DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**JOHN SZARKOWSKI (JS)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)**
LOCATION:	**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**
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CC: Square footage and space and study center.

JS: Oh, it'll be wonderful; yes.

CC: Really?

JS: Yes. Our permanent collection's base will be—plus a gallery that may or may not be permanent collection space—will be about three times what we had before. And I won't be buried in the middle of the surrealist painting collection; not only us, but the other [departments], Prints and Drawings, Architecture and Design.

RC: That'd be a good break from that; that's a heavy part of the collection, the surrealist paintings.

JS: I think it must have been terribly confusing to the visitor to suddenly stumble across Photography or Architecture and Design or Prints and Drawings in the middle of—

RC: I found it refreshing actually.

JS: Refreshing? Yes, but—

RC: Disorienting.

JS: I think it'll be maybe equally refreshing but a little less—

RC: Jarring?

JS: Confusing.

CC: I find it confusing. There are days when you want to go to a gallery and just see what they have, but if you've been a number of times, you're coming to see a certain exhibition, and you don't want to particularly see Neopolitan this or that.

JS: This space is going to be terrific in the sense that all of the various collections galleries will be accessible from the public space, basically from the escalator, so that you don't have to wait for those terrible elevators and get insulted by the elevator operators. Although, I mean, I think they're marvelous, the fact that most of them have retained some degree of sanity for as long as they have, I think, is absolutely astonishing. But—

RC: They probably have one of the toughest jobs, it's true. Dealing with so many people all the time.

CC: So we've got a pretty big task for ourselves here. You've heard something from that main meeting, but what we intend to do is—

JS: Yes, but I never believe what I hear in the main meetings. Tell me the real truth.

CC: Alright. We're going to make an hour long film about the Museum, and it's not going to be about modern art per se or about the collection or any of those things. It's really a history of the institution, but also a projection into what's it like now and what does it project itself to be in the future. We've roughed it out to be what we think, probably three periods. One, '29 to '39, Alfred Barr and the beginnings and the excitement attendant on that. And then a very large period, up to the present, the forties and fifties, et cetera, and really the growth of the Museum; the Museum perhaps hitting a peak, especially in the fifties and sixties, of tremendous influence with Victor D'Amico's [education] department and the Good Design exhibits and of course, the Photography Department. And then the last part [will] be really not so much telling the story from the inside out any more but beginning to talk to the curators who are here now, yourself, Mr. [Kynaston] McShine, and other people who might appear in other parts of the film, but projecting into the future. Seeing, are we satisfied with what we have? Someone like Bill Rubin might say we want to plumb our own collection; we have a fabulous collection; we don't have to be a 21st century museum; we don't have to do all that; we have the best for this century. Other people, maybe Kynaston

McShine, might say differently that I want to be an advocate or that I want to continue to be an advocate.

JS: It's going to be hard to be a 21st [century] museum just yet.

CC: [Laughing] Yes, because it hasn't started [laughter]. But we look forward to speaking to you because in a way it's almost all so neat. The intriguing part of the Museum to us is not simply that it's developed a great collection of painting and sculpture, but that it has developed the Department of Film, which is pretty extraordinary in what it's done. And of course, the circulating exhibits and the education programs are pretty novel in their own right. And speaking, even to someone like Monroe Wheeler, to know that through him and other people, now in the University of Wisconsin, there's some kid in his dormitory room with a reproduction of a [Paul] Gauguin picture. In a sense, that started early on by having—

JS: When I was a kid at the University of Wisconsin, which is where I was an undergraduate, we got exhibitions from this museum before, long [before], in fact years and years before I ever set foot in this museum, that would arrive in boxes and crates, very well packed. And we would unpack them and say, "Oh, so that's what a [Vasily] Kandinsky watercolor looks like."

CC: You'd just uncrate it?

JS: Uncrate it. The degree of security—it was forwarded to those exhibitions in the middle of the student union, where there were no doors to lock and—

RC: And this, you're talking a Kandinsky like the ones up on the walls now?

JS: Yes, we got a lot of them.

RC: Not that one; ones—

JS: Not big oils, but—

CC: Works on paper and—

JS: Well, enormously valuable, of course, but beyond that, they're irreplaceable works that they sent out in very expert crates to people, some of whom possibly were even less confident than I was. [Laughter] It's hard to believe in retrospect

that it might be true. I mean, we did indeed have a very responsible and competent woman who was the faculty advisor to the exhibitions committee, but she didn't sleep there either. The whole sense of the possibilities was, on both the giving and the receiving end was, I think, a good deal more—

RC: Auspicious.

JS: No. What's the name of the party that my grandfather ran, for county commissioner, [INAUDIBLE: 0:07:16]?

CC: The Whigs?

JS: No, it was later than that. [Laughing]

CC: The Know-nothings?

JS: [Laughing] No, it was later than that.

CC: I don't want to insult your grandfather. [Laughter]

JS: Oh hell. Who was it that came before the Progressives?

CC: Bull Mooses?

JS: No, just before them.

CC: Right about 1900.

JS: In the nineties, and William Jennings Bryan...Populist! Populist. I don't think that any traditional or any conventional since there was ever much of the populist in Alfred [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:08]. But in another funny sense, there was a good deal of it. And also the circumstance allowed it, because he was dealing with this funny material that not very many people recognized the worth of, so it hadn't become, for better and worse, as precious as it is now. Anyhow, what I began to say was that this institution made a great mark on me long before I had ever—a decade, at least, or more—before I ever set foot in it. Not simply through the traveling exhibitions but—

CC: No other museum was sending out crates full of work either, were they? Was that a pretty novel thing to be going on?

JS: Well, it was fairly novel, though I think there were other institutions that circulated exhibitions, but not *that* kind of exhibition.

CC: Right.

JS: But beyond that, I know, when I was in school, I was only going to school for fun, because I thought it wasn't interesting.

RC: That's a good reason.

JS: But I had been a photographer for a long time by the time I was 17.

RC: How did people, and how did you, respond to this new art? Were you ready to embrace it? It was modern and you were jumping on the bandwagon with The Museum of Modern Art, all these innovative people who started the—I mean, some people—because then it wasn't chic, necessarily. It was still pretty controversial when they were starting out to send these things around.

JS: I was dumber than most people but I would say that I wasn't necessarily jumping on any bandwagons. I ended up being an art history major in Wisconsin because I like to look at the pictures and there was nothing else that I felt I was obliged to learn since I was a photographer anyhow. I could afford to be stupid except in those areas when it was interesting to learn something. And one of my art history professors, a man by the name John Kienitz, who was young enough that I felt able to interrupt him in lectures, when we were saying something that was clearly wrong. And one day after the lecture he stopped me on the way out and said, "I take it you're interested in photography." And I picked myself up and said, "I'm a photographer." He said, "Oh, good. Go down to the co-op," the student club bookstore, "and buy this book." And he wrote down on a white card what I should buy. Being an obedient student of my generation, I went down and I—it'd be nice to look at it; I really don't want to buy it—so I bought it. What, about 1944. And they gave it to me and they said, "That's four dollars," or whatever; it was expensive, it wasn't any cheap book. So I gave them the four dollars and I went to relax in my room and looked at it, and I was absolutely—I mean, that was a bandwagon I wasn't immediately ready to jump on. I thought they were just stupid, those books.

RC: What was the book?

JS: It was this book of—with a black cover, just plain photographs of, you know, funny American small-town scenes and called *American Photographs* by Walker Evans. Do you know that book?

CC: Mm-hm. And it looked like a lot of ordinary stuff?

JS: Yes. I mean, they were clear, they were sharp, with the swans on the reflecting pools. Where was the backlighted snow?

CC: Where was technique?

JS: The character studies, the old men with greased faces, the light shining across their nose and their forehead.

RC: Romantic.

JS: Well, I may be overdoing it; I may not have been quite so—it seems in retrospect. But I was close, and in the end, I was good. I knew how to do that [laughing] and other, various other things. So I wasn't cowed, because I knew something about it.

RC: This was new photography? This was the vanguard?

JS: To me.

RC: But wasn't it also as exhibited by the Museum, they were sponsoring this, or was it just the fact that photography was being shown?

JS: That exhibition [*Walker Evans: American Photographs*] was what, 1938, I think, and it was published in an edition of probably 2500 copies, a fair portion of which was distributed to the members. And in '43 or '44, probably there were still books left in the stores. So it was not a great best-seller book.

CC: When did you do that film we saw on him yesterday afternoon? That was much later though.

JS: We didn't do any film on him.

CC: On Walker Evans? There's something with your voice.

JS: Maybe, it could have been an Arabic name.

CC: No, it's on Walker Evans and it's in color. It was a film. We saw it yesterday in the Archives.

JS: Who made it? Do you remember?

CC: It was narrated by you, and then suddenly there's a quick interview with you about Evans. And Evans is still alive, and he's giving classes at Yale, and it looks like the late sixties; '69, '70. And it was about *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

JS: It's in color?

CC: The film is in color; the actual footage isn't in color; and then—

RC: I'm thinking it might have been some CBS, or some news.

CC: No; I'm not sure about that.

JS: Maybe it was a film done by [INAUDIBLE: 0:15:02] or somebody at the time of the exhibition here. There was another film which was a quite nice little film which I think was in black and white, which was done by a student [Sedat Pakay] of his at Yale with a vaguely Arabic name, the young man that did it.

CC: Going back to the other stuff, what's difficult for me to comprehend I think is, photography, at least in the thirties, was still very much representational imagery, and a lot of the modern art imagery wasn't. [JS laughs] So, was there a clash there? Or with [Alfred] Stieglitz and his 291 [Gallery] and all that, did that problem get solved a long time ago? Or was that an aesthetic clash?

JS: That's a dichotomy that you won't get much satisfaction from me about, because I don't think that's—

CC: I'm just curious if there even is a clash; maybe there isn't. I was wondering why they're draws on different sensibilities though. Did there used to be big debates down at Stieglitz's place [where] he'd be showing pictures but then also—?

JS: That was before my time. But I think one of the things that's happened to a considerable degree just in my time—I think that photography has gained very considerable confidence and sophistication and the photographers who have a sense of what they want to do don't worry about, as much as they might have in

the Edwardian period, about whether or not people are going to regard this as being high, low, medium, or non-art. They know and have a sense of what they're doing and what their intentions are. And I think that there is among the best photographers now fundamentally no worry about what other people—how other people might categorize the medium in terms of the best works of Praxiteles or the great ancients.

RC: That's really due to the museums, I think, saying: This is art. It's okay.

JS: No, it's not due to the museums. Nothing is due to the museums except—I think at best what a museum can properly do is to bring the artist and its potential public into a kind of proximity where they might get to know each other and understand what each other's interests are. The notion of having a 21st century museum is to me totally foreign to the idea of what a museum's responsibilities are. This may be because I wasn't, except occasionally and on and off, in the the museum business until I was at least, or at best, on the threshold of middle age and had been a photographer for 20 years or so. But I feel very strongly that a museum does not does [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:21] and does not usurp the prerogatives of the artist. You are by definition behind; that's your function, to be behind. You don't have to be a hundred years behind, and if you're good enough, maybe you don't even have to be 10 years behind. And if you get *really* good enough, maybe you can only be a few hours behind, but you're behind by definition. That your function is to try to understand what work is being done, has been done, maybe even that has been done a long time ago but still has in it vitality and a potential for explaining the unachieved potentials of an idea or a medium that deserves to be more widely seen. But it is quite distinct—it seems to me the role is fundamentally distinct from the kind of a role that an artist preforms. If you put yourself in the position of being competitive with the artists, you cease to serve what it seems to me is the role that you're supposed to serve, which is as a—well, procurer is a nasty word, but it's something like the same function. It is an inter—

CC: Is there always the danger that you'll enshrine the artist, almost unwillingly? That the artist will become championed or will feel suddenly that—not that you'll do him a disservice, but you give a certain attention to someone—

JS: Of course.

CC: Just by the very fact of your exhibition.

JS: All the time. Not only a danger but it happens.

CC: Not to say that people's work deteriorates after that or anything like that.

JS: Well, sometimes it might. No matter how hard you work to try to explain what it is you mean, obviously it's easier for a potential audience to say, "Oh; so-and-so!" is a hero, or—it is no different in the arts than it is in intellectual fields or in politics or in the military.

CC: I think there are a couple of advantages you have, though, over some exhibitions. We were talking to someone the other day who said it's a shame—one of the curators here, [John] Elderfield, said, in his mind, it's terrible when you go to certain exhibitions and it's all place-cards and a complete description and an Acoustiguide telling you every which-way to think about every which picture. And some modern pictures suffer from that only because people feel called upon to look at the catalogue or to listen to a guide or to get some kind of a fix on what they're looking at. Whereas, if you go to Robert Miller gallery or whatever and go upstairs and see a Eugene Smith show, there are little tags. They tell you maybe where the picture was taken or the date, and there is a catalogue. But you're hit so much by the imagery; it's either familiar to you or it becomes so familiar to you so quickly. And it's not simply because it's representational but just the nature of the—it's almost photography is confrontational, in a way. It's an immediate appreciation there or an immediate rejection, one or the other. In a way, it's a great advantage that a lot of pictures—it's just like going down to see your [Eugéne] Atget show [*The Work of Atget: The Art of Old Paris*]. A couple of weeks ago, I went down to see that. And I got a feeling for Paris, you get a feeling for the way the pictures are made and you walk away with a certain sense. And I didn't feel called upon to hear all the stories attendant to it. And I heard they were fascinating. I later read up on that.

JS: One of the nice things about Atget is we know nothing about him. Which is marvelous.

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:24:08] just the thing itself.

CC: I think it just makes it so much—it's just such a readily accessible medium, but maybe you're still running up against—

JS: I don't think it's necessarily all that—at least, unless I'm a visual—

CC: Do you think it's taken for granted as imagery?

JS: Well, if I'm not extraordinarily dull. I still find that it's full of surprises and full of things to learn that I didn't know of. Of course, Atget is not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill photographer, but I meant that in some ways Atget is nice because he, in a sense, in photography, corresponds to the people who built Gothic cathedrals or something like that: thank god they left no diaries and they didn't teach.

CC: Theories about photography. Everyone would rather know that he walked around with a big camera.

JS: Look at this. This is really quite interesting. This is the third volume of Atget [*The Work of Atget: The Ancien Régime*]. It starts here. Now, I didn't realize this before. How long have I been looking at these pictures now since we got them in, what? '68 or whatever it was.

CC: This looks like *Last Year in Marienbad*.

JS: This is Versailles, the first ones, where he started it in 1901. He learned how to make that picture. And [INAUDIBLE: 0:26:00].

CC: With the heavy foreground?

JS: I never—until we began putting together this particular volume and looking at these particular separate issues, a figure in the foreground silhouetted against a flat background with a deep, rushing, baroque space. Until you begin to put the book together, you don't realize that at Versailles he had a certain problem, a certain progression of ideas that does not necessarily relate to what he began to do at Saint-Cloud, see, here, where he began, in 1904, three years later when he already knew a lot of that. But it's a different place so he's got a different problem, and it's like making a different movie, in effect. Right? So he learns how to make this picture, and he makes it over and over with variations, you see.

CC: You're talking about in formal design.

JS: The sense of what the possibilities of what the place is like and how you describe that.

CC: To get the best picture for the place.

JS: Now look at this; this is very interesting, I think. Almost the same issue, but this time he does this. Right? You see what I'm saying here. Even the year is not so important because that might mean half a dozen trips every time he's learned something. But I mean in these pictures they are pretty comparable, and they are half way in between this idea, or this idea, which is also this idea, and this idea, and this idea. Isn't it interesting; here he has brains enough to reverse the whole procedure and use the white sky as the shape.

CC: Yes, that's fascinating. Look at that. It's almost like a negative of the other one.

JS: Yes. [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:18] And then, here, or here, where he suddenly will put the main object in front of the vanishing point, and instead of the vase here being kind of an element in the modulation of the big dramatic baroque space, it's so much more interesting

CC: And here he's got [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:56] towards the middle.

JS: Yes. Whereas here, if you compare that to that, the vase becomes much more important.

CC: Sure; it *is* the picture.

JS: And it becomes—not that the rest of it isn't also very much a part of the picture, but that this thing as an object for contemplation, a story—

RC: That's what that's about.

JS: Yes. And then—

CC: Is he playing with that same sort of thing when he goes vertical and makes you concentrate on something very thin and almost fragile?

JS: This is all Versailles. He had two series. He went till about 1906, then he stopped at Versailles. Then he comes back about 1920 and starts over again.

CC: Did he photograph at any particular time of day, like early morning or—? It has such a haunted look to it. Or is that the nature of the film? Or am I just being nostalgic?

JS: No, as he got older, he worked—people always say he got up early in the morning so people wouldn't be on the street, but that's not true. He came to get up early in the morning and work late at night because the light was better. I think. And here, when he gets to Saint-Cloud, here, he has basically quite a different idea of what the problem is. Versailles is like a museum; that's where Louis the 14th and the 15th and the 16th and Marie Antoinette [were] and all that. When he gets to Saint-Cloud, the objects as objects are very much less important, even though he starts—it's only three years after Versailles. But when he's at Saint-Cloud, he's photographing weather, and light, and the quality of it. And then when he goes to Sceaux finally, at the end—I'm not making a speech to you, but, except when you're dealing with something that's that good and that rich and that interesting. I think it's more interesting for us than it is, you know—

RC: For the people looking at it in his time.

CC: Is this in the continuing series of books that?

JS: This is number three, yes. It comes out next year, and after that will be four. But he was just so dang good and so rich, that I suspect it's probably even more interesting for us than it is for the public. Ha-ha-ha; that's they're tough luck; right?

CC: Are the French as appreciative as the Americans?

JS: Oh, no; they don't know anything about it.

CC: [Laughing] They don't pay much attention. I'm only curious because it's its own home ground; I just was wondering whether they think of this as being more humdrum and we think of this as—

RC: We've done that for them.

CC: This is the epitome of fin-de-siècle. Well, the players have left the stage.

JS: If I was a French curator, my nose would probably be a little bit out of joint because of the fact that the great Atget collection is in New York and not in Paris;

right? So, the most natural response is to say, 'Well, he was an interesting primitive.' [Laughter]

RC: That is very unique and wonderful about the Museum is that it really captured New York as—I think people would agree—as *the* art center, if you had to pick one. Obviously, it's spread out to a lot of places; there's great art all over the world, but, how is that—

CC: It's interesting when you look at [Edward] Steichen or some of that group, people I don't think realize the connection with the rest of art that they had, that they were very much attached to and very cognizant of all—I think when people look at a discipline, they just see them as perhaps quite separate. But as you were saying, when you studied art history, and then you were a photographer, and you knew art and art history, and I think some people nowadays aren't as aware of that. They may think of it as something very, very much different, photography not being all that connected to paintings.

JS: It's both of those things.

CC: At least in the United States. People who are photographers and talk photography, they don't seem to be as—they don't talk about picture making in the same way that a painter will talk about it, and they don't—but maybe they don't have that many people to—or there's not that much in common anymore.

RC: The role the museums play—

CC: John, do you think there was more in common in the old days than let's say Robert Mapplethorpe and some New York painter? I mean, is he so far different in what he's doing now that he's not his compatriots anymore?

JS: Probably I'd broach that question a little differently, a little more historically. I think in some ways because the opportunity existed here in this institution a long time ago, and because of the fact that the institution itself was such a funny one, you know, with—since Alfred had defined a role for it in principle that was so much broader than he was able to keep track of or administer in an effective dictatorial way, even if that had been his wish, which I don't think it was, a fair part of that went on here. I want to read you something I think is wonderful. Is it in here? [Pause to 0:36:42] In about 1937—not ancient history—or '38 maybe,

when Beaumont Newhall was doing his big history of photography show [*Photography 1839–1937*],[INAUDIBLE: 0:36:57] probably ever, and Stieglitz was two blocks down the street, not willing to speak to anybody, especially not this upstart institution that was directed by a kid, you know, Alfred Barr. And obviously, the Museum was working on moving in on Stieglitz's turf, after he—

CC: Since 1905.

JS: So that the relationship between the Museum and Mr. Stieglitz was not apparently all that good. But Ansel Adams obviously had an immense reverence for Stieglitz and Stieglitz had given him more than one exhibition at An American Place, in the year before, in '36. And Stieglitz and Adams had a running correspondence. Adams writes to Stieglitz and says: 'Listen, I know you're not very fond of The Museum of Modern Art, but I think you really should go down there to see an album that I lent to that young fellow there who's doing that history of photography exhibition, whatever his name is, an album of 19th century western landscape photographs by somebody name [Timothy] O'Sullivan, whom I never heard of. And I don't know who he was, but,' he says, 'I think the Museum will exhibit the album open to a wonderful picture called "Cañon de Chelle" [*Ancient Ruins in the Caños de Chelle, New Mexico. In a Niche Fifty Feet Above Present Cañon Bed*]. But,' he said, 'there are half a dozen other pictures in that book that are just absolutely as good as—in addition to that one, a half a dozen other pictures in that album that are as good as anything I've ever seen.' I mean, he was so excited that he didn't even remember to say, "Except, of course, for your work, Mr. Stieglitz." [Laughter] Normally, he would have; it would have been the standard form. And he said, 'Especially,' he said, 'look at one called "Inscription Rock with a Ruler," [*Historic Spanish Record of the Conquest. South Side of Inscription Rock, New Mexico*].' he said. [INAUDIBLE: 0:39:27] everybody's stealing my books. [Laughter]

RC: This would be the place I'd come to, to get the good stuff.

JS: Well, you'd be out of luck. Somebody beat you to it.

CC: You have to have your references handy.

JS: Don't give up. "Inscription Rock with a Ruler," he said. Do you know the picture?

RC: Not sure if I do. [Tape break at 0:40:07]

JS: What are you doing?

RC: Taking notes.

JS: Ah, taking notes, as we say. But it is fascinating that so many of the people who are now in the pantheon of photography were really forwarded there by other photographers. Ansel, who knew nothing about the history of art, or very little, and very little about the history of photography, and who has a few strong intuitions, sees this album of photographs by Berenice Abbott, who was working in a very different style and towards a very different end. She sees the work of a cranky old Parisian commercial photographer, Atget, and it's like St. Paul on the road to Damascus, I mean, her life is changed. Walker Evans and Lincoln Kirstein being quite impatient with—put off by most of what was passing for creative photography at the time—go back and sort of resurrect and promote who, at that time was called Brady—that's a term like Homer. [Laughing] Turns out that he was the head of a committee, like King James didn't write—

CC: Was Kirstein really anti-modern art, or, he had a burr in his side about modern art, but yet he was also one of the original Harvard Co-op people, wasn't he?

JS: Mm-hm. He wasn't anti-modern art.

CC: How did he split off?

JS: He was against—he disagreed with Alfred about Alfred's definition of it.

RC: Which was?

JS: Well, I think that Kirstein was much more sympathetic to certain aspects of surrealism and perhaps, to put it a little less neurally[?] than that, to the possible literary and intellectual referential aspects of modern painting, and Alfred was more concerned, more interested in formal and structural ideas in modern art. I don't think one should make too much of that kind of division. There's also always the question of strong minded men in the same room.

CC: But Barr, the way you saw it, he was an insightful and very severe critic, yet at the same time almost very happenstance?

JS: Very open.

CC: Very open?

JS: Enormously open. Well, he can't be open to everything at once. Of course, it's more difficult. But basically, the [INAUDIBLE: 0:43:52] of issues that Alfred was capable of getting interested in, or actually historically got interested in, is astonishing. He had a mind of enormous flexibility and openness, and he was not worried about whether or not what he loved one day was absolutely coherent intellectually with what he had loved the day before, and he could love both of those things simultaneously and be interested in them in a disciplined way and approach them with intellectual rigor, without choosing up sides.

RC: Do you think that those values have transcended him here now?

CC: Or that they are alive now?

RC: Is his spirit still in the Museum? Somebody even gave you a great compliment and said John is the one who embodies [JS laughs]—we've been asking people, who embodies Alfred Barr? We spoke to so many people.

CC: We'll let them be the judge.

JS: Well, that's very much too large a compliment, and I reject it. Perhaps the only limited sense in which it might make some sense is that we all respect—and my predecessors, who I consider—

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:45:44