DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**WILLIAM LIEBERMAN (WL)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**RUTH CUMMINGS (RC); CARL COLBY (CC)**
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RC: Just for us, this is—

WL: No, I hate those things.

RC: So we don't have to take notes.

WL: Alright. Go ahead.

CC: What we hope to do is to tell the story from the inside out, and to begin with the older generation, which would be the Eddie Warburgs, and we even spoke to Lincoln Kirstein, Philip Johnson.

WL: Well, what actual connection did Eddie have, apart from his memories?

CC: Well, we hope, for him to be able to evoke a bit of the atmosphere and the mood of the period.

WL: Oh.

CC: In relation particularly to the Harvard Coop exhibitions that he helped put on with Lincoln Kirstein, and just to describe, in a sense, the times; to give an idea or a sense of really what it was like at that time, what people were collecting, why they would consider modern art at that time to have been outrageous. Just to re-create that feeling for us because those of you on the inside, and even people in New York, they feel it's—

RC: A fait accompli. It's understandable.

CC: That it's always been there. They can't really imagine a time when it was all that outrageous. But particularly, across the country, it would be interesting to know that Katherine Dreier and a number of other people were very early disciples, in a

sense, of modern art, and what that meant, to be carrying the banner at that time. Not to say that he was a great critic or even patron. I mean, it's really difficult to say, but he certainly can give a sense of the period.

RC: He was around, and we were looking to paint a picture of the era.

CC: He's an outrageous, impish character, and he's a lot of fun, really.

RC: He did a great impersonation of [Alfred] Barr.

CC: He gives a sense—he talks about his mother doing this and that, and he financed all these things, and I think to tell those stories in such an easy way, and for exhibitions to have been done that way, and for troupes of players—

WL: I can't think of a single show that Eddie did at the Modern.

CC: No, not at the Modern—but, well, he did do something that he said—someone there had said that he had done something there.

RC: It was mostly Lincoln, though.

CC: But he doesn't take credit for much, and I don't think, deservedly so. He hasn't really done all that much.

WL: Lincoln, on the other hand, functioned really as a curator of the Latin American collection which seemed to be in abyss, at present, [and] was largely of Lincoln's formation. Lincoln also co-directed at least one or two shows. For instance, there was one called American Realists and Magic Realists [*Americans 1943: Realists and Magic-Realists*], which he did, I believe, with Dorothy Miller. Then, of course, he directed the great [Elie] Nadelman show [*Elie Nadelman*]. I mean, Lincoln really functioned as a curator; perhaps it goes back to Harvard *Hound & Horn* days.

CC: He was very outspoken, but he wasn't feeling good.

WL: Lincoln was always very outspoken. Lincoln has changed considerably.

CC: But he was fascinating. He's really the only person we've talked to who, in a sense, questioned that the emperor has no clothes. His attitude is so opposed, really, to most of the general feelings of most of those who we speak to, that he comes, I wouldn't say as a refreshing view, but it's an extremely novel view. And

he both, I think, loved and detested Alfred Barr. It's really a very strange evocation he gives of him, and also of the Museum, of money and power and all of this business.

WL: Well, I think Lincoln, in a way, is Alfred's invention. [Laughter] Let's face it. Edgar Kaufmann's an Alfred invention. Philip Johnson is Alfred's invention. And whoever tells you that Alfred didn't invent them is just talking through their head.

RC: When you say invent them, people arrived on the scene and he molded?

WL: He shaped the people, just the way he invented me. I mean, various people involved then were initially bright, but he was the great beacon, though, that illuminated the whole scene, and could direct people and direct people very, very well, without imposing. And it also was always an inspiration to work with him. He was unique in that he really saw the complete picture all of the time, and he was seldom wrong. I mean, even today, if I was at a problem, I'd say to myself, "Well, what would Alfred have done?" And of course he also not only saw like a god, he wrote like a dream. I mean, he is, really, a great prose stylist.

CC: Some people have said that he's really the unknown tastemaker of the 20th century.

WL: Well, he's not only the tastemaker, he simply is Mr. Modern Art.

CC: Did he have any idea that it would become so prevalent and popular, in a sense? That it would reach its audience in such a—?

WL: Well, times change. Impressionism was shocking when it was shown; things are bound to change. But Alfred could see all points of view, I mean, all visual points of view. And he could exercise taste and judgment. He could also fit them in where things belonged without cubby-holing. He realized that very often more than one path leads to something. There's never going to be anyone like Alfred Barr.

RC: Do you think the Museum still embodies his spirit, or has it gone and transcended?

WL: Well, Alfred believed very firmly that a museum of modern art should be able to be seen in one visit. He believed that very, very firmly. And he believed that the

changing or temporary exhibitions should be seen in the context of the permanent collection itself. What he would have thought of this new expansion, I really don't know. It becomes obvious to anyone, though, that it'll be impossible, really, to absorb the whole Museum at one time. I myself was the founding director of its two most recent curatorial departments, Prints, whenever that was, and Drawings in 1971. I don't think Alfred in the beginning envisioned a separate drawing department; I really don't know why. But he certainly did envision a separate print department, just the way he had envisioned Photography.

CC: Do you think the Museum is like a headless horse since his departure? Is it very difficult for it to hold on, to be a standard bearer?

WL: No, there was a marvelous director who succeeded him, René d'Harnoncourt, who perhaps got on better with people. He had the innate facility for making everyone believe that he was their closest friend. He was very good; yes? Excuse me [tape break at 0:07:35].

CC: We would have certain people cover certain areas, because obviously, for you, [being] of the Museum, you know that you could speak at length about it. I know you could speak for weeks on it. But—

WL: I want to help you in any [way] you want or that I can. I mean, that place is my life. And what; it goes back to 1943. Their records are slightly wrong, incidentally. They have me coming in a year or a year and a half, later. But if you look in *Romantic Painting in America*, the credits, that shows in '43, I'm thanked as a staff member. [RC laughs]

CC: Because in our reading of it, and this is including other researchers and people that we spoke with, it appears to be [that] you were groomed as the natural successor to Alfred Barr; [that's' the way I was [told] to read it.

RC: People have said—

WL: Nay, it was. Alfred, though, you must remember, marvelous Alfred Barr became ill, and for a long time he didn't realize it. Then when he did realize it, it was devastating. But he continued working. You must also realize, and I'm not being disloyal, but a lot of the present problems of the Museum go back, not to Alfred so much as they do to René d'Harnoncourt. By placating everyone and being

everyone's best friend, really accumulated enough dust that it could be rolled into a ball.

RC: So that when he was out of the position, whoever followed had a big task.

CC: Yes. And no one could succeed Alfred and René. Absolutely no one.

CC: Speaking to Lincoln Kirstein, Warburg, Monroe Wheeler, different—we've spoken to a lot of different people who are of an age also who would have known Alfred quite well. They've been able to evoke—

WL: No one knew better Alfred than I did.

CC: But that's what I feel, and I think in terms of an evocation of the man himself, other people have been able to say a thing or two; Sidney Janis; Leo Castelli gave a very affectionate portrait.

WL: Where would Sidney Janis be if he hadn't been able to profit from the [INAUDIBLE: 0:09:50] show? Alfred brought him into the Museum, to the Advisory Committee. He collected long before he became dealer.

CC: Do you think the Museum is, its power and influence, is extremely pervasive?

WL: It's something that always concerned me, and I know at times it worried Alfred. To use the old expression, we could put toilet seats on the wall and people would rush out and buy them. It's a very great responsibility. Sometimes one giggles, though, we used to have shows called Good Design which, let's face it, were rather pretentious. And then someone had the wit to get out another [INAUDIBLE: 0:10:33] which set that up, [laughter] and everyone thought it was just terrible. I thought it was hilariously funny. [Laughing]

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:10:40].

CC: It seemed to be an environment, a community there, where people could really go the full length. We've seen films of Philip Johnson at an automobile design show [*8 Automobiles*] and talking about the shape of the door in relation to a window, and I mean, he was just having a hell of a lot of fun, and making a good point, too.

WL: Well, Philip's always been a ham. [RC laughs]

CC: But it seemed to be that it made modern art, rather than something very mysterious and suspect, it made it—

WL: Accessible.

CC: Very accessible

WL: Part of everyday lives.

CC: Something all of us could see, and—

WL: Uh-huh.

CC: Which was more difficult to explain? With Surrealism and Dadaism and, which was the toughest part of the game, really?

WL: I don't think you can divvy it that way. Alfred or anyone who worked with Alfred just, with his great training and guidance, one always let's say spoke or looked directly to the object, whatever it was. I mean, so much of art thinking is romantic and generalized. Alfred was not that way. He built up his specifics, and after each prop was in, then put the cloth, which was the umbrella.

CC: Did he, in a sense, invent modern cataloguing?

WL: Yes.

CC: And watching the show from—like, this is influenced by this? [Pablo] Picasso 1907 then influenced [Georges] Braque?

WL: Alfred was a great teacher by his installations. I mean, his installations, without too many labels, really taught something could be appreciated by the general spectator and subconsciously formed in their mind. To anyone more advanced, one profited by his installations. They were always extremely logical. And sometimes, a juxtaposition would be violent, but that would be very deliberate on his part. He did get to sort of hate horizontal pictures because they took up so much room on the wall. [Laughing]

CC: Previous to his installations, was a museum-going experience more of one where you simply entered a room of, say, masterpieces of 19th century French academic painting and you simply saw them, but there was no progression, nothing to be learned?

WL: No.

CC: But when Alfred hung a show, he changed the way of experiencing a museum? I guess the difference is—I went down to Washington once to see some two shows, one was *The Fifties* [*The Fifties: Aspects of Painting in New York*] at the Hirschhorn and the other was the *Post-Impressionism* [*Post-Impressionism: Cross-Currents in European and American Painting, 1880-1906*]. At *The Fifties* show, it just seemed to be everything from the fifties just sort of there, scattered. It was a dis-settling show. There were great paintings but no sense. Across the street—

WL: Did you see my *Art of the Twenties* show at the Modern, their 50th anniversary show?

RC: It was a few years ago.

WL: Yes. That was all the Museum's collection, and I wove together every media, including film and photography.

CC: Well, I was going to say, the other side of the street, almost to the other extreme, *Post-Impressionism* seemed to track a very complicated, convoluted track through Post-Impressionism.

WL: Well, that first Post-Impressionist show in Washington, one really remembers expensive frames.

CC: But it attempted to tell a story or to teach you something.

WL: Well it tended to tell it the way Alfred Barr had told that.

CC: Right. And I got so much more out of it.

WL: Remember that show was a sudden show, it was a cancellation of the National Gallery, and they latched onto something that was in London at the Royal Academy.

CC: People have written that you also have that facility for exhibition.

WL: Yes.

CC: For putting together an exhibition, for not simply the scholarship but for the—

WL: It's essential you think of the people who are looking at it. For instance, the way Alfred would change eye levels just so people wouldn't always be looking *that* way. It's really quite effective.

RC: Do you see that so much though, now?

WL: Sometimes. Occasionally, if it's [INAUDIBLE: 0:15:05].

RC: But he did that out of a matter of principle.

WL: No, no. He believed, though, that people get tired of always being at the same—

RC: Tired of just on the same level.

WL: Yes; sure.

CC: Do you see anyone at the Museum as having any of the sort of eternal flame of Alfred? Is John Szarkowski, for instance, somebody who seems to carry?

WL: John is essentially a wonderful person in that sort of Will Rogers aspect of him; he's terribly ingratiating [pause] and he certainly is a good historian of photography. I don't think though that—I know that he himself is in no way comparing himself to Alfred.

CC: No, not in comparison but in terms of carrying on basic values.

RC: Because some other people, I don't know if they even relate, since they weren't around and the departments are so big now that they don't have contact with people who were still there.

CC: He was very, very young then, but still, to—

WL: Well, he didn't install his first show, if I remember, Arthur Drexler did.[1] And Arthur Drexler loves exercising his architectural muscle, and if I remember the installation, it was sort of like a fortress [INAUDIBLE: 0:16:22] imposed. I mean, one person holding and carrying the flame and passing it to someone else—that really did *not* happen at the Modern in *any* way.

[1] The first show that John Szarkowski curated at MoMA, with Grace M. Mayer, was *Ernst Hass: Color Photography* in 1962 and it was installed by Herbert Migdoll. However, a year later, Szarkowski curated *The Photographer and the American Landscape*, which was installed by Arthur Drexler.

RC: Was it partly due to how special Alfred was in the circle around him, then when the staff and Museum became institutionalized and growing as it did in such an expansion? Is it ever possible, do you think, to carry forth with that core of ideas and people? It almost had to expand.

WL: One worked as a team, and one thought as a team. I mean, we didn't sit down at a table and say, "My guys are going to do *this*!" sort of crap. But one instinctively—

RC: Was connected to the other players.

WL: Yes.

RC: But that doesn't exist now, do you feel?

WL: I think certainly much less. I mean, all these separate departments with their own directors, being called directors over their stationery, let's say, Department of Pots and Pans, and then the letter is signed, "Director." And the outside world must think there are about 10 directors. There's *nothing* wrong with the title Curator or Chief Curator. And I believe very much that the titles should be curatorial.

RC: What about the dealing with, for instance, the Projects room, which was a tip to trying to be more current?

WL: Projects came into being because the Modern was being criticized negatively for not being "with it." And that seemed like a good solution. I think when you begin worrying that you're not "with it," that perhaps, is bad in itself. I wonder how many informed people could recall five of those Project shows.

RC: I recall two.

WL: No, I mean that quite seriously.

CC: But ideologically, what sort of track do you think MoMA is on?

WL: It's impossible to answer that because it's more than 50 years later. In 1929, when the Museum opened, Claude Monet had been what, dead only three years. People don't realize that. And [Auguste] Renoir survived the second World War;[2]

[2] Auguste Renoir survived WWI as he died in 1919.

[Edgar] Degas died at what, 1917. I mean, it doesn't work the way the textbook said it did.

CC: [lLaughing] No, not at all.

WL: Actually, by 1906, all of your Post-Impressionists had copped, and it was the Impressionists who were still alive.

CC: Then there are oddballs like [Pierre] Bonnard who were still painting.

WL: [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:23] .

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:25] catch up with it.

WL: Bonnard and [Édouard] Vuillard survived the second World War.[3] But what I really mean to infer is that in 1929, things certainly were different. And something done in 19...

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:19:42

[3] Bonnard survived WWI as he died in 1947, but Vuillard died of a heart attack in June of 1940.