DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**WILLIAM RUBIN (WR)**
INTERVIEWEWRS:	**CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)**
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WR: People who worked very closely with him and were deeply and tremendously loyal to him. Alfred [Barr] tended to inspire more respect and admiration than affection. And I think actually, for many years, though, there was tension between the two men. Alfred, I think, never accepted the idea that he was replaced as director of the Museum and was always critical of René [d'Harnoncourt]. René was an immense personality, who understood all this and as you no doubt know, was only willing to take the job on the basis of the reinstating of Alfred as director, really, of the entire museum collection, not just painting and sculpture.

CC: All aesthetic judgments were left with Alfred?

WR: That's right. Well, I would say this, that the Museum's exhibition program was not really in Alfred's control, and that was in part—I mean, that was generated by everybody, but with René at the head. So that you might say that René's art part was more connected with exhibitions. Alfred tended to be more involved—except for those exhibitions which he actually did, which were numerous—largely to do with collections. And though he was nominally director of all collections, he didn't really deal with much more than painting, sculpture, and drawings. Everything else: architecture and design, prints, film, and so forth, he was purely nominally director of.

CC: What were his great attributes and contributions? I mean, he's such a watershed character.

WR: Alfred's greatest quality, I think, was his eye. And I think that's what it had to be if he was to accomplish these things. But in addition to that, he was a brilliant art historian, and he saw the Museum and its activities intellectually, in connection with a comprehensive art historical notion. That is, it was his aim to produce the first synoptic collection of modern art. If you have visited museums in Europe, you will know that in Paris, even today, the collection at Beaubourg which is probably second only to this Museum's collection in its range and so forth, has only one [Piet] Mondrian. It has no Italian Futurist painting. It is dominated by the national schools, that is, the movements which took place. Since the history of French painting was at least for a large part of it modern art; French painting covers a lot of territory. But still, there were a number of different things that it doesn't cover. And these are very under-represented. So, it is not synoptic, and it is not balanced in any way. Alfred's idea was to have a synoptic collection in which all world art, modern art, would be equated according to its quality and importance historically. The collection was built up that way. If there was anything at all that was under-valued by Alfred, it was the American art of that period, which Alfred considered, and fundamentally rightly but not as rightly as it now looks in retrospect, he considered it provincial. Since there was not enough money to buy as widely as one would have liked, Alfred tended—and there was a kind of tacit agreement, in fact, at one point, if you read his summary, it was actually expressed, that, at one point, that the Metropolitan and the Whitney would concentrate on the American art. This is why I inherited a collection which doesn't have a decent [Marsden] Hartley in it. Now, you see, a painter like Hartley, who was really quite an important, fine painter, with all of the [Pablo] Picassos we have, we don't have a good Hartley. And this is because [at] that phase, Alfred was committed to the notion that the great modern tradition was taking place in Europe, and he was 98 percent right; you know? But there was this one thing. Also, I should say this, that the coming of age of American art, what I've called the American Renaissance, which really begins in the forties with the younger [Jackson] Pollock and younger [Mark] Rothko and so forth, as this unrolled in the fifties and sixties, and especially as it got beyond Abstract Expressionism, which was rooted fundamentally in European painting, in abstract painting and in Surrealism, and it got into figures like Jasper Johns and so forth, you found more and more echoes of an earlier American tradition that went back

to [Charles] Demuth and Hartley and so forth, and in other cases, to precisionist painting and so forth, and even to photography. All of the twenties and thirties, if I could call it that, looks different to us now than it did right after World War II. You know? So that would be, I would say, the only area that was perhaps under-weighted in this broad synoptic idea, but fundamentally, Alfred carried it off. And in order to carry it off, he had to have first, the eye, which was a very catholic eye. Most people who feel intensely about painting, tend to feel intensely about one kind of painting. Alfred felt intensely about a great variety of things. That's the first thing. The second thing is that Alfred saw the formation of the collection as something related to a historical process, which had never—you see, no museum had ever been formed before to deal in the same way with the art of its own period *self-consciously*, if you can put it that way, on a historical basis.

CC: So he was aiming to teach.

WR: Yes. There was an evangelical and a didactic thing, not didactic in words but didactic in works.

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:29].

RC: The mission.

WR: Yes, but basically through the works, to make the history of art visible, the connections visible and so forth.

CC: And that's why he would have had that map, for instance.

WR: Yes, well, those were the early didactics. Later, I think he outgrew—we outgrew that. But the collection, you see, as the collection made things more and more visible by the works themselves, it became less and less necessary to use words. Also you have to remember that as you proceed into the later forties and fifties and sixties, there was a change in the sophistication of the audience. Art history, modern art history, was not taught in the thirties and twenties. Meyer Schapiro and Alfred gave, and [Robert] Goldwater, gave the first courses in the subject in the thirties—Alfred briefly before he came.

CC: At Wellesley.

WR: Yes, but after World War II, modern art became a popular course on campus. And you have whole generations of people now who come to the Museum already with a kind of sophistication about this material which would have been unthinkable in the 1940s. I mean, you think of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* as something that's always been there, the kind of famous monument and so forth. The picture was unknown in 1938 when Alfred bought it. There were people who criticized the fact that he gave up, to acquire it, a small [Edgar] Degas racehorse picture, to buy this supposedly unfinished clumsy ugly picture. You see? And it's very hard to project oneself back into a period in time when what we consider given and known was not known and given.

CC: There were no precedents.

WR: And you see, in that sense, Alfred had to virtually construct this; there was no literature. The first catalogues of The Museum of Modern Art were the literature on modern art with the exception of a few things that happened in Germany, basically, and that got cut off in 1933 by [Adolf] Hitler. So today, I like to think that our catalogues make an important contribution, but they're one of thousands of books that are appearing all over the world on this subject. Whereas, in 1939, if you were to have a bookshelf of modern art, it would have been dominated by the publications of The Museum of Modern Art.

CC: We talked with Philip Johnson; his initial library became the Library. And we were this morning with Paul Gottlieb, I mean my god, look at that that's an empire of art books.

WR: Now, by the same token, if you look back at those books, the texts are full of errors, they're very short, I mean, they don't have at all the serious scholarship. But that's because there were virtually no tools; there was no body of information to work with.

CC: When you look back now, though, would it be fair to call Barr a modern-day [Bernard] Berenson?

WR: I would think that's demeaning to Barr. They weren't at all alike. Berenson was fundamentally a kind of aesthete, and he was very much involved with

attributions, art market, building private collections, and so forth. Barr, I think, had a public tradition.

CC: He was more of a proselytizer, evangelical?

WR: Yes. I think his vision was bigger than Berenson's vision. That is, the vision of this Museum collection, the vision of making a synoptic history of modern art which would contain all schools and keep the things in balance. Now I don't know when Alfred first formed this vision. In some rough form it must have been there right at the beginning. But in the earliest days of the Museum, the collection was kind of helter-skelter. And gradually it began to fill out. One of the things that would amaze most people under 60 today—and I have almost to feel my way into it by checking back—is to see what the collection looked like in the forties when The Museum of Modern Art was already a famous institution, as compared to what it is today. 80 percent of what's out there wouldn't be there. You know?

CC: So it was still very much a scatter-shot collection of pictures?

WR: It was still a very scatter-shot thing until the fifties, when it began, it was a great decade for the filling out of the collection. And during that time, Alfred was already building for the future. This was a very important aspect of Alfred's thing, [which] was that, there wasn't enough money to buy more than just a little bit here and there, but what he could do—and he wasn't alone in this. One thing we must never forget is the important contribution of people like James Soby, many others. They would interest a trustee or a friend of the Museum in a picture, and the quid pro quo—because the Museum would have "found" the picture, so to say—would be that they would either will it to the Museum or make it a life-interest gift, which no longer exists as a possibility, but there used to be a tax situation called the life-interest thing, where you gave it right away, you kept it for your lifetime, and you got a tax deduction anyway, based upon your life expectancies. So we have a great many things which Alfred knew would come someday, like all of the Nelson Rockefeller pictures which are now in, and all of the James Thrall Soby pictures which are now in. Well, all those were being envisioned, you see, back in the years when those collections were being formed.

CC: And they were being selected by him.

WR: They were being selected, and the collection, though it looked spotty in the forties, in Alfred's mind, in those interstices were all of these pictures out there that would someday come, you see, and fill that out. Now, based upon that, by the time I came into the situation, the late sixties, it was more a question of filling the occasional lacunas, of refining, elaborating, and so forth. I think that in a certain sense, we are like the pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants—that is, we see further than they saw, but they covered the main territory. And I don't think that it's possible for our generation to do the same thing, because the pioneering effort is always the hardest one, and that's what they accomplished.

CC: And also, I wouldn't want to slight the people who came between yourself and Barr, but I mean, you're the inheritor, in a sense, of the collection; the overseer. But as you say, he might have been given limited funds, but he was given enough to go to Europe and get prizes, whereas you have to contend with—I'm sorry for eavesdropping, but—pictures that are extremely expensive. And we're not talking two or three pictures, we're talking about unbelievable amounts of money.

WR: The thing that has happened is that since the mid-fifties, the art market has skyrocketed, which makes—I mean, we cannot buy pictures with money, to be perfectly frank, except for new young artists. The cash we get, which is, by the standards of what certain other museums get, minimal. Beaubourg gets seven million a year; we get $150,000, and it's all gifts. There's not a cent in the budget of this Museum, and there never has been—

CC: To buy pictures?

WR: There's not a cent in the annual budget of the Museum for any department acquisitions. The only funds that any department has are funds which have been given and put into securities or whatever and produce X amount of money. For us, that amounts to about $150,000 a year, which will buy you about a third of a big [Roy] Lichtenstein. You know? So we use that money exclusively for the work of young artists. And yet, we have been able to get some very important, great historical masterpieces. And we've gotten them either by gifts, prevailing upon the artist or collector in question to give it, or, in a number of cases, by

buying it. But we buy them with pictures. Pictures are the only thing that can afford pictures these days. Nobody has that kind of money, you see? So, for example, we got the big [Henri] Matisse *Swimming Pool*, that was a million dollars. Well, that took a bunch of pictures. Now, the Museum has had a certain number of pictures that either came early and were later surpassed by better works of the same genre, or they came in a bequest where there were five good pictures and 15 that weren't so good, and so forth and so on. And we have sold these pictures to buy other pictures, and that's essentially what it comes down to. Now that is a very delicate thing, as you know, because it has been abused and misused by other museums. Alfred sold pictures left and right. But in those days the Museum was like a private club, and nobody questioned what went on. Alfred sold 10 [Paul] Cezannes. Now today, you'd be crucified.

CC: You couldn't go to Paris in the name of one of your trustees and buy pictures, could you?

WR: The thing is that today, the pictures aren't there. That's the first thing. To find the pictures is already pulling the teeth, and then you have to put together a combination to get the object, you know? In Alfred's day, the pictures were there but the money wasn't there. And I think it's perfectly logical, in those days—for example, the Museum paid for the *Girl before a Mirror*, $1000, if I remember correctly. Now today that picture would be somewhere in the neighborhood of eight million dollars. And if you think of the—we paid $24,000, actually, [because] we could only get up $20,000, and the dealers who had the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* made a gift of what we couldn't afford or what Alfred couldn't afford, [and] he got the $20,000 with this Degas racehorse picture, and that's what paid for the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Well that's a priceless picture today. But if you consider that I had in my own apartment a painting of Frank Stella's that I bought long before I came to the Museum—I paid $800 for that Frank Stella; it's worth $350,000 today, and that was only 20 years ago—it will give you some conception of what has happened. So we face a different set of problems. The problem now is to find the pictures. But we're not interested just in finding great pictures. We're interested in finding *the* great picture that fills a lacuna in the collection.

CC: So really, you're continuing the vision, or at least the gospel according to—

WR: We're continuing the vision, there's no question. The vision is exactly the same, but as the collection expands—I mean, when you have five Picassos, a spread of Picassos meant these five pictures. When you have 35 Picassos, then you need this, this, this, and this, do you see what I mean? If you're to have a balanced overview of his art. And there were certain lacuna at the time that I inherited the collection, which had not been filled, not for lack of trying, but simply because quite literally we could not get a work. And the classic example is that with all of the Picassos that we had by 1967, we did not have a single construction sculpture by Picasso. Now, the Picasso construction sculptures are the first time that western sculpture moved from making solid monolithic forms into open work and moved away from modeling and carving into construction, and moved away from bronze and clay into tin, metal, wood, whatever.

CC: Assemblages.

WR: Okay; assemblage. The first one of these sculptures, the granddaddy of all of them, is the metal *Guitar* of 1912. Okay? Alfred had tried for years to get one of these. But there aren't many, and Picasso loved them, and he held on to them very tightly, having let only one out of his studio in his whole lifetime, which was a gift to the poet Paul Éluard and later sold it to Roland Penrose. So at the time that I came, literally, there was one of these out there. I bought it from Roland Penrose at a moment when his collection was stolen and he needed money fast. And after he had sold it to me, he called me back and he said, "The Tate is screaming, they won't let it out of the country; I've got to sell it to them." So there we were, still with no [INAUDIBLE: 0:20:00]. Now, there, by pure—mind you, Alfred had tried to get it from Picasso, René had tried, they tried through dealers, even through [André] Malraux; nothing. Picasso wasn't pressured by money. By pure chance, a dealer who came in to visit me said he was going to visit Picasso, and I had an inspiration; we had a little Cezanne, it wasn't a very good one and we never showed it. And Alfred had said to me, "Someday when we want something, you go off and sell that Cezanne." Knowing how Picasso felt about Cezanne, his lineal father, I wrote a note to Picasso and enclosed a transparency of this Cezanne, and I explained how important it was for our collection with all our other Picassos to have a couple of these construction sculptures, and would he consider an exchange of a Cezanne for them. Well, it was the Cezanne that

got him. You know what I mean? And I got the message, "Come bearing Cezanne." And that's how I got to know Picasso, who I got to know quite well at the end of his life. I was able to get other gifts from him, and most recently, a beautiful gift from his widow. But the point is, we did get one of those [*Guitar*] and it did fill this lacuna. Now as I said, the lacuna wasn't there for lack of trying, it was just that he couldn't [INAUDIBLE: 0:21:26].

CC: Besides Alfred being the aesthetic or Presbyterian or proselytizer or whatever, he was also very, very much the present day—? Or he was very much the Director in terms of having to do what you do?

WR: Oh, absolutely.

RC: Very savvy about people and how to get what you want?

CC: That was the definition of the job; right?

WR: He was a collection builder. That was Alfred's base. Alfred's first love was the collection. As important as the exhibitions were, I think particularly as the collection grew bigger and more important as we moved from the thirties into the forties, fifties and sixties, Alfred's role—well, finally, when he was Director of Collections it was almost legislated into the Museum—was basically that of a collection builder, who did occasional big exhibitions.

CC: Establishing what you could get.

WR: Yes, establishing what you got.

CC: What drew an Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to him in the first place?

WR: I have no idea. I didn't know Abby or [INAUDIBLE: 0:22:22].

CC: So you can't comment?

WR: Yes. As I recollect the history of the Museum, it was Paul Sachs who had suggested this young man. I think that his seriousness, his energy, and his—

CC: Is it the scholarship, though, that you're talking about? This vision?

WR: The scholarship, the vision, but also the toughness. Alfred was a terrifically tough character, and I mean gentlemanly, but very, very firm. And in the various struggles and internecine wars, I mean, people who were around here in the

thirties and forties said it was like a Byzantine court. The not so nice side of the picture was [that] there was a tremendous amount of infighting in those days. And I think that Alfred was well constructed to navigate in those waters. And that if he lost the big battle—finally, in the forties—it was because it was an impossible situation. You could not run every aspect of this institution.

CC: The newspapers—not just the newspapers; I saw today's article, but, if the Jane Livingstons of the world or the other people out there who might complain, most everybody, first of all. I don't care who we talk to—

WR: If you go back—you have Jane Livingston complaining today. If you go back into the thirties and particularly into the forties and fifties, the complaints were rampant. The abstract painters complained abstract art wasn't getting [attention], the realist painters complained that realistic art—the entire Abstract Expressionist generation—I mean, I was a good friend of Rothko, I knew Pollock fairly well, all those guys thought The Museum of Modern Art was shit because while it was the first museum to buy most of those works, it did not treat them on the level of Picasso or [Fernand] Léger or whatever. And to be perfectly fair, Alfred didn't really think that those guys were that good.

RC: Yes, wasn't it Dorothy [Miller] who kind of brought them?

WR: No, Dorothy didn't think they were that good either. Don't make a mistake, Dorothy was fundamentally Alfred's marionette.

RC: Assistant?

WR: Dorothy was basically Alfred's protection against the artist community. But not a decision was made by Dorothy that she didn't check with Alfred.

CC: I think you can see that by talking to her.

WR: But, you see, Alfred thought highly of some of these people, but he did not think that the Abstract Expressionists were on a level with the great movements in Europe. And you see that in the collection. The first thing I had to do when I got here—because I came here as a young man being committed precisely to that generation—the first thing I brought was the big Pollock. There was no big Pollock in this collection. There was no black Pollock. So I brought the black

Pollock. I brought the big [Arshile] Gorky. I would say 70 percent of the Abstract Expressionist paintings we have came in between 1967 and 1971.

CC: So you were redressing a [INAUDIBLE: 0:25:48]?

WR: I was redressing that particular aspect of that. I have also tried, but it's much harder, to do this, to redress somewhat the American art of the twenties and thirties. We have bought certain works that fall into those categories.

CC: Is it impossible for you, then, to—I mean, you say the people complain now; of course they do. Most any of them, if pressed—

WR: One thing that would be very educational for you—

CC: You can't do everything for everybody, can you? You can't be realist and everything?

WR: Yes, you can't please all the people all the time. And the best museum curators [are] the ones that have a very clear vision of what they think is right and turn out to be right in the end. You see, that's the real test. Very little of the art of any period is really very good. And if you try to kind of encompass everything, you end up with nothing really. One thing that would be educative for you, since you—I mean, Jane Livingston is nothing as compared to—read Harold Rosenberg's review in the *New Yorker* of a show which must have taken place about 1967 or '66. I was here—I don't even think I was on the staff. I was a guest director at that time. Maybe it was '68. It was a show called *The Sixties* [*The 1960s: Painting and Sculpture from the Museum Collection*] and it was what the Museum had bought in the last seven or eight years of Alfred's reign. And Alfred wrote a long, angry letter to Rosenberg afterwards, defending his policies and so forth. But the kind of criticism that—this kind of criticism is basically—it comes from another place. It's a provincial versus—it's like Grenoble against Paris, that sort of thing. It's a different kind of thing. What they were being criticized for then was right here in New York. Rosenberg, who wrote the essay on action painting and so on, was emotionally and on a level of his friendships, deeply committed to the Abstract Expressionists. And he shared their feeling, which was ultimately proven right, that Alfred had underestimated their role in the

history of art. Because today, Pollock et alia looks like one of those great flourishings that took place around Cubism. And it didn't look that way to Alfred.

CC: To me, I read Rothko and I read Masaccio, and all I see [is] a direct link. [Franz] Kline is one of the—

WR: If you could have seen the steam coming out of Rothko's ears years every time The Museum of Modern Art was mentioned, you would be amazed. And there is—as a matter of fact, there's a film, just so we see the realities of this—there's a film that Barbara Rose made on [Willem] de Kooning, which has a lot of footage of de Kooning. And there's one place where she mentions The Museum of Modern Art, and he has some unpleasant things to say about the Museum and Alfred in particular, which gives you some idea of where—

CC: So they felt no kinship with—?

RC: They were really—felt maligned by the—

WR: No. They admired the institution, they wanted to make it here more than anything else.

CC: This was where all their heroes were, right?

WR: They grudgingly accepted the fact that the Museum had bought some things. But, they really felt under-rated, under-valued, and so forth. And there's no question that the bulk of our acquisitions, important acquisitions in the first years after Alfred had died, were right in the area of Abstract Expressionism. If we have today 10 Rothko's, seven of them came in that period. If we have today 20 or so Pollocks, all but four, all but three, came in that period, or since 1967.

CC: Maybe that's the reason why, when you look at it, why pictures like—I worked on a film on Franz Kline, for instance, and things like Rothko—and if you really look at that period, where are the pictures? They're scattered around Albright-Knox, Chicago has got terrific ones, some are down in the Phillips; and why aren't they all in New York is the first question you ask.

WR: We had basically one picture, and I bought a very big one in this first group when I came in. So, if the second generation, *my* generation in painting and sculpture has done anything, it was to first redress that basic thing about the American

Renaissance, and then to fill lacuna in this vast synoptic thing which Alfred had built.

CC: And that's what your mission is still today?

WR: Yes, and still today. The greater the collection becomes—every addition to the collection in some way, proposes the need for another addition. Do you see? As I said, when you have 40 Picassos, you need certain kinds of things that you didn't need when you had five Picassos. And if you have a 110 Picassos, you need still other things; you know?

CC: It's like if you get that one construction—

WR: Yes.

CC: Then ideally you need—

WR: Unfortunately, every other construction is taken by the Musée Picasso and that division of the spoils, so that can never happen. However, another way of putting it is that we were not that strong in Picasso sculpture. One of the things that we did not have, for example, was one of these big busts of Marie-Thérèse Walter which Picasso did in the early thirties. And I went recently—the best of them—the biggest of them and the best of them exists in only one bronze and two plasters. And the Musée Picasso took out of the estate the bronze and one of the plasters, which left one plaster with Jacqueline [Picasso]. I went there and offered to buy it [*Head of a Woman*], and she made it a gift. So that filled that slot. Now, another kind of thing were the later metal constructions, not the early Cubist ones, but the ones from which Gonzales came out; the one with the themes like the woman in the garden and the one with the colander, or the colander painted white. Now that sculpture, which was taken by the Paris museum, I am going to have on a long-term loan basis, because they don't have a 1909 Horta Cubist picture, which they need. So we're making some exchanges, and in that case it will be a loan exchange because the national museums in France are not allowed to divest themselves of objects. In the case of the Guggenheim, we were very weak in [Vasily] Kandinsky. I don't know why. Alfred just didn't focus on Kandinsky as much as on the French painters. And since we had two, the smaller two of the "Four Seasons," it had always been my

dream. Now you would have thought that that might have been thought of before, but apparently it never was, to bring those four Kandinskys together here. And so I—knowing that they didn't have a Matisse, and that they didn't have other things—I raised the question with Tom Messer and it worked out and we made that exchange. But you see, these are—let us say, these take place on a certain level of connoisseurship and art historical knowledge which wasn't even available 20 years ago, and they take place in the context of a collection which is four times the size of what it was in the 1950s.

CC: I wanted to emphasize that, for instance, even in this pre-interview but particularly later on, you're a major player in the sense that we can talk to you or you could be on film and talk for a long time about a number of things.

WR: You need to just tell me what you want.

CC: What we wanted to keep in mind was—let me put it this way, the audience for it will be those two million or three million people who watch PBS who are going to be coming into your Museum now after it's reopened. Picture it a month or so after you open up again. And what we wanted to give to them, especially from your role, there may be people critical, like the Livingston types, [who are] critical of what you're doing.

WR: What people are critical of is what they consider to be the inadequate exposure of younger artists in the exhibition program. It's not the collections.

CC: No. But I wanted you to speak to, in a way; you're going to be now cast in the role of the champion of the collection.

WR: Right.

CC: Number one. Number two, carrying the same standard that we believe Alfred Barr—

WR: Right.

CC: He put the stake up and you—

WR: Yes, well, I'm very much—Alfred Barr was somebody that I immensely admired, learned—I was a student of Meyer Schapiro's at Columbia, and an indirect student of Alfred Barr at the Museum. And my vision coincides with Alfred's

vision, and I feel that I am carrying his work forward, but that he did the hardest job. And it's not an easy thing today, but it's not as hard as it was.

CC: Is it also tough for you though to be in the position now of being a guardian rather than a champion, in a sense. It's easy for him because he was putting the—

WR: That's a very difficult thing to say, because when I came to this Museum I was a champion of a good deal of art which was not really appreciated much by the Museum. First, in a general sense, Abstract Expressionism, which had been under-valued, but also certain pockets elsewhere of artists the Museum had not paid any attention to. And in my own—I had been a collector before I came here, and though in the case of Frank Stella, for example, Alfred did latch on to him very early—I did the first Stella retrospective [*Frank Stella*] 10 years down the pike for Frank, and I felt very much involved with the outer edge of avant-garde painting in the late sixties and early seventies. I have to be perfectly frank with you, I wouldn't say this probably on camera, but having lived through the Pollock generation and Stella, Pop art and minimal sculpture, and I'm a great admirer, for example of Sol LeWitt. You see that reflected in the exhibition program and so forth. The new art of the later sixties and seventies has struck me as first being alien to my own taste because I'm a lover of painting and sculpture, and a lot of it has been inter-media, going out into things that simply don't move me. I have to be very frank about it. And second, I don't think any of it is great. You see, ultimately, the question I always ask myself, to buy something, is, how likely is this object to be in the galleries 50 years from now or a hundred years from now, you see? When I buy a Frank Stella, I think that it's going to be in those galleries. And an awful lot of the stuff that we buy because we feel we have a certain reportorial responsibility, I know isn't going to be in those galleries. You know? And I doubt seriously that either Mr. [Robert] Mangold or who is the other one Jane Livingston incited? But the point is that only in hindsight can you decide whether—there is literally not an important figure, even in her terms—we do have Mangolds in the collection. We buy all these people. The fact is that the whole machinery of contemporary art, which when I was young consisted of about 10 or 12 art galleries and two museums, has now become all over the country, all over the world, such an immense operation, that the possible role on

the exhibition level, as opposed to the collection level of this Museum is *necessarily* restricted and can never have the dominant role that it did before.

CC: I think that is an extremely important point.

WR: I mean, as I look back on our choice of the handful of retrospectives of younger artists, so to say, that we've had since I've been here, [Claes] Oldenburg [*Claes Oldenburg*], [Anthony] Caro [*Anthony Caro*], Stella, [Ellsworth] Kelly [*Ellsworth Kelly*], LeWitt [*Sol LeWitt*], I think they're a pretty good group of artists. There are certainly other artists that I think are just as good, but if we're going to be responsible for a hundred years of art, which we are by now, and you see every year, every decade that goes by, our responsibility to cover gets that much greater, we have to have shows for the late 19th century, the early 20th century, and then we have all these different departments. There's just so much exhibition space and so forth. Meanwhile, out there, museums are multiplying like rabbits, and they need things to show. And it's perfectly natural that they're going to think that what they're doing is often better than what we're doing. And maybe sometimes it is, but—

CC: Also, I think what you're saying is, that in Alfred's day, god, just to be even showing a [Vincent] van Gogh was a big event, and he'd been dead for 30 years. Whereas now, PS1 and these places—

WR: Yes, for example, you take the pioneering shows, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, for example, in 1936. Well, in 1936, Cubism was 30 years old. But it was still pioneering because no one else had done it, you see. Now that gap has narrowed until the point now where they're giving retrospectives to artists that shouldn't have retrospectives. It's because the machine needs more fodder than there is good art. There isn't enough good art to feed this immense machine that is operating today. And—

CC: People didn't travel then. If there was a show in Paris, you just didn't get there.

WR: Absolutely. Now, the thing, you see, which more and more makes this museum unique is its collection, because for contemporary art, most artists would rather have their show here than elsewhere. But they know that we can only have X number of shows and that's not very much. And if they're not among the few we

choose, they certainly will want to have it in another museum. In fact, if they can't have it in three years or five years, they'd rather go to the Whitney, and if they can't have it there, they'll go to the Albright-Knox, and so forth and so on. Okay.

CC: It sounds like the movie business.

WR: We don't have—except for a certain prestige edge, we don't have any other advantage over any other museum in terms of strictly contemporary art. I think our group of artists that we've shown since I've come here in retrospectives can be put next to any other group and look pretty damn good. I'm not in the least embarrassed about it. But I could imagine another list of seven artists that would also be very good and might be very different.

CC: But also, you're in a position to do pretty extraordinary things that other people can't do.

WR: Right, that's the whole point. The Primitives show [*"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*], the Picasso retrospective [*Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*], the late Cezanne [*Cezanne: The Late Work*]—

CC: Also things that draw out of the Film, Photography; you could do a whole Expressionism thing that would knock everyone out.

WR: The whole Museum can do things which other people can't. And it's my feeling that we should certainly do the things which only we can do. I'd like to do the best job possible in the very contemporary as well, but that is an area—it's a kind of thing where in that area, we're one point and there are thousands of points on that same horizontal plane.

CC: Sure.

WR: Whereas, as you go back in time, it gets wider and wider and *only* we can do a Cubism show. I mean, there's literally no other museum in the world that can do a Cubism show, at least without our agreement.

CC: You did your Dada-Surrealist [*Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage*] and Barr did his [*Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*], but in a way, there's been some time since then.

WR: There may be another one at some point.

CC: It's very conceivable that you could put a Dada show and you could draw on films; you could get Mary Lea Bandy to do—

WR: Unquestionably, there will be another show, probably either *just* Dada or *just* Surrealism, down the pike at some point. There will be another Frank Stella retrospective of just the work he did since the last retrospective. Excuse me for a second. [Speaking on phone from 0:44:05 to 0:44:15]

CC: One of the things that we wanted to—besides carrying the torch, you're also—we're just telling you what we see.

WR: I'm on the hot-seat, in a certain sense, because you see, The Museum of Modern Art is considered as the most prestigious of these museums, and rightly so. The guy on top, the shooting can only come from below. Do you know what I mean? But what I think you have to understand is that it has always been thus. And if you really look back, today there is a tendency to think that there was a golden age when everybody thought what The Museum of Modern Art was doing was very good. That's a myth. The criticism, I would say, that it probably is true that there was more criticism of The Museum of Modern Art by contemporary artists in the late forties and fifties than there is today. I would also say that the nature of the historical shows has changed considerably. If you just compare the catalogues and the art historical substantiality of them and so forth, the whole standard of operation has altered considerably. And the name of the game, in big historical—

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:45:36