DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**LEO CASTELLI (LC)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**CARL COLBY (CC); HARVEY ARDMAN (HA); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)**
DATE:	**1983**
TRANSCRIBER:	**JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED AUGUST 6, 2018**

CC: It would be a PBS film, one hour, 1984—it would be at the time of the opening.

LC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:06] [laughter]

CC: So, this really was just kind of a familiarization session so that we could see which areas, vis-à-vis the history of the Museum, that you might best speak to, whether it would be—and I can give you some examples, but you could then maybe target—

HA: In other words, we're not here with cameras today. This is just a kind of informal chat.

CC: And it's not questions about the whole of the Museum, but if there were particular areas that you would propose...

LC: Well, you know, I could tell you right away that The Museum of Modern Art has been my basic art experience when I got here in '41, from France, where I had started a gallery. That was very naïve, and I didn't know much about art but had some experience from my French gallery that I opened. And so when I came here and saw what [Alfred] Barr was doing at the Museum, I was just amazed. He just—there was nothing remotely close to that in France, which was, after all, at that time, the center. They didn't know anything about anything. [INAUDIBLE: 0:01:30].

RC: They didn't know what they even had.

LC: Some artists—they didn't know the existence, practically, of [Paul] Klee or [Vasily] Kandinsky, although Kandinsky was there. Not to mention the German expressionists—anything, Die Brücke, whatever. So here I found the whole

history of contemporary art wonderfully displayed, analyzed, [and] dissected. Actually, I was involved with the Surrealists in France at my gallery—Max Ernst; they didn't even know about those; just the beginnings.

HA: So you must have been astonished by this.

LC: I was quite astonished when I saw—

RC: Come here and see it—all the way there.

LC: Well, then, I got to know them all. When there was the War, of course, and they got into the army, but then after the War—only exhibitions—my numerous encounters with Alfred Barr and the other people there at MoMA, well, it's been really—

HA: What was your relation—?

LC: They speak for all of us.

RC: Incredible.

LC: A great thing, you know? So I could speak about that forever. But what is really best in those cases is not to generalize, but to speak about concrete examples.

RC: Sure; and your memories.

LC: When Dorothy Miller was doing those 16 Americans shows; when Alfred Barr came to see the Jasper Johns show for the first time, the first Jasper Johns show.

HA: Oh yes, I'd *love* to hear about that particular one.

LC: And all that, you know. Perhaps we should do that on the camera.

CC: I think so.

RC: Sure.

LC: I can really talk for hours about that—of my experience with the Museum.

CC: I think if we were to pinpoint then certain areas—one you could certainly speak about is the influence of the European art on America, but also how there was a great appreciation here for things European.

LC: Well, actually, I practically dismissed European art after a few years here. It was my intention when I opened the gallery to sort of show European art alongside of American art. And then, well, I found that for many years—now there is a change there—there was no European art that you could compare to American art, starting with the Abstract Expressionists, on and on through [Robert] Rauschenberg, Johns, [Cy] Twombly, the Pop artists, [Frank] Stella, and so on. There was nothing to compare. So, there isn't much to say about that, but I'd be most happy to.

CC: And the reasons of the shift of the center of art from Paris to New York; I think you could speak very well about that.

LC: Yes. The shift actually had occurred much sooner than people suspected.

HA: When did it occur?

RC: Evidenced by you. Before the War, you mean.

LC: Well, as far as understanding [and] presenting contemporary art, the shift had occurred already in the thirties when the Museum opened. There was absolutely no understanding of art—I speak of European art in Europe. The understanding of that art was here.

HA: But of course Europe didn't think this; Europe didn't know about this.

LC: Europeans didn't know anything about that. Actually, the Europeans—I mean the Germans, the Swiss, the Italians—became aware of it much sooner than France. France held on to their belief that they were still an important center, when it was quite obvious to everybody that they didn't exist. [Laughter]

HA: You mean after World War II.

LC: After World War II, yes.

HA: There was nothing much left in France, I guess. A lot of the artists had come to the United States.

CC: That was also quite favorable, don't you think, though? When people like [André] Masson and [Jean] Tinguely all came.

LC: There is a great deal of importance that you attach to that. It was an important thing that happened there, but some would say, one of the many, many, many things that happened. It was not just, in my opinion, the basic event. No, I don't think so.

CC: How about as a characterization of Barr himself, as a human being?

RC: I was just going to ask that. You knew him well.

LC: God, he can hardly be talked about without going down on your knees. [Laughter]

CC: Almost like a Richelieu, almost like a cardinal?

RC: A high priest of art.

LC: Well, he was everything. My admiration for him was just boundless. Actually, it's a shame that I was so impressed by his achievements that for many, many years, I didn't feel comfortable talking to him, you know?

HA: You were awed by him?

LC: I was so awed by him. But he was so—actually, I shouldn't have been because he certainly was not a man who wanted to inspire awe at all. And he was very, very kind to me. I can remember seeing him for the last time at a dinner at the Museum, and then after that, he went to the hospital, had that unfortunate operation, and then that was the end of that. And I was sitting at the same table; Dorothy Miller also was at the same table. And we talked a little bit, and he was so kind to me, and he said that he had great admiration for what I had done, and there were so many things that he had not understood right away and still didn't understand, for instance, like Rauschenberg, and that he was so sure that since it was I who had picked Rauschenberg and showed him so very often and had so much faith in him, that he must be very, very good; that he had complete trust in my judgment. I mean, he was like that, yes. I remember when he came to see the first Jasper Johns show.

HA: Ah yes, tell us about that; I'd love to hear that story.

LC: An amazing, amazing event. Well, nothing happened to me before or after, or to anybody, I think, any gallery in the whole wide world—what happened there, at

that time when he came and just stood in amazement in front of that exhibition that I had of [Jasper Johns], and the excitement, and spending hours there. And then calling—he came, I think, with Dorothy for the first time, and then calling others, like [James Thrall] Soby and Blanchette Rockefeller to come and see, for heaven's sake, to see this thing. And he wanted practically everything in there. [Laughter] The episode with the target with the plaster casts that he then felt he couldn't buy [*Target with Plaster Casts* (1955)] because—[instead] he bought the one with the faces [*Target with Four Faces*]—because of that green object in it, the green penis, that he felt the public might object against it. Then he convoked Jasper Johns so that Jasper Johns would tell him. First of all, he wanted to see the man who had done all of these things, and then he wanted to find out if perhaps that case where the penis was couldn't be covered unobtrusively. [Laughter] So, Jasper said, 'Well, if you want to nail it down and make it really a definite thing, then of course, I wouldn't be very happy about it, but if you want to do it sort of casually, well, you can do what you want.' But then, Barr being incredibly honest about those things, he said, 'No, no, then in that case, perhaps I prefer not to have the painting.' But then that episode with the *Flag* and Philip Johnson, it was again, one of the fantastic stories.

HA: What happened, exactly?

LC: Well, what happened is that he wanted the *Flag* very badly, that you have now, but he felt that maybe there would be a terrible outcry because of all kinds of patriotic organizations, desecration of the flag, and all that. But he wanted it very badly, and wanted to secure it in one way or another so that it wouldn't go away, so he called Philip Johnson. And Philip—and normally, at times, I wish I had kept a diary, because he came so many times that there were so many episodes. But anyway, he had an appointment there with Philip Johnson at the gallery, and he said to Philip, 'Well, you know, I have misgivings about this *Flag*, but I would like to secure it, and perhaps you, Philip, would buy it for us.' So Philip was not too enthusiastic or impressed about that *Flag*. [Laughing] And he said, 'Well, I really don't quite understand this painting of the *Flag*.' So Alfred said, 'Well, you know.' [interruption, buzzer, phone conversation from 0:10:50 to 0:12:00 then tape break] So then here he is, sort of a nonplussed Philip Johnson. So Alfred says, 'Well, you know, after all, you can look, in its favor, it's not very much.' It

was $1,000 less 10 percent, $900. So Philip Johnson finally said, 'Alright, fine, I'll take it.' So he bought it, and then he put it in his office. Actually, he put it under glass—I can remember now seeing it there.

RC: In Philip's office?

LC: Yes, he had it in his office under glass. And then a year or two later, I don't know exactly when, since, well, lots of flags of Jasper had been seen all over the place and there had been absolutely no outcry. [Laughter] I think he went to Philip Johnson and said, 'Well, now everything is sort of calm and finally you can give me my *Flag*.' So Philip said, 'Your *Flag*? It's not your *Flag*, it's my *Flag*! [Laughter] I do like it very much and I'd like to keep it for a little while longer.' Then he gave it as, you know, as an homage to Alfred. But that was what happened with the *Flag*.

RC: Oh, that's a great story. Well, we've been hearing how Barr, with his great openness to art, was, on the other hand, cautious.

LC: Well, certain things he understood right away, and I naturally understand very well how he took to Jasper right away, as I did. We had the same kind of background and we related it to all kinds of things which were quite obvious to us, to me, but not as obvious to a man as good as [James Johnson] Sweeney, who didn't understand it. Sweeney, for instance, came to the opening of the show, and I remember him coming down the spiral staircase that I had there before at East 77th, and just laughing his head off and saying, "That's really the limit, Leo!" [Laughter] "What's all that about, the flags, the big white flag?" So actually, even a good man like Sweeney didn't quite get it.

RC: That's great. We're going to have to remind him of that when we see him. [Laughing]

LC: Yes. Well, later on, Sweeney said to me, "I can't imagine what a terrible ass I was, not to have understood Jasper Johns." [Laughing] He sort of admitted that he'd been very stupid about it. Anyway, there was that, and there was an episode of Stella, you know, the black Stellas at Dorothy's *16 Americans* show, and where the Trustees didn't want any part of that Stella, the black Stella that you have there, The Marriage of Squalor and Reason [*The Marriage of Reason*

and Squalor, II]. [Tape break] And how then—well, it was [INAUDIBLE: 0:14:48] how Alfred came to see me and said, 'I can't get it through the Committee but I can spend so much on my own,' I think it was $700; and 'Would you let it go for $700?' I said, "Yes, of course." I let it go for $700. So he got it. But still, after he had done that, the Committee said, 'Alright, you were entitled to do it, but well, we still feel that it's a big mistake because it will just occupy a bin in our storage space forever.' [Laughter] So just imagine how sharp that committee had been. [Laughter]

HA: It's interesting that you talk about Barr getting that at a bargain price. Would you call Barr a shrewd bargainer when it comes to buying art?

LC: No, no; he was totally naïve about that. He didn't bargain ever. Whatever he liked, he would have given the double if he could have afforded it. No, he was not bargaining ever. No, that was not his intention.

HA: I see.

CC: Was he probably one of the most—

LC: Well, of course, he had to—

HA: Economize; yes.

LC: It was important, yes, but it was not in his nature to take advantage of that.

HA: Were you also close to René d'Harnoncourt?

LC: Well, I knew him quite well. I wasn't as close to him as I was to Barr, because, after all, I had no real dealings with him. As far as Barr is concerned, of course I always felt a little bit in awe of him, so I wish I had been sort of—

RC: But he must have been in awe of you, when you think about it, because [INAUDIBLE: 0:16:35].

LC: Actually, there were a lot of people that I was a bit in awe of, at that time, because, well, I helped—there was not—

CC: He must have been glad how much of a champion you were.

LC: Ehhhh, that, maybe, but that applied also to certain artists, for some reason. I was very comfortable with [Mark] Rothko, but I wasn't very comfortable with

Bobby [Barnett] Newman, who was a good friend, really. I wish I had been sort of more involved with him, but I was very close to [Willem] de Kooning, for instance; good friends there. Or [Robert] Motherwell. But with some people, well, who knows, it depends on personalities, of course.

RC: Right.

HA: How would you describe the relationship of the Museum to the galleries, and vice versa? It seems to me there was a symbiotic relationship there.

RC: At the time. Maybe it's shifted now.

LC: Well, really, it's very difficult—I never discussed it with Barr. I think that Alfred understood the role, and for that matter, Dorothy, with whom I really had more day-to-day dealings, understood the role of the galleries very well. They were not snooty about the galleries, considering us sort of mercenary and all that. They, I think, knew very well—although we never discussed it—that we did play an incredibly important role in the art world. Although there are still some people who feel perhaps that we are out to make money.

HA: Well it seems to me that you're the kind of interface between the museum and the people, in a certain sense. You're the bringer of the art to the people who can own it.

CC: Well, Alfred Barr always said, for instance, that he thought his role as a museum director was to take a few steps back from the forefront just to let it judge just a bit and then to buy things and to acquire things for the Museum.

LC: I didn't get what you meant by that.

CC: That instead of being just at the edge all of the time buying whatever was new, whatever became current, that he would take one or two steps back—his role was to be a few steps behind the artists, behind the forefront—

RC: [Of] most contemporary work.

CC: Just so that he could judge for a moment.

LC: Any museum director has to act that way. You can't just rush into things; that wouldn't be right; it wouldn't be the proper thing to do at all. But when he saw

something that—he trusted his judgment, I would say. In the case of Jasper Johns, who came out of the blue, he immediately felt that there was a very important man there; this of Stella, too. So it wasn't a policy there just to hold back and see what—no; when he found something that he really was enthusiastic about, Barr, he would go ahead right away, I think.

CC: Do you think he was probably one of the most, in terms of his critical mind, one of the most effective Americans in the 20th century? He was very, very important culturally.

LC: There's nobody like him, I think, because there was a—well, enthusiasm, and at the same time, well, prudence [about him]. But his knowledge was such [that] he knew all the precedents, so when he had absorbed them so well, he could make very quick judgments well, as I could, probably, because of [the] knowledge of previous things. If you don't have that, then of course then you don't trust yourself. But I trust myself to understand something right away if it properly relates to whatever it is in the past. His knowledge of the [Henri] Matisse or [Pablo] Picasso, clearly, of the Surrealists, was such that he could immediately connect with something that came afterwards. So anyway, this is just—

RC: This is a great start and we hope that we can continue.

LC: If you then want more details about [INAUDIBLE: 0:20:55].

CC: I think what we would do is, we would take some of the information back that you give us and we can then compose particular questions for particular areas.

LC: If we have more time and leisure, then probably many, many things will come back.

RC: Right. And you can be thinking about the kind of things obviously that you'd enjoy speaking about because obviously your memory is wonderful.

CC: We're looking for particularly people who knew Barr very well and who can give an evocation of him. And what you've said of him is very, very good.

RC: It's wonderful, and you speak with a good nostalgia about that time, but then also, you're very much here and—

CC: And very much you're a part of the time, also. So that's very interesting.

RC: So that's a great perspective for us.

CC: Also, we're trying to gauge the—one of the questions we keep asking [is] the relationship of people like yourself and [Sidney] Janis, who were out doing things.

LC: You might get Janis?

CC: Someone such as yourself and someone like a Pierre Matisse, people who were looking ahead.

LC: Yes, well, that's very interesting, too, and I have a lot of things to say about my relationship with Matisse, with Janis.

CC: Because I think the whole—

LC: It was a whole different world then. Now, everything has become more...

RC: That's what we'd like to paint.

CC: Was it more like a secret society?

LC: I wonder how [the] others feel about these incredible developments.

RC: Exactly. Do you have any thought about that?

LC: Well, okay, [INAUDIBLE: 0:22:20].

HA: When you came to New York, there were very few galleries, when you came to start your own gallery.

LC: Very, very few.

CC: Janis told us there were maybe six galleries or something.

LC: There was Curt Valentin, of course. There was, even Valentine Dudensing. There was Pierre Matisse. Betty Parsons wasn't there yet but right after the War she was there, and [Samuel] Kootz was there. And Janis came. They all came after the War. When I got here, actually, there was Julien Levy, there was Curt Valentin, there was Pierre Matisse? No, he wasn't? Did he start before the War? That I can't remember, I think he was there.

CC: Yes, and he helped bring Masson. So it was a very small group. You could see it in an afternoon.

LC: A very small group.

CC: In one afternoon you could see everyone.

HA: But what's happened? We have 600 art galleries today. What caused that?

LC: Well, we have to investigate. [Laughter] Certainly, in part, it's The Museum of Modern Art's fault [laughter] or virtue. Because it influenced everything around it. All the museums, whenever they occurred here in America, were under the total influence of the Modern. They set up patterned on MoMA and on Alfred Barr's approach to modern art. So then there was this tremendous publicity that occurred all over the place then as a result of that. Maybe there were other important things, for instance, there were certain people, individuals, who came before the War, like Tom Hess with *Art News*, and well, perhaps in a more conservative way, [Harold] Rosenberg and [Clement] Greenberg.[1] There were some great individuals who played an important role [here]. But all that [INAUDIBLE: 0:24:27].

HA: But would you have ever dreamed of this, of these results?

LC: No, I would never have dreamed about that—that's amazing what happened here.

RC: [Laughing] It's beyond your dreams.

HA: Is it wonderful or horrible; which? [0:24:42 interruption, phone, to 0:25:00]

LC: Yes, well, it's wonderful. For me, it's wonderful. I don't think there's anything wrong with this. But everything, of course, has its faults and virtues, and [INAUDIBLE: 0:25:10] are all to sort of strip it. For instance, Alfred, back in '29 when the Museum began, was in the woods, as we are here now. And [he] sort of [had to] classify it [modern art], analyze it, and straighten it out and systematize it. Now it's our [job], not mine alone—but there's also many other people involved in this to do the job that he did.

HA: And the Museum's role has changed a lot since then.

LC: Oh, enormously, I know.

[1] Thomas Hess, Harold Rosenberg, and Clement Greenberg were all proponents of Abstract Expressionism who were born in the United States.

HA: What is the Museum's role today, as far as the galleries are concerned and as far as the art world is concerned?

CC: Are they much more institutional now?

LC: Who?

CC: The museums.

LC: It depends on the museums, it depends on who runs them.

HA: I'm talking about MoMA in particular.

LC: Oh, MoMA now is in a sort of a special phase, thanks to, well the work that you do there, the change of space and so on. And of course Bill Rubin is of a more conservative nature than Alfred ever was, although he has a good understanding of what's going on. But he's sort of so much more focused on what he likes so much; Matisse and Picasso, and so on. Whereas I would say that Alfred was more open to new things. You don't have at the Museum anybody now who of course can equal Barr. Kynaston [McShine] is pretty good, as far as the more contemporary things are concerned. But, well, I don't know—but actually, how can you ever replace Barr? [Laughter]

CC: That's a good ending.

RC: That's a good ending. Let's end our film like that.

LC: I think that there was a moment after Barr disappeared—at that moment the Museum went through a bit dark situation there, and then thank god Rubin came along. He put everything together with the fantastic energy and authority that he has. So, in spite of the fact that you can perhaps reproach him of not paying enough attention to what's going on here, he has been a godsend.

CC: He put the thing in order.

LC: Order, yes. How would the Museum have been able to survive without him?

HA: Fascinating. Thanks very much.

LC: Well, it was a pleasure meeting you.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:27:40