DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**MARK STEVENS (MS)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**RUTH CUMMIMGS (RC); CARL COLBY (CC)**
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RC: Interview with Mark Stevens, critic of *Newsweek*.

CC: [Tape break] the Museum, nor is it impossible to, all of those questions that we then would, in a sense, end the picture on, because we're not looking to make a positive view of the Museum; we're not really looking to make a negative view either. We just—it becomes a larger question at the end because you can talk about [the] present and future.

RC: And is it a living institution, or is it a [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:34]?

CC: Here, I'm going to start with at least one question: What was your past reaction to the Museum? Or, what is your initial reaction?

MS: Actually, my views on the Museum are pretty concise and quite [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:47]. In the early days—and of course I wasn't around then—but in the early days, the Museum was not really a museum in the way that you think of—what the word "museum" connotes was not really what applied to that particular museum. Indeed, it thought of itself as something apart from the usual kind of museum. It did not think of itself like the Met, for instance, or the Louvre. In the early days it had an advocate's role. It was trying to teach modernism to people who weren't terribly interested in modernism or who opposed it. So it had a very activist, pedagogical function in those days. It was often seemed as radical as the art. It also had a very important role in bringing European ideas to what was still a pretty insular country in the twenties and thirties, especially in the thirties when American painting, American scene painting, began to become very involved with regional sorts of art and with trying to find out what was really American; people like [Thomas Hart] Benton and that sort of painting. The Museum of Modern Art stood for a sort of classier, higher, European-tinged idea

of what art could be, and it really brought modern architectural ideas and [Henri] Matisse and [Pablo] Picasso to American eyes. As modernism developed, [as] the painting and the arts of modernism developed and became wholly accepted, the Museum's function changed. It no longer needed quite so much to be an advocate. At the same time, there were lots of other museums developing. It used to be that The Museum of Modern Art was the only show in town. It was the only bunch that was really pushing contemporary art. Now there are countless museums doing that job, so its influence is beginning to dilute a little bit. At the same time, as modernism became established as a style and as everybody liked it, and as The Museum of Modern Art bought it, the weight of its collection became enormous. It has the greatest collection of 20th century art in the world, by far. Any institution that's been around for 50 years and which has such an incredible collection of work, is going to start being dominated and affected by the weight of that collection. A lot of people complain now that The Museum of Modern Art isn't contemporary enough, it doesn't do enough work with younger artists, it doesn't show enough contemporary artists, it's not really interested. I think that's partly true. The Museum of Modern Art in a small way does pay attention to contemporary art, but nothing—it doesn't have anything like the role it once did to people like Picasso and Matisse when they were contemporary artists. But I don't know that that is so bad. If you have the greatest collection of modernist art in the world, you begin to start thinking about that, shaping it, trying to understand it better, trying to improve it, trying to present it well.

CC: Well, where do you think it began to slip?

MS: I think it began to slip probably as soon as modernism itself became fully established.

CC: By the time of the abstract expressionists?

MS: I'd say in the last, probably the last—and you have to make—I mean, this is not uniformly true. I mean, they continue to have very influential contemporary shows. But the last really sort of ferocious advocate-adversary sort of situation was probably the abstract expressionist movement. And they weren't—

CC: They weren't immediate champions.

MS: No, they weren't. They were already pretty late on that. There were other people who were—but again, I don't think that's necessarily bad. A museum has many different functions.

CC: Well, let's take it maybe one step further. If it did begin to slip and that's alright—

MS: "Slip" is a pejorative word.

CC: Or that its function changed.

RC: Lag a bit in time.

CC: Let's say—granted, it is the greatest 20th century collection. What then is more contemporary than modern? Or, what happened with modernism? If you were to explain that to the broadest possible audience on national television, what could you say about modern art?

MS: *Life* magazine did a big long piece on Jackson Pollock, I forget when.

CC: In the early sixties, I think.

MS: No, no, way longer than [that]. '52 or '53. And it was him going like this [gestures with hands]. And that was still sort of middle-class America looking at artists as incredibly weird, you know, like, look what this guy's doing.

CC: Gorillas painting; my child—

MS: At the same time, it was *Life* magazine with a huge circulation, in a way celebrating this guy. I mean, the feelings about him as expressed in that piece were certainly ambiguous, and yet he was considered important enough to do [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:28]. So I think that probably in the late fifties, abstract painting and modernism became respectable for a wide range of at least upper-middle-class people.

CC: There were certainly a lot of imitators.

MS: Yes, well there was, but I mean—and that process in mind was of course began with people like the Rockefellers and the Guggenheims who—and in Paris, it was—it's always been chic for aristocratic types to play around with art. Well, this little gimmick, this little sort of social gimmick became well known, I would say, by the late fifties. And then, you know, a lot of people knew that it was chic

to have advanced art. The market started to roar in the late fifties and early sixties. Then Pop art came; and yes, there were a lot of people who didn't like it, but there were enormous numbers of chic people who did.

CC: Well where do you see its function, then?

MS: So there by then, as I was saying, by the late fifties and early sixties, modernism was an established style.

CC: What about now? Do you see it [as] something as its greatest days of glory were in the days of Matisse, Picasso, and then [it was] beginning to flame, modern art per se, or what the Museum can champion as the best—its center, its heart is probably where? In the tens, twenties and thirties, isn't it? In terms of—

MS: Modernist art?

CC: Yes.

MS: Yes, probably until—and here you're talking criticism, and it's a complicated thing. My own view—

CC: It would be as if somebody were to ask you, if you felt that it is the greatest collection of modern, but now maybe that's quite established, is there anything now to pick up in its place?

RC: My feeling is that galleries now have kind of superseded the museum as being [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:27].

CC: Even in art movements. Not so much galleries, because—but, are there that many things going on now?

MS: Do you mean who is doing what The Museum of Modern Art used to be doing?

RC: Yes.

CC: Or is there anything going on that is what they are doing? Are they popular—? Is there anyone now, let's say, popularizing what they—anything with the talent, even, or the shock, or the forcefulness, of what they celebrated in the 1920s?

MS: No. Because when they were doing it, art was way off the track, way out of most people's minds. Now it's very—

CC: Much more mainstream?

MS: It's very mainstream.

RC: And from what you describe, then, to summarize it, the Museum had a great role in that, in mainstreaming art, acceptance of modern art.

MS: Also, I would call it "The Museum of Modernism," not The Museum of Modern Art. Now there's a big argument going about post-modernism, and it may be that they're not the museum for the post-modernist period. I myself am pretty uncomfortable with that word, post-modernist, because it seems to me there are—a lot of art that's now called post-modernist is quite modernist.

CC: Just the issue I came to wonder, is there anyone who's celebrating, let's say, Ed Ruscha or Robert Morris or Carl Andre?

MS: There are lots of people. You see, there's not that sense of authority that The Museum of Modern Art once had.

RC: Uh-huh.

CC: Oh, I see.

RC: So what is the experimental art? We were trying to figure this out. Can anybody be shocked anymore? We've seen it all.

MS: I think it's pretty hard. I mean, you can shock, sure. There are a lot of people who can be shocked pretty easily; there are millions. But there's just a very large supportive audience that there didn't use to be for art. Indeed it—now shocking is, I think—if you set out to shock, you're engaging a very cliché tripe because that no longer has any sort of resonance.

CC: It's hard to predict the future but do you see, if you were around in the year 2050, looking back at the 1980s, 1990s, the year 2000, do you think there will be pictorial art that will have as much resonance and strength and mastery as, let's say, the early part of the 20th century? Or do you think our concept of static visual display is changing and we're now focusing more attention on moving objects, or—? I'm just trying to open it up in the broadest possible. Because, for instance, we looked through all the art books, and certainly now, school kids who have never looked at art in the United States will look at art, and they are great

paintings. [Georges] Seurat, [Paul] Cezanne, Matisse, they are exemplary, [Pierre] Bonnard, pictorial image makers, and the abstract expressionists in my mind are the match of the great Italian Renaissance painters; fabulous color combinations, and mood and feeling, [Mark] Rothko, people like that. Do you see any of that continuing? Or do you see it as being very fragmented and it will be good picture making. I mean, are we in a mannerist period now?

MS: I think now is certainly a mannerist period. But mannerist periods [INAUDIBLE: 0:11:57]. I can't predict. It may well be that the painting will begin to be rather [tape break] were never on the edges of the arts the way poetry is. It can be done, there can be very good poetry written now that a lot of people aren't so interested in.

CC: That's true. Whereas in the early 19th century, that was the rage, wasn't it?

RC: So what do you see in another discipline moving out?

MS: Well, you were saying that maybe movies—and what's interesting about The Museum of Modern Art in trying to be open to every aspect of modernity, it didn't just get itself involved with painting but also did good work in, especially photography, but also films.

CC: So it's really—so now they've become more—it's more established, obviously, and it's taking on more of the functions of what?

MS: Of a more traditional museum. See, it sounds contradictory, a museum, not an advocate out there in the streets fighting. While The Museum of Modern Art had that contradictory dialectic going on early in its career, now the balance, [and] the scales have tipped a little bit, and now it's more a traditional museum. But again, I think the main thing is the weight of its collection; that would be the main [INAUDIBLE: 0:13:20]. Well, if you have all this great stuff, your instinct is going to be to somehow deal with that. And that stuff happens now to be old, to be past, not contemporary. And The Museum of Modern Art with William Rubin certainly—

CC: I was just going to say, is that his strong suit?

MS: He's the—

CC: Keeper of the [INAUDIBLE: 0:13:44].

MS: The symbol of that. He's primarily interested in Picasso and the Surrealists. And his great shows were late Cezanne [*Cezanne: The Late Work*]; late Cezanne being one of the main impulses to one of the strands of modernism, like, Cezanne to cubism, from cubism to people like [Piet] Mondrian, and from there to Abstract Expressionism. And then he did the great big Picasso show [*Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*]; Picasso being the premier modernist. So he stands as, I think, as the sort of symbol of the Museum moving towards its own collection. He—and also this new building and gallery space—the collection got so strong, so large, that they felt obligated to—

CC: To enshrine the collection, in a way?

MS: Well, to give it more room.

CC: I'm not saying it in a bad way.

MS: No; to give it more room, to get more of it on the walls. And inevitably, as you have more of it on the walls, more gallery space, their contemporary stuff is going to look smaller in relation to the collection.

CC: Yes, it's interesting too; look at what the Met and the East Wing [East Building of the National Gallery] have done, especially the east wing, they built, really, the whole wing to have shows, to have exhibitions, but also to build a contemporary collection. E. A. Carmean wanted to do that with Carter Brown, but it's very difficult to do that now. You can't go out and buy a [Willem] de Kooning or a, who knows, a [Robert] Motherwell, a [Georg] Baselitz, anything; they're extremely hard to build that kind of collection now. They have some—

MS: Well, you can build a collection of good works, but what you can't get is what The Museum of Modern Art has, which is incredible depth as well as great works.

CC: You mean each artist.

MS: They have not only masterpieces by these individual artists, but a great depth of drawings and prints, everything. So that they can—

RC: In the beginning there was a thought, a concept to make the Modern like the Luxembourg was, as a testing place for great works, then they move on to the

Louvre. And they had talked about all the great works that'd move on to the Met, and obviously, that didn't happen.[1] But, if we all had this kind of power to change things, do you think it still would fill a key role in being able to be on the edge and be a tastemaker and so forth, if they got rid of its collection?

MS: Well, they're still a tastemaker, and they're still the most influential museum in the contemporary arts. And for an artist to get a retrospective there, it's still the best, classiest place. I mean, it's better than the Whitney, say, or the Guggenheim, if you can get a retrospective there. But no museum could fulfill the same role as The Museum of Modern Art now because the times are just entirely different.

RC: And there is an art market.

MS: And there is an art market. They were—like I was saying, they were pushing stuff that people didn't want to hear about in those days. Now a lot of people want to hear about art, and there are a lot of people pushing it. So it would be very hard to.

CC: Was there anything in those days like PS1 and those sorts of things? The club?

MS: Well, yes.

RC: Certain galleries.

CC: Small little things?

MS: Yes, a few artists,

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:17:10] gallery that—

MS: You just had—I mean, I wasn't around then, so I can't speak personally, but from my reading and what I know, even in the fifties, there was just nothing like it. I mean, now there are hundreds of galleries, and not just in New York, but throughout the country. In the fifties, I remember reading, it was, I can't remember; it might have been Harold Rosenberg. He wrote something once, [that] it used to be that even in the fifties, you could go around and hit every

[1] 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.

gallery that showed any good art in about two or three hours. There was about 10 of them. There was three or four terrific galleries that showed the European masters, like Pierre Matisse. They would have the great ones from Europe there. Then there would be four or five others who would show lousy American art, and four or five others who would show a lot of the good American art.

RC: Was that [Leo] Castelli? Is that too—?

MS: Castelli came later. No, I mean—

CC: You're talking about back in the early fifties. He's talking about people like, well, for instance, de Kooning. It's fascinating. De Kooning had his first one-man show when he was in his forties. Franz Kline was about 44 or 45 years old. Franz Kline was showing—when he was in his late thirties, he was still showing at the Washington Square exhibition, having drawings—

MS: And it was also a very—quite a small world, I mean, because it was so much on the outside and so much apart from the mainstream, and because art wasn't so fashionable in middle-class thinking, these guys really were on the outskirts, living a bohemian life.

CC: Do you think that had—the Museum had an incredible affect on modern culture, just in a sense, the triumph of the bohemian? That these people who were living that kind of—because it seems to have flipped completely, especially in a place like New York. It's even difficult to imagine. New York now seems like most people individually appear to be in some regard rebellious in terms of their style of dress, whatever.

MS: That's all chic now. Do you want [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:17]?

CC: But the whole idea of chic; did they help promulgate that, do you think?

MS: No, they were the real thing. [Tape break at 0:19:25]

CC: If we were to compare, say, three periods. [Guillaume] Apollinaire was a critic, John Canaday was a critic in the fifties, and then what people do now in terms of criticism or reportage, has it changed very much at all? How would you define [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:40]?

MS: As with the Museum, before modernism became the rage and everybody knew about it, there was a real teaching and asserting function to be played by fine criticism. They could support art that other people thought was terrible. They could explain it. They could try to understand it. It was as though there was a whole new territory to investigate and explore. That stopped when modernism became so well known and established. Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, who were the main American critics, are probably, I would say, the last significant critical forces that we have.

CC: In terms of taste-making and—

MS: Yes, and because they were—

CC: Proselytizing, particularly?

MS: And explaining new art that—[to] a lot of people, in a new way. Their main stuff was the abstract expressionists, and they were the people who really championed a new kind of art. Now, there are plenty of critics now who champion every new wrinkle that there is, but because there are so many of them, and because there are so many people looking for the new wrinkle, it becomes almost instantly explained, and there is not that need for sort of sustained argument.

CC: The difference between—Lucy Lippard would be doing what you're doing. She's very much a causal—

MS: Yes, well she's—

CC: You can see it coming but—

MS: I really respect her quite a lot, although I don't know her. I mean, I think she's a little—I think she's pretty bonkers.

RC: She had her day; I mean, she really was important, I think, too.

MS: I think so, too. But still, there was nothing like Greenberg or Rosenberg. She continues now—I mean, you can see in her stuff in the *Voice*, she continues to perform to that old model. She thinks she's trying to put art that, especially politically-motivated feminist art, to an audience who doesn't want to know about it. The trouble is that I often don't know if it's very good. Now maybe she'll be

right, and then she will have—you know, if she's right, and that stuff turns out to be the main art of the period, then she'll have a place right up there.

RC: Let me ask you about another person, a real obviously motivating force, some people call him the soul of the Museum, Alfred Barr.

CC: Do you consider him one of those, too?

MS: I'm not really the person to talk to.

RC: Right, but what I was going to ask, since we're here now is, is there an Alfred Barr in the art world? I'm not saying at the Modern. Is there somebody who has that kind of vision, who has changed, who has adapted, as Carl was saying before visual responses to art?

CC: I don't think it's possible.

MS: It doesn't need to be done now, and it can't be done that way. [John] Szarkowski, the photography curator at the Modern, he played a very influential, important role in sort of defining and trying to come up with standards for judging photography; modernist standards. So he did a little bit what Barr did. He sketched out the sort of—

CC: I think that's true. He really, he's done—

MS: He's sort of last. A lot of people disagree with him a lot, but he still has a kind of a central position in the curatorial—

CC: What's happened to photography is pretty much what happened to modern art with Barr.

MS: Yes, but later, so that it can manifest itself later.

CC: That's interesting. I mean, he was interested in photography then, but there was probably very, very little market at that time.

MS: Yes, early on, and he—now again, it would be very hard to do in photography what he did because the field is so well mapped.

CC: Right.

RC: Right.

CC: What about—? Have you read back into Canaday and various other New York critics or any of Barr's material? Have you read much of that? Have you formed opinions?

MS: About what?

CC: Let's say about Barr, and do you think his—were you impressed by his writings, Alfred Barr?

MS: I don't think he's a great art historian.

CC: I didn't think so. I just want to try to get a fix on him. It's really not a question, it's just kind of an impression, but it's difficult to get a fix on him, really. He seems to be a popularizer, yet also very impassioned, but I don't get an awful lot of original—

MS: Well, it was original then.

CC: Yes.

MS: He was [pause] in his writing, he's a very formalist sort of critic and writer, which was a new way of writing about art in those days. Now, when modernism is so available and people are looking back at it, I think they're developing a somewhat richer view of modernist iconography. But he was always very concerned, it seemed to me—I may be completely off the wall here but from my view, it always seems to me that he's very interested in being right about how the forms are working, how the paint was put on, and all those sorts of things which modernist painters themselves were primarily interested in, so that he was writing about art in a way that modernist painters were thinking about art themselves. And he thought that's what he ought to be doing, that's what he ought to be pushing. In retrospect, that's a big part of the story, not all of the story, so he seems a little bit limited. Meyer Schapiro wrote a good thing on him in this respect. But he was obviously an amazing, incredible force.

RC: He had such vision. I mean, if from the outset his plan was to have modern art encompass all the—

MS: He was less interested in American work.

CC: Do you think he was right about that, now in retrospect, about American [art] as opposed to—or the American [art] in his time, the thirties?

MS: Yes, I do. There was—Picasso and Matisse are more important.

CC: Why is there such a huge gap with Americans?

MS: There have been great modernist—

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:26:51] and then we tend to forget about painting until

RC: Well, now they're having their shows right now, right? The Ashcan.

MS: Yes, but there's also a lot of—I mean like Patrick Henry Bruce and people like that. There are a lot of—and [Arthur] Dove, and those sorts—maybe they're not great painters but there are a lot of good American modernist painters who were working in the twenties and the thirties, and who weren't doing the regional sort of stuff. And maybe he probably didn't pay enough attention to them. They certainly are worth complaining about. Even in those days, I mean, the artists were always, at least from what I read, they were always bitching about The Museum of Modern Art, and thinking that he was European oriented and leaving them out in the cold.

RC: Was it particularly strong—? I seem to remember, I don't know the exact events or, in the sixties and seventies, weren't there really rallies and, what was that stuff? [Was it] more of the same, or why did he—?

MS: I can't remember the particular instances.

CC: Labor disputes?

RC: And is it now as strong? I mean now, is—artists [are] just as—

MS: There were demon[strations], I can't remember what; the union thing.

CC: Museum workers organizing.

MS: There were feminist things.

CC: Anti-war stuff. And then again, it was the Rockefeller museum, so a lot of anti-big-money, big war—

MS: Big everything. The Museum of Modern Art was very established. It was the biggest museum in modern art.

CC: What would you see, let's say five or 10 years from now, if you were writing like you're writing now, and you looked at—? What would fill a schedule at The Museum of Modern Art in terms of exhibitions? Do you think it would be things like [a] Helen Frankenthaler retrospective?

MS: What I think should fill it? Or what—

CC: Should, or will.

MS: Well, you know, they do their schedules way in advance. You can probably find that out literally.

CC: That's true.

RC: That's an interesting point.

CC: It is interesting.

MS: They do; they have to.

RC: Because in the beginning, they did like 25 shows in three years, and sometimes have repeats within a three-year period.

CC: They do do it three or four years in advance.

MS: Oh yes, they have to.

RC: For big shows.

CC: In 10 or 20 years, would you see them very much more than doing what they're doing; retrospectives and culling their own collection?

MS: I think they will be organizing their own collection, culling it as you say, doing big shows of the major modernist figures, doing one or two retrospectives a year of living painters, probably a number of group shows like their drawing shows of the past couple of years of, you know, six or seven young people who catch one of the curator's eyes. But I would guess it would be more of the same.

RC: So is there any more evolution to be had, or has it reached its 'this is what it will be'?

CC: I think he's saying that's not necessarily so bad.

RC: Oh no, I know, I'm just—it was to see if this is where it's—

MS: It could all change, of course, if they've added—with Rubin there, I think this is what it will be.

RC: But if you were there, would you [INAUDIBLE: 0:30:18]?

MS: Well, I'm pretty sympathetic to Rubin, really. If someone else came in who really wanted to be more contemporary, it could all change.

RC: Like what if Pontus Hultén was there?

MS: Yes, if Pontus Hultén came, it would change all around; there's no question; and it could be done.

CC: And he would pretty much just enshrine the permanent collection; it would just be there.

MS: Yes, but then he'd go after—he'd do lots of sexy shows of younger people. It could really happen. It's just that with the Board, The Museum of Modern Art is so kind of [INAUDIBLE: 0:30:53], really.

RC: You smiled when you said that, would you like to see that? I mean, you smiled when you were saying, 'Yes, it could happen, Pontus Hultén.' I know you're sympathetic too, but I think that's important, that—would you like to see it become a little bit more dynamic, or do you think it's fine now?

MS: Yes, I would. What I would like to see them do is try—you see, I don't think they're really trying at all in the contemporary field. It's not that they're doing too little. That's not what bothers me so much. It's that I don't think they're really thinking or trying or really working hard at it. So what I would—my criticism would be yes, go ahead and do your shows of Picasso and [Joan] Miró and they'll probably—I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if they do some huge abstract expressionist things, or a big Pop show, even. Go ahead and do those things that are very established, but think seriously too, you know, once or twice a year, about more contemporary things, and try to do something interesting, rather than just take four or five people and put them on the walls, [artists] who people are

talking about. Try to suggest what they're doing, or even give a retrospective to a [INAUDIBLE: 0:32:14].

CC: Since they did that show of drawings with [Francesco] Clemente, and Mario Merz [*New Work on Paper 2: Borofsky, Clemente, Merz, Penck, Penone*]. And that's, you know, anybody who follows—to people on the outside, that might seem pretty new and exciting, but these people are established.

MS: That's not necessarily—it's a nice thing to look at maybe, but it's not, I mean, it doesn't represent a real curatorial effort to sort of think about what's going on now, or to—

RC: Well, do they have the people there? I mean, in all deference to—

CC: Do they have that strength to do that?

RC: Yes; to who's there. It doesn't seem like anybody's willing to take [INAUDIBLE: 0:32:51].

MS: That's hard.

CC: The last curatorial show I ever saw like that was the post-impressionist show in Washington, where E. A. Carmean just laid it down. It was an unbelievable show. I mean, I don't know if I agreed with everything he said, but he walked you through—if you didn't go from painting number one to painting number 76 and read the little things, then you weren't getting—you could still go see the pictures, the late Gauguins and all, but—it was fascinating, to see it from his point of view, to listen to that kind of push, push, push, and then you come back and argue about it. The pictures are always going to be there. It's not—I see what you're saying; give us the vision.

MS: Also, what they do—I mean, I'm sure they would say that they're doing what I'm going to say now by implication. But one thing that The Museum of Modern Art always prided itself on being—and this is again, it's very much got to do with the modernist consciousness—which is that they always thought that they were self-conscious about what was historically valuable, what was going to last, so that they looked at history and they thought, there is really only—you know, there's significant painting and there's minor painting. I mean, Clement Greenberg is always like that, too. There's major and there's minor. And major means being

up to date with certain formal developments and so forth. Now, when no one is sure what's good anymore, it's very hard to play that role of arbiter and to say what's good. For example, The Museum of Modern Art would never do realist painting in those days, because that was thought minor. Now you don't know, and it's much more complicated. But it would be nice if The Museum of Modern Art, even though it's so hard now to determine what's good, it would be nice if they tried a little harder to do that themselves by asserting, even if they're wrong, asserting certain things as this is what's good now. They would make people furious, but it would be interesting if they did that.

RC: Sure.

MS: If they would say—if they did a show, for example, on neo-expressionists and didn't include [Julian] Schnabel, with the snub being that they don't think he's a good painter, they think that—maybe they're right and maybe they're wrong. But it would be—they'd be taking—

RC: They'd be taking a stand, something, a position.

MS: They'd be exercising taste.

CC: Rather than it just being a corporate showcase, which is, often times, what seems like is kind of surface

MS: Rather than just kind of showing five or six people who are in the news and putting them on the walls like in those drawings shows.

RC: To confirm what's going around.

MS: Yes, if they made polemical shows—

RC: I think people would get excited about it.

CC: Is there anybody who is—? A couple of names—

MS: But you see, they don't have that polemical edge now. They used to have a polemical edge. Now it's—they have—there's nothing polemical anymore.

CC: Does anybody do it? Does Alicia Legg do it? No?

RC: Of the curatorial staff that you know of, who's the most forward? Or is that still hard to say?

CC: John Elderfield? Kynaston McShine?

MS: They're all so interesting. I mean, John Elderfield is—he certainly keeps up with contemporary art. He's very academic. He's very interested in, like Rubin, in the great modernist painters. I think the collection has a—it weighs on him too, in an interesting way.

CC: What about Alicia Legg?

MS: McShine, I don't know. It's hard to say. I think maybe yes. But I don't know what the politics are.

RC: Again, look at the shows he [INAUDIBLE: 0:36:12].

CC: What about the other one we're going to go see—February first is Bill Lieberman. I'd be curious as to—how would you characterize him? We're going to see him, and no one's really given us a fix on him as to what—he was there very early in the sense he was Barr's protégé, and then there was the scuffle and he went to the Met and Rubin stayed. What sort of vision does he have, or how would you characterize him at all?

MS: Bitter?

CC: [Laughing] No, no. Well, then he might be very lively, but besides that, what's his curatorial vision? Is it very different than Rubin's? Or is it just two parallel tracks that don't talk to each other?

MS: He has a sort of a—I'm giving a sort of a—and you can't use this.

CC: No, no.

RC: It's just to help us.

MS: What they would say about each other. I mean, they don't like each other at all. And Rubin would say about Lieberman that he's a bit of a dandy; he's got a really good eye, which he does; but he's not really serious in an art history way. He's not really serious in making interesting shows about significant things that make important points. A sort of typical Lieberman show—what was that thing that Twenties show [*Art of the Twenties*]? Did you see it at the Modern, three or four

years ago? It was the 1920s, just the art of the twenties, as a low period of modernist [INAUDIBLE: 0:37:56].

CC: Sort of very *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*?

MS: Very eclectic. And he did a show that was really quite marvelous of just sort of juxtaposing things in wonderful little positionings of this next to that, and a real pleasure to walk through, I found.

CC: Installed very well?

MS: Installed very well.

RC: But it didn't make art historical, important—

MS: It was a bit of a—

RC: Hodge-podge?

MS: Well, it was sort of a self-consciously arty show, full of the light and this, that, and the other, but not serious, not weighty. You don't need the catalogue, the way you need the late Cezanne catalogue now, or something. And he's very good at getting stuff. He's good at sweet-talking old ladies for their collections and doing that thing. Which is why he's probably valuable to the Met.

CC: What's he doing there for 20th century?

MS: I don't know.

RC: Isn't Lowery [Stokes] Sims the chief curator of 20th century?

MS: I don't know what Lieberman is doing. I don't know what shows he has.

CC: Apparently he had that one show out of the blue. It was a retrospective of Clyfford Still.

MS: No, that was a Hess show.

RC: That's right.

MS: When he died, but Thomas Hess that was his.

CC: That was right out of the blue.

RC: It was wonderful.

MS: You see, he was coming in with—he really wanted to, I think, to compete with the Modern and to do—

CC: Everyone was shocked.

MS: —important art historical shows at the Met of modernist painters.

CC: Who did the *'40–70 New York Painting and Sculpture* [*New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970*] show? In 1970, it was called *1940–1970*, a big, big show.

MS: At the Met; that was [Henry] Geldzahler.

CC: That was [a] seminal show.

MS: Yes, he—

CC: That was a hugely attended show.

MS: Yes, he did. There was that catalogue. Yes, that was a very important show.

CC: When did Rubin come? Who would have done the Barnett Newman retrospective, things like that, at the Modern, around that same time, '70?

MS: It might have been Rosenberg, as a matter of fact, who wrote the essay to that.

RC: Then what would Rubin's fix be?

CC: Well, he's told us—

MS: That he's power hungry and gets all the space and the money and the shows. And sort of is such a dominant figure that the other people sort of just—

CC: Is he almost dominant over the rest of the Museum? Do you think? People intimated that to us, that he's so strong that [Richard] Oldenburg is the administrator, obviously, and the president and the director of the Museum, but—

MS: Rubin is certainly dominant.

CC: Rubin is very powerful?

MS: He is very.

RC: That he can sign on anything, like, he [INAUDIBLE: 0:40:52] and he shakes the hand—

CC: In other words when someone from San Francisco or Seattle at [a] museum, when they think about the Modern having to do something with them, they immediately think they'd better talk to Rubin.

MS: Yes, he's Barr-like, the most important.

RC: Once again, a personality that's shaping or giving character to—

MS: Yes, and shaping that as we were discussing. But if he weren't there, it's possible that all that stuff I was saying about the weight of the collection—

CC: I think this is good though, because what you've given us is a—I mean, who's to know if we're going to—if it would be included, but I think, depending on how the mix goes, it could be very good to include that, because what it's saying really is that they did their job, and they could continue to do certain things, but at the same time they do have something to celebrate. And it's almost—it deflates the problem, in a way. What appeared to be a problem in the beginning: Can't they continue to be contemporary? Can't they continue to be exciting? It's almost as if other people are doing that. Yes, they could do it. If it was the best of all worlds, they would do that and celebrate their collection. But perhaps if they continue to just be strong and develop and cull, winnow out their master collection, then that can be enough in itself.

RC: Well it's also interesting, especially for our film purposes, is that, it is people. I guess it always is people, that give certain institutions their character and so forth, and it was a spark—

MS: There have been a lot of strong figures at The Museum of Modern Art.

CC: It's disarming, too, because, if you were on film, you might expect you to be more, I don't know, demanding of them—

RC: Or upset with the—

CC: Or feel that they ought to do more in this, that, and that. Yet in a sense, it's an interesting reverse, because you're in a sense appreciative of what's there and celebrate what's there. And I think—

MS: But I wrote a piece once that was really pretty—I mean, what I said in the end there about, in the small number of things they do, they ought to do it better.

CC: You wrote a piece about that?

MS: Yes, I did.

CC: Because we'd like to—I'd like to read it.

MS: I wrote it a few years ago.

CC: For *Newsweek*?

MS: Yes. They did, they do—their Projects thing and all that.

RC: Their Projects room; yes. I was so excited about that, but then now, is it [INAUDIBLE: 0:43:10]? Jasper Johns, I love the drawings, but that's not new. I mean, that is new of his work but we've seen his work.

MS: Well it's also an easy, easy way to not do anything big.

RC: That's right.

CC: Just to have a Projects room;

RC: Do you remember seeing—?

CC: It was like having a romper room or a playroom in your house.

MS: You can do 20 or 30 of them a year, almost.

CC: It's like having a kids' room in your house; let them play.

MS: And they disappear; they don't really get a lot of attention.

RC: That's great. Do you know what the Projects room—the scale of it in the new space?

MS: I don't know.

RC: I wonder if they devoted—that would be interesting.

CC: Do those things get reviewed? Is it your decisions and your editors as to what—if you were super excited about some particular small exhibit at the Modern or the Met or wherever, could you do that if you wanted? Or does it have to be—?

MS: Yes, but at *Newsweek* and *Time* we have so little space, and it's really a lot about—I mean, sometimes—

RC: That you need to cover the newsworthy—

CC: You write up three or four different things and normally one would—

MS: No, I have to propose a story, and I only work there six months a year now, but I have to propose a story every week. And about half the time, it will get space. And then there's something else.

CC: It just gets taken out?

MS: So it appears maybe three out of five weeks.

CC: I would think they'd want something more than just the big guns.

MS: Yes, they do, and we do. But again, for *Newsweek* and *Time,* again, if you think, what can you do that's most useful. My view is that—I've been telling you how everything is now so known in modernist—well, to the *Newsweek* and *Time*, there are a lot of people who still really don't know a lot. And the most interesting thing, I think, the most useful thing that I can do when I'm writing for that audience is to try to write clearly about stuff that maybe you know a lot about already but that they don't. And to hit the new—see, in a way I'm asking in my criticism of The Museum of Modern Art, I'm asking for them to do shows that I could write about more in the contemporary realm.

CC: Oh, I see.

MS: That sort of drawing show—I mean, John Ashbury who alternates with me, he did review that, but I wouldn't have, because you can't—I mean, what can you say? But if they had really then tried to say this is a particularly interesting configuration or shape of things or ideas or way of painting or something like that—

CC: Yes, that's true.

MS: And tried to understand what's going on in some way, then I could wrestle with that idea. And I mean, the Photography Department still does those sorts of shows.

CC: Mm-hm. What do you think about—?

MS: And that Beaux Arts show [*The Architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts*] was very important in architecture.

CC: How about something like a bellwether like *Louise Bourgeois*; is that—?

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:46:02