DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: **LAWRENCE ALLOWAY (LA)**

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

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CC: I mean it does create an answer [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:03]. I guess to a lot of people it just—

RC: It was a creative solution as far as the financial people go, to make this tower.

CC: I think it might be from the point of view of the people who already—

LA: I mean, aside from if it can sort of generate lots of ample good funds and so forth, I mean, the fact that the Museum is at a very different point now than it was—you mentioned a romantic beginning, and perhaps so, but somehow it's changed a great deal. I've been thinking about the Museum on and off ever since you've told me about [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:46] and the extent to which it's institutionalized its own taste is in one way a terrific success, where in another way maybe is kind of conservative. For example, William Rubin, the present incumbent, who is a terrific scholar, I think, and a man of super energy, he has done—he has updated [Pablo] Picasso's Alfred Barr exhibition and he's continually done [Joan] Miró studies—I think that was a [James Johnson] Sweeney exhibition [*Joan Miró*]. Now he's done [Giorgio] de Chirico [*Giorgio de Chirico*], which was a James Thrall Soby exhibition [*Giorgio de Chirico*]. So, this is not for lack of invention on Bill's part; it's positive. He really wants to establish tradition and update it and keep it going. And so I think the place is kind of frozen, but on a marvelous scale and without any impairment of its terrific scholarly standards. I mean, regardless of the size of the real estate and the amount of dollars it cost.

CC: But does it shift the focus from the brash aesthetic adolescent to one of the more established middle-class art appreciator? Is it now simply a repository of great works but not the proselytizer it once might have been or the priest that it might

have been? It used to carry almost a religious banner; you lived or died by modernism. But now...

LA: Well, in a way, they try to keep it on inasmuch as the effort is to keep 20th century art small, and so elitism has taken over proselytizing. But it's the same causes: cubism, abstract art. It's art on the whole separated from social input. A kind of formalistic current runs through, from Alfred Barr's—many of Alfred Barr's early shows, and certainly through to William Rubin—so that in a way, it's not so much that it's gone from being adolescent to being establishment, it's that it's been a terrific success, on the basis of very palpable ideas.

CC: I think you're right about [that]—it's very interesting what you said; it's quite brilliant. Because now—it began as something small that was preaching this one thing to be prolific—

LA: Right.

CC: But really what's happened is now the pyramid is narrowing and it's saying, 'Well *only* this is the true word.'

LA: Mm-hm.

CC: So out goes representational, out goes super-realist, out goes many things that don't fit the scheme.

LA: Exactly. And they've induced it for Pop art and, you know—and then it had to be just the one Pop [work], Roy Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl*.

CC: The cooler Pop.

LA: Yes, so, they did a terrifically intelligent analysis of what key pictures are, and then get them, because they're brilliant and resourceful at that, and then reproduce it forever afterwards. [Laughter]

RC: So then it's no longer precious.

LA: But it also becomes an emblem of value. And they have so many pictures that have become emblems of aesthetic valuing.

CC: Rather than develop a learning aesthete. In other words, rather than teaching your eye, they've simply shown you objects that are of purported great value, and you judge from there.

LA: Right.

RC: And you recognize them.

LA: Well, it's a self-supporting process. On the one hand, it increases the value of the collection, and on the other hand, it increases the righteousness of those holding the collection.

CC: Mm-hm. But to somebody [who is] unaware, it doesn't really teach them how to see, does it?

LA: It doesn't teach them how to relate to contemporary art as an ongoing experience with a lot of things in it. And it's that which—the Museum didn't begin like that. They had [Vincent] van Gogh and—you know, among their early exhibitions—and [Winslow] Homer, I think, was another one, as well as—

RC: The Americans.

LA: But gradually that stuff was reduced, and the purer formal line emerged as the real interest.

RC: So do you think the Museum, in its relationship to contemporary art—? Well, you just said, has changed, then, since its inception?

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:35], it's in danger of suffocating itself?

LA: I think it has no connection to contemporaneity any longer. On the other hand, I think it's the greatest museum of 20th century art—say, in the first 50-odd years of the century—that exists. It's just amazing.

RC: So what would you say as far as a projection of the future, if you had the powers that be? Should it just do—what can it do?

LA: I don't see how they can move other than [what] they're doing, really, because you can't go around raking in works forever without having storage problems. And they don't have any interest in the Whitney Museum's notion of having scattered museums around and putting parts of the permanent collection into

that, it seems. The only time they've distributed the permanent collection is during the rebuilding.

RC: Now.

CC: And also Bill Lieberman, who mentioned, even with the little aside to the past about how we'd love to get those pictures back here again on a permanent basis at the Met.[1]

RC: The earlier works.

CC: But he did say that [that is] something that would be scandalous now but really, what New York museums should consider, is interchanging on a temporary basis and allowing, let's say, the Whitney, to have a terrific show by lending here and lending there—I mean among themselves really.

LA: You mean among New York museums?

CC: Among New York museums.

LA: Oh bullshit. You can go from one art museum to another without any problem. I think the problem is rather the relationship between New York museums, which are a very preppy little group, and the rest of the country. And I can see the purpose of exchanges there. But I don't think that bringing the [Vasily] Kandinskys from the Guggenheim down to Met, and the Met sending its [Andrew] Wyeths to the Guggenheim—

CC: Well I think he meant it in terms of things like when he had the *Art of the Twenties* show and things like that. The Modern is in a good position to do exhibitions like, let's say, [on] the German Expressionism [movement] and having it reflected in painting, sculpture, film, photography, design; and they can sort of do that whole thing.

LA: On that basis, yes. But you know, it's typical. Alfred Barr felt, I am told, that he had neglected grossly in the Museum, expressionism. So he looked around and

[1] Lieberman is referencing 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.

found this hotshot, youngish art historian, Peter Selz, [and] brought Selz in. Selz bombed. He did his German Expressionist show, but then he was too abrasive a man, and he was too anxious to start his own movement out of American artists. So, for various reasons [INAUDIBLE: 0:09:40]. But it's typical of Barr, I thought, that he should contemplate what he had done and then introduce a corrective. Whereas there's no sense any longer, it seems to me, of that internal correction sense working. It seems to be a kind of—Bill Rubin's solidly based academic formalism has no outside—

RC: Check or balance.

LA: Check or balance; right.

RC: So did you have any contact with Barr himself?

LA: No. Well, I met him [INAUDIBLE: 0:10:25] once or twice. That's all.

RC: Is there anybody else that exists in the world of art today that embodies his spirit of doing things?

LA: No. A part of that is because of the changed circumstances. You see, Barr did it—Barr had this great discovery of modern art at a time when it was a relatively compact body of information that had been discovered. Now it's only too well known and of absolutely enormous dimension. So it's hard to think of anybody who could both proselytize and have a simple enough situation to work with.

CC: There's also—just when he was championing this little cause, along came these women [Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan] who had unlimited funds who felt some connection to it and felt that they were a part of their time and they wanted to push to a certain extent not too far, but they began to support just at that moment.

LA: Oh, I think they made MoMA marvelous. If you take away the women from American museums, they'd look like European museums, you know, very skinny and bleak, like the Tate Gallery or the museum of modern art in Rome. They're jokes compared to what is sort of routine almost here.

RC: That is an interesting phenomenon, that American patronage of the arts differs so much. They had to catch up so fast, they felt, or establish themselves in one fell swoop.

LA: Don't you think it had to do with the fact that American women were better educated than European women? Aside from aristocratic women who turned to racehorses and jewelry and so forth, American women had an education which included the obligation to educate more people.

CC: Yes, I see that in Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's own writings. Not only was she taught an appreciation of music, particularly art and that sort of thing, but she was also imbued with a mission that art is good for you and that these are things that can help correct your spirit and give you nourishment in a spiritual sense.

LA: Right.

CC: And I think, saddled with that, plus with the wealth that they had, I think that just made her, actually—

LA: But you see, there were wealthy women in other parts of the world too, but there's not a corresponding increase or not a corresponding development of museums of modern art.

CC: I guess they also felt that they could do it; they could actually have a little club or a museum and just get it going, if they could afford it, and this is what they would do. But to have something other than just a temporary show is quite extraordinary.

LA: In a way you know, that leads to what is a problem for the modern museum or its prospect. The fact is, the Modern really has become a repository. And what we really need is a separate system now of kunsthaus. So don't have permanent collections; don't sort of gradually accumulate the kind of inertia which it's got.

CC: It begins to feel that way, that we ought to have in a sense our Louvres or whatever and also our Jeu de Paumes that have—you already know that when you go [to MoMA] you'll see the [Henri] Rousseau, you'll see the permanent collection, you'll see all of what you want.

LA: They are blocks of time.

RC: Right.

CC: Right, and that maybe the Whitney, let's say—it just would be refreshing to know that let's say the Whitney just happened to be now *the* museum that all the new people flock to—

RC: And try to be.

CC: Because each one of them now has this little [INAUDIBLE: 0:14:38].

RC: But the galleries here seem to have taken up—I mean, people really visit galleries; it's not just the people who are there to buy.

LA: Right, yes.

RC: And that's where—

LA: But I think there used to be a reciprocal relationship between galleries and museums in the earlier days. Now that's become formalized, and galleries simply service museums with their current hotshots and classics, and curators have permitted this to happen.

CC: And they work in tandem, possibly. There'll be a Picasso or something, and then the Pace will have its Picasso

LA: Well that's the galleries imitating the museums. But there's also the fact that—[I'm] thinking of the Whitney; where do the new artists come from? They come from galleries. That's how you—you have to be sorted by the galleries before you are admitted to the museums.

RC: So it's really a factor of economics, then, and the marketplace?

LA: Yes, but it's also a factor of taste, I think. It's a social factor, too. I mean, Dorothy Miller's shows at the Modern, 50 Americans, 60 Americans, various numbers, they—almost all the artists came from galleries, and a lot of the artists looked pretty bad, but the ones who looked good, the best ones, the Abstract Expressionists, most of them at that time came from [the] Betty Parsons gallery. And Betty Parsons was very close to Dorothy Miller and Alfred Barr at that time. So...

CC: So it was like a farm team.

LA: And so there was no—I mean, there's no question of bribery and corruption; it was a mental and emotional opinion.

RC: It's a community.

LA: It's a community, right. But now the gallery situation has become much better organized and they do so well, and the curators have become so passive that they just [INAUDIBLE: 0:16:50].

CC: How much selection do you think Alfred Barr really made, let's say, when he went to Europe? I mean he really—if you look at it very closely he went and saw what was active in the Bauhaus. He also went to the Soviet Union for some time and saw some things there. But by that time—he's also, in a sense, shopping and being the tourist when things have already bubbled up to the surface. [Henri] Matisse was known, obviously, and [Paul] Cezanne and people like that, they all were known in Europe. So he didn't really discover anything, he simply, what? Brought it to America and popularized it?

LA: Well he put it on a more substantial basis. There had been no research on Matisse like Barr's research on Matisse. I think Alfred Barr, you know, really turned English into the language of modern art history. Now, that's an amazing thing, because it used to be German. I mean it still is for some periods of art. But absolutely not for the 20th century.

CC: Did he really establish the whole method of scholarship and of—?

LA: It was together with Barr—I think, both research and production of catalogues, and research and production of exhibitions, and research and the growth of the collection. They all sort of meshed.

CC: One sort of triumvirate that really is very bizarre to look at—and it's Alfred Barr on one end, very much the Presbyterian and the Protestant whose appreciation of art in seeing a hierarchy and cataloguing. And then Eddie Warburg, the mother's son, just the most perfect patron of the arts, a sort of happy-go-lucky person who always paid the bill, who really appealed. He said Barr's great failing, he felt, was that he didn't have a glandular response to art; he sort of lost that; he became very much the intellectual and the aesthete, rather than—and then on

the third side of the triangle would be someone like Lincoln Kirstein who absolutely rejects out of hand all of modern art post, what? 1935?

LA: Post 1940s lyrical symbolism. [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:09].

CC: Exactly, I mean everything between magic realism or whatever his last departure [was], he feels it's lost its humanity.

LA: Yes, well, I can see why he minds, because the Museum had a magic realist phase. If you look back at the early catalogues, they're very heavy on magic realism.

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:30] and people like that?

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:32] and...

LA: I forget their names. If you look back, you'll see that they were picking up this thing about American romanticism and magic realism. They sounded like [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:43] for a while; you know? And then they dropped it, and of course, that meant dropping Lincoln Kirstein, too. He hasn't really recovered, in a sense.

RC: No, he's really vitriolic about it.

CC: I guess what Lincoln made you think about, at least, was that he made it apparent, or in his mind very apparent, that when you're now looking at pictures, you aren't just looking at a picture, you're looking at a Picasso that then you have in your own [INAUDIBLE: 0:20:13] hierarchy. You're given a direction before you're even allowed to make up your mind. In his mind he says people can't draw any more, they're only making collage.

RC: Now they can, today. It took [INAUDIBLE: 0:20:26].

CC: Now I guess they're drawing again.

LA: That's right.

CC: He likes to think of it as being more fragmented, more broken up than just going along the wall and seeing [Paul] Gauguin leads to this and this leads to that. Because art has too many anomalies[?].

LA: Well that's one of the things that has happed with surveys and the way museums hang their permanent collection, art has been linearized, as it were.

RC: Well, Barr instituted that, no?

CC: Some people don't appear, for instance, [Pierre] Bonnard, it just doesn't make sense. He should be pushed back 30 years, or, late Matisse.

LA: Right. Or if you go through The Museum of Modern Art's collection, expressionism is so often a little blip on the side.

RC: Right. Meanwhile, it's this big—

LA: Meanwhile, Cezanne, cubism, abstract art...

CC: This expressionism comes whipping around the corner just when [Piet] Mondrian is trying to—

LA: And [then] there's, this muddle; [this] little blip is formal, or figurative, political, Latin American art, which again, the Modern was, I think, very good at supporting when it did. You know, it was early and moved confidently, but now the formalist line has obliterated it, and it's just a miserable little space.

CC: Do you think they'll have to open up now a little bit? They're just going to have to open the gates a little bit more?

RC: Asked in another way, do you think that with another person—? Rubin has chosen this rap, this main highway for art—if there was another person, maybe another Barr-type person who wanted to spread out more, would that change the course or is it solidified?

LA: Well, yes. I think it needs somebody as fanatical and tough and intelligent as Bill Rubin to do it. Because Rubin is a very tough person to argue with, so it'd be awfully hard, if you were a curator there, to have an argument. I mean, you can see how the rather weak junior curators got wiped out with their New Talent shows. They just occupy a little corridor on the way to the restaurant; the Projects.

CC: Is it because he's so—he represents the status quo; he's entrenched in his Cezanne, his Matisse.

LA: And let's face it; he's marvelous at it.

CC: He's very wonderful.

LA: But he is not an open-minded man.

CC: So it makes it very difficult for any—

LA: It makes it impossible. I mean, Bill Lieberman is at the Metropolitan because of a fight, an institutional fight with Rubin that he lost.

CC: He feels he's in exile; and he of course feels that [because] he was probably the heir apparent to Barr. And then he feels Barr invented him; he said as much. He said, "I was invented by Alfred Barr."

RC: Yes, and he does. He said, "We were created out of all the same mold," certain people, because "Barr made us."

CC: And that was it, from somebody who's—

LA: But it's Rubin who actually applies Barr harder.

CC: To systematize him?

LA: Because Lieberman's own practice is pretty sloppy. He was amiable, a nice guy, good tastes, you know. But he didn't have the rigor that Barr has, and Bill does.

RC: Well that's good to know.

CC: Are there any museums that you see anywhere exhibiting any of the verve and excitement that you might wish the Modern had more of?

LA: No. Not really. That is to say, I think the Modern's problem is more the problem of the period. It's not uniquely its own. I think the fact is, we are now in a situation of—we're saturated by information from magazines, galleries, so that every museum is having to settle for only a part of the cake. So they're all having problems.

CC: Robert Hughes was complaining about the fact that—he said most of the time, half [of] the time, he's acting as a big headline service for these blockbusters. He has to write up something on the Vatican, and then two months from now he'll be writing on the who knows what, the Peruvian Incan treasures of whatever.

LA: Especially if they're gold. [Laughter]

CC: So he really feels—he says he's a dyed-in-the-wool modernist and he loves the Modern and all that represents, but it's just, where's the new stuff? It's very difficult for him to get in and plow through.

LA: I mean, I think the new stuff isn't in museums. And not just because it's new and museums will put it in in a year or two, as it used to be the case. I think there is now such a quantity of new work that it's more than the museums can handle. And also, I think the alternative spaces system [and] realism are on the whole scarcely compatible with the taste and training of the curators. Because American curators come out of the Institute of Fine Arts, mostly, or places like that. They've nearly all got a graduate education.

CC: Well, we met a couple of peer scholars, someone like John Elderfield, very erudite and lovely.

LA: And he's out of the Courtauld Institute.

CC: But look at him. He's an absolute—he's a gem for that, but he's probably not going to take too many—he's just very strict. He's not an outsize personality; he's not a flamboyant character. He's someone who is very methodical and...

LA: He's a very good narrow scholar, but absolutely within Bill Rubin's tolerances.

CC: Mm-hm, which doesn't say—

LA: He was Bill's first hiring, I think when [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:02].

CC: Do you think that Americans are just too inundated and saturated—? Well you said they're saturated with information, but, I mean, do you think Americans are just, we're just much too over-exposed to things repeatedly like this?

LA: Oh no.

CC: Are we too in love with information and not so much with criticism or with growth?

LA: No, I don't think that. In fact, one of the good things that I think is the high exposure to—

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:34].

RC: Still, must have some [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:36].

LA: What I'm not so pleased with are the ways in which it's narrowed down. And one of the ways in which it's narrowed down is by graduate education, where you come off from your teenage culture, [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:54] iconic works and everything behind you, and switch to a whole new set of topics which are closely identified with the faculty.

CC: So suddenly what you're doing in your spare time and all of your—the thoughts, the impulses that brought you there in the first place are all scuttled, and suddenly you're taking on—

LA: Yes, your peer culture is shuffled, is moved down, and you take on the ongoing faculty, curator, museum director.

CC: Well I guess that would be like if everybody interested in music suddenly could only study classical music.

LA: Yes, something like that.

CC: Or anyone who was interested in films was only making—

LA: And honestly, that doesn't apply to all art as such, but it does apply to an awful lot of curators.

CC: And also to an awful lot of art that becomes—well, that's celebrated.

LA: Yes but look at all the art which isn't celebrated. I mean, look at the alternative spaces, look at realism. That's not subject to that kind of [INAUDIBLE: 0:29:05].

CC: If you think about it, look at the whole Chicago—and not just the Hairy Who group but what is it? Roger Brown and all of these—they're a lot of illustrators and graphic people, and Ed Paschke and all these people who even illustrate for *Playboy*, for instance, and who've done those outrageous air brush drawings and all that kind of thing, and that doesn't make its way into too many curatorial spaces. Or does it?

LA: I think you should check the catalogues.

CC: Sometimes it does and sometimes...

LA: There's a Who Chicago up there.

CC: It's funny you mentioned that because when you said illustration or popular culture...

LA: Right. Well, somewhere up there there's a thing called Who Chicago, and there's been a Chicago show touring Europe.

CC: That must have been a real eye-opener for people.

LA: It's quite flat, probably around your hands, I think.

RC: Speaking of—well, we didn't really speak of Pop, specifically; I know that's a real interest of yours; but, that time at the Museum, in the sixties, how would you characterize what was going on there? I know what was going on outside. They must have kind of missed the boat a little bit.

LA: Yes. One of the things that Alfred Barr didn't really like much, I think, was Abstract Expressionism. My impression from things people have said and what the Museum actually acquired, is, he didn't like it too much. He left that to Dorothy Miller.

RC: Who did okay.

LA: Who did okay. But if you look [at] when William Rubin went in, one of the things he did, which I think was very forward, was [a] terrific beefing up of the Abstract Expressionist collection. He knew just where there was a gigantic early [Mark] Rothko [missing] and just which [Barnett] Newman was needed, and so forth. And so he amended the state of the collection, which was pretty tacky, actually, when he went in.

CC: How could Barr have missed the boat on Abstract Expressionism? It seems obvious now, I guess, but...

LA: He didn't like the art.

CC: Wasn't it very outrageous when it was first seen? I mean, it looked so different than everything else.

LA: Well, I suppose—how many things can you be responsible for discovering? Since he had brought everything from post-impressionism to de Stijl.

CC: I could see missing Pop, I guess, because it's just so new and so different looking than—

LA: But he also was—well, again, there was a dutiful acknowledgement of it.

RC: He liked [Jasper] Johns. He immediately picked up on Johns.

LA: Yes, he did.

CC: I guess what I was remembering was something like—well, like, if you knew Rothko and Rothko had been making surrealist pictures; he copied [André] Masson and he drew inspiration from the early Surrealists, and then he gradually put the forms in and gradually—and finally came up with [INAUDIBLE: 0:32:15] pictures. It seemed to be more of a painterly sensibility than someone like a [Andy] Warhol or Lichtenstein that—well, it didn't stand very much, but boom, suddenly people were either outraged or just absolutely loved it.

LA: Johns was a special case at the Modern, as you know, and Barr flipped for him and got several in. On the other hand, no [Robert] Rauschenbergs, and Rauschenberg was left alone for a long, long time.

RC: And then the prices went up, up, and up.

CC: There's a funny interview with him by Mike Wallace when they ask him about his show and whether he'd want to have a show at the Modern. He goes, "Ah, I don't really care about it." It's a very—he says, "Well, they didn't recognize me earlier," and it's very petulant but it's very funny though. He just makes it very clear that the Modern isn't doing him any favors.

LA: Well, it wasn't really, until the Smithsonian exhibition—

RC: They had that big retrospective.

LA: —went to the Modern that they'd done anything of any scale, and that wasn't originated by the Modern; that was Walter Hopps at the Smithsonian.

CC: Do you think America is simply catching up to European appreciation of art, at this point?

LA: Absolutely.

CC: Or is America truly inundated with art and the appreciation of culture now?

LA: Oh I think so. I think it's Europe which is lagging. I mean, look at the reports on the French conference on culture in Paris. I mean, it's a joke.

CC: So the floodgates opened with Barr and others of course pushing and [INAUDIBLE: 0:34:04].

LA: We really live in a high information age.

CC: It's funny to see how many people [there are] streaming through that museum. Of course, the Met [INAUDIBLE: 0:34:15].

RC: It's amazing.

CC: Whereas 30 years ago, you would have walked through those museums. They weren't that crowded.

LA: I know this is the wrong museum, but I used to work at the Guggenheim, and I went there one Sunday afternoon to see how a show I had done was doing; it was Francis Bacon. And it was packed, happily, with people. About 6,000 people went on a Sunday afternoon.

CC: On one day?

LA: Yes, on one afternoon; it wasn't even open a full day; that's five hours. That was soon after I'd come to America. And in Europe I had been to the first Jean Dubuffet retrospective at the Palais des Arts Décoratifs. And in a month they had about 6,000 people. And I realized that the American taste for culture is not as superficial, not something to be apologized for or despised.

RC: Robert Hughes said that at one point he—much as he thinks it's great that the acceptance by the public is so high; they embrace almost anything—two things he said, they're not too discriminating, and another thing is that he would love to be in a museum—and he likes to think of a museum as a temple, just to be there and see the pictures, not have the opening, and...

CC: I think he's concerned that it's become sort of a...

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:35:42