INTERVIEW WITH: **WILLIAM S. RUBIN (WR)**

INTERVIEWER: **LYNN ZELEVANSKY (LZ)**

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BEGIN AUDIO FILE 2000.32 Side A

LZ: [0:00:07] Because most of the stuff that I have to ask you about is really, it's pretty focused on just a few things. The main thing, you know, this whole topic for me, actually started in your seminar. You know? In 1985. (Let me just make sure that this is going.) And one of the things I remember you talking a lot about was that when you came into the Museum, you really filled out the abstract expressionist collection.

WR: Mm-hm.

LZ: And I guess

WR: I would say two out of three, or three out of five, of the pieces that were hanging when I left, were things which we had acquired.

LZ: Since the time you came in.

WR: Yes.

LZ: Some people say the Museum was very late on abstract expressionism.

WR: Well, in one sense yes, and in another sense no. First of all, you have to remember that the Museum bought the *She-Wolf* in, I think it was '43 or '44.

LZ: '44, right after it was painted.

WR: '44, right after it was painted. And it was, I believe, the first museum to have a large [Jackson] Pollock, the white, snowy picture. You have to check this out, but I'm quite sure that that was purchased before the Metropolitan, which was very heady in those days. They had this fellow who was an artist and a very good –

but I can't remember his name now – they bought a black picture, a stained, black, 1951 picture, which they subsequently traded in toward *Autumn Rhythm*.

LZ: Right.

WR: Now, you'd have to find the date at which they bought the black picture. It was later in S.I. Newhouse's collection, but I don't think it's still there. And that, if I'm correct, one could say that the Museum bought – and it wasn't Alfred, it was more [James Johnson] Sweeney.

LZ: Oh really?

WR: And Sweeney – now, Sweeney was the main agent for that, if you look back.

LZ: For the first drip Pollock?

WR: For the first, no, not for the first,

LZ: For *She-Wolf?*

WR: *She-Wolf*. I think Alfred [Barr] bought the first drip Pollock, but you'd have to check that out. Certainly, it was during his reign. And it might have been influenced by Jim Soby or Sweeney. A lot of things which one just imagines were Alfred's ideas were really other people's, but you know, that's the way it goes. But what counts is that they were in the Museum. Now, if I'm correct in saying that that white picture precedes the other, then one can say that it's the first large, poured picture to enter -- a classic poured picture -- to enter a museum. You could say that in any case because it's – the black picture was not the same thing; it was not a poured picture. It was more of the __[0:04:05]

LZ: Mm-hm.

WR: And the only picture which I recall of the classic type which might have been in a museum before MoMA bought the white picture, was the picture called *Cathedral*, which is in either Dallas or Houston. I can't remember where that is. But you know, in the catalogue of the Pollock show which was done here in '68 or '69,[1] there's a kind of chronology of events, and those kinds of things, also in the Pollock catalogue raisonné, an even more developed chronology of events in

[1] https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1724 1967

which you can find out what was bought. Now, that being said, there was a widespread feeling among the abstract expressionist painters, that The Museum of Modern Art, despite the Americans show and everything else they did, was not treating that generation of artists in – or rather, that they were treating them as the local, provincial product, if I could put it that way. That as compared to the way in which European artists got treated, particularly the pre-World War II European artists -- but there was some sense that even people like [Pierre] Soulage and others were getting more attention, though I don't think that was at all why, that it was inadequate. There was usually one work bought, like Philip [Johnson] paid for that beautiful blue and yellow Rothko.

LZ: Yes.

WR: And that was the Rothko for a certain period of time. And there was no in-depth representation of these artists. For a long time, there was no [Barnett] Newman, but finally what happened was that, if I remember correctly, and I'd have to check the minutes of the meeting, it was decided to buy the black one called *Abraham* – I think that's the name of it – and the committee, if I recall, rejected it. And Philip paid for it and gave it to the Museum.

LZ: As he did so often.

WR: Yes. So, that was sort of

LZ: When was that, Bill?

WR: Well that, you'd have to check that fact. I mean, it all kaleidoscopes in my mind. It's certainly long before I came in. But. There were also, I mean, the Museum had very limited funds. And as the prices on these artists began to creep up in the '50s, it was felt that there wasn't a real disposition to spend money on these artists. For example, as late as 1957, I think it was, maybe it was '58, in any case, it was after Pollock died, there was a show of Pollock things, and Lee [Krasner] was hoping that – Sam Hunter did the show – that the Museum would step in and really get serious, but it didn't. Then there was a show of David Smith, and I remember, because that show of David Smith – all of those shows were in a series called Artist in Mid-Career.

LZ: Oh.

WR: And the David Smith show, which went on at the same time as the [Roberto] Matta show, which I curated as a guest curator in the ‘50s. Now what is interesting is, Matta would be a perfect example of an artist whom Alfred and Jim [Soby] thought extremely highly of, and I think they were quite right, in terms of what he was doing in the ‘40s, you know. But Matta, for example, was much better represented in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s than some of these other major abstract expressionists, in numbers of works and importance of the work, and so forth. In any event, when the David Smith show was on, which Sam Hunter also curated, I remember Sam saying to me that he hoped that they would buy *Australia*, which was then for sale at a modest price. And there was, I think, partly because Alfred thought that he was going to get a work, not as great but of the same period, from Nelson Rockefeller -- and I forget what the name of Nelson’s piece was, but it was a good piece -- they didn’t reach for *Australia*. And later, Nelson sold that; it had never been on the list of his gifts, and god knows where it is now. But, I bought *Australia* long before it came to the Museum, and I always felt that its place was here, and that it was regrettable that the Museum had not bought it back when it was cheap-o. I paid much more than – much more; still small potatoes, but it was more. And when I came to the Museum, I decided I would give it, because I could see it just as much here as I could at home, and you know, I felt, since I was very attached to David [Smith] personally, I felt it was sort of the thing to do. But, let’s say that there was no feeling when I arrived here in 1966, there was no feeling that the Museum should have any depth in any of these artists. And that was already some years after American art was imposing itself in a lot of places. A lot of people felt that the efforts made for the AbEx generation were inadequate. And they felt that way. In fact, there was one point, and I don’t remember __[0:12:05], there was a demonstration outside the Museum by the AbExers and a lot of the Tenth Street people as well, and so forth, that the Museum somehow was not giving the homegrown

LZ: Well, in 1940, there was a – but you’re talking about later.

WR: I think there was something later than 1940.

LZ: And then there were figurative, non-abstract painters.

WR: No, no, that's a different event. But it was something after 1940.

LZ: There were.

WR: And if you listen to the AbExers themselves, they were very critical of the Museum. I think that naturally they saw it from the point of view that they were a great generation, on a par with the great European generations of pre- World War II. (Did I ask Greg to Xerox something?

LZ: No, you had something.

WR: Greg! Listen, would you? Now, what did I do with that catalogue that has to go back? Oh wait a minute, here it is. Yeah, this. Would you Xerox the two images that I've marked, that one and this one, and hold them for a letter which I'll dictate by phone to you on Monday. And then you can return the catalogue.)

LZ: So, one of the things that I would

WR: Let me get to the end of this thought. There was a feeling that the Museum could and should do more. And if you, I mean, we today have the sense that – I mean, the Museum has the greatest collection of AbEx, and it did buy before other museums, but it didn't do that much.

LZ: It didn't do it in depth.

WR: And the artists themselves were very critical. For example, if you really want to hear something virile, there's a movie on [Willem] de Kooning, made, I think, by Barbara Rose, or maybe it was by the wife of that guy who died that ran the cable companies, you know, that sort of merger genius. Well, his wife made art movies. But I think it was Barbara, and certainly through Barbara you could find out about this film. All I can remember is that what de Kooning says about Alfred [Barr] was hair-raising.

LZ: Really?

WR: Yeah. Now, I know that Mark [Rothko], who let his hair down with me very often, was critical. And Adolph [Gottlieb] was somewhat critical. But you have to realize that all of this criticism was from the artist's point of view, and I think you can never do enough for artists.

LZ: Yes.

WR: On the other hand, there's a real question of whether enough got done. And the fact is that when I came here, René [d'Harnoncourt] asked me, what do you think are the things we have to do first? And he said that he hoped that he could get me a nice big lump of money so that we could, you know, because every new person that comes in sees the thing differently. And so I said to René, the two things that we have to do before all else, is, late Matisse and AbEx. And in the first two or three years that I was here, we made a huge thing to get, to fill in those things. What we got was the big decoupage *Souvenir d'Océanie* and we also bought, but it got bought out from us through a dirty trick by Pierre Matisse, the big blue nude which is now in the collection of SOLO, and it wasn't until a little later that I was able to get the Swimming Pool. But I mean, that was the agenda there. And the other thing, the much bigger thing, was AbEx. And there I made a kind of sweep, because I knew the artists. And I went around to them; I said, "Look. We really want to get this generation well represented in the Museum. And we don't have much money." In effect, what we did with many artists like [Robert] Motherwell, is, we bought one and got six or seven as gifts. Now, the problem was, Pollock was already dead. But I was able to negotiate a deal with Lee [Krasner] that brought us – and we must have 22 Pollocks now. We really show the whole career. But more than that, we didn't have a big, wall-sized Pollock, and there are, as you know, only four. And the thing which I did in the first years here was to buy the big, wall-sized Pollock for *One*, and *Echo*, which are arguably the two best pictures that we had. And I also bought the little thing that looks almost like a finger painting, which was the first all-over painting. It's called *Shimmering Substance.*

LZ: Yes.

WR: It's small, but crucial, because it represented the real shift. Because Pollock went into the all-over before he went into the pour. Pouring was a way of extrapolating from the all-over idea. So, we right away made those three important purchases, and then I began negotiating with Lee, and we ended up with *Gothic* and we ended up with a whole slew of stuff. That took some more years, but it was part of the same plan. With Rothko, I got him to give us a whole bunch of pictures. You know the wonderful acid red and green picture?

LZ: Yes.

WR: The big yellow picture, two or three other Rothkos that we have. I think we got five pictures from Mark. Some of these were promised gifts and came in only after his death. Other things were given right away, depending on the artist. And the – I'm trying to think now, of other artists. So with Mark, we had two classic Rothkos. We had by that time the blue and the plum one. Which are both beautiful pictures. But we had no earlier work, no transitional work, no late work. And with Barney [Newman], we had only *Abraham*. And there, I bought the big red picture, which says, "Gift of

LZ: Oh, it says Ben Heller?

WR: It says, "Gift of Ben Heller." It was a purchase, in the sense that we bought a Pollock, a Newman, and a big [Arshile] Gorky drawing in one deal, and then for tax reasons, wanted one to be considered a gift. __[0:20:40] But that was the same acquisition. So with Barney, I got whats-his-name to give that skinny little picture, you know, where the zip is the framer. What's his name? __[0:20:57]

LZ: Yes.

WR: To give that. I got Sidney [Janis] to buy for his collection – you see, one of the first things I did when I came in was to get Sidney to give his collection. Now, that already gave us some important abstract expressionist stuff, because it contained *White Light*, the late Pollock. It contained the first poured all-over picture, the little __ down there now.

LZ: *Free Form*.

WR: Yeah, something like that. And it also contained a couple of [Willem] de Koonings. And when we were sort of making the plans for the exhibition of Sidney's thing, I said, "Sidney, you know, you really ought to have a Newman in your collection." And he bought the big white picture [*The Voice*] at that time, so we got that in. So by hook or by crook, we got in a tremendous number of things. Now I gave *Australia* at that time, as a kind of example, you see. My attitude was, first of all, via-a-vis the artists, if the curator is willing to give up a great masterpiece by one of his AbExers, the collectors and trustees and the artists ought to be willing, too, you know? And it was that kind of psychology that we

worked that on. That's when we got the big, luscious [Adolph] Gottlieb pictograph that we have, because the little pictograph that had been bought years before really, The Voyage or something, [*Voyager's Return*]

LZ: Yes.

WR: Was nice but it was not one of the real great pictographs. And we got some intermediate Gottliebs.

LZ: Did you buy Reinhardt at that point?

WR: I bought a Reinhardt, yes. I bought a Reinhardt, and I got a gift of a Reinhardt from somebody, some woman.

LZ: Oh, Mrs. Hornick.

WR: Yes; right. Mrs. Hornick. And I got a gift from Rita [Reinhardt].

LZ: Yes.

WR: That was all part of the same thing: that beautiful white picture was, you know. That looks terrific up in the galleries .[0:23:25]

LZ: I think so, too.

WR: And I bought the big blue one, which isn't hanging, at that time, and got one of our trustees to give the red one.

LZ: Gifford Phillips.

WR: Gifford, yes. Gifford was one of the few who had such pictures that you could even get them to give; you know?

LZ: Yes. What about de Kooning at that time?

WR: Well, now you see, the problem with de Kooning was that – I mean, I got a certain number of pictures from – de Kooning had none of his own work. So the only person that I could try to do something with was Tom Hess, who in fact, promised to give us the little picture which was de Kooning's model for the stage curtain that was actually painted by another painter, after de Kooning's model. The little picture was gorgeous. Tom was going to give us that and some early de Koonings, but then he began discussions with the Met, to work for the Met or

something, and somehow we never got those things. But de Kooning was a tough nut to crack. The picture which I truly wanted was *Attic*. And I worked on Mrs. Steinberg there, what's her professional name as a painter, lived in Chicago; Newman.

LZ: Oh, Muriel.

WR: Muriel. I worked on her, and in fact, I had acquired for her a wonderful black Clyfford Still, which she could have never gotten through devious means. [LZ laughs] And I got her to the point where she was ready to commit the *Attic* to us. But she wanted to be a member of the International Council. And I asked the International Council __[0:25:50] to please put her on the Council, and they refused. And she was pissed as hell.

LZ: Why?

WR: Because they didn't like her. And

LZ: She seemed déclassé, perhaps.

WR: Yeah, it was, there was something. And I didn't feel I could push that. So she eventually took her marbles to the Metropolitan. [2] But originally, she had committed all of her pictures to Chicago. At the time that I was meeting with her, the object was, since Chicago already had *Excavation*, on that basis, to de-niche that one picture – I didn't ask for the whole collection. I just said that's the one we want. And she said, "Well, I think that," – they weren't treating her particularly well in Chicago. And so she said, "Well, I think I can de-niche that from the group," on the basis that they have *Excavation*, and therefore, *Attic* should be in New York." And in fact, *Attic* eventually came to New York. [laughing]

LZ: [laughing] Yes, but the wrong museum.

WR: But the thing is, that later, they [Chicago] treated her very badly, she just decided to rescind her whole gift to Chicago. But she was already pissed at The Museum of Modern Art because of this thing, and so it ended up at the Metropolitan.

LZ: That's really too bad.

[2] https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2007/muriel-kallis-steinberg-newman-collection

WR: But you see, that's the way things happen.

LZ: Yes, sure.

WR: But in any case, there was a concerted effort to give depth and historical range to the AbExers. For example, the second Clyfford Still, the black one with the red crack through it, came in through Sidney [Janis].

LZ: I see.

WR: I got the picture for Sidney. I once owned that picture. And so I was just getting all the good pictures that I could imagine into the Museum. We bought that beautiful big horizontal Kline, an early '50s Kline, from

LZ: *Chief*? Is that the one?

WR: No, *Chief* is the one that Alfred bought. That was the one Kline; you see?

LZ: Yes.

WR: And this – *Chief* is very curvilinear, and this one is sort of more like

LZ: *White Forms*? [no, *White Forms* is not horizontal and was a gift of Philip Johnson]

WR: I forget what it's called but it's a big, beautiful horizontal. [probably *Painting Number 2*, which was a purchase and is approx 6x9 ft] That was in Ben Heller's collection. And so, in effect, I bought out the heart of Ben's collection. Because after all, *One* and *Autumn Rhythm* and the big Gorky and the red Newman and that, I mean, that's the heart of his collection.

LZ: Sure, sure.

WR: And I gave *Australia*, and then whenever I could, I tried to get in things. So the number and range of our AbEx collection, which is now obviously by far the best, in fact, the only really deep collection of that generation, in the world, came in with me. But, it is not true that the Museum did not

LZ: Right. So let me put it

WR: Let's say, the artists considered it tokens.

LZ: Yes.

WR: And it's a very, very delicate issue, because I don't want to be put in the position of making it seem as if my predecessors were wanting.

LZ: Mm-hm.

WR: But let's face it, everybody's wanting in some areas, and Alfred simply didn't think that these guys were as good as the Mirós and the other.

LZ: And that was the bottom line. I mean, for example, he walked into Jasper Johns' first show, everybody knows, and bought three paintings; and Philip Johnson bought one.

WR: Right.

LZ: He never did that in an AbEx.

WR: No. And to understand that, you have to understand that Jasper's early pictures were, in a sense they had the cuisine of European art. And they weren't in-your-face pictures the way AbEx looked. I mean, today, you look at a certain kind of Pollock, it looks like __[0:30:33] But in those days, they were in-your-face pictures; you know? Whereas Johns was never that. Johns was always exceedingly refined and nuanced. They're wonderful pictures, those early Johns. I bought my own numbers out of that group of pictures, but they were a different kettle of fish. They had a strong feeling of historical continuity with Dada and Surrealism,

LZ: Yes.

WR: And all these other things. On the other hand, they also bought a black Stella, which I thought was a very courageous thing. In fact, I think that one could say that, partly under the influence of Leo Castelli, in the early '60s, they were more open to the new product than they had been throughout the '50s.

LZ: Yeah.

WR: Now, they did do these Americans shows, and they bought usually one picture. They bought one Clyfford Still. The bought one

LZ: One picture by each artist in the show?

WR: Yes, well, they didn't always buy one, but I think pretty much they bought one.

LZ: Often.

WR: Often bought one. And the shows were mixed bags in the sense that you had some great artists but you also had Herman Rose, you had various other people. And then there was a strong feeling about Dickinson here, and so forth and so on. What the AbExers wanted was the recognition that this was like the Cubist generation, or this was like the Surrealist.

LZ: But it does seem to me

(?: Can I just say hello to you?

WR: Hi, how are you, dear; great to see you.) [tape break 0:32:20]

LZ: Anyway, what I wanted to say was just,

(WR: Greg, you can run this off.)

LZ: It seemed to me the Museum had had this, from its inception, the sort of two-pronged policy towards American versus European art. That, it was as if you were in Houston and you were running the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and you had a local scene and then you had the

WR: __[0:35:50]

LZ: And it took them until the ‘60s to get over it.

WR: But there’s something else in there that I think you have to – they didn’t really get over it until the ‘60s. Be very careful about that. The one element that was not just like Houston/New York, was a kind of complex which sort of was based on the assumption that great art had to come form Europe. There had been no great art in America. There were some very good painters, yes. And I think that they were better, people like – what’s his name who did the big German portrait up at the Met?

LZ: [Marsden] Hartley.

WR: Hartley, yes. The German Hartleys, the things like that, were terrific pictures. But nobody would argue that Hartley was a Miró or a Kandinsky or whatever. And so there was a feeling that, fine as American painters might be, they would always be __ on the European __.[0:34:10] That is where the invention. (This is

fine, you can run it off and I'll sign it.) That's where the invention was to come from. And the fact that they bought heavily in Surrealism, you have to realize that when these guys were developing, the Surrealists were actually here, in New York, or at least a lot of them were. And there was a real feeling that these were the great artists: Max Ernst, Mondrian, [André] Masson, so forth and so on. And I don't think – I mean, the Museum bought this wonderful Masson called *Meditation on an Oak Leaf* right out of the show at the Curt Valentin gallery. And it bought, around the same time, the Pollock *She-Wolf*. I don't think that you could have gotten Alfred to say that the Pollock was as good -- I don't think – as the Masson. And it was partly a __[0:35:25] The Pollock was a messy, sloppy, violent kind of picture, compared, and it was out of Picasso, in certain ways, and there was a feeling: Well, you know, Picasso does it better himself. Whereas Masson was doing something that was all his own, though it wasn't quite as great.

LZ: Yes, right. It certainly doesn't look as great today.

WR: When the Europeans were here, a funny thing happened. The American artists took heart, because these mythological folk were seen as, not having clay feet, but being real people who weren't all that good. [laughing] You know? And therefore, the door was opened, so to say. And Peggy Guggenheim's sort of thing, where, they followed in there. The Museum went along with that, but more in a kind of way of sampling, if I could put it that way.

LZ: Right.

WR: Sampling would be the right word. It wasn't – the artists used to speak about tokenism, but it really was sampling, if I can put it that way.

LZ: Yes.

WR: Now, in the 1950s, when I began collecting these guys, the Museum was still very far behind with the AbEx generation. And that's when I got to know Rothko very well, around 1955. And his feeling was, he would give – he offered René d'Harnoncourt forty pictures. René wouldn't take them, of course. But later, I said, "Mark, forty we don't need, but we can use eight or ten." And we got them. But the thing was that, in 1955, when I bought my, what was then a big red

Rothko, which was the first very big picture Mark ever sold – it was a really big picture – he – the Museum's attitude toward this generation was still rather whatever. And there was some pressure on the Museum to show this new American art in Europe, because Europeans were beginning to talk about it. And so they organized, for Europe, a show, which was not, in the first instance, at all conceived for The Museum of Modern Art. And that is, *The New American Painting*. That's the important thing to remember about that show, is that it was not supposed to be at The Museum of Modern Art. And then, as the show was being assembled, there was an awful lot of pressure brought to bear on the Museum by collectors like Ben [Heller], and artists, and so forth, that it's scandalous that we'd show this in Europe but we don't even show it at home. And that's how *The New American Painting* show of '58.

LZ: '58-'59. It was shown here in '59.

WR: Yes, right. Well, that's how that got to be done. Now at that time, for example, [Hans] Hofmann was left out of that show because he was considered – Bill Seitz was the great defender of AbEx within the Museum, but he was constantly being thwarted.

LZ: And he was very new at that point.

WR: Yes. If Bill Seitz had had his way, there would have been more AbEx in the collection when I arrived than there was. But Bill Seitz didn't have his way, because Alfred ran the thing with an iron hand. And Bill resigned, in part, because he was very depressed over

LZ: Over that.

WR: Well, over a lot of things, but that was one contributing factor. And now, a lot of this is confidential, you know.

LZ: I know, I know.

WR: And be careful. You have to put it delicately; you know? Happily, we were able to catch up while the pictures were still around. You see?

LZ: Yes.

WR: Now, one could argue that I was not as interested in Pop art as I should have been. I still don't feel that Pop art represents the same kind of thing, but again, I bought what I thought was the best of stuff. Like, I bought, when I came, we had a Lichtenstein this big called *Flatten – Sand Fleas!* And I bought the *Drowning Girl* and so forth, and I had to make a real effort because I had to buy those out of collections. And I also bought the *Entablature*, and I got one from Sidney [Janis]. So we got in – we were three or four deep in Pop art within my time, but a lot of people felt, no doubt, that I undervalued [Andy] Warhol. And we had five Warhols, but they were – we had Sidney's portrait, we had another set of portraits, and we had the great picture that Philip [Johnson] had given the Museum, the Marilyn Monroe. But the Warhol amateurs would argue – and no doubt, I think Kirk [Varnedoe] is now at the point of trying to fill in some Warhols. Now, you know, I think Warhol may be somewhat better than I thought he was, but not much. That's my view of Warhol. I do think that there are certain kinds of Warhols and certain individual pictures which, if I hadn't been busy trying to get Pollocks, I might have tried to get. For example, the cover of the *Daily Mirror* with the plane crash, which Henry [Geldzahler] had, I almost bought for myself from Henry. But it didn't seem urgent, at that time, to get it for the Museum. First of all, Warhol, he was a young man who seemingly, I mean, he was turning out pictures by the thousands; you know?

LZ: [laughing] That's one of the problems with it.

WR: We did press to fill in with [Robert] Rauschenberg. We got a later [Jasper] Johns. Now there one could argue that we should have gotten five later Johnses, but.

LZ: Rauschenberg is an interesting case in point.

WR: Well, Rauschenberg, I had always – I was the one who started the thing on the Bed.

LZ: Well you lent a Rauschenberg to the 1959 American shows.

WR: I did? [laughing]

LZ: You did. [laughing] You did. And that really surprised, me, I have to say, because I had a thesis in my mind that Johns was a Museum of Modern Art painter and Rauschenberg wasn't. And you destroyed it.

WR: No, no, no, no; I liked Rauschenberg. I never thought he was as good as Johns, but I liked Rauschenberg.

LZ: He's a different kind of artist.

WR: I thought of him as more a synthesis of de Kooning and [Kurt] Schwitters, and that you could sort of parse him in a way you couldn't parse Johns. And to me the great geniuses are un-parse-able. You know? You can't parse Shakespeare, but you can parse Marlowe. In any event, we did fill in, and I mean, we filled in with [Ellsworth] Kelly. When I got here, we had one Kelly. When I left, I think we had six. When I got here, we had – we really filled in a lot of areas. But there were a couple of artists, like Warhol, we didn't strain ourselves on. And my attitude was, we had seven curators, and they were all free to propose things. And I encouraged everybody to propose. It wasn't as if – unlike Alfred, I never talked down at anybody. But nobody felt that we should have them.

LZ: Nobody felt that strongly about it at the time.

WR: We had a certain number of Warhols, and that seemed adequate, certainly until he died. You have to sort of go case by case. I think we did justice during my time to [Richard] Serra and to Sol Lewitt. And we got a couple of things by almost all the Minimalists.

LZ: Yeah. We're better on Minimalism, actually, than Pop art.

WR: Yes, well, there, one of the problems – we actually had three, at least three if not four [Roy] Lichtensteins. We had a lot of, I thought a lot of [Claes] Oldenburg. I had an Oldenburg of my own, and we must have had – we bought the Ray Gun thing, we have the big __[0:45:54] We have a lot of Oldenburg.

LZ: We do have a lot of Oldenburg.

WR: I mean, when you take Pop art, if you go back and look at the numbers, we had quite a number of Oldenburgs during my stay. So who were the other Pop artists?

LZ: Well, we don't have much depth in [James] Rosenquist, for example.

WR: No, Rosenquist we did not. I have a certain resistance to Rosenquist.

LZ: Well, Rosenquist is great for a couple of years, and then it ends. It ends very early.

WR: That could be called a blind spot of mine, Rosenquist. Even though I didn't really want them that much, we got [Tom] Wesselmanns, and I don't think we missed any other Pop artists, did we?

LZ: I don't think we missed anybody completely.

WR: We did very well with [Frank] Stella. We did very well with – and sometimes, as in the case of Johns, the problem was that the prices of the pictures had gone so far that with the $50,000 budgets which we used to have, if you bought a Johns, you couldn't buy anything else for a whole year. And you couldn't sell a Picasso. You could sell a Picasso to buy a Matisse, but you couldn't sell a Picasso to buy a Johns. You see, that's part of our policy.

LZ: I should just, because I don't want to take too much of your time,

WR: That's alright.

LZ: I should just cover the questions that

WR: Yeah, sure.

LZ: I have questions about [Dorothy] Miller's place within the Museum, and also the Americans shows as they were perceived within the art world at the time.

WR: Some of the Americans shows took place as I was just in graduate school.

LZ: Right.

END Side A at 0:47:46

BEGIN Side B at 0:00:07

WR: That it did show Pollock, Still, and these kind of people, Rothko, in these Fourteen, Sixteen, Americans context, while perceived as inadequate from the point of view of the artists and of the small group of amateurs of that art at that time, it was conceived of as very daring by the outside world.

LZ: Yes, the reviews were always terrible.

WR: Dorothy was very careful to put a mix in these shows, so that you couldn't say that she was bamboozled by abstract painting, or anything. There was usually a figurative painter. I mean, people like [Edwin] Dickinson would be in such shows, Herman Rose, and so forth.

LZ: But it is interesting, isn't it, that, to me, that seemed like part of their viewing American painting as provincial, in a sense, and they're treating it differently than they treat – I mean, on one hand you could say well, it was responsible of them because they didn't have the same effect in Europe as they had in the United States, that they supported a particular movement. And I know that they were very conscious of that.

WR: Yeah. I think that there was a long tradition of the Whitney being emotionally predisposed, and theoretically and legally predisposed, to show American painting. Therefore, there was no feeling that America as such, even though we were an American museum – modern art was felt to be an international thing, and should be judged completely on the level of quality.

LZ: Right.

WR: Now, the judgment call on that level was a little low.

LZ: Yes.

WR: But the feeling on the part of the larger public was: My god, what are these things that are being shown there?

LZ: Yes.

WR: And so, you have to kind of see what it was like in the context of those years. I would say that if you could criticize, you would have to criticize more the years of the later '50s and early '60s, than the actual period in which most of these works were done, which is the later '40s and the early '50s. Because I don't think that,

given the size of the space that was available and everything else, that the sort of sampling, that more than the sampling was called for in the very first instances.

LZ: Yes.

WR: But as it became clear that these artists had more breadth in them, and that the art was imposing itself, that's when, I think, one could criticize and could say that this was truly the first movement of American art that could be put on a par with the major movements of modern art in Europe, and that it wasn't being treated that way.

LZ: Commensurately.

WR: And that was my attitude, and that was what I did when I came in here. Now, that said, I would say that Dorothy and Alfred were much more open to this than museum people anywhere else, with the possible exception of the one man who was at the Met, who was very open to it. And that the Museum had first-rate examples of these artists from the word go. De Kooning's *Woman* is a perfect example. It did bite the bullet on __[0:04:09] And part of it was also, in the later '50s and early '60s, the prices of these things rose from next to nothing, or from nothing to next to nothing, [laughter] and Alfred, with his parsimonious Scotch attitudes, was shocked. There was sort of a built-in feeling that it's one thing if a Matisse and a Picasso are expensive, but that a Pollock should be expensive, this is beyond the pale. And

LZ: But by the time you were buying, Pop art must have been very closely priced to what abstract expressionism was

WR: No, Pop art wasn't.

LZ: You don't think the prices had caught up yet?

WR: No, no, no. Pop art – you mean when I was buying it personally in the '50s?

LZ: No, I'm talking about in the '60s, when you came into the Museum and filled in the gaps.

WR: Well, at that time. I would say, well, I paid for the big wall-sized Pollock $350,000. I paid $125,000 for *Echo*. I paid, I don't know, $75,000 for the big Gorky drawing, *Summation*.

LZ: And what would you have paid

WR: What one would have paid for a Lichtenstein oil then, I think I bought the *Drowning Girl*, you'd have to check it out, I think it was something like $15,000 or $20,000.

LZ: So it was still a lot cheaper than __[0:06:02]

WR: It was cheaper than the Pollocks. Now, remember, it wasn't necessarily that much cheaper than the Rothkos. The Rothkos were only $35,000, $40,000, $50,000.

LZ: __[0:06:20]

WR: The Pollocks were much more expensive, and the Newmans, not because anyone wanted to buy them, but because Barney priced himself according to Jackson. [laughter] It was always, "Jackson and me." And that's the way they face each other in the galleries now. I think it's quite wonderful.

LZ: Yeah, he would have been pleased.

WR: Oh, would he have been pleased. But.

LZ: But, so, let me just ask you about Miller. Is your sense of her

WR: My sense of Dorothy was that Dorothy was basically a person who was open to a variety of things. I don't think that she was particularly predisposed toward abstract expressionism. But she liked Clyfford Still's work and she liked some of Pollock's things, but she also liked a lot of things which we might not like so much. And her, I view, was to sort of being generous. The problem was that you could show certain things but the Museum couldn't buy that much and didn't have that much space to hang anything, hence the sampling process. My instinct was that Alfred often made decisions which were then represented as Dorothy's. That does not mean that Dorothy did not make decisions, but for whatever reason, in certain instances, I think Alfred preferred to keep his hand not shown. You know?

LZ: Well, it's seamless, also. I mean, I found letters in the files where it says to her, "Quick, I have to make," he's writing to her in Europe, "I have to make three

recommendations for Americans; you have to tell me who to," so he's depending on her in that situation.

WR: Yes, right.

LZ: But it's seamless. You can't tell, in those situations.

WR: No, the two of them were like one.

LZ: Yes.

WR: And so it's really hard to parse. You could talk to someone like Peter Selz, and even though he probably had some hard feelings because in the end, he had to leave the Museum and so forth, he might have some insights. Because you see, when I arrived, Alfred was just about to leave. And I don't think I could have survived under Alfred. And Dorothy had only one more year, so.

LZ: Was she a powerful person in the Museum?

WR: No. I think once, without Alfred, Dorothy had no power at all.

LZ: I wonder if you have any sense of it just historically; I know you wouldn't have been around at the time, but for example, 1943. She had done one Americans show; she had been at the Museum for eight years. She had ten years before that of museum experience.

WR: Well, Margaret Miller was really the Americans person before her. And it wasn't until Margaret Miller left,

LZ: That she got them, and that was like '46.

WR: And Margaret Miller is who you have to look into. I don't know much about her but there was always a feeling that she was more attached to the American painters, and that her leaving was partly connected to that. But really, I don't want to say. You have to check – there must be in the files stuff from Margaret Miller.

LZ: I'm sure there must be. I'm sure Rona's got stuff. So, for example, in 1943, she [Dorothy] was in a perfect position to do *Romantic Painting in America*, and she did it, but she did it with Soby.

WR: Yes.

LZ: In ’46, he asked her to work with him on his Shahn show. I mean, it’s not her show.

WR: Right. I think that, Dorothy was a self-effacing lady, to begin with. She was extremely beautiful.

LZ: That’s what everybody says.

WR: And extremely feminine. I mean, even when I got here in 1967, when she was no chicken, she was a gorgeous woman. And I think that her idea of femininity was, in part, not to be the boss.

LZ: Yes, I think so, too. And I think it was an idea that was well reinforced all around her.

WR: Yes, yes, yes. I think that’s true. And it was a generational thing, you know.

LZ: Yeah. Do you have any sense of why she didn’t write?

WR: I don’t think she had too much to say. That’s the first thing. I think she knew what she liked and didn’t like, but she was not one to verbalize. And I think writing was Alfred’s forte, and one of the pithiest writers.

LZ: And so, yeah.

WR: So I think that she didn’t feel called upon to do that. She was an executrix, to a certain point.

LZ: Yeah, yeah. Do you think the Americans shows fell to her in part because of all of this dynamic, that she was?

WR: I think that Alfred wouldn’t have wanted to put himself on the line,

LZ: Oh, that‘s interesting.

WR: For those shows. I mean, I don’t want you to publish that, but that’s my own.

LZ: No, but that’s an interesting way to think about it.

WR: I think that Alfred wanted these things shown at the Museum, but didn’t want them to have his name on them. [laughing] You know?

LZ: Yes.

WR: He wasn't that sure of how good these people were. I remember something he said to me [laughing], which you obviously can't print, but when I did the show of the pioneers, which was all works promised to or in the collection, Alfred walked through it with me.

LZ: Which show was this?

WR: Pioneers of American painting, or something. [3] There was no catalogue, just a checklist. And it was only things which we had acquired, and which were in the collection. But it was the attempt to establish AbEx as a big item in the Museum. And I remember we got panned for having Rothkos and things, by the *New York Times* guy who was Hilton's [Kramer] predecessor at that time.

LZ: [John] Canaday.

WR: Canaday. And I remember when we were walking through the show, we got to the Rothkos, and Alfred said something to me about so many fake, big empty pictures. [laughing]

LZ: Really? And Rothko got more support from them than a lot of other artists.

WR: Well, you see, first of all, Alfred was already __[0:13:20]. But second of all, what I think it represented was the grudging aspect of Alfred. But he saw that there was quality there. He thought it was lesser work. There wasn't enough going on for him. [laughing] You know? And I think for him, if it had to be, empty pictures should be this big.

LZ: [laughing] Yes.

WR: [laughing] That the whole notion of the great big empty picture was a little much for him. But there was also a certain taste at the Museum which you see coming out very clearly in Dorothy, and with Alfred too, for the second generation Tenth Street emasculation of abstract expressionism. Thus, for example, in that show which did not have Hans Hofmann, [*The New American Painting*, 1958-9*]*, did not have Reinhardt, did not have various people, and was not going to have Newman. Newman was a last-minute addition to that show.

[3] https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4289/releases/MOMA_1969_Jan-June_0121.pdf

LZ: Yes, I know. And so was [Jack] Tworkov.

WR: In that show, there was this woman painter whom the Museum starred, all the time.

LZ: Loren MacIver?

WR: No, she's an old-timer.

LZ: Grace Hartigan.

WR: Grace Hartigan. Now Grace Hartigan did a very knowing art-school redo of de Kooning

LZ: And Gorky, yes.

WR: It was sort of much more digestible, and it also was figurative. Between the skeins and blots and everything, you could see what was going on.

LZ: Yes.

WR: Grace Hartigan was, to some extent, the sort of *juste milieu* as in, the 19th century French writers called for between the impressionists on the one hand and the salon artists, they called for an art of the *juste milieu*.

LZ: A comfortable middle ground.

WR: Yeah, that's right, she was the comfortable middle ground, and the Museum bought heavily of her work. And she was included in that exhibition.

LZ: Right. And she had also been in one of the Americans shows.

WR: Yeah, so if you consider that she was going to be in a show that Barney was not going to be in, you get some sense, in '57, of where it is.

LZ: Right, that's right. In 1985, when I interviewed Dorothy Miller for your class, she said, she told me, and I have it on tape, that she said that "We never thought that Newman was as good as a lot of the other __[0:16:35]"

WR: Well, there weren't many people who did. Clem Greenberg was one, there were a few others. Tony Smith thought so. But.

LZ: And a whole younger generation __[0:16:55]

WR: Yes. Frank Stella, for example,

LZ: And Donald Judd.

WR: So you have this kind of thing. But what you have to realize is that we take the presence of the great Picassos and Matisses and Kandinskys and Mirós for granted. And now we take the Pollocks for granted, and we're looking at this and that. You have to realize that most of Alfred's time was taken up with buying Matisses and Picassos and artists that weren't there. It isn't as if you can think, "Oh, all this stuff was here," and "Alfred didn't buy enough of that." He was focusing on what seemed to him more present, and one could make some argument. I mean, great as Pollock and de Kooning are, they aren't Picasso and Matisse. They're on the next level down, with Kandinsky and Miró and so forth and so on. And he literally was focusing on the first level. [laughing]

LZ: Yes, yeah.

WR: But, I mean, he had blind spots, even there, the late Matisse.

LZ: He didn't like late Matisse.

WR: No. He refused the Snail that's now in the Tate. It was $64,000 and he thought it was just too big and empty.

LZ: [laughing] Again.

WR: And he liked it. And he said if we could get it reasonably. But he wouldn't reach for the Snail. Now, the Snail, is to my mind, the great masterpiece of the late Matisse. And it is <u>the</u> picture that should have been in The Museum of Modern Art. I mean, it is the piano lesson of the late Matisse. So, you know, one can always fault people, and god knows I could be faulted on a number of scores. But __[0:18:55] I think we made, we were able to catch up with certain kinds of things. I mean, I bought a Twombly for the collection. We had two Twomblys. Now, Kirk feels that Twombly is under-represented. He's probably right. But it wasn't that I didn't – I could be said to have been, what? Sampling Twombly. [laughing] I bought a Twombly for myself at the time for my own collection. But I didn't feel that the Museum needed a whole bunch of Twomblys. Now, that's what's good about having a change of direction. You look at the thing and you say, well, what's missing, in a sense. And that's exactly what I was doing. What

people don't realize is that when I came in, the Newmans were missing, the Pollocks were missing, all those things were missing.

LZ: Right, right, sure.

WR: But also, there were certain Picassos missing, and certain Matisses. The late Matisse, the Cubist constructions, all these things that had to be done. [laughing]

LZ: Yeah. This is great, though.

WR: Most of the things I bought were not contemporary things because I was still buying Surrealist things and Dada things and Picabias, and all those kinds of things.

LZ: I mean, I just wonder if it doesn't take fifteen years to buy contemporary art intelligently, with a real sense of what's

WR: Well, it may take ten years.

LZ: Ten years.

WR: It certainly, as the years go by, the focus clarifies.

LZ: Yeah.

WR: But anyway, there it is. You can call me in Florida if you want further information about any one of these things.

LZ: Okay, well, as I start writing I probably

WR: Okay, good.

END of Side B at 0:20:59

END OF INTERVIEW