

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: ROBERT MANGOLD (RM)
INTERVIEWERS: CLAIRE DIENES (CD) AND LILIAN TONE (LT)
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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

CD: I'm with Lilian Tone and we are conducting an interview for the Museum's Oral History Project. The subject of today's interview is Robert Mangold. It is November 18, 1999, and we are at the Museum. So, I guess I'll start at the beginning and just ask you briefly to tell us where and when you were born and just a little bit about your background.

RM: I was born October 12, 1937 in North Tonawanda, New York, a small town in between Buffalo and Niagara Falls. I went to art school at the Cleveland Art Institute and then to graduate school at Yale, and then moved to New York.

CD: When was it that you first became engaged with art, and eventually decided to make it the focus of your life?

RM: Well, for probably all the wrong reasons, teachers and. . . Let's see, when would it have started? Maybe even in grade school, but in high school, they all thought I had a lot of talent and encouraged me in that direction. So, I decided by the time I went to high school that I probably would be some kind of a commercial artist or something. I'd go and study illustration or something, which was still a very big field then. A lot of magazines had covers that were illustrations and this was the time of Norman Rockwell and all that stuff. So, I went away to school thinking that's what I'd be. You want me to go on?

CD: Well, let me ask you: as a child, were there trips to museums?

RM: I think that probably I had one trip to the Albright or something. My family didn't go there, but I think that maybe I went with a class. The Albright-Knox, or maybe it was just the Albright then. But, in any case, I didn't have a very. . . I mean, actually, I don't think I knew there were contemporary artists. It's funny to think of that, but I think that in that period of time. . . I knew there were people who would park their car and set up an easel and do a picture of something, but I didn't think that this was a career choice, that there were actually people who made paintings and then made it their life work. It was a hobby [is] what I thought. And so, I was attracted by the reality of commercial art. I went away to Cleveland and I come from, I guess you could say, a rural factory background. Most of my relatives worked at the Wurlitzer factory in North Tonawanda, which made organs and juke-boxes and things like that. My grandfather, most of my uncles, and so on. So, to make a long story short, when I got to Cleveland, I kind of looked at the illustration department and what was going on there and somehow it didn't seem to have the freedom that I was looking for. It seemed less interesting to me. And I became very good friends with a lot of the painters and sculptors there, and the teachers, and I just thought, this isn't a bad life. You teach sculpture or painting three days a week, and then you have the rest of the time to go home and work on whatever. It sounded good to me. So, I thought, well, this is what I'll do. I'll study painting and sculpture and be a teacher.

LT: Also, was it then that it became a possible career choice?

RM: Then it became a reality. Before that there were no examples. There was no reality to it. It was like painters were a historical situation, but not something that was contemporary to my mind. I mean, today it's so different with television and even the way the arts are covered in magazines. But at that time, it was kind of separate from the main flow of things.

CD: So, the idea of becoming an artist was in no way a daunting idea for you at that time?

RM: No, because I did it step by step. I saw these teachers who were by no means famous artists, but they were teaching courses. And I knew they were working on paintings because I saw their work, and so this was a life possibility suddenly for me. And I thought, this is a better choice than the other things that I'd been thinking about.

CD: And your family supported this career move?

RM: My family never gave me opposition. There wasn't money to contribute to my education, so after I got out of high school I had to work a year. And, at that time, education wasn't very expensive, so you could somehow get by with summer jobs and so on. I would guess that tuition for a year at Cleveland then was maybe \$800.00 or something. So, even when I then went on to Yale, it was manageable with a few government loans or something. You could get through it and survive.

LT: Can you talk a little about your time at Yale University?

RM: Well, let me just say, first at Cleveland, the big thing that kind of changed my whole perspective on everything was that I went -- this is very timely I guess -- I went to a Carnegie International in '56 or '57. . . and the Carnegie International then was. . . I think each artist had one work. And it had everyone in there at one time, from Andrew Wyeth and Ben Shahn to [Henri] Matisse and [Robert] Motherwell -- or I'm not sure about Motherwell -- but I know that [Franz] Kline was there, and [Willem] de Kooning, and [Adolph] Gottlieb, and [Jackson] Pollock. So that it had most of the world's art. [Alexander] Calder was there. It had all the range of what was going on was there, in one building, and it was a revelation to me because I hadn't seen New York School painting.

CD: So, this was your first real-life exposure to these paintings?

RM: And for the first time, I saw painting that was not abstracted nature. I've told this story a lot of times but, it wasn't an abstraction of nature, and it wasn't like design. It was like something that confronted you and had this physical and emotional presence, suddenly. And it was very different than anything I had seen before. I didn't actually love all of it immediately. There were European artists like [Antonio] Tapies and Alberto Burri also in the show. I remember this painting of Alberto Burri. It was with these wood shingles that were burned and so on. I mean, there were a lot of things there that were very new to me. So, I went back to Cleveland and went from painting still-lives and set-ups from the model, [to trying] to do these things. And I wouldn't say it was received with a great deal of [laughter] enthusiasm, but. . . I mean, I can't say that I was punished in any way. I just think that the teachers thought I'd been a little corrupted by it, by New York painting. Then I went to Yale Norfolk [Summer School of Art and Music].

LT: What brought you to Yale?

RM: Well, that's it. I was given a scholarship at that time. Yale Norfolk summer school was a kind of feeding ground for Yale. Third-year students from most art schools -- they were four-year institutions -- would send a prominent third-year student to Yale Norfolk, in Cleveland, one would go to Yale Norfolk and another would go to Skowhegan. You were given a scholarship. And the faculty at Cleveland thought I had this abstract potential, so they sent me to Yale Norfolk, and there I had contact with some teachers who were also teaching at the University at the time, and they encouraged me to come there. And being that I was out of money by that time they were able to get me a modest scholarship, and it all seemed possible. So, I went there. I wasn't so sure that Yale was the right place because I wasn't particularly fond of [Josef] Albers' work. I, kind of, wanted to go out to California schools where Clyfford Still was. There seemed to be more interest [in that than] for me than to go to this kind of more regimented art history oriented school. It seemed, in a sense, to

be a little more restricted from my distant viewpoint. But I went to Yale. Albers had retired, however, most of his courses were still taught by people who had studied under him. But the school had a little bit more openness, in that they had very good critics from New York who came up and looked at your work and talked to you. By critics, I mean painters, not "critic" critics.

CD: What kind of work were you doing at the time?

RM: Well, I had gone through a period of trying to make paintings that [were] out of the Abstract Expressionist vocabulary. But, by the time I'd finished up with Cleveland, I, kind of, felt like I really didn't know what I was doing, that I was imitating other people's work and style, but I didn't know where it came from or what it was about, really. So, actually, Yale turned out very good because I spent a lot of time studying the history of twentieth-century painting which I'd, kind of, skipped by, in terms of my jump to the present. I didn't do a lot the first year. I studied all of the twentieth-century movements from Cubism to Surrealism to Dadaism and whatever. And elements of that came into my work, but I didn't do a lot of work that year. And then the following year. . .

CD: And the art history courses?

RM: Well, you had to take two academic courses along with your studio courses. And art history seemed the most important for me to take and they had great teachers. So, I took a course in twentieth-century -- hmmm, what was it called? -- maybe modern painting, I don't know, and another course in American art. So, it kind of filled in the gaps in my education in a lot of ways. And then, of course, the art world was really changing at this point. This was when I went to Yale. It was 1960 and Pop Art was kind of emerging. [Jasper] Johns was showing and [Robert] Rauschenberg, and so it was a kind of time of a lot of things happening. And all of that was mixing into my work in different ways, the way it probably should in student work. You know, you should try to absorb everything.

CD: Did you come into the city to visit the galleries and the museums?

RM: Yes, that was the other attraction for Yale, that you could get on a train and come into New York and see shows. I should say that earlier, when I was in Cleveland and my mother was a clothes buyer for a local department store, she would have to take a trip to New York once a year or something. So, a couple of times, I came with her and I would get on a Madison Avenue bus and go up and I think I probably got the addresses from *The New Yorker* or something, and got off the bus and went into galleries. So, I had a little bit of that. And also, as students, we took a couple of trips to New York, but being near New York was very attractive. Yes. So, that was an asset that Yale had.

CD: Do you remember your first visit to The Museum of Modern Art?

RM: I don't think I went to any museums when we came in on those, maybe one or two, trips with my mother, because it was just like a one day, one afternoon thing. But, I think when I came in with other students, we did all the museums.

CD: From Yale?

RM: No, from Cleveland.

CD: Oh.

RM: We did. We went to the Guggenheim and the Whitney and the Modern. [Long pause]. But I actually don't have a great memory of it. New York was pretty spectacular.

CD: Yes. So, how about the time leading up to leaving Yale and moving to New York City? I think you moved to New York City immediately after you finished Yale?

RM: Well, I got to Yale in the fall of 1960 and then. . . The attraction Yale had in those years for a lot of students from Boston, New England, all over, was that you could go to graduate school without a Bachelor's degree, since most of the art schools — Cooper [Union] -- a lot of them didn't give degrees. So, people wouldn't have a diploma and there would be only certain graduate schools that you could get into. And then, to get into them, you'd have to. . . Yale was somewhat unique because I think when Albers came there, he wanted to be able to have this base of students from art schools and they set up a program where you could get into the graduate program, work on your Master's degree and get the Bachelor's on the way. You'd get your Bachelor's after one year or something, and then your Master's later on. As my program was set up. I got my Bachelor's in 1961, and then the next year, I was in residence. And then I was given an out-of-residence situation. And what that meant was that I didn't have to attend Yale. I could come to New York and work here, and at the end of the year, I would go back to New Haven and show my works before a jury and they'd give me my degree or not give me my degree. That would be my thesis, in a sense. I was at Yale for the two years and then the third year, actually while I was working at the Museum, I technically was still enrolled at Yale, on a certain basis.

LT: That was 1962?

RM: That would have been 1962, 1963 and then I got the Master's in June of 1963.

CD: How did the job at the Museum come about?

RM: Well. . . I had met my future wife at Yale, Sylvia Plimick. We got married in New Haven. We were both painters and came to New York. She had friends who had a job as superintendents of an apartment house up on East 72nd Street, between Park and Madison. And it was just a small apartment house. It was five floors, but you got your apartment free, and you got telephone and all the utilities, but no salary. And

there was a minimum of jobs. You had to keep the halls clean and you had to make sure the garbage went out a certain day. And also you might have to repair a toilet or something, things like that. But basically it was just a minimal amount of work, and you got this apartment free. So, we took that. And then, my wife got a job at Arthur Brown, the art store. I don't know if Arthur Brown is still in existence or not, but it was an art store in midtown. I looked for a job in a variety of places. I went to everything from the Museum of Natural History to the Met and the Modern. I don't know that I applied to the Whitney. But anyway, it was. . .

CD: For any job in particular?

RM: Well, guard jobs at that time. I'm not sure how I knew this but [they] were attractive because they didn't begin early in the morning. And I would have taken anything, I guess, a department store job or anything. But I tried these, and the Modern at that time. . . There was a wonderful woman who was in Personnel, who was, I think her name was maybe Miriam Takaezu. I have this idea that this was her name. But she's the sister of a very famous potter, Toshiko Takaezu, who shows and who actually was at Cleveland. So, anyway, I was talking to her and she was very receptive about hiring, trying to hire as guards, poets, writers, artists. I mean, maybe the whole Museum was. . . I don't know, but I took it as a direct reflection that it was her good will [laughing]. And this was -- after leaving school -- early summer. And I was hired as a guard to replace the guards who went on summer vacation. So, I was hired on that basis.

LT: So, initially it was a temporary position?

RM: Yes. I don't think anything more than the summer was promised. But I think there was an idea that if it worked out, maybe something would happen. And, as I say, one advantage was that this was a union job. Guard[ing], at that time, it was reasonable pay. And you got health insurance, and you didn't start until -- I think the Museum maybe opened at 11:00 a.m. and closed at 5:00 p.m. So, you had to get there maybe

at 10:30 a.m. or something, but it meant you could work nights and you'd get out early enough that it wasn't so terrible. It wasn't exhausting. I mean [laughing], being a guard might be boring, but it isn't often exhausting. And it was, you know, the great benefit of being around all these works. I mean, to come in every day. It was very military-like. You'd assemble downstairs, and you'd get your assignment as to what your post was for that day.

CD: Did it vary from day to day?

RM: Oh, yes. It varied all the time. One time you'd have the elevator. One time you'd have down where the movies were. One day you'd have this gallery or that gallery. So, you got all around the Museum, in a sense. And yes, I think it would have been very difficult if you had only one post all the time [laughing].

LT: Did you have a favorite spot?

RM: Well, to tell you the truth, everyone's favorite spot, I think, was in the movies [laughter]. But, aside from that no. I think that it was kind of interesting. I'm trying to think of the shows that were up that summer. I think there was a big Picasso show [*80th Birthday Exhibition – Picasso: The Museum Collection Present and Future*, MoMA Exh. #705, May 14-September 18, 1962]. And maybe a Mark Tobey show [*Mark Tobey*, MoMA Exh. #710, September 12-November 9, 1962]. I kind of remember that in a vague way. And there was another out in the garden [*Art of the Asmat: The Collection of Michael C. Rockefeller*, MoMA Exh. #709a, September 11-November 6, 1962]. Of course, this was a time when the Museum was free. Free and rarely crowded [laughing], as a matter of fact. I mean, it's kind of ironic in a lot of ways. But they used to say. . . On rainy days you had to watch out because all the weird people came in to stay out of the rain [laughter], so you had to be particularly militant or vigilant about things happening.

LT: And what kinds of things happened?

RM: Well, I mean, people [were] maybe handling works or doing things like that.

LT: Touching the works?

RM: Whatever. Yes, something. You had to be, you were supposed to be a little more alert because people would. . . It was a safe place out of the rain. All you had to do was walk in. But I met a lot of people who were here at the time. The other good thing was that there was a very systematic arrangement of breaks. You got a fifteen minute break every so many. And then there was a room down there where you'd go and you'd sit and talk with the other guards and everything. And practically everyone there was involved in the arts in some way.

CD: So, this was obviously a place that artists wanted to be associated with.

RM: Yes. And a lot of them were literary. A lot of them were writers of one kind or another, but it was very nice because people there were contemporaries and engaged in similar activities that you were.

CD: So, you could socialize with them?

RM: Yes, on the breaks and then you'd go back up and be with the works and watch people, which was what you did most of the time.

CD: Were you looking at the paintings on the wall?

RM: Well, you did. Yes, of course, you did. The paintings were the backdrop for everything that was happening. And you saw the paintings all the time. And certain paintings, certain areas and certain groups of paintings, you got to appreciate more, and certain ones you appreciated less and so on.

CD: Is there any particular work, group of works or exhibition that at the time was influential to you?

RM: Well, there were works. I mean, there were individual works. They're not unusual, particularly. I mean, if you were going to make a list, [Paul] Cézanne's *Bather* and Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and things like that were just. . . I never tired of looking at them. However, at that time the *Guernica* was here -- I never very much liked the *Guernica* [laughing]. The room with the *Guernica* was never my favorite. And there was the area where the [Piet] Mondrians and the [Kasimir] Malevichs [were], and that Constructivist work, which was very nice. And the [Constantin] Brancusi. There were areas that were always a pleasure to be around. You know, if you come in everyday -- which I'm sure you have the experience -- in a funny way, the works at a certain point become almost invisible. You just walk by them. What changes everyday is the people coming in and how they act in front of them, so that's what you end up looking at a lot of the time. So, what happened at the fall of that year was this Personnel person said to me, "You know, there's a opening in the Library if you'd like to be a page." I had no idea what a page was but it seemed like it was a good [idea]. There was a possible situation continuing there, so I moved up into the Library staff as a retriever of books and repairer of books.

CD: What was the Library like at that time?

RM: The film library, the library of all the film files and all of the books and everything was all one library. Slides too. And it was on the same floor as the print offices, but I can't remember what floor that might have been. I don't know. I can't remember. But Bernard Karpel was the Librarian.

CD: Yes.

RM: And he was very well known, and it was a very serious Library. And it was a very good job because I'd be shelving books, I'd be going through the material and

looking at things. It was a very rich situation because you could see magazines from the 1940s like Tiger's Eye and publications that you didn't know about. And you could leaf through certain articles, and so on. It gave you the chance to do that, which would probably not happen otherwise.

LT: Can we go back a little to when you were a guard. You were a guard for about one year?

RM: No, three months. June, July, and August.

LT: Oh, so only during that summer?

RM: That summer. So, it was just that period of that particular summer. I'm not exactly sure of the date, maybe it was September or maybe it was October, but anyway, I went to the Library at that point.

CD: And you stayed in the Library until when?

RM: I was trying to figure that out thinking that you would probably ask me. So, this was the summer of 1962, and then, actually I was here through two very dramatic moments in our culture of the early 1960s. One was the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the other was the assassination of Kennedy. I remember working in the Library then, so that was November of 1963. But I think that was kind of near the end.

LT: Yes, according to our records you worked in the Library until 1964, right?

RM: Is that right?

CD: Or maybe the end of 1963. The Museum closed in December of 1963 for the expansion. Do you recall that at all?

RM: No. No, I don't. I do remember a humorous thing about the Cuban Missile Crisis, when we came in one day, a lot of the famous paintings were down and gone, and something else was hanging up in their place. And rumor was that they were up in some cave somewhere [laughter]. They had taken the [Henri] Rousseau, and the most famous paintings that the Museum had -- they had taken down because there was this feeling that we might be under a missile attack.

LT: For how long were they away?

RM: That I'm not sure. I can't remember. But I remember suddenly the Museum was very different this day. It was like overnight somehow these paintings had disappeared. I'm not sure that there's any written record of all this.

CD: Well, they certainly went to storage.

RM: Yes.

LT: And while you were a guard were there other artists that were guards that you were friends with?

RM: Well, I met Sol LeWitt while he was a guard here.

LT: During this three month period?

RM: Yes. Actually, I don't remember him being a guard. When I would leave at night, he would have this night job. He would sit at the desk. So, I remember meeting him that way. [Dan] Flavin and [Robert] Ryman had left before I got here, just that spring or something. There were a few people who had left. Let's see, who else did I meet here? [Pause]. Lucy Lippard, who was married to Bob Ryman at that time, worked in the Library a lot because she did research for different projects.

CD: Did you get to know her?

RM: I got to know her.

LT: But you met her while you were at the Museum?

RM: When I was in the Library.

CD: She was working for the Museum, doing research?

RM: She was, yes. I don't think she was a regular employee, but I think they would -- I don't know who it was -- hire her to do research. And so, actually, they -- Bob Ryman and Lucy -- alerted Sylvia and I of a loft in the loft building they lived in on the Bowery. That there was going to be three floors open up above them. So, it was through them that we found this. . .

CD: So, some of these relationships that you had at the Museum extended to social life?

RM: Oh, absolutely. Yes. I mean, Sol's been a friend my whole life.

LT: How about Al Held?

RM: Well, it's funny you say that because I actually met Al Held at an opening at the Museum. I don't even know what the occasion was, but I met him and he'd just bought this farm in the country. Let's see, this would have been 1964 or 1965. So this was after I'd stopped working here. He didn't work here did he?

CD: Yes. He did.

RM: He did? Where'd he work?

CD: The Department of Circulating Exhibitions.

RM: Oh. I didn't meet him here. I mean, my time as a guard was very short. But Scott Burton worked for years at the membership desk. I remember meeting him. I'm trying to think, who else? [Pause]. There were other people whose names I've forgotten, who didn't go on to stardom [laughter], but who were terrific people.

CD: I have on my list Sonya Flavin and Elita Agee.

RM: Elita Agee, yes. I met Bill Agee, too, at that time. Actually, I'd met Bill Agee when he was at Yale. We were waiters in the law school dining room together. But this was like a reconnection, in a way. No, Elita was terrific. She worked in the Library and was a good friend.

CD: Was the Library open to the public at that time?

RM: Yes, yes. I think anybody could use it.

CD: Did you use it for your own personal interest?

RM: Well, I did when I was supposed to be working.

CD: O.K. [laughing].

RM: I mean, there were lots of moments when you would be shelving books and there was nothing too urgent. Then you could browse and get absorbed in whatever you wanted, and no one would notice or care.

CD: Was it a full-time job?

RM: Yes. Now I don't remember the hours. It was probably similar to the guards' hours because the Museum didn't open early and it closed at 5:00 pm. And I don't

remember whether it was a higher paying job than being a guard. I can't remember all of that. No, it was very good. It was very good. I used to have to get movie files. All this was one big thing, one big area. So, someone might come in for the file on Citizen Kane or something, and you'd get out this file for them, and it was all in one area.

CD: Did you take advantage of the theaters? Did you go to the films?

RM: Oh, actually, I remember, there was a Howard Hawks film series at the time I was here [*The Cinema of Howard Hawks*, May 31-Sept 1, 1962] and I did get to see a few of those because you would be assigned down there and there was a -- is it the same as it is today? -- there was a little room, and then outside, some things were hung there, but usually nothing that wasn't under glass. It wasn't like anything that you really had to watch too closely. And, so, you could slip into the -- you were supposed to slip into -- the movie and make sure everything was all right in there, but you could linger [laughter] at your will, I guess, and see the film.

CD: And on your own free time, would you take advantage of these services?

RM: No, to tell you the truth, on my own free time, I just left. Time was so short to do your own work and you were eager to leave when the time came.

CD: Right. I understand. So you were creating art then at the same time.

RM: Yes. I started having shows while I was working at the Museum. So, I had a show at, let's see, I guess it was first called Thibaut Gallery, and then later Fischbach Gallery. I think I had two shows maybe while I was working in the library. And then what happened was that I got offered teaching jobs. That's why I initially left. I think it was a teaching job at the School of Visual Arts at Hunter College maybe at the same.

CD: And your colleagues at the Museum that were not artists, did they know you were an artist?

RM: Well, we all were something. You know, I mean, everybody was. Most people there were either artists or poets. And although I was having a show I was by no means well known, or have any big reputation or anything. So, we were all in the same boat.

LT: Did you have any contacts with curators at the time?

RM: No, I don't think so. Although, when I worked in the Library, there was a coffee shop where everybody would go and have coffee. And Kynaston [McShine] at that time was there as. . .

LT: With the International Program at that, at that point?

RM: No, let me think. Frank O'Hara was working here, right? He was maybe associate or assistant to Frank [Note: Frank O'Hara organized circulating exhibitions for the Museum from 1951-1953, 1955-1966; McShine was also in the Department of Circulating Exhibitions in 1959]. So, people would have coffee, and David Whitney was here. I can't remember what David Whitney did. Whoever was taking a break at that time would have coffee. But, I don't remember the curators themselves. I don't remember meeting them.

CD: Bill [William S.] Lieberman?

RM: I used to see him. Because actually his print office was right next door to the Library. And he would come through, and back and forth. Maybe I got books for him. But I was just a page. You know, nobody knew my name.

CD: What about his reputation?

RM: Did I know him by reputation?

CD: Yes, What was his reputation among young artists like yourself at the time?

RM: I don't know.

CD: Others? René d'Harnoncourt, the Director. Alfred [H.] Barr, Jr.

RM: Well, these people were all in another. . . They were our bosses. It was another strata of things. Actually, at Yale, I went to school with Victoria Barr, Alfred Barr's daughter, who was very good friends with my wife and who I knew, and who was a painter in New York for a while. I haven't heard anything of her in a while. But I don't think I ever met Alfred Barr. It was like I would be the elevator operator and maybe they'd be on the elevator.

CD: Maybe you overheard some things [laughing].

RM: I probably did, but nothing that would make the tabloids.

CD: What about the Art Lending Service, do you remember that? [Note: the Art Lending Service was founded in 1951 under the auspices of the Junior Council, a non-profit volunteer organization of the Museum. The ALS functioned as a public art gallery and an art library.]

RM: I remember that it existed and that they had works that would go out [to the public].

CD: They would organize exhibitions where they would have work for sale and for rent and then for sale. There were a couple of your works included, but maybe a little bit later.

RM: I think it was later, after I left. I remember it was very funny because I was in the Library when Elita had to make a file out for me [laughter].

LT: Really?

RM: It was because she got these announcements, so she had to make a file under my name.

LT: Because you had started showing?

RM: Yes. But, you know, I wasn't the only one. It wasn't so unusual, this situation.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

CD: Did you ever purchase anything from the Art Lending Service?

RM: No. Believe me, we were so close to the budget in those years, I mean, it was impossible. I remember seeing a Frank Stella drawing that I wanted to buy around this time. I would have loved to buy it. It was \$500 and it was just totally impossible [laughing] to even think about it.

CD: You went to see the exhibitions in the Penthouse?

RM: But that wasn't even a thought. The idea of buying art wasn't even a thought. As artists, we exchanged works for the next few years, but nobody bought anything [laughing] even though economics were a lot easier. I mean when we rented these floors on the Bowery, they were \$60 a floor. I have no idea what they'd rent for today. I can remember that everyone had to really hustle and keep working. And I remember when there was a big snow storm Bob Ryman, who had quit the job here

and just wanted to spend time in his studio, would go out and work for a weekend shoveling snow I mean you were marginally getting by. And I didn't know anyone who was very well off. But this was before the affluent art world. Actually at that time everyone told you when you began as a young artist that you had to have some other way to earn a living, that there was no way you were going to earn an income from showing paintings because it was just so unusual. I mean, it was remote.

LT: How did working here change your working habits, in terms of studio practice?

RM: Well, I was young, therefore, I could work longer hours. And getting out at 5:00 pm. meant that by 8:00 pm. you could have dinner and be in your studio. And you could work for three, four hours and then go home and certainly be able to get here by 10:30 a.m. So, it was manageable. You were able to have a reasonable amount of time to work. I'm trying to think of how many days the Museum was open. I think that the Museum was always closed on Mondays then. I'm not absolutely sure of that, but I think it was closed one day anyway. [Note: the Museum began closing to the public on Wednesdays starting in 1975 to save on operating costs.] And there were some occasions when I was a guard when there were special openings [for which] you had to come late, and maybe you got extra pay for that, I don't even remember. But it didn't happen that often. Did I answer your question?

LT: Yes, you did. But also, I was curious to know how your work changed during the time you were here?

RM: Well, being around the works that were here helps delineate what interests you and what doesn't interest you. When you're around them all the time, it's like living with one of the great collections of painting or sculpture. And you sharpen your sense of what interests you and what you want to do and what doesn't interest you. So, that's important. But also this was such an extraordinary time in New York. There were so many things going on and it was a clash of so many movements and ideas and things that were happening at one time. People tend to think of the '60s and they

think of Minimalism. But they think of Pop Art and Minimalism and Op Art. There were these happenings going on. People were doing happenings and there was Kinetic Art things that moved and made noise, and light sculptures and light paintings and sound. There was a lot of stuff going on at one time in all different directions. And it was an extraordinarily lively moment in the history of art. It was certainly the most lively moment that I remember. Plus it was still a small world. It was like that was also a great advantage because you could go to a party, a loft party, and everybody would be there from Barnett Newman to Andy Warhol.

LT: Yes, you said this once.

RM: You could house it in one thing. You could see every show in New York. Once a week you'd walk up Madison Avenue to the '80s. Allan Stone was probably the end. And you would see all the shows. It was all so manageable. It's all so unmanageable now [laughing]. I mean, you have SoHo and Chelsea and uptown and downtown. And it's very difficult to keep track of things to see. Plus it's just so much more, so many more artists. When the Museum has these things now where they invite. . . You see how many artists come to that.

LT: Yes. So, what you're saying is that the opposition that we see today looking back at the '60s between like Pop and Minimalism wasn't. . .

RM: It wasn't so clear because there were a lot of mini-movements like "Hard Edge" painting and a lot of things that people were trying to focus on in different ways. And it wasn't as simple as it looks in retrospect. And even more things came in towards the end of the 1960s: conceptual art, and process art.

LT: There seems to be a definite change in the sculptural quality of your work from 1965 on. And I was wondering if being around the Museum. . . I think that you had left the Museum by 1965 already. . .

RM: Yes. Yes.

LT: Your work seems to be blurring the line between painting and sculpture up to that point. And from then on, it seems to become painting.

RM: Yes. It's true. And I think that this was a period when immediately after the -- I mean the Abstract Expressionists were there and doing great work. Newman was still making great paintings and so was [Mark] Rothko and many of them. So, most of them were still working and doing very, very interesting work. But it had already been digested in the art world. Everybody understood what this was about. I remember at Yale there were people who were planning to be fourth generation Abstract Expressionists. They really said it. They really thought this was something that was going to go on forever. But I think that the direction was totally away from painting. Totally away from painting. I mean, even [Jasper] Johns, who we think of as certainly a painter more than anything else, was making objects. So there was a lot of painting that was becoming sculptural in the sense that it was becoming structured like [Lee] Bontecou or something.

LT: Was this a reaction to [Clement] Greenberg's thinking?

RM: Well, I think that most of the people I knew, were not very involved in. . . Yes, I didn't even mention the color field thing. That was another phase. Very powerful at that time. Maybe the most powerful in terms of criticism and curators. It was very powerful. But most people looked at that painting and saw it as slightly suspect. I must say looking back at Morris Louis, I like his work a lot. But at that time, it seemed to be so championed by Greenberg, and there seemed to be so many people supporting it, [Kenneth] Noland, [Jules] Olitski, etc. Plus there was more from the Washington School, and Gene Davis, Paul Feeley. It was a large group. It didn't seem interesting to me. It didn't seem like a way out. And the way out of it all somehow came through Pop Art in one way or another. I became involved in things that were outside the studio, whether it was industrial materials and paints and

fragments of architecture or whatever. It was not something that came from this other position, which seemed impossible to continue. And I think these things happen in history all the time. I think that there are probably young artists who will come to an exhibition of mine and think that this kind of work is impossible today. It's impossible for them to think about doing it. It's not impossible for me to do it [laughing], but it's impossible for them to think about doing it. And I think certain things are possible and certain things aren't. And at that point to continue the Abstract Expressionist trajectory, as varied as it was, there was just no way to go on with it. And so the direction that seemed to be the painterly direction was the direction of color field, the Greenberg direction. But that didn't appeal to most of the people I knew. And for me, Stella offered a way out. There was in Stella's early paintings a way to make painting and to re-examine what painting was about. And I think he was a very key figure for many artists in the 1960s. I think it shouldn't be lost sight of the importance of those works. And they were really equal in importance with Johns and Rauschenberg's works and in an odd way, [Ellsworth] Kelly wasn't. Because, for most of us, Kelly looked too European, too out of Matisse in a way.

LT: Too lyrical?

RM: Yes, I think there was this other American idea, which was very powerful then, which was that we still had to separate ourselves from Europe, from the European direction, which was a way of using color and a way of organizing a painting, which somehow you had to separate yourself from. I don't know how clear I can make it. Kelly clearly spent a lot of time in Europe, and this clearly comes out. He still had a very strong connection to European painting. And that's what it felt like when you saw it. Where Stella didn't and other things that were happening didn't. People were using spray paints and doing things that were coming out of contemporary industry materials and so on, and it was another way of dealing with painting. I just take it from the perspective of painting. Obviously, if you're doing sculpture, it's different. It's even more clear for [Donald] Judd or people like that.

LT: I have a few questions regarding conservation. I was reading the file on the painting 1/2 W Series that we own and you say in the questionnaire that it's acrylic on masonite.

RM: Yes.

LT: And that you applied paint with a roller.

RM: Right.

LT: And so this sort of reflects what you're saying.

RM: Yes. Initially, my earliest paintings. . . Well, the earliest ones, I worked, I did with brush, when I first came to the city. And then I wanted a way that had less to do with the sensitivity of the hand, in a way. Because I wanted to apply the paint in a very flat manner. So, I sprayed them but. . .

LT: So, those are the walls?

RM: Yes, walls and areas are mostly spray. Then it got to a point where I'm not exactly sure whether I just really didn't like the sprayed surface anymore. . . It was also very fragile. And I think I didn't want to use oil paint anymore.

LT: But it was sprayed oil paint.

RM: Sprayed oil paint in the early ones. The *W Series* was the first time I started using acrylic paints and a roller. It's hard to spray acrylic because it -- the water base -- dries up in the spray gun. You can't spray it in the same even way, or at least I couldn't with the apparatus I had. And rolling seemed like a very practical way of applying the paint without being sentimental or romantic about it. It was a way of just applying the paint, in a matter-of-fact way. And I was attracted to it. I liked using the

roller for that reason. It wasn't a fussy movement. It wasn't a fussy way of working. But it laid an even layer of paint, and it seemed perfect for what I was trying to do.

LT: So, the choice for acrylic as opposed to oil paint was more about adapting to the roller technique than for the specific qualities of the acrylic paint?

RM: Yes, I'm trying to think of why. I guess I liked the fact. . . I liked using acrylic because I hated waiting for paint to dry. There were all these different kinds of paints. People were mixing powdered pigment and roplex, and were working with magna and other kinds of paints. But I gravitated towards the acrylic because I could roll a surface, and if I didn't like it the next day, I could re-roll it or whatever. I could go on with it. I wouldn't be in this state of anxiety, waiting for something to dry.

LT: I noticed that you used a kind of transparent resin, shellac, over the masonite before you applied the paint.

RM: Yes.

LT: And that was a protective measure?

RM: I didn't know exactly what the best techniques were. Some people thought that masonite was a very stable painting surface, but there was also the idea that you should seal it.

LT: Otherwise it would absorb too much?

RM: Well, since masonite is made from wood pulp or something, you figure sooner or later something bad is going to happen [laughing] to the surface. So, there was someone, I don't know who, [who] suggested that I use shellac as a separating film, as a sealer. But yes, I did use it.

LT: It wasn't for the texture?

RM: No, and in some cases, when you see what looks like brush strokes, it might be the shellac because I couldn't roll shellac. I had to put it on with brush strokes. I had to put it on with brush. In some cases, there could be an impression of that that comes through on the surface. But I think those paintings have held up fairly well, so I guess it's okay technically. I had done some paintings on plywood and other commercial boards at that time, most of which haven't survived.

LT: And after that did you abandon the roller?

RM: No, but at a certain point I abandoned the hard materials, masonite and plywood and so on, and decided to go back to stretched canvas. And the reason I had abandoned stretched canvas initially was that it was too much of an art material. I mean stretched canvas was about making paintings. And if you went to a lumber yard, there were all these different materials you could work on. They were just materials. They didn't have an identity.

So, at a certain point that seemed very appealing. But these works were very heavy. And when things are heavy, they tend to get damaged more because when you move them, when you set them down, the edge gets knicked or banged. [Laughing] I had paintings in those years that fell off of people's walls. I don't know exactly why, but at a certain point, I decided I really wanted to go back to using canvas. And this was about, I would guess 1970 or 1971 or something. But I didn't stop using the roller. I used the roller through, I think, all of the 1970s. Let me think now: there was a point toward the late 1970s when I started working on a lot of works on paper where I used a brush. And I decided I wanted some of that quality in the painting, so I used a brush, too, for a few years, and then I went back to roller again, which is, I guess, my preferred way of applying paint. [Laughing]

LT: I have a few conservation questions. Not that we have any conservation problems with your paintings, on the contrary. We control the light levels in the galleries whenever we show paintings, and we are very conservative about the light levels. I was wondering if you had noticed fading or shifting of color of your work?

RM: No, well, I haven't really. No, I haven't. I've had paintings that were damaged, but they weren't damaged by light. I don't think that that has been a particular problem. I can remember one work from the mid 1970s that seemed as though the paint became more transparent as years went by. It was actually a very light color. It was painted a kind of light pink almost. When I saw it, maybe five years ago or something, it seemed as though it was becoming more translucent. But basically, I think the color, acrylic pigments, seem to hold up very well. I don't notice any real problem.

I notice that everyone is extraordinarily light conscious. I mean on all levels now, about everything. I was up at the Yale museum not too long ago, and they were telling me that they can't show furniture in light because it's wood, and that light destroys wood. But I'd never thought about that as a problem. Their colonial furniture, historic furniture, they have to have in the dark. Not in the dark, but away from daylight.

LT: Of course, you have to find a balance.

RM: Yes.

LT: Yes. Otherwise, you never show anything.

RM: It gets to a point, if it goes too far, that you can't see the works.

LT: No, I think that our conservation department was concerned that the colors may be fugitive.

RM: Yes. I never did experimentation. I always used commercial colors, not that they're all necessarily so good. I'm trying to think if I ever did any paintings where I used commercial hardware paint. I don't think I did. At least none that lasted and survived. There was a paint store down in the Village where a lot of people used to go and buy commercial Dutch Boy paints and use that stuff. Well, I did some paintings with aluminum paint from the can and so on. But most, as I say, of those are gone. They're not in existence anymore. The things from 1964 on, or 1965 for sure, were done with fairly stable materials. I may have used the more economical acrylic paints, Bowcourt or something. But I think they've always been pretty stable.

LT: How do you feel about restoration of your paintings in general? Do you yourself like to do the restoration of your work? When you are asked to restore your work, do you do it?

RM: I've done it a couple of times. I've done it a couple of times when something happened to a work. Let's see, a work called *Yellow Wall* from 1964-1965 was lost. We didn't know what happened to it. You know, it had been lost for years and then someone discovered it. It was in a loft I lived in and, I guess I had a trucker who was going to move all the work. And anyway, this work got left behind. And so, for ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years, it had sat in the back of this loft, and it was pretty damaged. So, I repainted that. Maybe I did some repair, too, I don't recall. But I think that it's better to have work restored than. . . I mean, if it's restored with the intent to use the same kinds of materials and the same surface that was there before, it's better than showing a work that's. . . Well, if a work is severely damaged, you can't deal with it anymore.

LT: So, what you're saying is that you prefer that it looks pristine rather than having visible scars on the surface?

RM: No, I don't know if I'm saying that. I think that a little bit of damage is not so bad. But if it gets to a point where you can't look at the work because all you're seeing is this problem, then something has to be done. Either the work has to be removed or one has to attempt to restore it. So, I'm very sympathetic to having it restored if there's an intention in trying to restore it rather than re-create it. I think in certain kinds of work, it's very difficult. Certainly Newman's work is very difficult to restore. When you have big fields of a single color, if something happens to that it's very difficult to do anything to it. There's a finite number of these works and somehow restoration of them is the only way of keeping them around. I mean, I don't know any other answer. I'm amazed. I think paintings are very tough, actually. I mean, if someone cut it up with a knife or razor or something. . . . But I'm always amazed, looking at paintings of mine from a period, that they've been shown here and shown there and unpacked and packed, and that they still look reasonably good, that they still look clean. I'm kind of amazed [laughing] that they can be handled as much as they are and survive.

LT: May I ask you what you think about the representation of your paintings in our collection?

RM: You just have a new one now and you have a frame painting from the 1980s. And you have the *1/2 W Series*. And now you have also that irregular. . . .

LT: *The Distorted Circle*.

RM: *The Distorted Circle*, right. . . .

LT: . . . *Within a Polygon*.

RM: And then you have this new one. Well, obviously I'd always like you to have more [laughing]. But I think that it's a reasonable sampling of my work.

LT: Any specific series that you feel should be represented that's not?

RM: Well. . . maybe it would have been nice to have a work from the *65 Walls and Areas* or something like that. One of the very first group would be really nice. If I were going to select an ideal group to put in The Museum of Modern Art, it wouldn't necessarily be these, this group, but I think that the 1968 painting is a very good painting. And I think the 1972

LT: *The Distorted Circle*.

RM: Yes, what year is that from?

LT: '72.

RM: Yes, and then there is a big jump until the frame painting, which is a good frame. I'm a painter who works in groups of work. And a group of work lasts a couple of years, and then there's another group of work. So, ideally, I'd like one of each group of work to be here [laughing]. It's not always possible, so obviously I was very pleased that they got this last painting because it's a major work for me. It's very nice that it'll be here.

LT: We're very happy to have it. Can you talk a little bit about this last painting? I'm not sure if you were sent a questionnaire.

RM: I have been sent the questionnaire.

LT: Oh, O.K.

RM: Yes, well, I think this is the largest painting I've done. I mean, it comes out of this series of "zone paintings," which I'm still kind of working on. I've worked on this series for two, three years. This was maybe the most complicated one up to date

because the earlier ones had a central zone of either black, gray, or white, and then a painted field on the right and on the left. And I was very interested in extending that horizontal. You read these paintings from left to right. And you read it through these breaks, and so, I'm doing more things that are extended almost frieze-like. There's no way to deal with them as a one, all at once, in a way, which works totally against everything I've always said and the way most of my paintings read.

LT: Yes [laughing].

RM: But I like trying to extend that into some kind of continuation, a kind of a continuation reading. I probably did more studies for this painting, which they ask in that questionnaire. "How many studies?" And I thought I don't know how I'll be able to count all of them. I mean, I must have done dozens and dozens of studies working towards that painting. You know, I tend to do studies for everything I do anyway. But I worked this out, and over a period with several small paintings and several works on paper and so on. So, for me it was like every once in a while as an artist you think, "Well, this is a kind of culminating painting for me. This sums up a whole series of things, and it's in this particular painting." And so, this was one of those kinds of paintings, and I'm very glad it's here because as an artist you want to be represented in this collection in that kind of way. It's a very important painting for me. An artist tends to be more connected to their recent work than their past work. But I think right now it's my most important work. So, good.

LT: Great.

CD: You said earlier that you had lived through two historical moments while you were here at the Museum, one being the Cuban Missile Crisis when the . . .

RM: And the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Yes. I remember sitting in the Library when someone came in and said, "I just heard on the radio, the President was. . ." They were very -- the '60s were -- an incredible time.

CD: Was it casual here at the Museum at that time, in terms of dress?

RM: Well, I'm trying to think of whether I had to wear a tie or a suit. I certainly didn't wear a suit. I didn't even have a suit. But I'm trying to think if I had to wear a tie. I don't think I did. Well, as a guard, you know, you got your uniform. So, that was taken care of. But in the Library, I think I just wore what would have been normal street clothes. Yes, I think I wore dungarees and a normal shirt. I'm sure I didn't wear a tie. I guess it was informal. When I worked here it was still the early 1960s, so we really weren't into the full-blown Woodstock area yet, which was later. But there was a person who was kind of in charge of us, who would come around and make sure that the guards weren't supposed to hang around together and talk together. They were supposed to stay at their posts. So, there was this one person who went around and checked to make sure you were in your. . .

LT: A supervisor?

RM: Yes, I don't know what he was called. And then there were always rumors about guards or supervisors or whatever, who used to hide bottles in the Louise Nevelson. [Laughter]. I'm not sure whether that was true or not.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2

[What about the size of the Museum at that time?]

RM: Well, I guess it was small, in terms of all museums, it has somehow been that way. I think museums were always smaller and quieter and never very crowded and free. So, now they're expensive and crowded and much bigger in all cases. But basically, you know, it doesn't change my perception of the Museum that much. I mean the

Museum still houses these great works that I love to see, and I guess it's good that there are so many people who go to the Museum and there are long lines, and I guess that's all good.

CD: Do you have any thoughts on the merger with P.S.1?

RM: No, I don't know. I mean, I have no idea how that'll work. The Museum of Modern Art somehow is always going to be what's here, to me. It's a little bit like that when museums have satellites if that's what this would be. It never seems quite like The Museum of Modern Art because it's not so accessible. I get to P.S.1 once a year maybe.

CD: How about here? Do you visit the Museum often?

RM: Yes. I try to see most of the exhibitions. It's located in an area where it's accessible. I come to it. Of course when I was here the Whitney was connected to the other end of the Museum. So, you could literally go from the Whitney to the Modern. I don't remember how that worked.

CD: Well, the Whitney was on the 54th Street side adjacent to the back of the Museum and the garden, where the Education Center is now. [Note: the Whitney opened at 20 W. 54th St. in 1954; MoMA announced its acquisition of the Whitney Museum building in June, 1963.]

RM: You could go between them. You could go from one to the other. I mean I'm a little vague on that. But, they were both here on that same block. It was great. There was the restaurant in the garden. And I remember the summer I was there, I think you still have the jazz concerts in the garden?

CD: Yes, Summergarden. I'm going to ask one last question just because it's coming upon us soon. You said you left in November of 1963.

RM: Well, I'm not sure. It could have been December or something.

CD: Do you recollect the atmosphere of the Museum at that time, since it was closing for the expansion? And I ask because it's not unlike something we're going to go through very soon.

RM: Yes, yes.

CD: The morale? The general atmosphere?

RM: No, I don't remember. I don't recall. I was working in the Library, and the Library probably went on, didn't it? I mean, they wouldn't have closed the Library, would they? Well, see, if I'd been here then, if I'd been here through that. But I don't remember.

CD: So, you didn't leave because the Museum was closing down?

RM: No. I left because I got a teaching job. And the teaching job paid even better and was even less hours [laughing]. It was like a step up in lots of ways. But I don't remember that. I don't remember people worrying. I don't remember any apprehensions going on at that point. [But] maybe there were. It's a long time ago.

LT: Thank you so much.

CD: Thank you.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 2

END INTERVIEW