else and he was just kind of discouraged [laughing] that the machine didn't really perform the way he had thought. And I remember the black stain on the garden stone, which they got rid of. I don't remember how they did that.

RS: Well, they own a lot of stone, or they did. Now they've run out pretty much, but they own a lot of stone from the quarry...

RR: Oh, that's good.

RS: So, I think what they do is—I know what they do is that when things crack or are damaged, they pull up the piece of marble and put down a new one. The in-house name for that pattern, which is not a pattern, but the natural formation with the gray and the white and so on, is "Dead Bunnies in the Snow." [laughter]

RR: That's great.

⁶ [*Homage to New York: A Self-Constructing and Self-Destroying Work of Art Conceived and Built by Jean Tinguely*](#) [MoMA Exh. #661, March 17, 1960]

RS: One thing that you did, if I'm not mistaken, is you actually attended some of the drawing classes for a while.

RR: Oh, yes. I forgot about that. There was a school, well, in the building adjoining the Museum there.

RS: One of the townhouses?

RR: No, it was... it was a new part of the Museum.

RS: Oh, the Philip Johnson addition.

RR: I guess so. And on the second or third floor they had this school. Well, it was a class of mostly drawing, I think. There wasn't much painting. Yeah, and I took that one time.

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

RS: Alright, so you were going to say, about the teaching of the...?

RR: Yeah, I don't remember who was teaching that. And I think I got a special rate or something because I worked at the Museum. Because I didn't have any money at all. I was just making enough money to pay the rent and eat some hamburgers [laughing], and that was it. And buy some paint. Anyway, I took a class there. I don't remember much about that, or what it was called. It was... in fact, thinking about that, the Art Lending Service had a painting of mine. This was later, I think. I don't know if that still exists.

RS: No, they haven't had that for a long time.

RR: They would lend paintings to people. They would rent paintings, I guess it was. And then the people would buy them if they wanted. Anyway, they had a painting, I got it

back, I think. In fact, I think there was even a label on the back—it was a small painting—saying “Art Lending Service” or something.

RS: Well, this was the one that Gertrude Mellon bought, isn't it?

RR: No, this was a different one. Oh, no, the Gertrude Mellon one was a staff show that was in the penthouse, because there were a lot of artists working there. And so, I put this painting in, and Gertrude Mellon bought it. I think it was \$80.00 or something like that.

RS: That's what it says on the back.

RR: Oh, yeah [laughing].

RS: I remember when we were doing the exhibition⁷, I looked on the back and I was thinking, “Wow!” [laughter].

RR: Yeah. But that was a surprise for me and the first thing, of course, I ever sold. And \$80.00, that was a lot for me, because I was making \$40.00 a week or something like that... or maybe \$50.00 or so. So that was a big help [laughing]. And not only money-wise, but of course, that someone had actually wanted to have a painting of mine, that was really a special thing. Incidentally, I have that painting now, but I won't go into that story.

RS: Oh, no, go. Tell it.

RR: Well, Gertrude Mellon, I hadn't seen her in many years, or the painting, of course—although I didn't know her, even—but she had brought the painting to Pace. This was, maybe, ten years ago or so. Maybe it was fifteen years ago. I don't remember times. But anyway, she brought it to Pace for them to see what it was worth—I guess she was settling her estate and she just didn't know what it was worth. So, I was told

⁷ [Robert Ryman](#) [MoMA Exh. #1663, September 26, 1993–January 4, 1994]

that the painting was there and I went to look at it, and I hadn't seen it in so many years. I contacted her and I asked her if she would consider selling it to me, just because it would be nice to have that. She didn't want to sell it. So she said no, she couldn't do that, but she would give it to me because she said that she had had it all those years and now I could have it back [laughing]. And I said, well, I couldn't accept that, because—I mean, I would have to give her something, and I offered her the Beckett book that I had just done some prints for, and no, she didn't want that. She couldn't take anything. And I said, well, could I title the painting *To Gertrude Mellon*, because the painting was untitled? She liked that, and she agreed that I could title it, so I did. Actually, I believe that it was in the retrospective.

RS: It was in the show, absolutely. Who organized the staff shows, do you remember? Was it done by the curators, or was it done by the staff itself?

RR: You know, I don't remember at all who did that. I think they had one every so often. I was only in the one show—or maybe it wasn't so often that they had it, but I just remember that one time in the penthouse. Of course, the restaurant was in the penthouse at that time. So, they would have paintings up there, in the restaurant. There was also a little restaurant downstairs, off the garden, but I don't think they had any paintings in there, in that space.

RS: Well, I remember when we did [the 1993 retrospective], there was a staff show that year, and it was one of the first ones that had taken place in a very long time. And you were very keen to go up and see it. And I thought that was pretty terrific, actually.

RR: Oh, yeah.

RS: Because there weren't all that many people who were going to see it under any circumstances, because in those days it was up on the fifth floor in the corridor. It was sort of backstage. I was very struck by the fact that you were so eager to see what people were doing. And somewhat later, you bought a painting from Stan Gregory, who was one of the painters.

RR: Stan Gregory, yeah. Well, he had a little show at some gallery, I can't remember now. And he was one of the preparators that were working on the installation for my exhibition. I was interested in seeing what he was doing. I guess there are a lot of painters that are still working at the Modern.

RS: A lot, yeah. And some very good ones, too.

RR: I'm sure. That's good. I'm glad that they're still hiring people.

RS: Well, it's the lifeline, I think, for quite a lot of artists, where this gives them some job security. It gives them actually quite a lot because they're in unions, and they have health benefits and a host of things that are very hard... Plus, they get what you got, which is a lot of exposure to both works and to the people who make them.

RR: Yes, sure.

RS: Just to double back quickly on one issue. Do you remember at all what you did in these art classes? Was it taught abstractly, or were there exercises, or did you have a model ...?

RR: There were models. I remember that, but it was not a rigid kind of a thing. You could work abstractly. And I don't remember so much painting there, but drawing, and then kind of experimental things. I think techniques were talked about, types of paint ... there was some of that conservation-type approach to things. But I don't remember much about that.

RS: Was Victor D'Amico still there?

RR: Ah, that name's very familiar. Yeah, sure. In fact, what was he? Was he the head of that, Communications?⁸

⁸ Victor D'Amico was actually the Museum's Director of the Department of Education.

RS: Yeah.

RR: Yeah, I remember him. I remember the name more than him personally.

RS: And who was in these classes? I mean, were there other artists, or were they kids?

RR: It was mostly adults, but, no, I don't think there were other artists. Or, there might have been a couple, but I didn't know them. But mostly adults. There were some women... I think it was an adult kind of art appreciation thing. Well, it wasn't really art appreciation, but... I don't know what you would call it [laughing], but it was an adult class. No, there weren't any kids.

RS: And, aside from that class, you didn't go to art school, did you?

RR: No.

RS: So that was it.

RR: Yeah, that was it.

RS: So, your art history education was at the Modern, and your very brief studio education was at the Modern?

RR: Yeah, but I also got a lot of information from artists, from other painters. And I got some information from Bill Scharf, who was a painter who lived across the street from the Modern, which seems strange. These days no artist would live across the street, but, of course, there were brownstones there at that time. And well, from books I got information. I got a lot of information from the Public Library, the art division on 42nd Street. And technical information from artists. Not so much aesthetic information. I got the aesthetic from the Museum, from seeing paintings, from just looking at things. Looking at things a lot [laughing], and seeing them every day and really looking at them. And the Met. I went to the Met a few times, but not so much.

Mostly it was at the Modern. And sometimes galleries, but not so much galleries either. I mean, I saw gallery shows, but it was mostly at the Modern that I really got aesthetic information. So, that was the education. And then from trial and error, just from seeing how things went together. And books, as I said.

RS: Once you had left the Modern and had also gone through your time at the Public Library and began to sort of have some public presence as an artist, what was the first occasion that the Modern or anybody involved in the Modern expressed interest in your work, or in a sense, saw what you were doing?

RR: I don't know. That was much later. That was in the late '60s, I guess. I don't even remember.

RS: Because your first show was up on 57th Street and that guy, what was the Italian guy?

RR: Paul Bianchini.

RS: Bianchini, right, yeah. And that was the one that got snowed out.

RR: Yeah [laughing].

RS: But did anybody from the Modern sign the book or come to see the show that you know of?

RR: I don't remember who saw that show. I don't remember anybody from the Modern, but there might have been. No, I don't remember. There wasn't another show in New York until Fischbach, which was about '69. Thinking of shows ... I showed a little painting twice on 10th Street. They would have Christmas shows. And I was never involved with the 10th Street galleries—actually I didn't want to be, because I didn't want to be involved with the cooperative gallery—but I was usually invited for the Christmas show. And I remember showing some small paintings. They had many

paintings in those Christmas shows. Nothing ever sold. I never sold anything... that was in the '50s, '58 or somewhere in there. '58, '59.

RS: That you're aware of, did Barr ever see you work, or Dorothy Miller, or Bill Rubin?

RR: No, no, no.

RS: Did Bill Rubin ever express interest in the work at all?

RR: No. No, in fact, I wasn't there when he was there. And I don't know if he ever saw my painting or not. I just thought of someone else who was there who is now at the Met.

RS: Oh, Bill Lieberman.

RR: Bill Lieberman, yeah. He was there when I was there in the '50s. I saw him quite a bit. He was usually in the basement gallery. He was involved with photographs, I think.

RS: Drawings.

RR: Drawings, yeah. And they showed the drawings in the basement in the movie lobby there at that time, because when I would be at the movies, I would see him. No, Bill Rubin, I never knew him.

RS: I remember, actually, the first time I went to the Modern, which was '67, I guess, and somebody I knew knew Bill Lieberman. And so I got this grand tour, and I was taken up to the Board room, and I saw all the drawings that were laid out for the acquisitions meeting. And I had never seen anything like this before in my life [laughter]. It was amazing. And I think of him very much as part of the Museum, even though he's been gone forever.

RR: Yeah, that's right.

RS: So, when you said Kynaston bought this painting, it would have been in the '70s sometime?

RR: I guess it was in the '70s.

RS: Was that the first time that anybody in the Museum, in a sense, identified you as somebody...

RR: I think so.

RS: Did Alicia Legg follow your work, for example?

RR: I think she might have known about it. I don't know if she'd seen very much, or if she'd seen anything, but I did know Alicia. She was a friend of Leo Rabkin, and... well, I guess that was later. She did a show of Sol [LeWitt]'s.

RS: That's right.

RR: That's the only show I remember her doing, but she must have done other things.

RS: It was a gorgeous show. I saw that. It was a beautiful show.

RR: Yeah. And I think she left quite a short time after that. But I didn't really know her when I was working at the Modern. I mean, I remember seeing her around, but I didn't know her at all. I don't know if she knew my paintings. I don't think so. She might have seen some things, but I don't know.

RS: Was Riva Castleman ever...?

RR: Oh, that name's familiar. She did see some prints. She was particularly interested in prints. I think, the Museum bought a portfolio or something [[Seven Aquatints, MoMA #307.1972.1-7](#)]...

RS: They do, they have it.

RR: I can't remember, but yeah, she was interested in that. I don't know what she had seen of the paintings.

RS: And what about John Elderfield, because he was in the Drawings department.

RR: I never knew him. Was he there?

RS: He wasn't there when you were there, but he was there afterwards, and I'm really thinking about the period where you're out in the world as an artist.

RR: I don't know what he saw of my painting. He might have seen some things, but he never really... I never talked to him about it. He never mentioned anything.

RS: Now, Bernice Rose was somebody...

RR: Oh, yes. She was there when I was working there, I believe. I don't remember what she was doing there, but I remember seeing her around.

RS: I think she started out as a secretary or curatorial researcher or something like that.

RR: Yeah. I don't know what she was doing there, but I remember seeing her. And I didn't really know her, but later I got to know her.

RS: Well, she made an exhibition of drawings in⁹, it would have been the late '70s, I guess it was, which had those anodized aluminum sheets where you drew with ink on them, for example.

RR: Yes. Well, she did several drawings shows, and I was in two that I remember. The first one was the drawings on the plastic, which, the Modern has one, I believe

⁹ [Drawing Now: 1955–1975](#) [MoMA Exh. #1117, January 21–March 9, 1976]

[\[Untitled, MoMA #311.1992\]](#). Those were the first. That was the first show, I believe. And the second one¹⁰ was, that was the show she did where I did the drawings on the metal, on the aluminum panels.

RS: Well, there was a very important show she did called *Drawing Now*, was that the [first] exhibition?

RR: Yeah, sure.

RS: That was the one that had the drawings on plastic? Or mylar or whatever.

RR: Yeah, I think I have a catalog for that someplace. She did several drawings shows. One was on the first floor, I believe. Maybe, I don't remember. And the other was in the basement. This was later, in the '70s.

RS: Because she'd been a big supporter I know, her enthusiasm for your work is very...

RR: Yeah, I guess later she had seen a number of my paintings. So she was familiar, but I don't know who else at the Modern was familiar with my work. Maybe more than I think.

RS: When the '70s came along and when you had by that time been showing quite a lot... you'd had a show at the Guggenheim in '72, was it?

RR: Oh, that's right. '73 maybe.

RS: '73. Okay. And what was your sense about the Modern's engagement with contemporary art vis a vis, for example, the Guggenheim at that time, where Linda Shearer—who later came to the Modern—but when Linda was at the Guggenheim, she did a show of Bob Mangold. She did a [Brice] Marden show. Did she do the show at the Guggenheim of yours?

¹⁰ [New Work on Paper 3](#) [MoMA Exh. #1401, June 26–September 3, 1985]

RR: No, Diane Waldman did that show, but... no, I didn't really have any sense of... I didn't really think about that, what the Modern was showing or what the Guggenheim was showing. I didn't think about that at all. At that time, you know, it was the '70s, I hardly remember what was going on [laughter].

RS: The [inaudible] seeps up from down...

RR: I remember the Jewish Museum, which, I think was... was that in the '60s?

RS: Mm-hmm.

RR: Yeah, in the '60s, that's right. And they quit. They stopped showing contemporary work because there was a protest or something about the Vietnam War. I don't remember what the protest was or what form it took. Oh, there was a show on and I can't even think... the artist closed the show or something for a day... I can't remember now what happened. I had a painting there, in that show. That's the reason I remember it. And then right after that show, they didn't show any more contemporary art [laughter].

RS: During the '70s, well, actually in the early, very early '70s, there was the Art Workers' Coalition [AWC].

RR: Oh, yes.

RS: Were you engaged in that at all?

RR: Oh, no. I hated that, actually.

RS: Carl Andre and Mel Bochner, and Lucy [Lippard] was involved in it.

RR: Carl Andre, who I knew very well, actually. I knew Carl very well. And he was always walking around showing a "V" sign with his fingers, you know, like "Victory." I could

never understand that. And actually, I was against... [The AWC] were for collectors. They wanted collectors to pay artists if they sold something or if they lent it, I can't remember right now. But there were a lot of rules that they wanted to put on paintings, for collectors to follow. And I was against that. I always thought that if someone bought something, it was theirs, and there didn't have to be any rules on it, and there shouldn't be anything like that. I was not involved in [the AWC], at all.

RS: Lucy was very active, wasn't she?

RR: No, not really.

RS: No?

RR: She was supportive of some of their ideas, but she was not really involved in it, as I remember. No, not in any serious way, she wasn't. No, it was a ridiculous thing. I didn't like it at all. And actually, Carl, I don't think he... I mean, it was a place to showboat or something, you know. I don't think he really cared about it that much. Maybe he did, I don't know.

RS: What was your sense of how the retrospective that we did was? I mean, I know it's hard for me to ask you this question, because if the answer is that you didn't like it... but just be frank anyway. How did you experience that whole process? How did you think about a show at the Modern at that time of your work, and so on and so forth?

RR: Oh, I liked it. I mean, I was very happy. I was thrilled that my paintings would be there, and also that it was such a free experience with the two of us, being able to install in the best way that we could. It wasn't as if the paintings were going someplace, and someone who didn't know much about them was trying to put them up and not knowing really what they were. But it was an ideal, I thought, situation where we could really work with the space, and we had paintings we could try and if we didn't want them, we didn't have to put them in. That was really an ideal situation, I thought. I was really happy with that. Yeah, it was really terrific. And I was, always, even at that time, kind of amazed that there would be an interest in my work, that

much of an interest in my work. Well, I guess I thought there might be, but that there really was an interest, that was fantastic.

RS: What was it like to, in a sense, come to the place where you had been a guard, and suddenly have it be there in support of your work?

RR: Well, I didn't really think of that so much, but... well it was the Modern, of course, The Museum of Modern Art, which is the museum in the city for contemporary art, even though there's the Guggenheim and the Whitney, but The Museum of Modern Art was really the top. I considered that the top place, so that was terrific.

RS: The other side of this is about how you're represented. When I got there, there was, I guess *Twin* was in the Collection. There was a painting called... it'll come to me in a second, but it was an early-'80s painting with an aluminum strip molding that held it up [[Attendant, MoMA #134.1985.a-b](#)].

RR: Oh, yes.

RS: There was that, there was a little unstretched canvas [[Untitled, MoMA #135.1985](#)], and so on. We were able to get quite a lot of things since then. I got *Pace* [[MoMA #452.1994](#)], which was the shelf painting.

RR: Oh yes, that's right. Yeah.

RS: We got one of the aluminum sandwich paintings [[Record, MoMA #1330.2000](#)] that had come out of the Peter Bonnier show.

RR: Yes.

RS: Ronald Lauder bought works, not all of which he's actually given yet, but which he's promised, including the orange painting [[Untitled \(Orange Painting\), MoMA #532.1998](#)].

RR: Oh, yes. That's right.

RS: There's enamelac on corrugated board paintings that we bought out of auctions, that Ronald bought out of auctions for the Museum. I mean, all together now, there's a very substantial body of work. But I wondered, given that that's the case, how you think about how you're represented. Are there big chunks of things that should be attended to, or little chunks of things that should be attended to? Are there things that you particularly would like to see in that combination that would better represent what you've done?

RR: Well, you know, I...

RS: You gave a painting, too. You gave that beautiful little enamel on manila board painting, which is in the Drawings collection because it's paper, but it's actually a painting [[Untitled, MoMA #595.1998](#)].

RR: Oh, yeah. I forgot about that. I'm not even up on what the Museum has. It's just something that I haven't thought of. I guess if it was brought up to me, that I could think about it. If the Museum wanted certain paintings through the years to make more of a survey, or if they wanted a certain special painting, then I could think about that, but I have no idea what they would do or what would happen. The San Francisco Museum, they have a group of paintings which they got together, or which was gotten together for them. I can't remember now how that happened.

RS: It had been on exhibit, wasn't it? There was a group of things that you had worked out and to put together for exhibit, and then they bought the group. They have wonderful things.

RR: They have a good group of paintings. And I guess the Modern would also have a good group, even with what they have at the moment.

RS: Well, the Guggenheim also bought the paintings from [Giuseppe] Panza.

RR: Oh, yes, that's right.

RS: So, they have a very nice ensemble.

RR: Yeah, the Guggenheim, they really have some good... they have the big *Surface Veils*, and they have a number of large paintings from the '70s. Mostly everything's from the '70s, that's what they have, which is what Panza had. Then, of course, they have the standard, on the steel. So they've really had some major, large paintings, which I guess will be shown from time to time. I think in Bilbao they have shown some of them. I haven't seen them.

RS: I mean, I think your work is, in a sense, most easily grasped by both a sophisticated audience and by the general public if it's seen in a group, so that, in a sense, one can learn the language by looking at one work...

RR: Yes, I guess.

RS: ...and thinking about the differences between it and something else. I forgot to mention, also, there was one other thing that was there already before I got there, which was that beautiful *Surface Veil* [[MoMA #122.1986](#)] that's on fiberglass pasted on wax paper. I think that means there were four works of yours there before we did the retrospective, and counting what Ronald has bought and promised, there's another six or eight, I guess it is, pending. But I do think that we should—you know, it's not my job anymore—I do think we should round out as best we can both recent work and also fill in some holes backwards.

RR: Well, Ronald, he has some very good paintings.

RS: He does.

RR: The 1958 paintings.

RS: The one with your name in ochre? That one he's promised to the Modern.

RR: Oh, yeah. I think he has another one.

RS: He has that very big one with the blue and red sort of curl stroke with the heavy white strokes on top, and then it has the unstretched piece of canvas on the side that sort of curls up.

RR: Oh, yes. That's a very good one also.

RS: And that's the one he doesn't want to give us, but I want him to give us anyway. And he has given us the orange painting. That's already in the Collection.

RR: Yeah, he has some really very good ones. And so, I would think there would be a good selection at the Modern, or at least, or as you say, if they want certain other ones, that's not a problem. Well, if I have it, it's not a problem. I don't know if someone else has it. But, I hope to do some new paintings, too.

RS: Well, I was going to say, that's the other thing, what we don't have, *Pace*, which is the painting that sticks out from the wall and metal dowels, is relatively recent. That's an '84 painting I guess, something like that.

RR: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

RS: And the Bonnier paintings are '84. Well actually, *Pace*, I think is maybe '86 or '87, because that was Daryl Harnisch who showed those.

RR: That's right, yeah.

RS: And then, the Bonnier paintings were from '84-'85 or '83-'84, I can't remember. So we have things up to that, but still, that's 20 years ago, practically.

RR: That's true [laughing]. I'm very glad that they have *Pace*.

RS: Yeah, that's a wonderful picture.

RR: Yeah, which incidentally, has nothing to do with Pace Gallery.

RS: Yes [laughing], I know that.

RR: The title is just what it was, *Pace*, you know. That was long before Pace Gallery, or anything, or I wasn't even thinking of Pace Gallery, but it just seemed like a name that was not associated with, you couldn't associate it with anything.

RS: Yeah.

RR: But anyway, that's a very special painting. And of course, now there's the other one, *Pair Navigation* is at Dia, which was done at the same time, and the other one, *Factor*, which stands. Those three paintings were done at the same time.

RS: Well, I can tell you, it was a very interesting acquisitions meeting, because I think people were truly perplexed by this. And I remember part of my speech was to say something to the effect of, "You've read, no doubt, lots and lots of art criticism, verbal form of asking the question, 'What is a painting?' And here is an object which asks all of those questions and is a painting. And if it can come out from the wall, if it can be painted on two sides, if it can have two different kinds of paint, top and underside, if the edge that's in front of you is not the edge, but actually is the image..." I mean, all those kinds of things. And I said...

RR: That's terrific [laughing].

RS: ... "That's it in a nutshell." I remember also, when I did the installation of the not entirely monochrome paintings, but generally monochrome paintings for the end of

century shows¹¹, I was able to put this diagonal wall in the middle of the room, and the orange painting was on the back side of the wall as you came into the room.

RR: Oh, I remember that, yeah.

RS: And on the far wall, all the way across the whole gallery, was a Rothko. I think it maybe actually was Philip Johnson's. It was the blue and yellow one [[No. 10, MoMA #38.1952](#)]. And the pattern was, if you came into the room, you saw Jasper [Johns]'s *Green Target* [[MoMA #9.1958](#)]. You walked around and you saw your painting, and they were roughly, I think your painting was started in '55-'59, and Jasper's painting was made '54-'55, something like that. So they were of a generation. But you saw the thin edge of your orange painting first, which had those blocks of color on the side.

RR: Oh yes. That's right.

RS: And then, across the room, before you saw the face of your painting, you saw the Rothko with zones of paint the same way... And to sort of get people to think that actually the side of the painting was also, in a way, a front of the painting. It wasn't what was left over, it was a surface. And not only is it true that if you put your paintings with each other they talk to each other, but they say very interesting things to other paintings as kind of "eye-sharpeners."

RR: Yeah, that's good.

RS: Is there anything else that sort of comes to mind about the Modern, any kind of sense you have of it or any restlessness that you may have about it?

RR: I'm sure there are other things. They just don't come to mind at the moment because I saw a lot there... but the Modern has always been the special place in the city, for

¹¹ *How Simple Can You Get?* [MoMA Exh. #1857, April 26(30)–September 26, 2000] in [Making Choices](#), the second cycle of the MoMA2000 exhibitions

contemporary painting, or for, not just for contemporary painting, but for art. It's a special art museum. And, of course, having worked there years ago, that adds to its special place in my mind.

RS: What do you think the change in scale of the Modern will... I mean, when you knew it, it was a relatively intimate place. It's already gotten to be a much bigger one, and it's about to become even bigger, twice as big. Do you think that the increase in size has an effect on the experience of art?

RR: I don't know. I don't think so. I mean, there'll be more to see, and it'll be a bigger place. I don't know about the actual running of the Museum, how that's going to be affected ... it will just be bigger, there will be more people. But it should be good. It should be better, because there will be more to see and more things happening. And I think they'll have some daylight in these new galleries, won't they?

RS: Some.

RR: Yeah, some. Not a lot ... I don't know. I haven't thought about that.

RS: What do you think about... when I was there, there was a strong feeling among some people who were very much engaged with the art of the '60s, the art of the '50s, but they sort of felt that something had changed in art, and that perhaps the Modern should concentrate on the period of the 1960s and backwards, to the 1860s, say, but not try to keep up with the new art in general terms, and particularly to keep up with new media, installation and video and so on.

RR: Oh, yeah.

RS: And that The Museum of Modern Art, in a sense, should adhere to a kind of classical definition of Modernism. Do you think that that's a bad idea, a good idea? Can you foresee a time, in a sense, when modern art as you experienced it sort of becomes something else and becomes therefore an issue for another institution?

RR: I don't know. I don't think about that, and I can't really get involved in it, because that's something else. But I have thought that some of my early paintings are now modern art [laughing]. They're not contemporary art anymore, if modern art is what? It goes to the '70s or something like that. So, my new paintings are contemporary art, and the early paintings are modern. I don't know that that matters, or it doesn't matter to me. I don't get involved with that. I don't know what to think, really. If I had some say-so in a museum, how the museum was going to work, I just don't know what I would think. It seems like they would always be, to a certain extent, involved with contemporary art in some way. Maybe more so some times than other times, but I wouldn't know what to say about that.

RS: Do you think it's important for the long-term understanding of your work—I mean 50 years from now, or whatever—that it continue to be seen in the context of new art, that there always be some new art there?

RR: I think that, in a sense, there will always be new art there. I don't know where mine will be, or, what will be thought of mine. But, yeah, there's certainly going to be new art. There will be new things. People are always doing new things. Artists are always searching and reaching out and trying to... Well, also the social time and society has a bearing on that, too. I wouldn't even want to think about it. I'm just going to try to move my paintings as much as I can. I always want to do something that I don't know how to do exactly. I always want to see how I can move the paintings a little bit more, and sometimes it moves very slowly, but ... that's all I'm doing, and that's all I want to do, really. Just see what I can do with a painting. And I'm not concerned about what else is happening around.

RS: Well, that's a good place to stop, but I actually had one more question to ask you. Is there any work of previous generations, but especially is there any work of artists of your generation, that you think is underrepresented in the Modern? Where curators should go back in and think again and bring something, a particular artist, a particular work, into the Museum that isn't currently there, that would make a positive difference?

RR: Yeah, well, there probably is. I can't think of anything at the moment, but I'm sure there is something that's been overlooked, some things. I just don't know what it is at the moment. I can't think of anything.

RS: I mean, for example, you... I don't think we own one, but what's his name? The French artist... [André] Cadere.

RR: Oh, yes. He did the bars? Well, yeah. I think it wouldn't hurt to have something of his, sure. Yeah, that's a very good idea.

END INTERVIEW