

DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: ALICIA LEGG (AL)
INTERVIEWERS: RUTH CUMMINGS (RC); CARL COLBY (CC)
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RC: With Alicia Legg.

AL: We all think that the Museum is a compendium, but that it should be constantly looking ahead. And we're coping with this conflict, really, and we're caught in it. It's not an unpleasant situation, it's just a way of life. Face it. I don't think you can solve it.

CC: Do you think it's anything Alfred Barr foresaw?

AL: No, I don't think he—when he was at Harvard and then when he was teaching at Wellesley, and he had started this comprehensive idea of all of the material, all mediums and all styles, I don't think he thought way out beyond that, at that time. And certainly confronted it—it confronted *him*, I would say, in the fifties, not in the forties, because I came in '49.

CC: You came in '49?

AL: Yes.

CC: That was your first contact with the Museum? Or had you been a New Yorker and visited the Museum?

AL: Oh yes, I grew up across the river in New Jersey, so, I went to the Art Students League and came here as a student.

RC: The fifties and the sixties are obviously an important new phase in the Museum, as people describe it, because things changed and Abstract Expressionism really hit and it was a big new thing. How would you describe—? What are some

reminiscences of that period, and how was it changing? You were really part of that.

AL: Yes. Well, I was a very low cog. I was a clerk first in the Photo Reproductions [Department], and then I came in this department [Painting and Sculpture] in '50 as a secretary, so I've been here ever since.

RC: It must have been exciting.

AL: Well, yes, it was, and it was certainly a wonderful way to learn the collection. But as I remember it—because when I was at boarding school I had sent to the Museum for various books, and they were all Holger Cahill and the early books on the American collection. Some of them were Edward Hopper, and some of the great early things that we got. But then the [Constantin] Brancusi thing happened just before I came, and that, of course, was a very sensational current that I remember sort of galvanized us into modernism, in a way.

CC: When was that exhibition? The Brancusi?

AL: Well no, it was [the Brancusi incident](#) of the *Bird in Space* being rejected by the U.S. Customs, and it was a big sensation; notorious.

RC: Why was it? I'm not familiar with that.

AL: Well, the U.S. Customs rejected it as a piece of metal, as not a work of art.

CC: As sculpture. What year was that in?

AL: I don't remember.

CC: Late thirties?

AL: No, I think it was in the late forties; it was just before I came, I think.¹

CC: So that was a big—

RC: [A] cause célèbre for the—

AL: Oh yes, that was a really famous thing. So, up until then—well, we had already had the Dada Surrealism [[Fanstastic Art, Dada, Surrealism](#)] show and that was in '36. And Cubism [[Cubism and Abstract Art](#)]. They were just sensational eye-

¹ U.S. customs taxed it in 1927; Brancusi's suit against the U.S. was in 1928.

openers, but that was before my time. But I don't think that Alfred—I've forgotten the first question that you said.

CC: I just wondered if you thought that Alfred would have predicted that the Museum would become so institutionalized.

AL: No. I don't think he had thought that through, at that point.

RC: It almost seems like it had to become that way as it got into more and more areas. He opened the way to do that, though.

AL: Well, yes, he always intended it to be departmentalized because he wanted to represent these important fields, like photography and film, that had never been considered art. And that was a terrific thing for him to establish them on the same level as painting and sculpture.

RC: I'm just curious what the first Abstract Expressionist shows were like here. You must remember them.

AL: There was a show called Andrew Ritchie; no. First of all, we were picketed by a group of abstract artists.²

CC: The association of American Abstract Artists, in the forties?

AL: Yes, in the forties, as not representing them carefully enough. And finally, in the early fifties, Andrew Ritchie, who came in as director of—the Painting and Sculpture Department was divided, and Alfred Barr—well, previously there had been some kind of problem and he was sort of put on the shelf. That was in '43. But finally, when [René] d'Harnoncourt came in, Alfred was put totally in charge of the collection, and they brought in Andrew Ritchie to be in charge of exhibitions. So there were two divisions to this department, Painting and Sculpture Collections and Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions. And Ritchie's first exhibition was called [*Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*](#), I think. And that must have been in '50 or '51. And it was a survey of American abstract art, and he divided it into categories: biomorphic and all kinds of rather high-falutin' terms. But it was a good show—I mean, it was a representative show of what was going on and what came out of [Piet] Mondrian. There was a lot of very

² 1940.

important derivative work that became known as neo-plasticism that all derived from Mondrian, and it's still very important, and constructivism. And so that was one of our first answers, I think, to these protesters who had their picketing.

RC: What was the public response to that show? Do you remember? Were you in the galleries when people were walking around?

AL: No, I really can't say that I personally.

CC: We're going to be talking to a whole cast of characters for the film, all the way back to Lincoln Kirstein and that group, to get a whole appreciation of the earlier days. Since you are here now working and very much a part of the Department, if Bill Rubin is one thing and you're another, are you something different then? Do you see the Museum and the collection as different than he is?

AL: Bill has a favorite term, "synoptic." And I think that what he refers to is really what Alfred did [which] is to try and represent every important aspect of modernist art. But Alfred put more emphasis—he wanted to make it not only from the point of view of style, he was also interested in representing national—wanted examples of European, Icelandic, almost any outpost, to have an example—to have a very, very broad geographical representation. And I think as that turned out, it did not hold up, because—although we certainly went in for Latin American and that is not to be put down. It's still really important to have.

CC: How would your visions differ then, or do you see yourself as—?

AL: I was just going to say that I don't think Bill Rubin thinks in terms of geographical representation. He thinks in terms of stylistic developments more. And I think, actually, Alfred did too. This geographical thing kind of petered out.

CC: Wasn't of great concern?

AL: No, it petered out.

CC: Is it more of a concern to you?

AL: No.

RC: So what camp would you be in?

CC: If you're in different camps, how would you describe each one? What is his and what is yours? How do you see things?

AL: You mean you want me to compare Barr and Rubin?

CC: No, yourself and Rubin.

AL: I'm very, very enthusiastic about the collection; I think it's a great collection. I'm concerned about it representing at least one or two key examples of certain periods, and not over-representing some others. What I'm getting at is, I think Bill Rubin places too much emphasis on surrealism. I'd like to give some other things a chance. Is this all going to be published?

RC: No, this is just note-taking. This isn't official.

CC: I'll tell you why I ask you.

AL: This is just a personal gripe. We're laying out the galleries and we've got I don't know how many rooms that are going to show American surrealism; Americans who were influenced by surrealism in the thirties and forties.

CC: [Mark] Rothko and people like that?

AL: Yes, and more than one example, and I would say it's going to be too—

CC: Who's going to suffer in that, though?

AL: I think some of the neo-plasticists.

CC: Such as who?

AL: [Fritz] Glarner, [Burgoyne] Diller; they're not major people but they come out of Mondrian.

CC: And he doesn't have a particular affinity with the very cool, constructivism?

AL: We haven't really sat down and talked about it, and we're submitting this, and my list is going to have these names on it.

CC: Let's put this in terms of your context. We're not making an official movie for the Museum. At the same time, we're not *60 Minutes*, trying to—

RC: Dig dirt.

CC: And frankly, what we'd like to have in the film is, in a sense, controversy about the past. Someone could even tell us that, well, it started because of so-and-so, or Barr was it; no one could move. Let's say there was controversy about influences and people's contributions and ideas, really more a clash of ideas than of personality. And what we don't want and what we would cut out of the film or an interview would be if it's simply a diatribe, one against another, or one personality against another. It's more a question of—someone could celebrate surrealism and tell you how important it is and how everyone talks about it, et cetera, but then if you were to come in and say it's not the whole picture; they're not everyone, there's also this, and this is part of modern art, and this is celebrated, then it becomes richer because the ideas—it's a clash.

AL: I think we're going to solve that before this.

CC: I understand then. Okay then, it's not for me to—

AL: This is where we're going through these trial runs of—

CC: So you're going to gather all of the—?

AL: Yes, we've got, [she pulls out a paper]—here are the [Joan] Miró galleries, models and things. But this is a—

CC: How permanent would those be, once they're there?

AL: They'll be pretty permanent, because it's only the temporary exhibition galleries that walls remove; these will be here for a number of years.

RC: That's very interesting because we were speaking with John Elderfield, and of course, his department's [Drawings and Prints] works will be able to move, they will be able to rotate.

AL: Yes, and he's got so much that—

RC: Right; exactly. But this is more—the best of the collection.

AL: His space is sort of all open and he can make different things.

CC: Sure. Whereas yours, you have fixed walls and—?

AL: Yes, they're going to be. See, the 11 building, it had several changes with the new wings that we put on, but once that was done, then it more or less stayed put in the sort of classic maze style, and that's what this is going to be.

CC: Do you think it's difficult to represent all styles? Do you think it's just intrinsic in the way the collection was formed? Do you see any great gaps in the collection that need to be filled in?

AL: Very few. There are gaps and Bill Rubin is working [on it]. One of the things he has done is, as he calls it, lacunae, he fills lacunae, and he's done it very judiciously. Sometimes he's deaccessioned, and that hasn't always made people happy. In order to get something essential, there's no other way that we can acquire major things without selling something.

CC: So the Museum isn't—

AL: It's very fluid.

CC: So it's not faddish in any way? Is there much that has now stood the test of time, would you say, in the collection itself, that was bought? I know Barr once said something.

AL: Oh yes, yes, "in 20 years."

CC: If one in 10 exists—you've done a lot better than that, in terms of your batting average.

AL: Well, no, I'd say some of the new acquisitions—some of them of course are old masters, so they must have stood the test of time.

RC: And when you say old masters—?

AL: The contemporary work, nobody knows.

CC: Can you give us a couple of examples? I know that Jasper Johns for instance—

AL: Oh Jasper Johns is an old master now.

CC: He purchased those very early on, and those are master now.

AL: Yes, they've made it.

RC: Could you give one more bad—?

CC: Are there any that you could say are at the opposite end of the scale?

AL: Well, I would not like to. I think it's too early.

RC: I'm curious about the decision that was made to exhibit—you have permanent walls in here, whereas they gave movable walls to other departments. How did that come about? Do you feel that's a good design? There's more space, obviously, but...

AL: Our collection is so enormous compared with other departments, and also, just for practical reasons, it's so expensive to reinstall. We do have a reserve, and we lend a lot of material, and that gives us the chance to replace pictures that are going out on loan and bring things out from storage. And that gives us this flexibility of showing more than keeping the selection static. It's very flexible because things are going out all the time. And inevitably, when you take a big picture out, maybe you have to change a whole—you have to rehang, to make things work. And so it's a *constant* thing, and that is a budget matter. You can't do it *too* often.

CC: We were thinking of interviewing Sol LeWitt for the film. He'd be pretty amusing, don't you think?

AL: He's wonderful. Of course, he doesn't like to be photographed.

CC: No?

AL: No. I don't know that he—he took all those pictures.

CC: He was a guard here, too, wasn't he? He was a guard and also he had a one-man show [[Sol LeWitt](#)] here.

AL: And he was also a receptionist at the 21 desk for Victor D'Amico's night classes. As we all came out, there he was, sitting out here. He really is a terrific person.

CC: Yes, and his work is really very, very fascinating. It's very innovative.

AL: Oh yes, and that's it, it's not static.

CC: No. Has he always been working on that? Had he been working even in those earlier days?

AL: Yes, he had a show down on LaGuardia Place—I've forgotten the name of the gallery [Park Place Gallery]—of some—

RC: Was it Washington Square?

AL: Below Washington, near Houston, over in—

RC: Noho.

AL: Yes, Noho. And he showed some coffin-like structures that were quite avant-garde at the time. Little boxes. Then he had a show uptown, too, similar minimal shapes, rectangular shapes. He didn't get into the grid that early.

RC: And how early are we talking about?

AL: It has to have been early sixties, very early.

RC: Did you just take to modern art?

AL: Yes. Well, let's see. I went to a boarding school in Philadelphia and I took art, mainly, and didn't want to go to college. I wanted to continue to go to art school, so I went straight to the Art Students League. And I just fooled around; I was some kind of a dilettante painter, for years, living at home in New Jersey and coming into Manhattan. I did paint and I had a studio in the garage. I was at [Stanley William] Hayter's Atelier 17 when he was over here during the war, and a lot of terrific artists worked there, Miró and Louise Bourgeois; I swear I met her. Anyway, I learned how to etch and print, and I got my own printing press. So I was fooling around as it was but I was [INAUDIBLE: 0:25:35].

CC: Was the Museum pretty influential at that time, to all of you, as a gathering place, or—?

AL: When I was at the League, yes, we would come over here.

CC: Would you come here more than you would go anywhere else particularly?

AL: No, [laughing] we went to the automat on Broadway and 57th Street. That was a hangout.

CC: But in terms of looking at art and all, was this more of a popular spot?

AL: Yes. And then shortly after, when the Museum of Non-Objective Art opened, that was a sensational event, so that was a place to go. That was really something.

RC: More modern than the Museum?

AL: Yes, it was more modern, because it was totally abstract. It was the Baroness [Hilla von] Rebay's choice; she chose all these things for Mr. [Solomon R.] Guggenheim: [Vasily] Kandinsky, and that awful man [Rudolf] Bauer, who was her lover. But there were wonderful Kandinskys and other [INAUDIBLE: 0:26:57].

CC: In those days was the Met the kind of place where—?

AL: The Met was not in the picture.

CC: There weren't big blockbuster shows like there are now? Did it have mostly a permanent exhibition and that was it?

AL: You mean of contemporary art?

CC: No, I know they didn't have any contemporary [art].

RC: Did they have feature shows?

AL: Oh, well, they had some big shows.

CC: What was a typical show in the mid-forties or fifties, and would it change often? I'm trying to get a fix on how—now they seem very active.

AL: It's *much* more active now. I can't even remember.

CC: I mean, they didn't really have that many big shows; they'd have one or two a year? Of what kind of things? Like Italian drawings, or something like that?

AL: No, it seems to me they had—oh, I can't remember. I worked at the Met before I came here, for a year and a half, in the Costume Institute.

CC: Did you work here when Bill Lieberman was here?

AL: Oh yes. Sure.

CC: How would you characterize him? What was his vision?

AL: Very sharp and good.

CC: Is it very different than Bill Rubin's? Is it more contemporary, maybe, or more eclectic?

AL: No, no. Bill Lieberman is a product of Paul Sachs and Alfred Barr. So he had a very good grounding in early modernism. Then he was channeled into works on paper, for years he was curator of drawings and prints, and that was a very academic—he functioned very well. [In] collecting, he made some terrific acquisitions. But I don't think he followed—for many, many years, he didn't follow, during the early times in Soho, he wasn't really with it. But I think now he is.

CC: How would you define someone who isn't the Paul Sachs Alfred Barr school? As opposed to what? How do you characterize someone who has that education as opposed to someone who doesn't?

AL: I don't know anyone at all—I guess there are other museums or university people, but I don't really know. I'm terribly limited; I've just been here.

RC: Let me ask something else then, since you have been here, this is a good perspective. Is the spirit of Barr still here? Are there any individuals who—?

CC: Personify him?

AL: There are very few left. I'm one of the few. There's Monawee Richards who worked very closely with him on that big blue book, the catalogue; you know that.

RC: Yes.

AL: And the chronicle [*Chronology of Painting and Sculpture in The Museum of Modern Art (PASITMOMA)*]. Have you read his chronicle?

RC: I haven't read his chronicle.

AL: Oh boy, it's an eye-opener.

RC: When was that?

AL: This was when he was about to retire in '67. And also, Alfred had this fabulous talent for layout, and he instilled this in—I'm afraid that we had to keep new people in Publications; and designers think of themselves before they think of the work.

CC: He was a master at organizing.

AL: So you see, what Alfred insisted on is scale in reproductions. And you see, this is a very small piece, nine inches high. This is five feet four. And I mean, all of his books are designed in that [way].

CC: It's critical to an understanding of the pictures.

AL: It's so *absolutely* essential, but the problem is that book designers are taking over, and you had to have a *strong* curator or art historian in there, or you're just going to get a picture book.

CC: Right.

AL: Which is *useless*.

RC: Are these values still being preserved here?

AL: Well, with difficulty.

RC: And so you mentioned the chronicle.

AL: That is—

CC: So this is really—the book is the collection as he—

AL: Yes, it's a chronological—and you see, he put labels on the—

CC: And it is chronological.

AL: Yes, it's chronological, except that there was a long period of—there was a slump somewhere.

CC: It's true, though, I mean, look at this. It's a small picture, and this is a large one.

AL: It's the only way to show works of art.

CC: Otherwise, you'd be totally lost. You wouldn't know what you were—

AL: It's *elementary*. But you're not going to find it in many contemporary art books. What I want to get across—somewhere back here, it runs down. Look at these, look at the index. It goes back. See? Then it sort of repeats things that were acquired.

CC: Oh, I see.

AL: And then it sort of goes—it's a very eclectic bunch of things because it—but again, he does it chronologically. No, wait; no. I'm trying to get to visually—

CC: Oh, it must be right here, the whole...

AL: Yes, after the gap.

CC: After [Pablo] Picasso, yes.

AL: Now you see, he begins—see we got this [Paul] Cezanne after 19 whatever it was.

CC: Oh yes, acquisitions of '64.

AL: Yes, so, now it becomes chronological again. But when you use the book you have to be aware of that. It's a kind of trap, because—

CC: Him and [Henry] McBride, he was the critic. He was a very good critic, too.

AL: Yes.

CC: We read his things; he's really excellent. He seemed to have a great understanding of what the Museum was doing early on.

AL: Yes, he was sympathetic.

RC: Who would you say—? You gave us an idea of what the Museum is perpetuating in terms of an important thing that Barr did. Are there any other individuals that come to mind or ways in which Barr's influence is still very strong in specific people?

AL: I just think that it's with us all the time, the fact that we aim for quality. We don't always make it, but it is a—

RC: What happens when you don't make it? How do you deal with it? Do you have any particular philosophy?

CC: I like this, "Index of artists by nationality." And then they give the example of [Aleksandr] Archipenko, "an American born in the Ukraine and worked in Paris, and then came to the United States," so he's listed as French, Ukrainian and American.

AL: That's an interesting thing. Recently we, in our—

CC: It's very good, though, because you have an instant...

AL: In our catalogue listings, and this was another—

CC: Oh, here's chronicle of the collection.

AL: The chronicle just goes—

CC: So the chronicle really is something that's very—

AL: Oh, it's *essential* to read that chronicle. And it goes into disputes with trustees and things that—I mean, this period when we were going to turn over pictures to the Metropolitan, and then that all fizzled out.³

CC: "The danger of timidity...the Museum must continue to take risks."

RC: Let me ask you this. If you were put in Dick Oldenburg's seat for a second, would you change the direction at all, or are you pretty satisfied with where it's going? And now, with the expansion and so forth, is there anything different in terms of its doing a good job as The Museum of Modern Art that you would change?

AL: I think we are subservient to the box office, and are doing too many blockbusters. And I think we should do more contemporary art.

RC: That's a position I support, though I always enjoy things here.

AL: Yes, but I think it's something that we're stuck with; it's not that we're too happy about it. But it's a shame that we are not able to really take more chances and give more time and more attention to ephemeral stuff. But then the question is, what are we? Are we a kunsthalle or a kunstmuseum?

RC: More kunsthalle, I guess.

³ The Inter-Museum Agreement among MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1947, intended to allow the Met to acquire a number of older works of painting and sculpture from the collections of the two modern museums, freeing them to concentrate on more contemporary acquisitions. This agreement, by which such works as Picasso's *Woman in White* entered the collection of the Met, was terminated in 1953.

AL: Yes, well, not with our great collection. See, we do have such a *fabulous* collection. That means we are a kunstmuseum.

RC: Well I was thinking more as institution—I suppose I was getting the meanings mixed. Is there anybody else, though, who is championing the new work?

AL: In this building, in the Museum?

RC: No, I mean, who else but The Museum of Modern Art? I know, of course, there's the Whitney, but, is it the galleries really?

AL: Well, I think it's a very great thing that there are galleries. That's where you'll see a lot more experimental stuff than you will here.

RC: What about the relationship between the Museum and the galleries? I know at a certain time, they were working very, very closely together. Is that still true? The collection influenced what the galleries were showing, and the galleries would later on influence what the Museum was—I mean, what's that relationship like today? How would you characterize it?

AL: I don't know. I've gotten to be a cripple and I don't get around to galleries the way I used to.

RC: They must come to you, I would imagine. [Laughing]

AL: Well, I mean, there are younger people. We have here in the Department really lively—there are two girls, especially Laura Rosenstock and Monique Beudert cover the galleries. Of course, Kynaston McShine.

RC: We're going to be speaking to him.

AL: They are much more in tune with what's happening, and I will be once I get back; I'm hoping I'll be able to walk better.

RC: If one of these women is really hot about some artist, how do you make decisions about who to take in? I mean there's limited time and space.

AL: You mean for an exhibition?

RC: Yes.

AL: Nothing happens. It's the bureaucracy. We have to agree—if somebody has a bright idea, you have to get your peers around here to go along with it. Then it has to go before an exhibition committee meeting, and finally a trustees committee.

CC: Really, trustees also? Even for something like the [Projects](#) shows?

AL: No, maybe not the Projects.

RC: But for major exhibitions.

CC: But for major—something like [Louise Bourgeois](#), of course.

AL: Yes. And all this takes a lot of time. And it's too bad.

RC: You could have missed the boat by the time it gets—

AL: Well, we do. I think places like the New Museum is where really things happen, and Artists Space, and places like that are where you—and I'm sure Kynaston is going around and seeing all these things for his show, for the opening show [[An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture](#)]. And that's what we're looking forward to.

RC: Have you consulted with him at all?

AL: Well, not very much. He keeps his cards close to his chest. Naturally, we all are talking all the time.

RC: Sure. So it'll be a surprise and hopefully a delight, even to you. [Laughter]
Thank you for speaking with us.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:42:41