

DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: MARCIA TUCKER (MT)
INTERVIEWERS: CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)
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MT: He [Alfred Barr] was one of my closest friends.

CC: Oh, really?

MT: For years and years. And I met his daughter [Victoria Barr] through his wife, and she also is one of my best friends. And I catalogued Alfred's and Marga's private collection.

CC: Huh.

MT: So, I worked with Bill Lieberman, years ago, with Pat Hills. I worked with his secretary in 1969. So I wasn't sure whether that was—

RC: No.

CC: No, it's funny. One or two people mentioned you, but not specifically—

RC: In connection with—

CC: You know, the Museum. None of our associates—

MT: I don't talk to people about my friendships anyhow because they're private friendships.

CC: One of the people—one of our group [members], not the two of us but another fellow, spent two hours speaking to Marga Barr, and has been going through all of the—with Rona Roob, through the whole [Barr archive](#) and has come up with a lot of terrific letters.

MT: Well you know she's [Marga] writing a chronology ["Our Campaigns"], and I happened to read the—was it the 1926 pages? And they are so astonishing. They are so—first of all, they're so beautifully written. But they're also so informative in a way that very little else has ever been informative about the Modern. And they're so full of life and so true to the spirit of the things that happened. Although it's an informal form of a chronology. But I think that it's an extraordinary, extraordinary piece of writing. And somebody needs to be able to look at that.

CC: Well what we've been doing is going through the Barr archive, particularly with this other fellow, Harvey Ardman, who's working with us as the writer on—in trying to shape the story, and try to get as much of that early story as possible. Because the actual dialogue between, well, Alfred, let's say, and Abby Aldrich [Rockefeller], as to what to do with the first show, and how they attracted pictures, or why certain fields intrigued him; it's all very, very interesting. And it really shapes the way America looks at it, the way America faced modernism, how it all happened. So, what we wanted to do was to try to perhaps get from you, because you're with this museum [New Museum], is to have some perspective as to what the Modern's mission was or is or could be and how it—you know, is it serving that purpose? Or, is [William] Rubin right? I mean, it should be the past?

MT: I don't want to get into a polemic. You want me to try to answer that?

CC: I'd like an opinion, you see, because it's just like Lieberman or Lawrence Alloway, a number of other people, Robert Hughe—I mean, there's lots of good things you can say about the Modern, but there are also things that—you know, is it pretty continuous? Should it continue? What's the future for it?

MT: [Laughing] Should it continue.

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:02:53].

MT: [Laughing] There are too many museums in New York; get rid of a few.

CC: There are a lot of museums.

MT: It's hard to get to all of them. Also they could be [laughs]—no. It seems to me that—well, see, I'm in a peculiar position because I started this museum, and I

started with nothing. You know, I didn't have Rockefellers [INAUDIBLE: 0:03:17]. And it seems to me that there are very interesting contrasts. I mean, things that I have discovered that have parallels in the early history of the Modern, some of which are really rather unexpected. As for the nature and formation of the museum, it seems of course obvious to me that in each period—and it may be a 50-year period or a 100-year period, it may, in our own time, be a 25-year period—the institutionalization of what once were avant-garde organizations, is a given. And it's a given because it's necessary, because in some way those organizations, by virtue of their very success, become institutionalized. This is not bad. This is fine. Otherwise, we would have no institutions. We would have only organizations that blossomed for a short while and then died. So I think it's very important, because the institutionalization assures a future for that organization. But the other thing is that people are programmed to resist change, and at the same time, if you don't change, you're going to die. And it presents a very basic human paradox, that also manifests itself, obviously, in the formation and evolution of a museum. When I started this museum, I had basically very much the same intentions as the Modern must have had, and that is, I saw a gap. Right? Leapt off the edge of the cliff into the gap. It seemed to me that after eight years at the Whitney, no one was showing contemporary art with—and you may have read the *New York Times* yesterday, which of course confirmed my own thinking about things. But, it seemed to me that there was a real need for a museum of contemporary art, just as there was at one time a real need for a museum of modern art. It's just that the definition of “modern” has now changed to include all of the 20th century, and eventually, of course, the 21st century. The real problem, as I see it, has to do with collections. And there is a kind of a split between the collecting institutions and the non-collecting institutions. The collecting institutions think that what makes a museum is the collections. The non-collecting ones think that museology is an activity, a total activity, and which is of course my stand. Ironically, The Museum of Modern Art intended to collect for only 25 years and then to dispose of its whole collection.¹ I

¹ Tucker 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.

intended to collect for 10 years and dispose of the collection, with no knowledge whatsoever that the Modern, that Alfred had even thought about that stuff. So I was very—I was really knocked out when I found out that they had thought in that way, too, and I was both saddened that they hadn't been able to do it and heartened that they hadn't been able to do it, because it gives me a chance to try. But a lot of what I, the way in which I conceived this museum, had to do with what I saw happening at the Modern. For example, the increasing focus on collections because you can't bear to part with these great things, and increasingly moving away from any involvement with contemporary art, and the understanding that contemporary art is not really important, nothing was happening now. Of course, when Alfred was collecting in the early days, everybody else thought nothing was really happening. But Alfred knew that something was happening. And somebody once said to me that a good museum spans a whole generation; a great museum spans two, and a genius would barely make it into the third. And so in thinking about those things, I set up this museum, [and] chartered it in such a way as to ensure that we would only be involved with the art of the previous 10 years at any given time. That is part of our expressed function.

CC: Uh-huh. So you're not celebrating people who may have already been established earlier on.

MT: Exactly. It forces us into the present. And the other thing is that we will have a semi-permanent collection, and we'll collect for a period of 10 years, and then we will sell the whole thing and use it to refinance our programs or to recollect. [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:20].

C/R: Recollect? [CC and RC simultaneously]

MT: It's a great title for a show, right? Recollection. And that—sorry; I can never tell when thinking is going to work [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:38] [laughter] [whispering] [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:42]. When I worked at the Modern, I was an art historian, and an art historian in the really traditional sense. I was an Institute student, and in fact, I have a sort of funny story. I don't have a doctorate because of Bill Rubin, but this is not to be—

CC: Oh no, no, no.

MT: And that's because I was—

CC: We're not interested in any personal—if someone has something against somebody, you know, Rubin versus Lieberman—

MT: No, no, it's not against. I'm just stating a fact, which is that I don't have my doctorate because of Bill Rubin because in a lecture, he talked about—it was in 1970 and it was my second year at the Whitney. And I was just finishing up a doctorate and took a course, his course in modern art since 1940, because I knew it would be a [INAUDIBLE: 0:09:31]. And he was lecturing and he was talking about the authentic art of our time, as opposed to something that he called novelty art. And as an example of novelty art, he cited, and this is a quote, “some girl who makes plastic camels.” And that was the first show I did at the Whitney [which] was a Nancy Graves show. And I got up and left. It was really an astonishing thing. I got up and I left and never went back. That was it.

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:09:59].

MT: I left. And it was of course—someplace it must have been building. But this isn't a story against Bill, it's a story about points of view and ways of thinking about things, and the nature of judgments of quality, and the whole Greenbergian era, and on the fact that anyone—and this of course has to do with Alfred Barr—anyone involved with contemporary art, one goes directly to the source, and that is to the artist. That's what Alfred did. All of the notes, all of the journals; boom! He's out there visiting [Pablo] Picasso, he's talking to [Joan] Miró, he's negotiating with so-and-so, and he is a friend of these people. This is a friend, this is someone they speak to. He is also a scholar. The day of the museum administrator has come, the day of the fundraiser, the day of the entrepreneur.

CC: The showman.

MT: Sure.

RC: Ringmaster.

MT: Museums are modeled on [INAUDIBLE: 0:11:01]. So I see it, too. There are two structural models. One is the academic model and the other is the corporate model. And increasingly, you don't even find the academic model. Increasingly. When I worked at the Whitney under Jack Baur, that was the academic model.

Things were done for scholarly and intellectual reasons. And those pursuits always took precedence over the shopping bags, t-shirts, and that jazz. That's come to an end. And that is not to say, by the way—Rubin, of course, is a scholar, and Dick Oldenburg is one of the really good museum directors around. So this is not about the Modern. This is about museums in general. The Modern tenaciously holds to the academic model, and will persist. But as it holds to the academic model, then it has to justify that commitment. And that is justified by the nature and scope of its collections. So—

CC: And by its exhibitions also? What they choose to—?

RC: What exhibitions do grow out of their permanent collection?

MT: A lot of their exhibitions grow out of their collections. In terms of its commitment to contemporary art, that is no longer. And it's like old folks who say, "Things just aren't what they used to be; you know? Those were the good old days." And as somebody pointed out, *these* are the good old days. These are our good old days. Right? And we will look back on these, "Oh, I remember when I used to know E'wao Kagoshima." Right? And everybody will say, "You knew him?" "Yep, I worked with him." Because they can't think that way. But that's what happens. I mean, there's this big slogan across the front of our museum: "Today's risk is tomorrow's art history." Which is true; it's all perfectly true. But the thing is, you see, one can be right in hindsight, and only in hindsight, and unfortunately a lot of people in museums today who show contemporary art prefer to be right at the moment. And they don't understand that it's the consensus of educated opinion that will guarantee or assure a historical importance. And that will happen after we're dead, all of us; you see? So, my feeling about all of this is that as a museum of contemporary art, it's inherent in our function that we take risks, that we not worry about whether we're right or not, as opposed to the other museums.

RC: It's just like the old days at The Museum of Modern Art.

MT: Right.

CC: But do you think Alfred meant that in a sense The Museum of Modern Art was also for his own marker, the new museum, as far as he was concerned.

MT: Sure.

CC: That was really it.

MT: Of course.

RC: And he wouldn't have to worry about trust funds

CC: And he was committed to modernism but for him that was the new movement.

MT: Absolutely.

CC: He found antecedents and he just kept going [INAUDIBLE: 0:14:00].

MT: Right. But the thing is that he hit on it so well that after a few years, because history moves fast now, they couldn't bear to let it go, and so it became, thank god, one of the great institutions. I think that there's a real basic difference in the way I see things, and that is that I think of art as a repository for ideas. And whether or not the art itself endures, whether the objects—because we're not object oriented today in the same way, either—that is not the issue. It's the currency and the profundity of the ideas, the complexity of the ideas, and the ways in which contemporary art links up with the world. And I don't think that scholarship and contemporary art are at odds, and neither did Barr. Again, this is very awkward for me because I can in no way equate myself with Alfred Barr. That's ridiculous. I'm only saying that in one's life, when you're trying to do a difficult thing, and especially for me because everyone said to me: You can't do it; you can't do it; you can't do it; you can't do it. You look at the field for—

CC: You look for inspiration.

MT: Well, you look for inspiration. You look for someone whose work is paradigmatic. You look for, yes, for inspiration.

CC: I don't blame you. I mean, I don't know, if you feel uncomfortable allying yourself in the same sense and you feel very much a blood sister or blood brother with Alfred Barr, and probably a few other people.

MT: No, it's not that; it's that, I mean, I knew Alfred and I was crazy about him. He was a wonderful man. But I knew him better toward the end of his life, and I was—

- CC: Was he very, very quizzical? I mean, he was extremely knowledgeable, then, as to what he was looking at, or—?
- MT: He was very sweet. And I think that he didn't quite understand where I fit in. He knew me as a very close friend of [INAUDIBLE: 0:16:12], a giant age gap; a very close friend of his wife's. And he knew me as a very close friend of his daughter's. And he knew me as somebody working on the collection. So I had a lot of different—I mean, I had been around that family a lot in very different ways. And I don't know; I don't know. I had the impression that he was very sweet.
- RC: You know, people have said though that his response to art—he had such missionary zeal about his role in shaping art and helping us understand what this is, that he didn't have really a glandular response to art. Eddie Warburg said, 'Now I never knew if he really enjoyed it.' He was committed to it, but he didn't know if he really had the—
- MT: I think that's more about the way he was in general. That he was never a very demonstrative person, not in his home or anyplace. He was always very shy and a very internalized personality.
- CC: Do you think the people who were—? You know, it's interesting, we've spoken to now, even in the last month, a whole cross-section of New Yorkers from trustees and Donald Marron, dealers, et cetera, who had great affection for the Museum, obviously. A lot of them saying, "I grew up there." Robert Hughes, you know, said he was living in Sydney, Australia; if it wasn't for those catalogues, it would have been a long time coming. He's a dyed-in-the-wool modernist. But they all come back to that. They're a little bit chagrined really that there's not that much involvement with contemporary art, because even as Paul Gottlieb, the fellow at Abrams, said the other day, he said that the Modern for him is so special, and he devotes attention and time and likes to work for it now, because for him it always was so different than the other places. It always had that great affection for what was current. It always had, not simply as a cold collection, but it had that great—
- MT: But it isn't like that anymore and I wish people would stop bemoaning it. It hasn't been that way for 20 years, at least 20 years, and probably more than that. It simply hasn't. So what is the big problem?

CC: So it should revel in its—

MT: It's the most wonderful organization; it's fabulous. Leave it the hell alone.

CC: Keep it as a repository.

MT: It's more than a repository; it doesn't mean a dead thing. A repository can be everything that you want it to be.

CC: Very exciting.

MT: But, I mean, of course, you know, I see our function as providing—

CC: Do you think they should annex their most contemporary scene? They should have, let's say, another—not another building, but I mean—

MT: They can't.

CC: What can they do?

MT: They can't. Listen. We have three curators here; right? We have half a million dollar budget with a teensy space; right? Our curators can barely keep up with the work. They can barely, barely find out what's actually going on in the country. Kynaston [McShine] couldn't do it; he couldn't do it alone. You have to have the resources, the interest, the priority. They don't have it. This place has it. It's also in the tradition of a great city to do that, to make room for other organizations. When you have—you could start with the Met, and then you can go to the Guggenheim, the Modern, the Whitney; right? You can go to us, a baby museum, and down to—and I don't mean down literally, I mean also, I'm sort of thinking geographically, to the alternative spaces. And that's why this is a great arts city. But even if they tried, at this point they couldn't begin to do even the kinds of programs that we're doing successfully they couldn't.

RC: But can anybody? I mean, so, your role, you've defined—

MT: We're at The Museum of Contemporary Art. That's exactly what we do, museum of contemporary art.

CC: And you're saying yourself, even with your staff and a small space, even if you had a big space, it's very hard.

MT: We will, we will. We're just about to move. We'll be—in the summer we will move into 23,000 square feet.

RC: Oh my goodness.

MT: In a landmark building, two and a half huge floors.

CC: Where will that be?

RC: Where's that?

MT: Broadway between Houston and Prince. So we'll be the same size as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago or in Houston. This is substantial. So I mean, at that point, I also—I think that you have to grow into your role. You have to understand what's going on. I started with a couple of boxes in an office, and got this, and [INAUDIBLE: 0:20:44] this. And the new space also has an extra floor upstairs so that in five or 10 years we'll be able to move into another 10,000 square feet.

CC: Well, this is all good, because for us, what's nice about it really to me is it's not critical, it's simply counter. It's not against, it's just different.

MT: It's not against; it's adding on.

CC: It's adding on, a necessary succession of things.

MT: I've worked for so many years in museums, and I refuse absolutely to get involved in that kind of polemic. I mean, why should museums compete like corporations? It's nuts.

CC: Bill Lieberman said to us, I mean, he smiled a little bit too because he obviously would like that old connection of the Modern pictures coming to the Met on a permanent basis, but he knows that wouldn't happen. But he said that it's a crime that in New York, the Modern, the Whitney, and the Met, don't get together and have a big show together where one relates to the other. I mean, imagine if they even did expressionism, or German expressionism, or Russian whatever, the Whitney would be able to do something, the Modern could pull out their pictures, they could pull out the films from one department, the Whitney could screen things, I mean, you could imagine how it could all—

MT: But see, I think the Whitney also could do all of expressionism in America from the beginning, and we could do everything that's happened from 1978.

RC: Right. It would be great.

CC: And the Modern could handle—they could certainly show the films of German expressionist, they could show architecture, photography. It's really—you know, that kind of thing is criminal because, if you think about what the city could express if they could ever get together and politically help themselves out.

MT: Well, I just think they don't have the alternative spaces [INAUDIBLE: 0:22:22] constantly sharing information. I'm thinking of when I was in—just had an informal meeting, a day or so ago, of directors of museums of contemporary art in the country. Just so we could talk, because if those other guys aren't going to talk, certainly somebody has to talk. And now this is all I said.

CC: Would there be anybody else that you could suggest that we see, to interview, who might give us, again, like, your point of view, a refreshing point of view as to what—well, not just the Modern, but what museums can be doing in the future. More contemporary people, and I don't necessarily mean artists, but critics or museum directors or curators or interested outsiders, or—?

RC: To kind of pick up the ball [INAUDIBLE: 0:23:15].

MT: Well, Robert Pincus-Witten would probably be an interesting person to talk to. [Pause] I would talk to somebody like Jack Agüeros from El Museo del Barrio and find out what that community thinks of the Modern. I mean, the opening—

RC: And that's up on the East Side?

MT: No, it's on 103rd and Fifth.

RC: The director there?

MT: Yes, in connection with, how does he see the Modern? Is it totally outside of [INAUDIBLE: 0:23:47]? [Pause] I'm just trying to think of the people I used to work with. Well, Pat Hills, who is a remarkable—I think she's announced that she's a Marxist art historian who used to be—she's an adjunct curator at the Whitney sometime, and she used to be—I forget where she teaches. But she

was at the Modern because she was Bill Lieberman's assistant at the time when I was his secretary. I wasn't his secretary for very long.

RC: Pat Hills—isn't there a chap that we can try to track with at the Whitney? How do you [spell]—Jack?

MT: A-G-Ü-E-R-O-S, El Museo del Barrio. Well, I'd ask Mary Campbell who's the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem too. Now there would be an interesting thing; okay? She just—she did what I've done. They started in a storefront. Have you been up there?

CC: No.

RC: No, I haven't.

MT: It's a beautiful, beautiful museum.

RC: How many years?

MT: I can't remember how many years it's been; about 10 or something. Oh! They started; oh my god, this is amazing. They started as an idea of the Junior Council's at the Modern.

RC: Really?

MT: Mary Campbell. Tell her that I told you to call.

RC: Okay.

MT: So that she knows where—

RC: Where we're coming from.

MT: Yes, right.

CC: Yes, you must have wondered where we—it's just funny because your name is common among, the two of us, we know, and other people knew who you were, and I just—

MT: And I'm really amused that you didn't know that I had this connection.

CC: No, I didn't know the MoMA connection.

MT: Well, Marga is one of—

CC: And I didn't know Marga at all.

MT: Marga may be my oldest friend in the world.

CC: That's terrific.

MT: Maybe. We certainly [INAUDIBLE: 0:25:54; laughing] world.

CC: No, no, but also in the film, though—it's interesting. We have people who figure in the story really, more in the later part, as the last word, and that sort of thing. But it's interesting, a lot of them have things to say about, yes, connections with people, like with Alfred or with Marga, from early on.

MT: Well I met Marga in the sixties. I'm sure it's 20 years now.

CC: Did you know Elizabeth Shaw? We talked with her and she was very interesting.

RC: She really evoked Alfred.

CC: She said [she had] a thousand and one cheap lunches with Alfred, [laughing] and all kinds of things. She was a lot of fun. Anyway, she's also very—

RC: So maybe when we come to film—

MT: Put down Mary, it's Mary Schmidt Campbell, but just Mary Campbell at the Studio Museum, she's the director there. She's very articulate.

RC: Right.

CC: The artists that we were thinking of seeing, we were a little stuck because, well, we wanted to talk to Frank Stella because he's connected, obviously. [Laughter] Very much so. But we don't want a simple—and then Robert Motherwell I think is talked out about it. I really don't want to get—

MT: You should get Al Held, who was a guard.

CC: Sol LeWitt was a guard.

RC: Sol LeWitt just left the country.

CC: Yes, Sol Lewitt we were just going to see yesterday, and—

MT: Well call Al Held.

CC: Al Held?

MT: I think he was a guard but if not, he knows all the guards.

RC: Well wasn't Lucy Lippard something there at some time?

MT: Hold on. Robert Ryman and Lucy were married. And Robert Ryman was a guard, for sure. And Lucy worked in the Library the same year that I did, actually.

RC: She's involved in a book order, so she didn't want to talk right now.

CC: We're going to get her but she's—

MT: She's involved in a book on the Modern?

RC: No, no, she didn't write any books this year.

MT: Right. But Bob Ryman was a guard there.

RC: Right.

MT: Get those guys, as famous artists who stood there and wept.

RC: That's right; that's exactly—well, that's why we were interested in Sol, who also then ended up having a show [[Sol LeWitt](#)] there and had some [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:48].

MT: [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:48].

RC: Right.

MT: Where did Sol go? Germany?

RC: He's going to a lot of different places: Germany, Switzerland.

MT: He's about to have a baby.

RC: Yes, and that also. He said, "I'll be gone for a year. I'd love to help you but..."

CC: Because we really wanted to get some people who weren't just old guards who would say "I love the place" and all that. And with good reason. [Laughing] I mean, we wanted people who do like the place but who still reflect upon it and have a contemporary attitude towards it. And also people who wouldn't just be,

you know, well, critical because of some personal thing. If they're guards and artists and all, then that's been a long-time commitment.

MT: Well that's—between Mary and the guards, [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:30].

CC: What we'd probably do is, in late April and then through May and the early part of June, we have a television studio, and what we're planning to do is do the interviews there, and just stagger them so that we start telling the early story, and then we see it, we shoot for a week, then we see what we have, and we go on and on. We have a list of about 30, 35 people.

RC: Spark dialogues going on, so that people will reappear such as—

CC: Someone like a Philip Johnson, obviously, can say something about the old days, and he's also gentleman enough to talk about what went on with him. [Laughing] I mean, it's pretty shocking to him, even, in regard to the Museum, and he was really upset, supposedly, but...

RC: More, I think, in the way it was handled, not just the fact that he was—

CC: Here are all these people who, no great connection to the Museum, new trustees and all, telling him that, pushing his choices away. It happens.

RC: Yes, yes. It's really good, your perspective, because it makes sense. I mean, no one should feel bad; it's just an evolution.

CC: A lot of the youngest people who would appear really share a lot of the same attitudes as the very oldest ones, as the ones in their eighties. Because, well, Philip Johnson isn't the most contemporary person, but he's certainly, in his attitude and freshness as to his energy and what he wants to do and what he wants to see, and the chances he's taking and the risks he's making, he does not fit onto some old form, and he created the form, so he's intent on, and if he can override it, sure. And it's nice to see that.

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:30:10]. So do you have any travel plans? You do. Well, given our shooting schedule, late April, May, June, would you have a time?

MT: I go in and out, and you just have to let me know way ahead.

CC: Okay, about a month in advance or something, at least?

MT: At least.

CC: Do you have any idea when you are out? Maybe we could check on—

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:30:43