DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: **PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

INTERVIEWERS: **CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)**

DATE: **1983**

TRANSCRIBER: **JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED JULY 12, 2018**

CC: The beginnings of the Architecture Department are very key, to have that—when different departments were formed. And then to give a commentary and opinion at the end as to—what do you think? Is it a museum of fashionable art, or is it a mausoleum now, or a repository of great [art], or is it a shopping center, or is it, what can it do? How is it?

RC: Its direction.

CC: How radically has it changed, and has it—? Does it bring you sadness? Is it fun? Is it forward? And also, has the battle been won? Because frankly, when I do my reading of it, you and Alfred were really—and others—were very early proselytizers, and you really [thought] modern art was going to change the world, and you were in the forefront. And—

RC: And now it's at Conran's.

CC: And essentially, in the battle—the battle is won. There are people who still object and there will be revisionist opinion, et cetera, but it was the great cause of the 20th century. And there'll be [a] stretch backwards now, but it's pretty well holding its ground. And what do you do then? What does the Museum do then? Does it become a great celebration of this great epoch, or does it have a function? Maybe you could just ramble a bit about—

RC: You could pick whatever place. We were thinking, for convenience, maybe you'd want to start at the beginning and memories of your time with Abby Rockefeller.

CC: We want what the atmosphere was like, coming out of the Harvard Coop.

PJ: Gosh. It'd be like telling the story of my life.

RC: Yes.

PJ: And of course that doesn't really amuse me very much. [INAUDIBLE: 0:01:57] with all the dates or sequences of events.

CC: I think we're interested in your opinion.

PJ: But then, you probably got those.

RC: Russell Lynes helped us with all that.

CC: Facts and dates and who went where at what times. It's really opinion and—

RC: We wanted to make an intimate portrait of this place, and it's really the people's recollections.

PJ: Well, it's strange to say—of course, it was Lincoln Kirstein that started the idea about modern art. He would not admit this, and we don't talk about it together, but the history of the contemporary art, whatever you call it at Harvard Square, was my introduction to [Alexander] Calder, and my introduction to [Pablo] Picasso. And I got terribly excited. At that time, I was an undergraduate the same time Lincoln was. Lincoln graduated I think about the same year I graduated, in 1930, finally—although I was earlier in the class of '27. And it was that atmosphere, in that atmosphere of Lincoln's having this little group; and Eddie Warburg was, of course, a member, and what's-his-name from Washington.

CC: Phillips?

PJ: No, oh no. The man who was the director, the second director of the National Gallery.

CC: [John] Walker.

PJ: And at that period, my mother was an alumna of Wellesley, and she said a very interesting man is teaching at Wellesley; you ought to meet. And so I met Alfred Barr, and it was love at first sight, as it were. And he said, "Oh, by the way, Philip, I'm starting, at Mrs. Rockefeller's instigation, a museum of modern art in New York. Will you come and be the head of the architecture? There's no money." And I said, "Money doesn't make any difference; it sounds very exciting.

I don't know much about modern art." But at the same time that all this was happening, in the year 1928, I was reading articles by [Henry] Russell Hitchcock. And I decided in, I remember, two minutes, to make up my mind to change my entire life to architecture. And this was before I met Hitchcock. And so I thank my enthusiasm for the articles by him. I met Alfred, and that's what gave him the idea that it should have an architecture department. Alfred Barr was a polymath son of a minister, with [what] all that means; a very Puritan ethic. His idea of converting the world fit in perfectly with my own messianic complex. And it's very strange now in the days of pluralism and despair to think of his total devotion to progress and to—we had no doubt at all that it was progress. It wasn't really a change; it wasn't really a phase; art was onwards and upwards. Especially in architecture. You see, the passion in his letters from Moscow, which you've probably read, show that interest. Have you got those, by the way? They were published.

CC: No, we'll get a hold of those.

RC: We'll be in touch with the archivist.

CC: When did you take your trip to Europe and you saw all the great buildings?

PJ: In 1929. I remember, it was the Depression, and me and John McAndrew were looking at the same [Édouard] Manet picture in [INAUDIBLE: 0:05:29]. And we said, "Let's go see some modern art." So we took the car and [we got to] go around, and saw modern art pictures. And the next spring, I met Russell, and we took the definitive trip collecting pictures for our—we started to write a book [*Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*]. Why not? When you're 24, it seems quite easy. [Laughter] And so we started out, [and went] around, and saw every single building that was built at that period. It was about the middle of the period of the International Style. Our book really was—'32 was about the end of the period, but it seemed like to us the beginning of a world revolution in design, that we would be the heralds. Not Russell. Russell was not a Puritan, although his great-grandmother landed on Plymouth rock. But he was never—he was strictly a historian. I was a proselytizer and a propagandist. And with Alfred, he wanted to convert the world. And the modern architecture—you can find it in

plenty of other writings of the day, that plate glass would save the world, flat roofs, put flowers on the roof [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:43].

CC: This was very, very—I mean, it was few and far between, though, the modern buildings in 1929.

PJ: That's it. We were seeing them all. We couldn't see the ones in far Russia, and we missed a few in Finland but we saw everything on the continent from Sweden to Italy. Oh, we missed [Giuseppe] Terragni, one or two that we had in the book, but I think most of the things are in the book.

CC: What was the European or Bauhaus attitude towards America at that time? Did they think it was just totally—it was ripe and—?

PJ: A barbaric country they weren't very interested in. Europeans weren't raised in American culture; that happened much, much later.

CC: But you saw an opportunity to—

PJ After the War, mainly.

RC: Yes, it really switched over.

PJ: Yes, but we saw the [Le] Corbusier, [J.J.P.] Oud, and Mies van der Rohe as the leaders of a new aesthetic that would conquer the world and be not only aesthetically—but practically the savior of the chaos that we see around us, that we—you see, our fame is still chaos. [Laughter] But as far as design goes, everything here built since that day has been influenced by the International Style.

CC: It's too bad you have to look towards Third Avenue instead of looking towards the Museum.

PJ: Towards my building.

CC: Madison Avenue. [Laughter]

PJ: That'll be there long enough. [Laughter] From here you only see one good building, the River House, which was the only building here when we built this, with the perfect bottle top.

RC: Yes.

CC: What was Mrs. Rockefeller like? Was she very eager?

PJ: She was a complete covert by Alfred Barr. Alfred was found by Paul Sachs, who was a brilliant knower of people, a very rich man himself, a great collector, amateur scholar, and he saw in Alfred Barr the type of dedication and knowledge that could be put into this work. And so he was accepted by Mrs. Rockefeller as the director.

CC: Did she accept this ethos also? She had a bit of the proselytizer in her also?

PJ: Yes.

CC: A do-good—?

PJ: Especially through her son, Nelson. She had hopes that Nelson would save the world, and he did do his best. Failed by some degrees, but he didn't ever stop trying. And so he was our first convert, as it were, and he put us right to work at—it was too late to do much about Rockefeller Center, but we did work on it and try to make it more modern. And his mother was one of the most intense, high-minded people I've ever known. And she'd come in, and I'd get a little call. "Philip, there is dust on the black velvet background of that box," freezing me. We were, after all, very young, and I had not vacuumed that shelf. [Laughter] And I did use black velvet as a background. Funny how those things stand out. And it was one of the boxes she had given us, an [INAUDIBLE: 0:10:06] art nouveau box which is always on display still.

CC: Did it surprise you that a woman of that stature would jump in like this?

PJ: Not at all, because I didn't know not to—I didn't know enough not to. See, I was born reasonably rich, so the Rockefellers didn't impress me because my—they were all playmates of my family in Cleveland, before, so, to me—and then I met Blanchette, and she—that would be '31, when she had me do her house. So I just—it seemed perfectly natural to me that you'd be interested in modern art; why shouldn't she be? See, I missed the whole battle of the Met and the disagreements with the Met, and the fact that Stephen Clark fought with the Met.

And the lady I knew best was the third one, Mrs. [Mary Quinn] Sullivan, and Lillie Bliss, of course. And through Lillie Bliss, I met my best friend, her niece.

CC: Yes, we had a lovely talk with her, Mrs. [Eliza Bliss] Parkinson.

PJ: Oh, you've already talked?

RC: She's wonderful.

CC: And we talked with Blanchette yesterday.

PJ: She's just grand. But Blanchette came in a good deal after the others. And Alfred Barr's conception of the Museum should be mentioned here. There's never been a museum that had the interest across the board that he did and insisted on our having, that is, all the way from the library to films to still pictures to architecture to design. The idea no doubt came from the German Gesamtkunstwerk theories and the Bauhaus practice, although he never said it, but it was clear that that was in the air. But there was no museum, because the word "museum" was also suspect by the Bauhaus, who were anti-everything. The word "history", for instance, couldn't be used at the Bauhaus, and Alfred was an historian, and I was an historian. So we never got along very well with the Bauhaus socialist, social.

CC: So they were very radical then.

PJ: Very radical from our point of view. We weren't against radicalism. There was just no interest; it didn't fry any eggs. Communism never helped or hurt aesthetics. Alfred Barr's main interest was, after all, the film in Russia; his greatest passion was [Sergei] Eisenstein.

CC: We spoke to Jay Leyda.

PJ: Oh, did you talk to Jay?

RC: Yes, yes; he's at NYU.

PJ: Jay [PJ pronounces it, **lie**-duh] we called him.

RC: Yes.

PJ: Where is he?

RC: At NYU.

CC: He just did that new book on Eisenstein. Did you see it, *Eisenstein at Work?*

PJ: No.

CC: Oh, it's fabulous.

PJ: Oh, you see, when you lose track [of time].

CC: He was terrific.

PJ: He is, absolutely marvelous. And of course, I never knew him.

CC: He's now at the NYU Film Department. He's the historian; he teaches the history of film, Russian film.

PJ: Isn't that absolutely extraordinary. I never knew Jay, I just knew about him and I met him, of course.

CC: His new book is a big sensation. It's beautiful. It's Eisenstein at work; it's all his photographs, documents, and drawings.

PJ: Well that was Alfred's greatest thrill, was, of course, meeting him. And, let's see, early cuts of *Ivan the Terrible*. But, so Alfred was unique in the museum world, and in a way still is. But, there were only two museum directors who changed museology to such a degree, one was Alfred Barr and one was Wilhelm von Bode, the man that started the Nationalgalerie and collection in Berlin, which is still the finest collection in the world. I mean, but that's so selected. The Italian museums are of no use because they have this crap like what's in the Met now. The Vatican never knew why they were collecting pictures or what they were for. So it's a very sad show [*The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art*]. But if you had the same pictures taken from the Nationalgalerie, you've got a show. It's not the Nationalgalerie, it's the—? How does it go? It's been under lots of different names.

CC: That's why you like the—I mean it's Alfred really; he was a historian and that reflects itself in the Modern.

PJ: Right.

CC: It's a collection that you can see right through.

PJ: A collection and he intended it to be a very important historical monument, you see, as well as a proselytizing forum.

CC: He was a teacher.

PJ: He was a teacher, a professor, a historian, an inspirer, and a terrific scholar. I mean, his books haven't been equaled yet.

RC: Right.

PJ: On cubism and on surrealism and fantastic art, as short as they were, they haven't been superseded. It's really incredible. And to me, I remember telling René [d'Harnoncourt] when he first came on, I said, "Of course, René, you'll have to pardon me, but I'm still working for Alfred Barr. I know you threw him out, not you, the Trustees, but it doesn't make any difference. He is, was, and always will be The Museum of Modern Art." And I never have been the same since he lost his mind, as far as the Museum goes, because I felt we were founded [by him], and I didn't see how, what would happen. What happened was, that by then we were just knocked over the edge so we became the mausoleum, which you can take as a bad word, but I think it's wonderful. I think we are the only collection—perhaps we can't be surpassed, or equaled—of that period. Now our duty today would have been clear enough if you weren't here but how could you be too modern? There's no such thing. Alfred would say the thing is in evolution, things get more and more—and he always brought young people, much to my horror. I remember his taking me to [Mark] Rothko's studio, and I say, if my son couldn't draw better than that! You know, the old Ah! This is lacking in eyes.

RC: People must [INAUDIBLE: 0:16:14].

CC: So if he was around now and called you right now, he'd probably be down, wanting you to go see some pictures this evening down at so-and-so's place.

PJ: [David] Salle's? [Laughter] I'd be very interested in Alfred Barr on the new, and the [Julian] Schnabels.

RC: Really.

CC: Or on something else. But I mean he'd be curious, though, he'd be ever curious.

PJ: Ever curious. The only thing that we feel are lacunae; a very strange one is that when he first saw a Jasper Johns, who is perhaps the greatest artist in the world today, he bought three or four from the first show, shocking the Department so badly that I had to make an extra speech that when you have a director, for christssake, do what he says or leave. But they said, "Well we can't. We've spent all our—we don't have that much money to spend, and *three* paintings from *one* artist, at his *first* show! It's just not good judgment." It turned out to be very smart judgment. The only catch was, they never bought any more.

RC: Maybe they couldn't have afforded to—

PJ: Oh nonsense.

RC: —at the time.

PJ: But he never—he was the discoverer of Abstract Expressionism. I remember my first [Willem] de Kooning, asking him, "My goodness, why would you ever do that?" So last year I paid $100,000 for it. [Laughter]

CC: What's funny to me also is things like—well, with you and the *Machine Art* show, and it's an extraordinary thing to have put together, and then Beaumont Newhall, I spoke to him on the phone. We're going to bring him in to interview.

PJ: Oh good.

CC: And he was a trip. He said there he was, he was 25 years old, and he turned to Alfred, and Alfred—he thought he was just going to be a librarian or something; he didn't know what he was going to do, cataloguing. He turned to Alfred and Alfred said, "Well, what do you want to do?" And he goes, "Well, photography." He goes, "Well, what show do you want to do?" And he says, well, his favorite photography. Alfred said, "Go ahead; do it. But you'd better go to Europe, too." Off he went and did a book [*Photography 1839–1937*] that's still in print now.

PJ: Alfred had an eye for people that belies what everybody thought about Alfred, that he was very bad with people. Which indeed he was. He couldn't manage; he was a terrible administrator, which is why he had the trouble with the Trustees. But he had a gilded eye. I brought in a girl once who I met at one of

the Askew salons. I think that's where I met her, Iris Barry. And he said, "Well, what do you want Iris Barry to do?" And I didn't know. I said, "Well, she hasn't any money so we'd better give her a job sorting out postcards or something." He said, "Well, we don't have any library. Let's send her to library school." Well, you know the story. And I bought her her first dress. First dress, I mean, she looked like a tramp. [Laughter] So I took her over to Saks [laughing] and bought her a dress. And, but, of course, her background was in film. But...

CC: Then off she went, about year later, and she was in Hollywood getting pictures.

PJ: Well that was—I think it was longer than a year.

CC: Yes, in retrospect it was perfect.

PJ: It was absolutely a miracle.

RC: Yes, it really is.

PJ: But you see, we were all very young and thin. I mean, Lincoln and I were the same age as [James Thrall] Soby, and Alfred was near enough. And we were all not old enough to know better. And there was no precedent. There were no museums—we looked down on other museums just as much as the Bauhaus did.

CC: And even some of the early people, like [Alfred] Stieglitz, he probably looked at you aghast, didn't he, as to what you were doing?

PJ: I think Stieglitz probably regarded Alfred Barr; he was rather a good scholar. Alfred favored photography from the beginning, and Stieglitz was a big proselytizer himself. No, we didn't fight with Stieglitz. He was so annoying you couldn't help fighting with him.

CC: What was the curiosity, though, of the Clarks, the [A. Conger] Goodyears and all; were they always a few steps behind you? Were they a little cautious? Did they always ask your opinion?

PJ: What they hoped was that we would show up the Met and make their pictures, their collections, worth more. They had enough eye to see that what they were

buying wasn't shit. But they didn't have the eye for the next new [INAUDIBLE: 0:20:41].

CC: They didn't have the vision, though.

PJ: No, I didn't either. I mean, I'm not blaming them in any way. What they liked was a [Paul] Gauguin, [Vincent] van Gogh, as Alfred did, I didn't. I still don't. [Laughter] But I came in sort of a later generation with Johns. But you see, you can't blame the rich people that put what seem to be millions into pictures that the Met wouldn't legitimize. And so they invent their own fable, but then legitimize it for them. I'm really now part of what I'm talking about. They never mention things like money. But they were willing to pay a great deal of money to make this thing work, or it would never have gotten started. And the Rockefeller name helped a lot, although there was no Rockefeller name at first. She wasn't that rich, Mrs. Rockefeller wasn't given much money, and she had to have her little collection, as you know, up on the fifth floor.

RC: That's a pretty amazing thing, that she, despite her husband's intolerance of the—

PJ: Her husband's intolerance didn't extend to intolerance. I mean, he was a very quiet man, very much interested as his son was, in his own interests, and he said, 'If my wife wants to do this, well, she can have the attic.' It was very correct, and really very, very—he never got enough credit because he was so shy and self-effacing, but he did give millions and millions away when it was much harder than it is now.

CC: He gave the land for the Garden.

PJ: And his house, to please his wife. But she was a person [INAUDIBLE: 0:22:25]. Mrs. Sullivan and Mrs. Bliss were quite different types, and they wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for Abby. But it was Mrs. Bliss that I'm attached to. Of course, it was Mrs. Sullivan that had connections, and she was a very popular lady in society, and so their names, their combined names, along with Clarks, were enough to ensure the integrity of the institution. The hardest time was starting the Architecture Department. I was asked down to speak with the

Trustees about how nice it would be to have an architecture department. What it was then... [laughter]

RC: We heard you brought on your own staff and secretary and paid for your office and the whole thing.

PJ: I paid for the office and the secretary.

CC: And you did the research and you did the collection. What were they doing?

PJ: And I did the writing and the book was published, I remember, in my bedroom, with that printer over there and I had no room to sit down in my house. It seemed perfectly natural at the time. [INAUDIBLE: 0:23:30] publish a book, you sit down on the bed and do it. [INAUDIBLE: 0:23:36] tried to get it out on time.

CC: What made you pick—? Now we'll go way back to 23, 24 years old when—why architecture? It was the most visible change on the horizon?

PJ: No, no. I don't think you can say that. I know people who'd say, 'Why did you pick'—when the son was a preacher, why did you pick religion? I had a calling. I had a calling, to put it in emotional terms. It was as simple as that. I knew that there was no other thing in the world but architecture. And I cannot understand why anybody is interested in anything but architecture. You become a monomaniac. And I realize now, at the age of 77, there must be some other interests.

CC: Other people fit in but it all fits [INAUDIBLE: 0:24:23].

PJ: It would be the cruelest thing not to think about architecture all the time than to think more of it, otherwise they couldn't build these ugly buildings. Obviously, there must be people in the world who don't care about architecture.

CC: Was it a huge disappointment to you when, after the war, you started seeing a lot of houses go up and buildings go up and things in Dallas and Washington and whatever, that didn't conform exactly to your original

PJ: No.

CC: I mean not the world, you are not the only architect in the world.

PJ: Oh yes I am. [CC laughs] But they didn't all come to me. No, what disappoints me now is that I don't build all the new museums. I don't see any sense in hiring all these other people. But I haven't done a museum in 20 years.

CC: I live two doors from the, what Blanchette called the, yesterday; she loves that building on 64th Street, that little office that used to be the Asia Society.

PJ: The Asia Society; yes.

CC: I like that.

PJ: I enjoyed that. I was furious when they didn't come back to me, but I had insulted Johnny [John D. Rockefeller III?] so often [INAUDIBLE: 0:25:25] that I really can't blame him. I had enough fights with him.

CC: She's a little worried about that. The reaction has been quite, not so well to the one on 70th Street.

PJ: That's a terrible building.

CC: She said that yesterday.

PJ: Did she really?

CC: No, no, well, she didn't say as much about the building, no. She said it's had trouble, or it doesn't work, it doesn't—

RC: It hasn't kicked off yet.

PJ: She's having troubles, too. I think that's a little bit outside, too personal to talk about.

CC: What I meant, I guess, is that people—if you look at Bauhaus, or whatever your original vision [is], and you look at the great architects, and then you look suddenly at all of those things that have been built.

PJ: It's very discouraging.

CC: Is it?

PJ: All the better, it only makes sense for yourself, doesn't it?

CC: What did they do [that]? Did people buy the ethos? I mean did they just accept it yet the form and materials?

PJ: There are several reasons that aren't that honorable as the ethos.

CC: Cheap material?

PJ: Cheap material. If I'm building a building to make money, I build it as cheap as I can, because then the rent will be a greater profit to me, unless you charge more than the next building.

CC: Whereas here you're making granite and have workers

PJ: Oh well, but that's a corporation that can damn well afford it. And they don't care. And those are the best clients to build.

CC: What about the new materials? Are they cheaper now? Are there materials now that still, with different skins, and things like that?

PJ: I think we're getting better materials because there's more wish now for elegance than there was.

CC: So when did the place start becoming a little too close, a little too institutional? Did it lose its clubbiness ever, its family feeling? I mean, things being done in your basement or your bedroom.

PJ: Oh yes, then it became institutionalized, when they built the new building, but by then I had left. And I was there—I used to talk to Alfred about the new designs and try to criticize it, but I was outside. I was really not informing

CC: And he was pushed out in a sense.

PJ: And then he was pushed out.

CC: Exiled into the Library?

PJ: In '43.

RC: But then René brought him back.

PJ: Well, yes, René was his biggest backer [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:33].

CC: But by that time the collection had very much changed.

RC: Would Alfred have been satisfied with where it's come, how it's developed?

PJ: Well, it's impossible to say because he isn't here to say it, you see. I mean, I don't know what he would think. He never bought late Johns, and he never would buy any after the first beginnings, you see, and he did buy the first Johns. And so he might be today very interested in Schnabel. It's hard to say where his learning would—he's so different from Bill Rubin.

RC: What about in terms of the direction of the Museum?

CC: What are they doing now and what are those curators doing? Are they filling in his gaps or are they just—?

PJ: Yes, indeed. Rubin is a great admirer of the Abstract Expressionists and being able to fill in that empty slot, you see, extremely well. But Rubin is not interested in modern art, modern modern art.

CC: They just seem to be so different then. Now, someone like yourself to make a presentation, you'd have to have a hundred degrees, you'd have to be very—all the curators now are all graduate this, Ph.D. that.

RC: And their compass is very small.

CC: And you just happened to like the stuff, and you and Hitchcock went around and, you know...

PJ: And Eddie Warburg and Lincoln...

RC: You did a fine job; that's right.

PJ: Iris Barry was a reporter in England, and [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:54].

CC: So you stay connected because you obviously have a great personal and sentimental attachment.

PJ: Well, I'm giving them all my art because I don't think it's fair for a person to keep art if it's good. I'm proud enough of the collection not to want to bury it in the country. So I've given them, I think, 90 percent of it. [INAUDIBLE: 0:29:19] that keeps [INAUDIBLE: 0:29:21].

RC: Sure.

CC: Did Nelson pick up the ball from Abby then?

PJ: Yes, Nelson—and Abby said, 'Look, go and ask Nelson.' So Nelson became very good, [and] with his great energy, he could raise more money and talk to the men [INAUDIBLE: 0:29:36], and it blossomed. But I wasn't in on [INAUDIBLE: 0:29:42]; I was away until after the war. Then I came back and ran the Department again and picked Arthur Drexler who is still there, in our department. But you see, at first, we didn't have any rules at all. We didn't know what was right and wrong to do, so *Machine Art*, that was two martinis. The word "machine art" seems like a natural enough word now, but can you imagine, the jolt, "machine art" those contradictory words? What's artistic about a machine? Well, once there were four cartoons in the *New Yorker*. It says, "That faucet doesn't work? Well why don't you get The Museum of Modern Art to put it in as a work of art?" [Laughter] That kind of joke, which the *New Yorker* did so well.

CC: We have a great piece of film of you doing a,—I don't know, you're next to a Bugatti or something, or an Alfa [Romeo], and you're saying—

RC: Talking about the wheel.

CC: —"Look at this window! Look at this wheel!" Then you're suddenly outside, too, I mean, you're talking to somebody who got there. All the cars are lined down the street, and you were talking to an owner of a, I don't know, a Porsche or something. He's talking about his thing, and you're pointing this out, and it's just terrific.

RC: It was such—I mean, you were so serious, and you were just captivated by that; this is art.

CC: You're actually very candid and very funny. But at the same time—

RC: But it's for real. You know you're not joking; you absolutely were passionate about it.

CC: I think it made it very simple for people to see; it really was very obvious.

PJ: That [*8 Automobiles*] was one of the most controversial shows, *the* most controversial. I remember the British ambassador; Mrs. Rockefeller turned to him, "Lovely, Mr. Ambassador, very wonderful cars." He said, "I think it's

disgusting, those cars; what are cars doing in a museum?" It never crossed my mind to ask. It seemed like a logical thing, they're designed by somebody.

CC: Fabulously designed.

PJ: So Alfred Barr, of course, encouraged me; he always did. And then we had a lot of fun with the cars, but it wasn't considered museum-worthy.

CC: No. We talked to them, too. We talked to Ivan Chermayeff yesterday, and he was saying it's awfully tough now to have—you couldn't have really a *Good Design* show now, in the same sense, because I mean, people, with Conran's and—

PJ: Conran's is a descendant of The Museum of Modern Art.

CC: It's a descendant; it's a big museum gift shop.

PJ: Good Design now is just a [INAUDIBLE: 0:32:00].

CC: Quite obvious thing. So what does somebody like Drexler do now?

PJ: This poor man, he has trouble with design. We buy revived [INAUDIBLE: 0:32:09] things; art nouveau. He hates art deco so I never got that far, but [INAUDIBLE: 0:32:16]. But we're more historical—but we can't show weavings or anything; it all was done by Annie Albers there, or whoever; you know? So there's no—

CC: So it's more of a study center now.

PJ: That's right.

CC: And that's what the Museum should be; educational.

PJ: Yes. I don't feel the need for proselytizing; that's over. The International Style is over. What Arthur could do is to choose among the younger people—and speaking of, I always forget. And he has, I think, a very pointless show, the one he's got on now.

RC: *Skyscrapers* [*Three New Skyscrapers*]?

PJ: I mean, those buildings are no good until they're built. And they're going to be built, and they should go look at the building. You don't sit around collecting non-

architecture. I mean, it's just as if you took a [Paul] Cezanne and showed his first idea that someday he was going to make into a painting. What's the point when you can buy the painting? I mean, architecture shows were more interesting in those days because those buildings had no chance of being built. And they looked perfectly frightful.

CC: So it would be awfully better if he had an imaginary architecture or Aldo Rossi sort of things?

PJ: Rossi is not imaginary, but you can't show drawings all the time because Rossi's work is mostly [Giorgio] de Chirico-esque drawings. So he does—he had an early show up of [James] Stirling. I really don't know. I think he's in a terrible position.

RC: Do you think the Museum then can function in this climate of pluralism to weed out, to again set the standards?

PJ: No. Because, you see, standard setting is not what you can do any more. That was the test of a museum in a creative period of chaos, where we could pull together the good art of the post-impressionist period, and especially, and only, Picasso. Which is unbelievable that the head of the painting department at the Met told me: of course, now, didn't I really admit it, this Picasso craze was nonsense, and as soon as he died it would all be sold off for $50, and what is even all the excitement about. The head of painting at the Met.

CC: That's really very interesting. Wow, it's really true then when they say The Museum of Modern Art was the biggest mistake the Metropolitan ever made. [Laughter]

PJ: Yes, it certainly was. And they didn't have to. But it was a change in taste that we could seize, and we caught the moment, but that moment doesn't occur again. The Met is just as aware of what's happening as well as we are, now. They got Bill Lieberman there.

RC: So then you're—?

CC: We spoke to Bill and he was very good, I liked him. He said he was invented by Alfred Barr.

PJ: He was.

RC: In fact, he said all of you were, and then your comment that when Alfred passed away, you kind of didn't know where the leader was; if you had all been formed in his mold, did he groom anybody to be his successor?

PJ: No, he never groomed his own successor. It always has to be a palace revolution, like the succession of the Roman Empire.

RC: But who ascended to—

PJ: The emperor would shoot the present emperor, and then you're the emperor. Simple way.

CC: By the way, everyone we spoke to, and ourselves included, we thought your comments in that memorial tribute were really exemplary.

PJ: That was very good, wasn't it?

RC: Oh it's absolutely—it's potent.

CC: Very good. Very personal.

PJ: Well, he was—he invented me, and we just hoped that we were worthy of him, that's all. To us, to me, he's still alive. The people who don't know him, they should [INAUDIBLE: 0:36:05]. That's all.

CC: Well that's really why we want to make the picture, I think, is, we really want people to know.

PJ: Do you have any clips of him at all?

CC: Yes, we've got some clips from the first show, and—

PJ: [INAUDIBLE: 0:36:15]?

RC: Good stills.

CC: We've got a lot of good stills. As a matter of fact, we went to—

PJ: Oh, they're stills. You don't have much film.

CC: We have some film. And then we went to a lot of his early letters; we're going to be reading form his letters.

PJ: Oh good.

CC: His plans for it and all that.

RC: His wonderful diaries.

CC: That's actually three quarters of the film—I mean, it's he [Alfred], and that's really what the film is about. And then we'll catch up at the end.

PJ: A neglected man that I don't understand why this generation of people over there don't really realize it is Soby, because he was quiet, I guess. And he gave us some of the most wonderful pictures that we have. He's never been given a show. Everyone else who left his collection was given [a show], and that dealer, Sidney Janis, he had a show [*The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection*]. No one has shown the Soby pictures. You see, we think highly out of him of my generation because he was as close to Alfred as the rest of us. Just because he was a little more shy, but he had a lot more money than any of the rest of us, and so he very quietly took over the acquisitions.

CC: It's our great disappointment that we can't—we wanted to—I spoke to a trustee of the Hartford Athenaeum, who was this Mrs. [John L.] Bunce.

PJ: That's his former wife.

CC: Would she be interested?

PJ: I think that she'd be interested. Nellie, I forgot her last name.

CC: Howland? Bunce?

PJ: I can't remember any name. But Nellie was really not interested in painting, and it was early on.

CC: We also, just to fill you in, we had a very good talk with Monroe Wheeler.

PJ: Yes?

CC: And can you think of anyone who could further amplify—? It's hard to say who was a friend of Abby Rockefeller's when she was born in 1874, but is there

anybody you can think of who, of that group, like a Monroe or someone who could comment on her?

RC: Except yourself.

PJ: No, I didn't know her.

CC: You knew her a bit but—

PJ: I knew her a bit, but boy, she was the grand dame of the world to me. It was very rare to go to a luncheon or something. But of course, that's another generation. I was just a [INAUDIBLE: 0:38:28], forced on the Trustees. When I made my laden speech to the Trustees, [laughing] they almost booted me out of the room. And Mrs. Rockefeller got up and said, "Now, now, now. This will probably sound much better when you read it. Mr. Johnson's lecture is textured and I think you'll like it better when you read it." In other words, I had done such a bad job of presentation, [which is] unlikely, because I thought I had—

RC: That's your forte.

CC: I like those articles about you where you walk in and 20 minutes later, no matter what—I read something before about your presentations.

PJ: One of my earlier fortes. But apparently I was very bad, because Nelson Aldrich who was her brother and an architect, you see, who was very much against our having an architecture department because he didn't like what we were going to show. But the Department—they couldn't very well say no to Alfred because it wasn't going to cost the Museum anything. Not even office space. So that's how we weaved it in, then all of a sudden there was a budget for the Department.

RC: I guess the Junior Advisory Council was so rambunctious that they did disband you.

PJ: That's right.

RC: And then Mrs. Blanchette Rockefeller reinstituted the Junior Advisory Council with tamer

CC: That was a tamer thing.

PJ: That was later.

RC: Yes, right. But those days—

PJ: Those days we still had the battles in the Junior Council. You can't call it Junior Council any more because there are no young people around; they're getting old.

RC: Yes, Eddie had some good stories.

CC: What about some of the—?

PJ: Warburg, he is the world's funniest man.

CC: He's hilarious. He was doing imitations of Alfred, with his glasses down; then he did one of Lincoln, and he was really too much.

PJ: Oh, he is. He has the time; I don't, to sit around talking to you.

CC: Well, we don't want to take up—

PJ: No, no.

RC: Because when we come back to you we will kind of pinpoint areas, and just as we're talking now, they'll be easy for you.

CC: Especially this business of the early part and of Alfred and all [that], because if you think about it, I could just read you a couple of names we've got to evoke Alfred and to give a flavor of that. We really hope, depending on you and Monroe—

PJ: Bill.

RC: Eddie.

CC: Eddie, Bill Rubin, I mean the two [Bills], Bill Lieberman, Eddie Warburg. Lincoln, I don't know if we can get back in there. Not on Alfred, but...

RC: If it's a good day, we might.

CC: It's tough. You're probably one of the only people who—

PJ: Lincoln; I don't know.

CC: What's terrific is all of the compliments people give him, though, and Blanchette, other people. They really—this was it.

PJ: He was only disliked at the time because he was a lousy administrator. And of course Marga [Scolari Barr] wasn't very popular. Have you tried to talk with her?

RC: Yes.

PJ: [INAUDIBLE: 0:41:08].

RC: And Dorothy Miller we spoke to, but she was very monotone. And we thought we could get a rise more of her since she had such a big role.

CC: We're going to try to see Meyer Schapiro.

PJ: Oh, see Meyer. That was [tape break] he's scholarly, his wisdom. Please talk to him.

CC: We want to speak to him. And—

PJ: [INAUDIBLE: 0:41:32]. It's stupid of me not to think about—I've been thinking about the most important person. Because, you see, he could be the equal of Alfred in scholarship, but I couldn't. I just sat there gasping, whereas Meyer understood perfectly his reasoning.

CC: And he knew him.

PJ: Yes.

RC: Oh, that's great.

PJ: They were professionally—they didn't meet much, but they were professionally mutually admiring, which is very rare for Alfred.

CC: And Beaumont should be good, don't you think?

PJ: I suppose so. I don't remember Beaumont too much; that's because I was in another department.

CC: And Lieberman, of course. We spoke to Janis, [Leo] Castelli.

PJ: John Canady is not here anymore.

RC: Who?

PJ: Castelli and Janis.

RC: Pierre Matisse.

PJ: Pierre is around, god knows.

CC: Well, he was fun about Europe. He said the art—and he knew the artists, the French artists would come over here and they just couldn't believe it, and everybody was jumping on them, and they were celebrated. And they thought this was just the promised land. [Laughing]

PJ: [Laughing] It really was. Indeed.

CC: We talked to Robert Hughes, too, and he was pretty interesting.

RC: Lawrence Alloway.

PJ: Well he's the best critic we have today. He knew [INAUDIBLE: 0:42:40].

RC: He gave a great perspective, being an outsider.

PJ: Being an outsider and knowing what the—and a great person to talk to among the artists, there's only one, is [Frank] Stella. Stella is a prince of a man, as was Alfred. And Alfred asked him once why he didn't use orange and black in his prints and colors. So he said, "I will." He didn't, but. But, he is an intellectual, perhaps you've read his latest article on art something or other. His take on the Museum would be the most interesting, because he was—his [INAUDIBLE: 0:43:19] picture was sold to us. He's very articulate and he's the only one I know that believes in education. See, I always think, let's get them to stop all this goddamn nonsense at universities [INAUDIBLE: 0:43:33] art. He said " I owe everything to Princeton."

CC: And we talked to a few of the present trustees; we talked to Donald Marron.

PJ: He wasn't around.

CC: No, but he's not [INAUDIBLE: 0:43:46]. It's a little scary sometimes, too, you know, you think—

PJ: You're going to see somebody who's important and they don't know anything.

RC: We're looking forward, on the other hand, to seeing John Parkinson who is a young trustee.

PJ: Have you seen him yet?

CC: No.

PJ: Well, he's too young, but just the same, he's a *very* sensible man.

CC: Well, that's what we want to hear.

RC: That's the third generation.

CC: Liza said, if you're talking to me, talk to him. Then Blanchette was very—

PJ: [INAUDIBLE: 0:44:15].

CC: And Gifford Phillips.

PJ: Gifford wasn't connected with us during this whole period. He has his father's, or his uncle's, museum.

RC: In terms of other artists, we are trying to reach Bob Motherwell and [Robert] Rauschenberg.

CC: Sol Lewitt.

PJ: Motherwell is a good man. Bob Motherwell is from one generation, and Stella from another.

RC: As opposed to—well, it's been difficult to [talk to] Rauschenberg, to reach him.

PJ: I wouldn't talk to Rauschenberg. [INAUDIBLE: 0:44:46] sober [INAUDIBLE: 0:44:47] and he doesn't know anything about anything anyhow. He's [INAUDIBLE: 0:44:49].

CC: Bit of a smart aleck?

PJ: A smart aleck. A waste of time.

RC: He's been kind of hard to reach to but still is around.

PJ: And I wouldn't talk to Johns because he—

RC: He's very shy.

PJ: Not a bit shy, but he doesn't think the Museum has ever done anything for him.

CC: Maybe Jimmy Ernst we're going to try to talk to.

PJ: Jimmy?

CC: I don't know.

PJ: Jimmy Ernst was never regarded seriously at all, and it was only his father [who was], and I don't think that father and son liked each other.

CC: What about Elodie Courter?

PJ: Elodie Courter is terribly important. She is the crossroads. Are you in touch with her?

RC: The Museum, all they said was, she lives in Connecticut, and they don't have a clue.

PJ: Oh, isn't that terrible.

RC: And here's a fellow Connecticut person, so maybe...

PJ: She lives in Connecticut but she's here in New York all the time.

CC: Because she's very transitional, Elodie.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:45:51