DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: **ROBERT RYMAN**

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

DATE: **1983**

TRANSCRIBER: **JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED JULY 14, 2018**

RC: Contact with the Museum, and—

RR: Well, you know that I was never in the administrative area of the Museum, so I don't know really a lot of the details in that last bit. Of course, you know, I was a painter, and the reason I went to the Museum was to learn and to see the collection, and to—well, also to make a little living because I wasn't selling my paintings, which is I think a policy that they don't do any more, is [to] hire artists for those kind of jobs.

RC: What kind of things were you doing at the Museum?

RR: I was a guard, and I took tickets at the movies, and tickets in the front, and I got to see all the movies because of that. And I became involved—I mean, I got to see all the inner workings of how the shows were installed, the kind of behind-the-scenes part. But never was I involved with any of the administration.

RC: You were really involved in the hands-on part of the Museum. Obviously, there was a time when it was almost like a family, then like a club, then an institution, yes, but not this full blown, almost like corporate-size operation.

RR: Yes.

RC: So what years are you talking about?

RR: Well, this was in the fifties, this was mid-fifties, I think, '54, '55, '56, '57.

RC: That was really a hot time for the Museum, wasn't it? Kind of a heyday. I mean, Abstract Expressionism, had they championed it yet?

RR: Yes, well, it seemed that way to me. Of course, I was young and naïve, but I was—but it seemed like an exciting time. And they were—well, maybe this was

a little later, but then they had the Japanese house [*Japanese Exhibition House*], it was built, and a geodesic dome [*Three Structures by Buckminster Fuller*], and it seemed that there was always a lot of activity. And of course the movies and changing exhibitions, very good exhibitions, always, because the Modern, they were always the most professional.

RC: Well, [Alfred] Barr was spearheading that whole effort. He was around, of course.

RR: Oh yes, sure.

RC: So you had contact with him?

RR: Yes, well, not very much, but—

RC: How was his presence? Could you describe—? It was a different place at that time?

RR: Well, he, yes, he was very intense, always, with his work, and with his plans. But he was very open and friendly at times. I know he asked me once—which I don't know why he did this, but he asked me if I preferred the [Henri] Matisse *Blue Window* to the Matisse *Red Studio*, which I preferred. And I said, "Well, it's very difficult," I said, "I like both, but maybe I would go for the *Red Studio*." And he didn't say anything, he just kind of nodded. [Laughing]

RC: Wasn't that—? I mean, isn't that regarded as one of their best pictures, I think, or one of his favorites? I'm trying to remember. It's certainly an important painting.

RR: Yes, well, both; both are good. [Laughing] But yes, I think probably the *Studio* is a very major painting.

RC: So, in the days when you were working there, the difference was that there were a lot of other artists, like Al [Held], around, as a community, kind of, center.

RR: Yes, they had a policy of hiring artists. It was very good. It helped the artists out, and the artists were good people for the Museum to have because they cared about the paintings. It wasn't just someone who—it wasn't just a job. [Telephone rings] Of course, artists were always leaving; that was [INAUDIBLE: 0:05:11]. Yes, there was Al Held, there was Sol LeWitt, and Dan Flavin, Budd Hopkins was there, quite a number I've forgotten. And at that time, they were—it

was kind of a hangout for artists, too. A lot of artists went there to sit in the restaurant and have a talk and have coffee. I don't know, maybe that still goes on, because I haven't been involved in that so much personally, because—

RC: It just seems like a different time. It still seems like the romance was there, that it was a place that you could say artists and important ideas were being formed. Maybe it's just a change in the times, and some people commented on that, how, not only did the Museum change—

RR: Yes.

RC: But it changed as the public attendance changed, as it grew.

RR: Exactly.

RC: But nobody else has commented like you did upon this sociology.

RR: I think it could be that at that time there weren't so many artists, at least it didn't seem to me there were so many artists as there are now.

RC: Right.

RR: Now with the art schools, they just come out every year by the hundreds.

RC: Right, and they all come to New York now, [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:46].

RR: And I think maybe the art world was a little smaller, and so that might have—and then too, there wasn't—of course, the Whitney was—well, first it was downtown but then it moved next to the Modern on 54th Street, and then eventually they broke through the walls here. But the Whitney was not the size or the scope that it is now, and so there was only really—the Modern was the major museum; it was the only place, pretty much. There was always the Met, but that was a different thing.

RC: Sure. They really decided not to deal with the Modern. Monroe Wheeler was saying that in his day, when he was young, they'd say, "Let's meet at the Biltmore under the clock," and then the Modern became that meeting place.

RR: Yes.

RC: Do you think that the exposure that you had and your colleagues, other painters, had, helped in formulating your work?

RR: Oh absolutely. I learned a great deal from the Modern, from working there. Well, first, from just being, from seeing the art all the time, and seeing how it was exhibited, and the workings of it. But mostly just from looking and talking to people, also. Yes, it was very valuable for me.

RC: And now, I guess, if those dialogues go on—I'm sure they do, I mean, artists still talk about work, but it seems like now the galleries, the explosion of galleries that handle the current wave of painting, whatever the trend is, has supplanted the Museum as a place where the newest ideas are transferred. I don't know if that's good or bad, it's just the change [telephone rings] that people in the Museum have commented on that.

RR: Yes, it could be; yes, I think that's so, because there are so many galleries [tape break at 0:09:25]. I haven't, I go very often. Of course, now they've been renovating for so long, I'm not so familiar with it at the moment.

RC: But still you go? Is this part of your life in New York?

RR: Oh yes, yes, sure. I go to see a certain show, an exhibition. But I don't go very often.

RC: How about—? We were talking about [how] the galleries may have supplanted the Museum in the role of the ideas, that current in the art world. Do you tap into that now?

RR: The galleries?

RC: Of course, I know you show.

RR: Oh, yes, I go to the galleries. Not as much as I could. I mean, it's just so much and there's always the time problem.

RC: But then in the earlier days, you were saying, the Museum was really the focus.

RR: Yes, it's true.

RC: You'd just go there and you would be able to tap into what was—

RR: Yes, it was really a major focus at one time.

CC: What role does the Museum really play in your life as an artist now? Is it old time or is it like thinking of school, or high school, or—?

RR: Oh no, no. I go to see certain exhibitions that I'm interested in seeing, and of course—and that's most[ly] the major painting traditions of the—occasionally, maybe once every couple of years, I might go and take a look at the collection again. I'm very familiar with the collection. But sometimes, it's just a time when you feel that you'd like to do that. I mean, it's there; sometimes you need it.

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:11:38]. You can go back and get familiar with things.

RR: Yes.

CC: What about the exhibitions that they do put on? Do you think of them as mostly, at least for painting, let's say, very classically oriented modern classics?

RR: Well, mostly probably, yes, sure. They had, of course, these little token, these room shows.

RC: The Projects room.

RR: Yes, Project rooms; yes, for a while. I don't know if they're going to continue with that.

RC: I think so, but I don't know how much space comparatively at all.

RR: That was always—[it] wasn't enough, you know, kind of—[laughing] and it was never publicized that much, so you never really knew what was there.

RC: So then it's a frustration on your part that they haven't focused on more that's current? What would your position be?

RR: Yes, well, I think maybe it's just that the organization has become larger, and as I said before, there are more artists now. The art world has changed and it has become much more diffused and—but then, too, I think, maybe it's—well, I was thinking of the fifties again. I remember the [Jean] Tinguely machine [*Homage to New York: A Self-Constructing and Self-Destroying Work of Art Conceived and Built by Jean Tinguely*] in the Garden. I don't think they would do things like that anymore, which was quite a—I mean, it was—they would take chances, more chances on the avant-garde and the frontier work that was being done.

CC: And that was frontier at that time.

RR: Yes. I mean no one in New York had seen Tinguely, and particularly that machine, and he worked on a dome, the geodesic dome there, when it was set up in the Garden, and it was enormous. I remember the opening night, and it was drizzling rain, and everyone stood around for about a half hour and nothing happened, and then finally little things began; a little balloon started blowing up, and we cheered, and then the piano caught fire [laughing] and the Museum maintenance people tried to put it out with a CO^2 extinguisher, so the smoke was going up. And yes, things were not working right with the machine, but yet it was working. [Laughter]

CC: Yes, we saw a couple of films though, and it looked like it was doing what it was supposed to be doing.

RR: Finally someone called the fire department, they came in. Tinguely, I remember seeing him lounging in the lobby. I don't know whether he was dejected, but he was tired. [Laughing] When the fire warden came by he was sitting there. [Laughing] And in the morning, it looked like there had been a plane crash in the Garden; the marble was scorched. [Laughter] Then they put new marble in.

CC: Well, it wasn't supposed to catch fire, just run nicely.

RR: Yes.

RC: I'm trying to remember, that time was when the Junior Council was still active?

CC: No, that was much later. That would be in the thirties. This was in the fifties; right?

RR: Yes, it was in the fifties; I don't remember the exact year.[1]

CC: That must have been [INAUDIBLE: 0:15:36].

RR: Yes, and it was a great success. [Laughing] Not actually the way it was supposed to be, but it was a wonderful thing that the Museum would do that.

CC: And it was also probably a good time to have—we spoke to John Canaday, for instance, and for him to have been such an enemy or being in such an adversarial role between him and the Museum, I think all that was probably very, very healthy. Because then you probably all allied yourselves—I mean, there are

[1] 1960.

many people who allied themselves with the Museum against what the papers were saying about them. So there was a real different, camp feeling. Now it's so established.

RR: Yes, I wasn't so involved with that; I just accepted what was happening. But I think—well, [in] New York, there's only the Modern which has the international scope, but then the Whitney with only American art, and the Met. And that's really all—I mean, years ago, there used to be the Jewish Museum, but then they became kind of scared of [laughing] vanguard art and quit showing anything. Now, well, there's PS1; they mount some frontier shows. But there isn't—I mean, for the art capital of the world [laughing], if you want—there's very little museum place where you can show. In Europe, they have the Kunsthalles, and there's a lot of exhibitions going on. Not so much here, I mean, if I'm talking about avant-garde art.

CC: You can leave it up to the galleries—

RR: Yes.

CC: But the galleries may not have the critical judgment that's necessary to really impart knowledge, is what you're saying.

RR: Yes. Then another question is, the New Museum now, which they are moving and so maybe that will pick up.

CC: Still, I know what you mean; it's not like that. I think they're leaving into West Broadway, just hoping [INAUDIBLE: 0:18:31]. Unfortunately that museum is very spotty, sometimes good, sometimes very bad. You're just leaving it up to the individual judgment—well, talk about fads and fashionable things, that's what that's all about.

RC: And there really is a gap because if Marcia [Tucker]'s museum is going to be covering the last 10 years, what about artists like yourself? Potentially, you would have a show at the Modern, but there is a gap if they're lagging so far behind. So that must be a disappointment, because artists of maturity like yourself—there is a whole generation of people who are—

RR: Yes, well, I don't know; I don't know what the solution is. But of course, the Met, they've been kind of slow in any kind of modern work.

RC: They never really took it on in any full way.

RR: No, they just thought—which they could.

RC: Bill Lieberman was saying that he liked the idea of giving them [the Met] the first 20 years of the Modern's collection. [Laughing] In a way, it's a good idea which would free up the front end to incorporate more of what's current—

RR: Yes, oh yes, sure.

RC: —into the collection; there would be some more room. Then again, we heard that Barr, when he had made the first transfer of paintings, which was the original concept to the Met, that "Girl in White," [*Woman in White*] and some of the other, I guess, [Winslow] Homer, a Homer painting, it really tore him up inside—can't deal with this, can't do it.[2] But his ideas, there are people who still believe in his conception of what the Museum should be, from trustees through staff people. But then there's [William] Rubin, and then there's other trustees who have, I guess, a louder voice these days.

RR: Yes, I don't know; it's a difficult problem.

RC: That's kind of what we're trying—we're hearing all these different opinions on it and basically, we might just finish the film with these questions. It's a valid discussion, and that's what's going on; that's really the state of where it is. Nobody knows or can say it will be this, that, or the other thing, because they really don't know. Including the businessmen said there's still some risk involved. I mean, they've had the solution of the Tower, and—

RR: Yes.

RC: Hopefully it will be stable. So in that sense, it's funny. It's almost like in the area of financial concerns, which they had to evolve into to be part of today and the real estate in New York, that's where they're taking the risk, as opposed to in the internal curatorial sense.

RR: [Laughing] Yes; yes.

---

[2] Cummings 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.

CC: It just doesn't seem to engender the kind of affection that it used to. I mentioned the film project to the artists I know, who are, well, you know, older, or even younger. There's kind of a 'Hm, so what?' attitude towards the place now—

RR: Probably, yes.

CC: In the sense of, it's there, and it's established, but it seems to be kind of blowing on its own steam and it doesn't really need the community anymore. Well, it needs the big community that consumes it—

RC: The public.

RR: Yes.

CC: But it doesn't seem to be catering to you and all the other artists. And that's kind of a problem, because once you start playing to the public totally and not being—there just doesn't seem to be anybody like a Dorothy Miller out scouting for—or an Alfred Barr anymore.

RR: Yes, exactly.

RC: That's right. Marcia [Tucker] pointed out, the difference with Alfred and the current staff, or probably in general with museums, is that he visited artists' studios.

RR: Yes.

RC: He was friends with them, and he had that contact. And now, for some reason—I guess it's conflict of interest or nobody wants them to know that they're friendly with the artist, and they won't take your slides in and you drop them off—it's just different.

RR: Yes, I think that's still a fact. I wonder if they really—how aware they are of what is really going on in the art world.

RC: We tried to speak with Kynaston [McShine], who is in a precarious position, I guess, after trying to make the show [*An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*] that is what's new for their opening, and it's very guarded and he's very not talking to us. He asked us many more questions than we were allowed to ask him. [Laughter]

CC: It's a tough spot, too.

RR: Yes, sure.

CC: He has to select from thousands and say that this is something

RC: He covered the country.

CC: Of course, everybody will say that it's either too conservative a choice or—

RC: And nothing's good.

RR: Right; right.

RC: Ephemera.

CC: Nothing of any great merit there. I don't know. You'd think that if it would open up that there would be more space than just a little Project area.

RR: Yes, absolutely.

CC: Then there'd be that room for air that there isn't now.

RR: Yes, sure. They could take some chances and—

RC: Sure. And we were speaking with Arthur Drexler yesterday and he said, "So what if it's just exhibitions?" It doesn't mean that you have to collect the work, but just to show it—

RR: Yes, exactly.

RC: Sort of a Kunsthalle and Kunstmuseum together.

RR: Sure; yes.

RC: But we haven't really understood if, in fact, they will have that. I'm sure somebody has an answer to that.

CC: No, they seem to be—Bill Rubin is concerned with the collection, and bettering that, and maybe having a retrospective here and there, and having a historical exhibition across—a Vienna show, or something like that. And then, there's a huge gap, and then there's Kynaston McShine who supposedly is doing his Projects series. That's the bone they're throwing—

RR: Yes.

CC: —to the contemporary scene. What's bizarre, rather, is that, sure, there might be a bunch of 28-year-olds around who they can give a show to, the New Italians, the New Greeks, the New Algerians, or whoever they are. You can do that but what about just a couple of exhibitions—you don't have to have a major retrospective or something.

RR: Yes, exactly; sure.

CC: What about just a little visit to someone else in midstream, or whatever. It doesn't have to be Frank Stella every time.

RR: Yes, absolutely, sure.

CC: Because I think there was an advantage when it was a small community, because most everybody knew everyone else's work.

RR: Yes, sure.

CC: And the public was way outside; they were always pretty wacky anyway, so, they didn't have much of a judgment. Then they were let in on a few of the secrets and getting to know a few of the artists, the more vociferous ones. Now there's such a mass of artists and art public that it just doesn't seem to have that cross-fertilization anymore.

RR: Yes.

CC: You can't have a show that is there for certain reasons because it has to appeal to a big—it's either very big or very small.

RR: Yes, yes, that's true.

RC: And also, the public's lost, including critics themselves of critical edge; the reviewers are more reviewers and not critics.

CC: Have you found more interest in Europe and places like that, in your work?

RR: Yes, it has been.

CC: More interest there then, let's say, from the New York museum group?

RR: Oh, absolutely. It's—probably there's just more museums in Europe.

CC: Yes.

RR: But—

CC: Is the attitude different?

RR: Well, I don't know. Of course, as you brought up before, there are the galleries here, and a great many galleries, which, it's just the opposite in Europe; there are very few galleries, I mean, compared to New York. And maybe that has something to do with it, because of the gallery activity here, it's so staggering, that that could be it.

CC: There are also places that are like mini museums. I think of Pace; I'm sure they have buyers, obviously, and other people who buy from Arnold Glimcher and all that group, but they mostly—as far as the public is concerned, I think they're like little museums. They have a little [Pablo] Picasso show—

RR: Yes. Sure.

CC: Or they have a Matisse or have a [Joan] Miró show.

RR: And of course, that [Piet] Mondrian and [Constantin] Brancusi [*Brancusi + Mondrian*] at Janis, that was a major undertaking. That was definitely a museum show.

CC: Look at that! Sure. I want to say they're popping up in Washington and lots of local galleries have things like a Frank Lloyd Wright furniture show.

RR: Yes.

CC: And that's really a museum show. But they just have the space and the wherewithal now to do it, and the collectors are sophisticated enough. And I think a lot of people—obviously 95 percent of the people who go aren't buying, they're just looking.

RR: No, sure, yes.

CC: And then the ones who buy—

RR: There aren't too many galleries that do that, but the ones that do [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:05].

CC: The ones that can afford to, I guess. And in some sense, sometimes to have—even, like Robert Morris at Castelli every two years, whatever, that's like a mini—that's an update, really, on his career. If there weren't the galleries, then I guess the museums would have to do that. I think maybe the museums are just upset that they shouldn't play that role any more. Maybe that's what it is, I think.

RC: Or just that it's big. I don't think it's so much that they don't want to. Even Rubin said how—if he was to get in there and start showing contemporary things, how would the museum show be necessarily any different than what's going on in multiplicity all over? So he kind of chose not to do that because he *is* The Museum of Modern Art, so, he's wearing his colors, which is okay. People do look to the Museum for putting their stamp on two people, because they can't show a hundred that'll be shown in a season in the galleries. That was his feeling.

RR: Yes. I can see that. It's a difficult problem. There's always the financial part of it too, which is a problem. All the museums have that. Maybe it's just that the shows that they do do could be a little different, a little bit better, more vanguard is what I mean. Occasionally; not always but if it's the Modern museum, it should be right in the front. And if they're in the front, then the artists become interested and become involved with the Museum, and that makes the Museum have life and become more a focal point.

RC: After the days when you—

CC: Also doing something new, for instance, isn't necessarily doing something avant-garde, so, maybe that's a mistake.

RR: Yes. It doesn't necessarily have to be new; sure.

RC: Just what's current; showing something that's current.

RR: Yes.

CC: I think that's the debate, though. Someone will say—I find that when they'll have a show of Three Italians, or whatever, [INAUDIBLE: 0:30:51], [Francesco] Clemente, or whatever, and it seems to be—it's not so much that it's that avant-garde as that it's that good. It's new, it's a new picture, but, well, they're not the same thing.

RR: Yes.

CC: And I think it gets people confused sometime. And your avant-garde's thing is really a change in perception, a change in ways of doing something.

RR: Yes.

RC: Yes, I don't know if there is any vanguard art right now.

RR: Yes.

CC: The new is just something that may have popped up, but it just may be different, it's not—I don't know, it's semantical. It's not really semantical because avant-gardist does change the way—I mean, Mondrian was obviously an avant-gardist in his time.

RR: Yes, absolutely.

CC: Severely and probably flattened the competition. It was a staggering thing to look at, for someone who once painted trees to be doing that.

RR: Yes, sure.

CC: So, but just to see something new—

RR: No, I agree.

CC: Or imagistic painting, whatever; big deal.

RR: That's not necessarily the solution.

CC: It's not taking us anywhere.

RR: Yes, sure. Certainly a major Mondrian show would be fantastic. That would get some artists interested.

CC: I'd love to see a whole retrospective, once, of his.

RR: Yes, sure. That's a very good [INAUDIBLE: 0:32:18].

CC: And I was never so taken as when I saw his early work.

RC: At that Guggenheim show, that retrospective, that was pretty amazing.

CC: Oh yes, yes, the tree drawings.

RR: Oh, the Guggenheim, we never even mentioned the Guggenheim. [Laughing] I forgot about that.

RC: It's interesting, because it's an interesting slip.

CC: The Guggenheim, to me, it appears now to be the retrospective museum.

RC: That's certainly what they've been doing.

RR: Yes.

RC: Which is valid.

CC: Which is okay, but—

RR: Yes sure, it's fine. It's a function.

RC: I think it's a good resource.

CC: I think that's because of the nature of the space.

RR: Yes.

CC: It's about all you could really do.

RR: Yes.

CC: And you keep going down; once you get rolling it's hard to go back uphill, so you might as well be looking at the same artist's work and feel like you learned something on the way down.

RC: [Laughing] That's true.

RR: [Laughing] Yes.

CC: It's hard to double back. But they have that other room.

RR: Yes.

RC: Yes, that's for the—that's the permanent [exhibition]; that's the Guggenheim floor, the pictures.

RR: Yes, the Guggenheim collection.

RC: That really doesn't change.

CC: But sometimes during those retrospectives, you'd think that they—

RC: No, just those little side corridors before you go on the ramps, they'll have like drawings.

RR: Yes, the big roundabout kind of—the first ramp [INAUDIBLE: 0:33:28].

RC: Right.

CC: I started thinking of them as being—it's just a real oddity to me. Diane Waldman being an early 20th century, mid-20th century historian—it's really locked. It doesn't really seem to have much muscle.

RR: Yes.

CC: Maybe not to have a Dorothy Miller, or not just her, because I really thought of her more as a scout for Barr. But I guess it really all depends on who's on top. Let's put it that way.

RR: Definitely. That's right.

RC: It's the individual who leads it.

RR: I think that's what it's all about. It's whoever gets the spark.

CC: And maybe when Barr left—I mean, Barr obviously knew, and supported the Tinguely thing and was up to a lot of mischief [INAUDIBLE: 0:34:17]. He wasn't always the most avant-gardist, either.

RC: He almost missed—I mean, he was late on two [art movements]; Abstract Expressionism and Pop.

RR: Yes.

CC: He never liked Pop too much; he liked Jasper Johns.

RC: Then again, he was broad enough. They were saying that his commitment was to the synoptic view, so he didn't just focus on a specialty like maybe Rubin is sort of concentrated on [Paul] Cezanne and certain areas. He [Barr] could embrace all art, and that almost transcended his liking a specific thing.

CC: We spoke to Rubin and I think Rubin is almost happy with the fact that, as every day goes by, the Modern age gets older. Because as it gets older, it keeps

stretching itself. It's just this one big piece of taffy and it's getting stretched out very thin, and it only makes the early work that much more precious—

RR: Yes.

CC: And valuable in retrospect. Because as you go further away, it all compresses—and *The Dream*, and [Henri] Rousseau—pictures that people used to just treat as casually as Washington Square pictures, are now pressed into your mind—

RR: Yes, become really [INAUDIBLE: 0:35:34]. Sure.

CC: —as absolute icons of modern culture. And I think he is almost gleeful about that. Rather than the—completely the opposite, that you—and I know Barr wouldn't have been the opposite, but—instead of having the youthful opinion of well, there they go, and they just get jettisoned into history—not to say that you're never going to look to them again, but, let's say, they go to the Met or they become the Louvre, they just become that big old collection—

RC: Classics.

CC: And you just keep going ahead. I don't know. Marcia said a good curator is someone who can span one generation; a great one is one that can span two; and a genius—

RC: A brilliant one—

CC: Is one who can maybe span three.

RR: Yes, sure.

RC: And Barr was in that category.

RR: Yes.

CC: Or at least a couple.

RR: That's true.

CC: Whereas Rubin, not to take anything away but, [he] became an Abstract Expressionist, he was a big champion of that and he made sure that he bought [Jackson] Pollock. He well hung in, now he's keeping—now the tide's shift[ed], and he's holding on this way instead of planning things.

RC: Then again, we were speaking with Robert Hughes, for an outside [view]—again, [he] found no fault with the fact that they have a magnificent collection. He was saying that if you think of curators, a lot of museums—I mean, Rubin still has his position but he's strong and he has that spark. He can convince you and he does what he does with real commitment and devotion. And other people haven't surfaced as brightly and boldly.

RR: Yes.

RC: If you think of the other museums, [INAUDIBLE: 0:37:14], if you're looking at curators at museums, who is doing it? Well, he's doing *it*; he's doing his job.

RR: Yes, that is true.

CC: He's a real dyed-in-the-wool modernist, indeed, and he loves the old stuff. But he was also upset that there isn't a contemporary. And actually, we started seeing it in the articles—it was even part of the headline of his article on the Met's Vatican show [*The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art*]. It said, it's nice but why are they having it?

RR: Yes.

CC: The Italians, I think, justifiably, were very upset with the stuff that was sent over. They said, what the hell are they sending the picture robes here for? They might as well have sent postcards.

RR: I think they gained by it, with all the restoration and whatnot.

CC: Oh sure. But, in the larger sense, why take the chance? Why do it, because it would be like saying, The Arts of Bali, then all of a sudden next year, Bloomingdale's has a big opening, and the Met has a huge Bali show.

RR: Oh yes.

RC: Well, it'll happen. I mean, they're doing this already in China.

CC: Fine, but again it just seems like it doesn't change your perception any. It just introduces you to an area that you just haven't studied.

RR: Very true, very true.

RC: Like National Geographic, you know.

RR: Yes.

CC: It shows up your laziness.

RR: Exactly.

CC: Whereas, if you tie it into something, if you say, Bali and whatever, if you had a show that makes you think, American landscape pictures mixed with so-and-so—

RR: Yes.

CC: Or primitivism and whatever, at least you're trying something. You might fall flat on your face, but you're trying to make a point.

RR: Absolutely, no, I agree.

RC: Well, Rubin is doing that Primitive show [*"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*], which should be great. I can't wait to see that.

RR: Yes, yes.

CC: It seems like they're reworking a thing; it's pretty safe for him, though because of the Musée de l'Homme and all that.

RR: Well, one thing with the Modern, of course Barr, they did concentrate on Picasso and Matisse, and they have some very good Matisse's, but I think it's important for museums to, when they do collect, to collect more than one or two paintings, because then, if you have 10 Matisse's, that's really something, you know; that's special. If you just have one or two Matisse's, and then one or two of this, or maybe one of that, then it just becomes an anthology, kind of, and it's not so interesting.

CC: I think of it as like a joke when I see that almost in some Texas museum or out in Houston or one of these places where you walk in and they've got one of this and one of that, and usually not a very good one.

RR: Yes, sure.

CC: Frankly, I'd rather they had nothing and just have American Indian art or something and a great collection of it.

RR: Yes, they should have some conviction about certain areas.

CC: Specialize.

RR: Yes, and then really—

CC: The Modern is specializing; it doesn't have any American Indian art or anything. It's not dissipating its influence. It's got the Matisse and the Picasso.

RC: But that's what Rubin said his role is, and he's taken it on very seriously. He said they had four great Picasso's, and he said, "Well, you fill in, and then you have 10, but then you've got to balance it out with throwing some Matisse's." So he's balancing the plums of the collection.

RR: Yes but what I'm wondering though is, going on from there, though, I mean—well of course, there are always the gaps because of the money problem.

CC: I think it's turning into a shrine.

RR: Yes.

CC: And with both the good and the bad; what that implies [is] the bad being the emperor's clothes that nobody really regards it any more as art that disturbs you or that makes an impact on you, other than a stunning emotional impact. I think that's a great problem that the people just will walk by. The American propensity to educate everybody is what's been stamped in as being good, and people don't know why. And frankly, a lot of people are having [a] pretty mixed up idea. If you were to run through that place in a couple of days and you were from Omaha and then never came back, you'd have a Picasso stapled, pasted to your brain, and a Matisse and a Pollock and a [Andy] Warhol or I don't know what, but you come out with this cacophony of things that just don't really—they don't all make sense when they're put together. They have to have that; you have to have that educating vision.

RR: Oh yes, you do have to.

CC: It's very enshrined, I think. It's okay for what it is, but it's hard to be contemporary; it's very hard to relate it.

RR: Maybe that's the only way they can do.

CC: I think maybe it is. Frankly, I think that's the only way, is to be kind of—it may be irrelevant in a contemporary way, but they're—

RR: Yes, but they have—

RC: They have a responsibility to—

CC: They're like an Ivy League museum.

RR: Sure, yes, they have a lot of good work.

CC: It's a place to return to, but it's not a place that—but it disturbs me when I feel that it doesn't—even a European I know, a Cuban painter, who has kind of arrived, or whatever, a sort of surrealist. He's quite good, accomplished, and he's had some exhibitions around, and he said, "Oh yes," the Museum when he first came was—everyone was invited there all the time when they'd have parties for an artist, and it just had that special feeling to it. He'd go up there a lot, and they'd go in the evenings, and they'd go to an opening for so-and-so, and it would be small and [INAUDIBLE: 0:43:09]. It's that real feeling of conviviality with the people, that they cared about you and about your paintings and about your friend and his painting. It was just that community feeling. He said now, it's like an invitation to a big event, a mega event.

RR: Yes, right.

CC: No longer would you expect a call from them about—come up and see this, or we'd like to come down and see your pictures.

RC: Does the Museum—? Are you aware that people from the Museum come to see your work?

CC: Do you have any contact with them at all?

RC: Or, do museums do that?

RR: A little bit, not much.

RC: I guess, as you are with Blum Helman, they'd go to your gallery, right?

RR: I guess; I don't know. [Laughter] Maybe sometimes they do.

CC: There's not much contact?

RR: Certain people from The Museum of Modern Art.

CC: But not much?

RR: Well I never talk to them much. I know a few people. I know Kynaston and I know—oh, the Drawings.

CC: John Elderfield?

RC: Riva Castleman?

RR: Yes, and oh, I can't think of—Alicia isn't it?

CC: Alicia Legg?

RC: Alicia Legg? Yes, she's still there.

RR: And, some others.

CC: It must be kind of funny.

RR: I don't see them very often.

RC: But from the time when you were—? When did you stop working there?

RR: Let me see; it was probably about '58 or somewhere in there.

CC: To the fire? Before the fire?

RR: Oh, it was just before the fire. Actually, I was there though when the fire—I mean, I wasn't in the Museum when it happened, but I was passing by.

RC: Really?

RR: I knew what was going on; it was unbelievable.

RC: You were just in the area?

RR: I went through the 54th Street, the Garden entrance, and it was—you know, [people] carrying the paintings down, it was a horrible thing. Oh, maybe I was—I think I was just leaving at that time; maybe I was still there. Because I remember watching some of the restoration of those three—*City Rises*, the futurist painting *The City Rises*.

RC: [Umberto] Boccioni.

RR: I can't remember the others. By Boccioni, yes. That was just—I mean, half of it was gone. It was just charred, yes, and they—

RC: But they actually only lost two pictures, I think. Maybe more.

RR: I think there was one [Claude] Monet, a small one that they lost. I don't remember.

RC: So then after you left and were able to work on your own work, the contact kind of trailed off, or what did the people—? Where was your community, like Al [Held] and all those people? Did they all leave around the same time?

RR: Yes, I think so. Well, I went back occasionally to see the paintings and see exhibitions. But then, of course, I lost contact, kind of, with the staff.

RC: And the staff kept growing. You know there's people there now who really don't know who Alfred Barr was.

RR: Yes, I guess.

RC: Obviously, people there who wouldn't have had any contact with him, but still.

CC: Do you remember him well?

RR: Oh yes, I knew—I didn't have that much contact with him, but occasionally.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:47:20