THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **RICHARD E. OLDENBURG (RO)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: This is an interview with Richard E. Oldenburg for the Met, the [laughter], The Museum of Modern Art, I'm sorry.

RO: Yes, you got it right.

SZ: I got it [laughing]. I said the Metropolitan Museum, but I know this is different.

RO: I had dinner with my brother last night, and, in a way, that's appropriate because, of course, the real reason I wound up at the Modern in the first place was because of going to my brother's opening at the Modern where I ran into my predecessor, the head of publications, whom I had worked with at Doubleday.

SZ: And that was whom?

RO: Robert Carter. He had worked at Doubleday with me, and he was leaving, because he had been brought in by Bates, I guess. Bates Lowry. So when Bates left, he was leaving, and asked me if I wanted to take over his job, and, as I remember, I said, you know, "Not bloody likely." It seemed like a very strange idea to me. But there were various changes going on at Macmillan, so I thought it was interesting to at least explore, so then I had several meetings with Walter Bareiss. In retrospect, I'm

not quite sure why I had the nerve to take the job because, of course, there was no director. There was just this governing committee, because Bates Lowry had left and they hadn't named Hightower yet.

SZ: They had what they called a troika?

RO: Yes. The troika, with Wilder Green and Dick Koch and Walter Bareiss. So, in effect, I was hired without knowing who the director would be, which was odd. I mean, odd of me.

SZ: Great! [Laughing]

RO: Yes, well. Then, of course, John [Hightower] came on the following year, I guess, because I joined the Museum in December '69. I can't remember when John was appointed, but it was pretty soon thereafter.

SZ: 1970.

RO: Yes. And he left at the end of 1971.

SZ: Before we go there, just tell me where and when you were born, and just a little bit about your family background.

RO: I was born in Stockholm, Sweden, which was planned by my mother because my father at that time was Vice Consul in Oslo, and she wanted me to be born in Sweden. So she went back to Sweden for that, but then immediately, we went back to Oslo, where I spent the first three years of my life. Then my father was appointed Consul General in Chicago, and so we moved in 1936 to Chicago, when I was only three years old.

SZ: Right in the middle of the Depression.

RO: Yes, it was not a great time. And, of course, my brother was four and a half years older, so he was seven and a half, or whatever. I spent my whole time in Chicago, had my whole schooling in Chicago. It always amused me: in one of the books they wrote about my brother, I think it was Barbara Rose's book, they talked about some elements in his work from, you know, the rootlessness of being a diplomat's child. Whereas actually, we had about the most normal upbringing possible. We stayed in the same place from kindergarten through senior year.

SZ: You mean in terms of school?

RO: School. And the city, Chicago.

SZ: Was it a private school?

RO: It was a private school.

SZ: Did you travel back and forth?

RO: We traveled back in the summers, but then, of course, the war came. We came back on the last sailing of the Gripsholm in 1939, September '39, which is, of course, when the war in Poland had started. And then, of course, we didn't return until '45. We went back just as the war ended because my mother's twin sister was sick, and we were trying to get there in time. But, during that intermediate period, of course, we didn't go.

SZ: Hmm. So, did you feel, I mean, growing up in Chicago, did you feel like an American kid?

RO: No, I think because literally the Consulate was downstairs, we were living in this building the government rented, and it was really like being on foreign soil. The funny thing about it is, when I look back, other relatives and other children I know from foreign backgrounds seem to be bothered by this, and want to be normal and assimilated as quickly as possible. I remember thinking it was sort of fun. You know, Swedish was a slightly obscure language. It was like this secret language that I had with my brother or with my parents. I certainly didn't feel particularly Swedish, because I hardly knew Sweden, I'd never spent a day there, except for the summer, but I didn't feel that I really was Chicagoan either, because obviously we had no relatives there, we had only schoolmates and friends. But, in general, it was a very happy childhood, as I recall it. There was the slight uncertainty of whether my father might be transferred, but because, during the war they didn't transfer many people, we had a much longer stint in one place than we expected. When the war ended, he requested to stay on there because he had felt so content there. He was then the Dean of the Consular Corps there because he had been there so many years.

SZ: And Chicago? What was that like as a place to grow up at that time?

RO: I remember Chicago very fondly. It's one of the few cities that used its waterfront. A lot of cities, like Cleveland, cluttered up the waterfront with warehouses and so on, whereas Chicago was almost like Rio. We lived on a street on the near north side, where I could literally walk to the beach on weekends and go swimming; I guess the water was not as clean as it is now, but it still didn't kill us. It was really a very pleasant place. Where we lived, the near north side, was Michigan Avenue, right by the water. We had several residences there, but always in that same area.

SZ: And what about early influences? Obviously somebody must have had an artistic interest or ability.

RO: There were some artistic strains in the family, if that means anything, in terms of my

mother, who had studied to be an opera singer. She had a sister who was seriously considering being a concert pianist at one point. One of my grandfathers had been an amateur, but very good, painter. A number of things like that. And my father's family was a publishing family and was interested in printing and so forth. So, to that extent, we grew up with it. But I would say that, oddly enough, I think I was more conscious of literary and musical influences than I was of the visual arts, which is why, in a way, it was interesting that my brother, so early on, showed this great talent for the arts.

SZ: And he did show it very early?

RO: He did. Yes, he was a marvelous draftsman, even as a child. And then I remember, too, that explosion of art books after the war, the Skira books and things of that sort that suddenly made you acquainted with it. Plus, needless to say, we were living in Chicago and the Art Institute has one of the great collections.

SZ: I was going to ask, did you visit the Art Institute?

RO: Oh, sure. The Art Institute of Chicago was actually very lively. The Art Institute was marvelous. Then there was the Arts Club that presented very interesting programs and had some pioneering lectures. And the symphony, of course, was always a great thing, and the opera, lyric opera, so it was a very cultivated city.

SZ: And you did those things as a kid, too?

RO: I did because my parents enjoyed them. We had one special connection, which was the fact that so many of the leading opera singers in the world were Swedish, or Scandinavian, in general. They would always, when they would pass through, come and give concerts, recitals, or they'd perform at the opera. We had [Jussi] Björling, and [Kirsten] Flagstad, and Melchior, and Swanholm, and [Birgit] Nilsson, and

[Kerstin] Thorborg, and Branzell, all of them. And we were particularly close to Björling. He came and visited often. So, there was that kind of music in the background, too.

SZ: Did you play anything? Or sing?

RO: I played the piano, very badly, yes. That's about it [laughter].

SZ: And, the war, you remember? You said that you tried. . . you couldn't go back, and then, I guess, at the end you tried. Anything else about that?

RO: We were very lucky to spend the war years here. Obviously, Sweden was neutral, so no relatives being shot at in Sweden. Of course, there were some difficulties with Sweden being accused of collaborating in terms of ball bearings and things of this sort, but it was never something that caused us a great deal of trouble. So, anyway, we just had the normal experience of a family here without having relatives involved in the war. In a way, we had an easier time. And we, of course, corresponded with relatives who were in Sweden. And fortunately, Sweden never did get into the war.

SZ: So you graduated from high school in what year?

RO: 1950. Then, I went to Harvard. Coming home on vacations, that was sort of when I began to feel more at home in the East, really. I went four years to Harvard, then I went to Harvard Law School for a miserable year, which I hated, so I dropped out.

SZ: Why? Why did you hate that?

RO: I loathed it. I thought it was incredibly boring. It was also very different from the college, in the sense that it was so intensely competitive. I think the day I decided to leave was when this kid sitting next to me -- we were in a lecture and I had just

missed a point the professor had made, so I said, “Can I just get that from your notes?” -- said, “Why don’t you figure it out for yourself!” [laughter] At that point, I decided this was not my world. And that took some courage, because it meant I was draft bait.

SZ: Did you have dual citizenship at that time?

RO: No, I had Swedish citizenship still.

SZ: Draft bait?

RO: In America.

SZ: I didn’t know that that could happen.

RO: Yes, you could be drafted if you were not a naturalized citizen.

SZ: Well, they don’t draft anymore, anyway.

RO: They don’t draft anymore, no. But Sweden had universal conscription, too, so if I had been living in Sweden, I would have had to go into the Swedish army. But, in any case, I dropped out of law school at the end of the year, and went to work for Harvard and also started graduate school in history. But then, as I feared, I got drafted in 1956, and served two years in the U.S. Army, most of the time in El Paso, Texas.

SZ: [Laughing] Well, I guess as things go that can’t have been too bad.

RO: I would perjure myself every night crossing the bridge to Juarez because they’d ask your citizenship, and I’d say “U.S.” And, of course, I warned my friends that if we

ever got in a fight in a bar in Juarez or something, I would be running for the border, because I didn't want to be in a Mexican jail as a Swedish citizen.

SZ: Just back up a second. I think I read somewhere you majored in government?

RO: Yes. Probably, my major involvement at Harvard was on the *Crimson* newspaper, where, because of a misprint, I was always referred to as the "Drama and Obok Editor," which was meant to be "Book Editor." I wrote the theater reviews and movie reviews and book reviews. It was my major extracurricular activity.

The government thing came about because Harvard was particularly strong in it at that time, and the people who were there in government, Yandell Elliott and George Bundy and Sam Shaw were really powerful professors, and it was very appealing. After I left law school, I went to work as an Assistant Dean for Financial Aid at Harvard, while I was also taking graduate courses.

SZ: And you were studying history. What kind of history?

RO: Actually, I hadn't really gotten a focus on it. I was taking courses in eighteenth century history and Renaissance history and so forth, and, to be perfectly honest, I really didn't know what I was going to do at that point. And, I think in a way I was very lucky that I got drafted because I might have just continued on being a dean at Harvard and, you know, never getting out in the real world. It was very tempting and a nice place to be.

SZ: You liked it?

RO: I liked it. I was very grateful, a few years later, that I wasn't there because then I would have been a dean thrown out of the windows in the various riots and so forth that were going on in the late 1960s. But my time was a very placid time there.

SZ: The 1950s were a pretty placid time.

RO: That's true. The greatest event of my time was so-called "Pogo Riots," which were not terribly serious. I've forgotten what it was all about. It had to do with the comic strip "Pogo". . . as opposed to pogo sticks [laughing].

SZ: So, Dick, the army was really just kind of passing time?

RO: Yes. It was incredibly boring, but I was something that's very important in the army, a very comfortable thing to be: I was the battery clerk. The army taught me to type very well. The battery clerk has certain powers because the officers are all dependent on the morning reports that he types. So I managed to get some sort of special privileges. I lived off base with a friend of mine, and that was, you know, not technically legal, but it was. . .

SZ: . . . I was going to say, a pretty special privilege.

RO: Yes, it was. It was worse because he was an officer, so the whole thing was not kosher at all, but we had a pretty good time. We had an incredibly horrible little basement apartment, but anything was better than the barracks, so that was fine. Plus, I rather liked the Southwest. I'd never seen it before. I took a part-time job in the army library, and I also wrote book reviews for the local paper.

SZ: What about the army as, you know, the great leveler? Did you experience it that way at all?

RO: I did. I don't think I'd ever doubted it before, but the one thing that was pretty clear was that intelligence had nothing to do with education. I mean, I met an awful lot of very, very smart, technically uneducated young kids. It was very hard to be a snob,

that was for sure.

SZ: I didn't realize that the army could take you if you're a resident. Well there were no wars there [laughing].

RO: No. I was also incredibly lucky because I was in between the Korean War and the Vietnam War. For me, the army was really marking time. It was no great hardship except for the boredom factor, which is immense. It also carried with it something that was even more boring: You had the reserve obligation for several years after you got out. I had to go to these pretty hopeless meetings in Grand Central, because I was assigned to some transportation corps. However, we survived that, all of us.

SZ: I guess it had its pluses, too.

RO: Well, it does have the one great plus of forcing you to break off old connections. Several of my friends were hanging around Harvard as graduate students just, you know, with no idea what they wanted to do; they didn't want to leave because they weren't sure what to do. I think that was probably good to sever that. And by the time I got out, my brother had moved to New York and was living here and a lot of my friends were in New York, so I just decided to go there. And, following the advice of my mentor at Harvard, who was the head of financial aid there, and then he became the dean of the college. . .

SZ: . . . who was that?

RO: His name was John Munro. He was the person who originally interviewed me for a scholarship at Harvard; that was my first encounter with him. A great man. But he, looking despairingly at, you know, what strange interests I had, said that he thought I'd be happiest in publishing. That was a suggestion that didn't seem like a bad one,

and so I decided that's what I would try to do. I talked to a friend of my father's, Arthur Krock, who was the head of the big book store chain in Chicago, who said he'd give me a couple of references. So, I went to New York and I was incredibly lucky. I didn't know how lucky I was, because I didn't realize how hard it was to get a job in publishing normally.

SZ: It was hard even then, too?

RO: Oh, it was horrendously hard, because there were nine million people who thought it was a glamorous profession, and dozens of English graduates, mostly girls, coming out of school, willing to work for nothing. But I blundered into the biggest company. It's hard to remember, because now it's just a branch of the German Bertelsmann, but Doubleday ruled the world in those days. It was the big publisher with all the book clubs, and the bestsellers. It was king of the heap. And they had an intern program, and I went in there to see if I could get into that, not realizing that normally there were millions of people looking for these jobs.

I had no letter of recommendation. I had no particular thing, but I blundered in on the day when one person had suddenly been promoted, and the person he was working for was not going to be happy about it, and hadn't been told about it, and was off travelling. And the head of personnel, who was a pretty odd person decided that I would do. She liked my background and liked the fact that I was young, and so, she hired me for a real job, not an intern job, as assistant to the head of what then was called "syndicate rights." That used to be a big business, but no longer is, which was first serial rights or even second serial rights to books in newspapers and magazines. It wasn't sub-rights as we think of it now, in terms of book club sales.

Now, it's part of the sub-rights, but it's a business that's almost dried up. In other words, you used to serialize bestsellers in newspapers. Now, I can't think of anything to do it in. I'm sure that some of them do, but it's kind of a vanished field.

The guy who had been promoted was Tony Gibbs, the son of Wolcott Gibbs, the critic for *The New Yorker*: he'd gone into the publicity department. So, I wound up at Doubleday and spent, I think it was, about a year in the syndicate department. Then I got transferred, sort of at my request, to the production department. Remembering my family's printing background and so on, I thought it would be interesting to learn something about that. And so I was there. And then I became head of the design department.

SZ: So, this already meant that you were really on the business end of publishing, I guess, from the beginning?

RO: Yes. Yes. I, like everyone else, I wanted to be in the editorial side, but everyone started somewhere else and then wormed his way into editorial, and that was my plan, like everyone else's. And it was very odd. They assigned me to the desk that arranged for all the typesetting, and so I had to learn about that, and composition. It was hot metal composition in those days, and I learned about all that. And then because I had the typography background, they made me head of the design department, which was really more administrative than anything else.

SZ: Because you didn't do the design, you just coordinated all the aspects of it?

RO: I coordinated all the designers. Doubleday had a <u>huge</u> list of books. And they had, you know, the Anchor line that, that suddenly meant hundreds of, of paperbacks, as well as the others. And so a lot of the design was standardized because Doubleday had its own plants, with certain five fonts and so on that they could use.

SZ: Did they do textbooks?

RO: No. The odd thing about Doubleday was that it was the leader in the entire field, except for one thing: it had never gotten into the textbook field, which was what

made most of the other publishers viable. But Doubleday was so successful with its book clubs that the textbook thing never seemed to have appealed to them. They finally bought a company -- I can't even remember what it was -- a small company with textbooks, but. . .

SZ: But this was unusual because every, every other publisher had a textbook line?

RO: But Doubleday had such immense volume that they had their own plants, because of the book clubs. You know, they were printing hundreds of thousands of copies, and producing them themselves.

SZ: So, did you enjoy, did you like this?

RO: Yes. I thought it was fun because I was learning something new. It was completely new to me, and because, as I said, I had always had that interest in, not only in publishing, but in the printing side and the production side. As long as I was continuing to learn, I thought it was fun. And the people were interesting to work for. Publishing is an interesting area. The people tend to be very bright and creative.

SZ: Even today?

RO: I'm told less so today. Nothing I have said now seems particularly relevant to the Museum, but I have to say that there are a lot of similarities, if you think about them, between publishing and the museum world, in the sense of the kind of people it attracts, and the kind of general ambiance of the place. And in those days, it seemed much less of a business than it is today. It really did attract people whose greatest dream was to discover the next Tom Wolfe, or somebody like this.

SZ: But you never got to that part of it?

RO: No, I never got to that, no.

SZ: I just was wondering: Doubleday, having been such a huge presence in this field, to, really have disappeared, I mean. . .

RO: Yes. It's astonishing. Nelson Doubleday, who was the largest stockholder, just didn't care very much about the publishing side, and gradually, it just dissolved in a strange way. I've never done any deep analysis of it, but of the fact that they didn't have that textbook strength, and then the book clubs started doing less well. People were much more sophisticated than they had been, and these little book clubs sort of gradually went out of business.

SZ: And now, of course, nobody reads, so [laughing], it doesn't matter.

RO: [laughing] No, they don't. I walked by that building the other day, and was thinking, looking up in my office, which was on the second floor of that building, at 575 Madison on the corner of 57th Street. That's where I worked. Now they've moved a long way over.

SZ: Oh, and I think Random House was on 49th Street.

RO: Yes, everybody was up there.

SZ: And I know where McGraw Hill was.

RO: And Harper was right there on the corner.

SZ: So, in any event, so by the time you got to the design department, you had, I presume, a number of people working for you.

RO: Yes. I guess there were about twenty people. Then I had this offer from one of the main geniuses who had put together the whole production empire, or helped put it together, Leonard Shatzkin. Shatzkin had left Doubleday to go off to Crowell Collier, and he called me one day and offered me a job. He was starting a whole new line, Collier Books. . . The plan was to blanket the market. In other words, in effect, the way perfume companies buy space in department stores. He figured he could take over the bookstore world by just publishing so many titles that you could only just stock those books. It was an immense printing operation. And he offered me quite a lot of money by those standards, much more than I was making at Doubleday. I went back and discussed it with my boss at Doubleday, whom I liked very much and I decided I would take the job, so I did.

SZ: So that was what year?

RO: I think it was '61. I had gotten married the year before. And I was at Collier for about three years, and then, gradually, that empire was collapsing as well [laughter]. The problem with the empire was that you could have all the space, but if the books weren't much good [laughter] -- and they'd made a terrible mistake, which I tried to fight -- they'd produced a standardized design, so that you could recognize Collier books, but it just happened to be a hideous design, so you recognized it and you didn't pay much attention.

When they'd decided they'd spent enough money on this, the parent company of Collier, Crowell Collier, had also bought the Macmillan Company. A few of us who weren't discarded were kept on and moved over to Macmillan. And there, I was, again, put in charge of the design department, again, part of the production department.

And then I had this marvelous luck. They were going to change and they needed a managing editor, and they figured that I knew enough about the processes and so on

that I could take on this job. And so, somewhat out of the blue, I was offered the job of being managing editor, which, of course, brought me much closer contact with what I really wanted to do. The guy who hired me, Gerald Gross, said that the reason he got interested in me was because I was sitting in Stouffers, across the street from Macmillan, and was reading *The City in History* by [Lewis] Mumford, and he thought that that was a good sign, that maybe I had some interest in books [laughter] as well as in design.

SZ: And were you enjoying it? [laughing]

RO: Yes. Yes. But that was, of course, a great, a great thing for me. I really was part of the editorial department, and I was much closer. I was with all the editors and we were dealing with. . . Macmillan, of course, had a phenomenal backlist and was really a very respectable company. There were some famous editors there, who were quite wonderful. Cecil Scott, Peter Ritner. . . [pause] well, there were quite a few, and they became, basically my best friends, and so much of my life was spent with them. [long pause]

SZ: You liked doing that?

RO: Oh, yes, I did.

SZ: But not enough, I guess?

RO: Not enough, no, because I again began to wonder where I was going to go from here. And, they had hired a senior editor to be the sort of second in command, which I had thought I was. And then some of the major editors at Macmillan decided to leave. My best friends all went over to World Publishing. And, they wanted me to go to World, and so, World was trying to get me over there, just at the time when I ran into the Museum thing. In the meantime, my wife had once worked for the World

Publishing Company, and so she strongly advised me not to go work [laughing] for the World Publishing Company.

SZ: So you had the two things working at the same time? [laughing]

RO: Yes. When I went to the Museum, I went, with only one thought, of course, that I was going there as an extension of my publishing career. I respected the Museum's books, which I knew. I thought it would be great to be more or less my own boss of a department, which I didn't see much prospect of doing at Macmillan. And the other thing that was immensely appealing to me at the time was that already in the works, not really in the works but beginning to be in the works, was the proposal that the Museum do a Book of the Month Club project like the Met's, which had been enormously successful. So, that's when I started working with John Russell and got to know the people at the Book of the Month Club. So, in a way, I saw it as a widening of horizons for me. And, at any moment if anyone had ever asked me, I would have said I never expected to stay at the Museum. I thought that this would be one stage and then eventually, with this background, I would go on to another publishing company.

SZ: Well, when you first went to the Museum, my understanding is that that department had had a kind of an up and down history.

RO: Yes. It was not in very great shape. I mean, first of all, obviously, it, to this day, it's not easy to make money on Museum books, but it was losing far more money than the trustees were prepared to tolerate. And a lot of the income was coming from *The Family of Man* and things like that. *Impressionism*. The individual books were not doing very well. The store operation was nowhere near as big as it subsequently became, and Marna Thoma, do you remember her?

SZ: No.

RO: Marna Thoma was the head of the bookstore operation, and she was, in many ways, quite a remarkable person. She always had very ambitious ideas for the store, and she found me sympathetic. She was able to do some things that she hadn't been able to do before. And as a result, the store became considerably more profitable. The other amazing discovery I made was that it was taken for granted that the books would come out about a year after the exhibition. [laughing] This didn't, didn't exactly increase sales.

SZ: [laughing] Not a way to make money.

RO: No. The editors there whom you well know, were so concerned about the accuracy and the research and so forth, and that was much more important than getting the book out in time, which meant, of course, there were no sales to be had. So, that had to be changed, and we managed to change that. And, I think my first real triumph was with every pressure put on it, that we managed to get the Gertrude Stein catalogue out in time for the opening of the show.

SZ: You walked right into that?

RO: Yes, it was an amazing event.

SZ: Because?

RO: Well, just the fact that it appeared. I made a pact with Helen Franc that it would get out on time, no matter what. Even if it was upside down.

SZ: When you went there, did you know many of the cast of characters?

RO: No, I knew hardly anyone there. In fact, literally, I might have met a couple of the

people. I think I had met Bill Lieberman because I'd given a drawing to the Museum, one of my brother's drawings, at Lieberman's request. Bill [laughing] had told me something that wasn't true, actually. He said that he couldn't have the drawing in the show if it didn't belong to the Museum, so I gave him the drawing, and subsequently found out that that was not correct. I'd had some contact with him. I would say most of the contact I'd had was just as a visitor to the Museum, but also through my brother's show, because I'd met Alicia [Legg] and I'd met some of the people there.

As far as I was concerned, it was like joining another company, that's what I expected would happen.

SZ: Did you ever have any feeling about coming in with your last name?

RO: Obviously, I had thought about that very hard. I even talked it over with my brother, who didn't think it was a great idea. The thing that made it possible was that my brother had already had his retrospective and they certainly weren't going to have another show of my brother's in the foreseeable future. So, if there had been any conflict, it was pretty well over. It would have been, obviously very difficult before that. So that made it seem no, no problem. Secondly, of course, in my job as Director of Publications, there was no opportunity to influence acquisitions, show schedules, or anything. If I'd suggested anything, no one would have listened to me even if I'd wanted them to. Claes was, you know, slightly worried they'd be wary that they'd fall over backwards not to have any conflict, but I don't think he or I considered that I'd be there for the rest of my life [laughter].

SZ: And in that position.

RO: Yes.

SZ: Now, I don't know if there's anything at all you can tell me about Carter, who

preceded you? If there's anything worth saying?

RO: I think he wasn't there all that long.

SZ: No, he wasn't.

RO: I think he'd done a good job; I knew him from Doubleday. He was the head of advertising at Doubleday, if I remember correctly, and he was a nice guy. And I think that, as I remember, he had gone there because of a very close friendship with Bates Lowry, and when Bates was forced out, he had no interest in staying at the Museum. So I don't think he had too great an effect on the department because he hadn't been there long. Prior to that, they'd had, as you say, ups and downs with over-printings of books, and so on. One of the major things that got me points with the trustees, rather undeservedly, was that I pointed out that we were carrying at full value this enormous inventory of books that were basically not saleable. And there really was no particular sense to this, so we worked out a plan where, based on the average sales figures for all these titles and so on, I was able to mark down those books and try to sell them out or distribute them. That brought in quite a good deal of money and also cleared a lot of space in the warehouse. It was not a particularly brilliant plan, it just helped the bottom line of the publications.

SZ: Let me just turn the tape over.

TAPE 1, SIDE 2.

RO: This was at a time when the Museum was being analyzed sideways and upside down and so on by an outside management consultant, Cresap, McCormick, Paget, if you remember them, or "Christ More People," as John Hightower called them. They seriously presented a report on the publications, which said that their major recommendation was to publish more bestsellers [laughter], which showed you the

quality. . .

SZ: How much did that cost? [laughter]

RO: . . . the quality of the thinking that was going into this plan. So, I solemnly accepted that and said that was very good advice.

SZ: . . . and you would try. . .

RO: . . . and I would try. [pause]

SZ: How much interaction did you have with the rest of the Museum at that time? The rest of the staff?

RO: Well, quite a bit. What I hadn't realized when I went there was how central the publishing job is, and that certainly was what led to everything else. The fact that just by doing my job, I necessarily got to know all the curatorial staff people because in one way or another, they were involved in the publications and the exhibitions. So, in my first couple of years there, my first year there, I had really gotten to know everybody pretty well. And I was sitting in on exhibition planning things, if it involved publication plans as well. I'd sometimes obviously even deal with the artists in conjunction with this. It was a perfect place to get to know people rapidly, because it affected all the areas. And the same, oddly enough, was true in relation to the trustees, because a lot of the trustees were interested in publications and would at least talk to me about them, and I would meet them at parties and so forth. And one particularly happy event was when I first met Mrs. [Blanchette] Rockefeller. She came to see me, made an appointment to see me, because she wanted to publish a book on the International Council's trip to Japan, and she was willing to subsidize that. So we worked on that, the planning for that, and that was how I really got to know her, which of course, was one of the great events of my whole time at the

Museum, was working with her. I've never known whether that had, certainly it might have had, some effect on my getting the job [as director] in the first place, that we did know each other at that time.

SZ: Why was she particularly interested in that trip? In doing that?

RO: Because their closest friends were the people who'd sort of been the guides of that thing [Mr. And Mrs. Lawrence Roberts]. They'd traveled together. She and Todd Rockefeller would travel with them. They were experts on Japanese museums and so on. They'd even written a guide to Japanese museums. And it had been a particularly successful trip, and everyone had enjoyed it, so she wanted some kind of a permanent record of it. I don't mean a book, it was really a booklet.

SZ: Yes, right. You mean that she would distribute it?

RO: Distribute it to the members of the International Council. That was what we counted on, which did indeed appear.

SZ: Well, it was a pretty memorable trip, I think, from what I know.

RO: Well, I think it was probably, by the standards of those days, a most exotic trip because nobody had gone quite that far.

SZ: Now, it seems terribly tame, right?

RO: Tame, yes.

SZ: Well, just a little bit more. So, it was the three of them – Walter Bareiss, Wilder Green and Dick Koch -- who were kind of running the place when you first came.

RO: Yes.

SZ: And so you would deal with Dick Koch?

RO: Well, I dealt, I dealt with all three of them. I think the person I dealt mostly with was Dick Koch. I dealt with Wilder Green a lot. He was the other one of the troika. Because Wilder was theoretically in charge of the design department when I was Director of Publications. So, Wilder and I had to work very closely so, in a way, I guess I worked mostly with him. [pause] That was why I finally wound up having Wilder design my house in the country, which he did.

SZ: Did you have any impression of how that arrangement was working?

RO: Well, I mean, everyone knew it was obviously a temporary arrangement, and so people were tolerant of it. But they were waiting to see what would happen. I think everyone was a little stunned by the speed with which Bates Lowry had come and gone. And, obviously, then there had been the loss of d'Harnoncourt, which had also been a great blow to a lot of people, because some of them had had the theory that René would guide Bates, and so that Bates wouldn't have made some of the mistakes he did make. I think everyone was a little shell-shocked. And that's what amazes me when I think about it: I'm surprised that that sort of stage of uncertainty didn't give me greater pause when I decided to take the job [in Publications]. But when I got there, there were already a lot of rumors that John Hightower would be the likely candidate. Nelson [Rockefeller] was recommending him. I never knew Lowry at all.

SZ: You didn't know Hightower before he came?

RO: I didn't know John before he came. However, we did have a mutual friend in common, Paul Gottlieb, whom I knew from other associations. He had been very

fond of John. And I liked John from the moment I met him. We got along very, very well. But I think he walked into just such a hopeless situation, not simply in the Museum, but in terms of the times. The demonstrations in the lobby. I remember coming back from lunch with John, or just going to his office and he had a credenza with, that was just coated with messages from people who'd called him, ranging from all the trustees to every political action group and every artist protest. It was just hopeless. I don't see how anyone could have coped with it. And by the time I got in, a lot of that had peaked, except in terms of the union. There was nobody pouring blood in the lobby at the time.

SZ: But, you know, it does bring up the question of what place does an institution like the Modern, an art museum, have in that larger political context?

RO: Well, that was exactly what it was all about. I think John was under so many different pressures. There were the pressures to make a political statement about Vietnam, which, you know, really was not the job of the Museum to make. There was the pressure for greater attention to minority art and diversity and so forth. There were demands that the institution, in effect, dissolve itself or that all the rich trustees resign. I mean it was just beyond belief. Two things came out of it that have been important lessons. One was there was no question that museums had to recognize, particularly when they were starting to get government funds and so on, that they had larger public responsibilities. I've often said when people have asked me what the biggest change during the time I was director was, that it was this transformation from a very, quite a private institution to a very public institution. And that was happening to museums all over the place. The other lesson, however, I think was that the institutions that maintained what they were all about and that said so, and didn't change their whole system to adapt to the demands that were being made, survived very well. And I think the lesson there was that that was the right course rather than to suddenly come up with special programs just geared to answer every protest. John was torn between the two because he was trying, on the one

hand, to accommodate some of the legitimate demands, but also was trying to avoid some of the pressures he was getting. And every time he would do one or the other, he would irritate some of the trustees. And so on.

SZ: Did you ever ask yourself what you would have done had you been director at that point?

RO: Yes, I often did, because I was so sympathetic to John, and the pressures were so great. I'm not sure I would have done things very differently from what John did**.** It's easy in retrospect, when all of those pressures have died down to say, "Well, just hold fast" and, you know, tell them all to go to hell, but that wasn't possible because you were dealing with constituencies like the artists**,** and the curators were very sympathetic to them. And you were dealing with legitimate demands. There was no question that the Museum had paid less attention than it should have to some aspects of the program. I think John was coping in a crisis situation that; it's hard to predict how anybody would have handled it. There were just too many things going on.

SZ: Well, it's just sort of the up and down of, I guess, of the political environment.

RO: Yes. It was very much a problem inside the Museum, too, because that was when the Staff Association was formed and there was all this unrest. Not to mention the fact that the Museum was in terrible financial shape. When I became director, the deficit was substantially more than ten percent of the whole budget, and John had to cut staff. Just at the time when he was negotiating with the Staff Association, they had to pare down the staff, and they didn't fill vacancies. It was not a happy time for anyone. I think, in retrospect, quite aside from how difficult the times were, probably any one or two successors to René d'Harnoncourt were doomed to failure because they would never live up to the confidence that everybody had developed in him, couldn't live up to the legend. I mean, there were people who barely remembered

René, saying, “Oh, in the old days, it was all so great.”

SZ: And I guess by this time, too, I think Monroe had left and, and Alfred Barr was retired, you had this big vacuum.

RO: Oh, yes, it was certainly the end of an era. Monroe was virtually off the scene. Alfred, of course, was in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. He was working on his book project, but was not focusing on anything else, not able to focus on anything else. I remember, so sadly, having lunch with him, at his request, and he was delightful: he still made sense, but he couldn’t remember, at one point, he couldn’t remember Picasso’s name, and he said, “that man, that man in France”. It was just on-coming.

And, again, publications was central in the sense that I was working with, with Alfred and with Marga on the, these book projects. So, I got to know Marga, and I got to know, as well as I could, Alfred.

SZ: It really was a good way to get a handle on a lot of it. In terms of, in the publications department, anything else that was accomplished under your watch that you’d like to include here?

RO: No. Well, I think the books were respectable that we produced, but that, of course, depended a lot on what the exhibitions were. The Book of the Month project, of course, was a failure, simply because there just wasn’t that appetite for modern art that there was for the Metropolitan’s series, so we wound up just publishing the one volume book, but it was still a very good book. But I think in general, the publications department, when I left, was in far better shape than when I came. But there were a lot of reasons for it.

SZ: Did you select your successor?

RO: Yes, I hired Carl Morse. I'd worked at Doubleday where he was the head of Anchor books, and then he became the head of publications when I became acting director. At least, I think so. I think he was acting director when I was acting director, because no one knew what was going to happen to me.

SZ: Yes. You mean you could have gotten bumped back?

RO: Yes.

SZ: It just occurs to me there was another big deal -- you said you got to know various curators and staff people. Were you aware of the struggle that was going on between the two Bills?

RO: [laughing] It was very hard not to, yes.

SZ: Well, tell me about that.

RO: Well, it was, by the time I got there, it was beginning to develop into open warfare. Bill Rubin, of course, was maintaining that, as curator of the collection, he had total say over the collection. Whereas Bill Lieberman, of course, was director of the department. [laughing] This was obviously not a very good solution, if the director had to borrow pictures from his collection [laughter] to do this. I was, needless to say, well aware, but I tried to stay out of the way. I was working independently on projects with both Bills and I got along quite well with both of them. I tried not to appear to take sides. [pause] Bill [Rubin] was what he always was: at times absolutely impossibly difficult, but at other times, really quite marvelous, what he did was so terrific, that I got a great admiration for him, too.

SZ: And the ultimate solution to that struggle? I mean, I think was settled before you

became director, or even acting director. I think it was in '71, supposedly.

RO: That was the famous Bareiss solution.

SZ: Oh, I didn't realize it had a name [laughing].

RO: Yes, well Bareiss, you see, was a great partisan of Bill Lieberman's and he didn't like Bill Rubin. The solution, of course, was to set up the Department of Drawings with Bill [Lieberman] as, as head of it. Which, in a way, I'm surprised worked as well as it did, because it was clearly a demotion for, for Bill. [Laughing] Then, you had the problem of negotiating loans from the Department of Drawings for Painting and Sculpture shows. And problems with acquisitions, as to whether this was a work on paper or a drawing. That put the Matisse collages in there [Painting and Sculpture]. There were Alice in Wonderland qualities to all of this.

SZ: The last thing for today would be to recount how you were tagged to be acting director, and how you felt about that.

RO: It was a great surprise to me. We'd all tried to do what we could to support John. There was a delegation, in fact, that had gone to Bill Paley's to say that they thought more time should be given to John and so forth. And. . .

SZ: You liked him?

RO: I did, very much, yes.

SZ: And as a director, you felt what about him?

RO: God knows his heart was in the right place. I just think he was just under terrific pressures. It was a new world to him. The fact that he'd been on the State Council

really wasn't preparation for anything as complex as the Museum. No, I liked him very much, and I was sorry when he left.

But what finally happened was that I was having lunch with Paul Gottlieb at the Algonquin Bar, when in the middle of lunch, I got a call from Ethel [Shein] saying Mr. Paley had called my office and wanted to see me immediately. And, needless to say, I did. Paley and Tourtelot were there and they asked me to take over as acting director. Under the circumstances I could hardly say no. Though I was, of course, wondering what would happen at the end of that, because it's tough even if you've been acting director to go back to something, if it lasted too long. And I had no idea how long it would last. But I don't think I had the slightest thought that it would be something that would develop into my being named director or, much less, stay there for twenty-two years.

I knew a lot of the problems, and I wasn't looking forward to them, but the political tempo had quieted down a little by the time I was there. It wasn't quite as bad as it was at the height when John was struggling with it.

SZ: And Paley, had you had a lot of contact with him?

RO: Not much, but I'd had a lot of contact with Tourtelot, who was Paley's right-hand person. I'm quite sure that the idea of the acting directorship came from Arthur.

SZ: That's interesting.

RO: Because he had known me, and he had hired me, basically. He had interviewed me. Bareiss had recommended me, and then Arthur had interviewed me, before I came as director of publications. And we kept in touch, pretty much. And there was a logic to it, because if you were looking around, what you had in me, as head of publications, was somebody who had been in contact with almost all the people, had

a reasonably good relationship with them, and hadn't been at the Museum long enough to have any long-standing enmities or identification with one Bill, or with the union or with any of this stuff. If I were looking around, in other words, for someone to put in that job, it wasn't as illogical as it seems. They could have gone back to some troika arrangement with Dick and Wilder, but that didn't seem to be such a good idea. But I'm quite sure, at that time probably everybody assumed that this would be an interim thing.

SZ: So it was sort of on that basis, or understanding of that that you said yes?

RO: Yes. And, as I said, it worried me slightly, because I wasn't sure what trouble I would get into in the next few months [laughing] and then I'd have to look for another job.

SZ: Let's see, how old were you then?

RO: It was January '72, I guess, wasn't it?

SZ: Oh, and then you were made Director in June.

RO: In June, yes.

SZ: That's right, yes.

RO: I was 39. I've forgotten how old John was. I think John was a year older than I, but I'm not sure.

SZ: Last question. At that time, did you feel that you had these diplomatic skills, which a lot of people have attributed to you? Did you feel that that was a strength, that somehow you'd be able to, when you thought about these different conflicting. . .

RO: Well, I never thought of them as diplomatic skills, and I don't think of them that way now, as a matter of fact. I think what I had -- even though I'd been there a short time -- a reputation for being pretty honest, and not plotting or scheming or anything. What I tried to do was simply to take on every one of these problems as they came and just see what would be the fairest solution. Because I don't think anyone thought I had any hidden motives, I think in most cases, it worked out. Basically, the old staff didn't change. In those early months, I certainly didn't feel that I had the power to make any radical changes even if I'd known exactly what to do.

SZ: Yes. [pause] Well, was that difficult being in that kind of limbo?

RO: Yes, it was no fun. Far from thinking I had the diplomatic skills, I was, obviously, seriously not sure that I would be up to it. For a brief period, I had a psychosomatic back problem, which I have no doubt came directly from that. I've never had it since. And, needless to say, the union things were not easy either.

SZ: You needed the title to really be able to operate?

RO: Yes, I mean an acting director is limited. You try to come to the right solutions, and so on, but if you don't, your power to impose them is a little less strong. But, as it happened, I didn't come in with any idea that I wanted to get rid of X or Y or change the whole program or something. I think it was more a case of adapting to changing times. The trustees, I must say, were very supportive because they knew it was not an easy task. I wish I did remember that, you know, better than I do, because it was such an incredibly busy time for me that I don't think I really had much time to analyze what I was thinking of, because I had to pick up all of these pieces that were left by John. Because John, of course, hadn't picked his time to depart. But I talked to John, you know, since we did get along very well, I talked to him in my first weeks there, and got caught up on what he had in the works and what was going on.

SZ: They put you in that office?

RO: Pardon?

SZ: You were in the office? In the director's office?

RO: Yes, I was in the director's office. I took Ethel [Shein] with me, which was very helpful, because she'd been there for so many years.

SZ: Ethel had been in the publishing department.

RO: She'd been in the publishing department, but she'd also been at the Museum, and she knew a lot of the staff members whom I didn't know, hadn't come in contact with, and she was able to do that.

SZ: And who asked you if you would consider being director? How did that happen?

RO: You know, it's a funny thing, I don't really remember any particular process. I think that from the first moment, it was said that, "Oldenburg is one of the people we will consider," but I'm not sure it was said with any particular conviction. Certainly the plan was to have a search for a new director. I really didn't know that much about the search activities that went on. They also had staff members involved, Betsy Jones and Dick Palmer. To this day, I know only a couple of the people who were actually brought in and interviewed. I rather suspect that several people declined the thrill. Two directors had managed to stay for a year and a half. It was not considered the plum job of the century. But, what did develop in the course of this was I did get a very close working relationship with Mrs. Rockefeller and with Paley, and that was certainly central to the whole thing. And, I think I got support from the staff mainly from fear of meeting something worse. [laughter]. By that time, they were ready to have someone who would stick around for a while.

SZ: So, it was a happy set of coincidences?

RO: Yes, well, it's funny; maybe I put it out of my mind, but I don't remember it as any kind of step-by-step thing. In retrospect, it's very funny when you consider how long it took the Museum to pick my successor. The fact that this decision was made in six months I thought was pretty remarkable now that I look back on it. I think Mrs. Rockefeller did push it very hard. She said she wanted to resolve this, and she was happy working with me, and that she thought this would be the right solution. But it was so totally unpredictable to me that, four years earlier, or for that matter much less ten years earlier, if anyone had said that I'd wind up director of The Museum of Modern Art, I would have laughed hysterically.

SZ: Well, that's one of the wonderful things about some people's lives [laughter]. This is a good place to stop and we can start, I guess, tomorrow, unless you have, I cut you off and you were about to say something else.

RO: I wish my memory were better about this.

SZ: I think you're doing fine.

RO: It would be good to jog my memory. For example, I couldn't on pain of death tell you what shows were on during this period. I have no memory of working out the exhibition program during those six months. I remember later on when I was in the pattern of *The Late Cézanne* and Bill and I going to Europe and all of that kind of stuff. But those stressful first six months must have taken its toll, no question about it.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **RICHARD E. OLDENBURG (RO)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **MANHATTAN**

DATE: **MAY 4, 1999**

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: The first strike at the Museum was in August, from August 20th to September 3rd of 1971, and that was, obviously a two-week action under Hightower.

RO: Under Hightower, yes.

SZ: And your strike was October 9th through November 29th, 1973.

RO: That's what I remember. It was around, of course, Thanksgiving. The other thing that I didn't mention, when we were talking about how I came to the Museum, was that, thanks to my brother, of course, I had gotten pretty much involved with the art world when I came back out of the army. Did I talk about that?

SZ: No.

RO: When I came back in '58 to live in New York, my brother was living here. Through him, I met Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Segal, Rosenquist –everyone --

because they were all in very close contact. They were also very supportive of each other; they were marvelous people, and that became, to some extent, part of my social life because I would go to parties, loft parties, etc. I bring this up only because even though I wasn't really involved with it, it was not a world that was new to me. I knew pretty well what was going on on the contemporary scene. I went to gallery openings. I was well aware of the Green Gallery, and the Janis, and Castelli's, and all of these people. So, it wasn't as though I came from a purely publishing background because, at least through osmosis, I had gotten pretty close to this and followed the press and commentary.

SZ: That was really a very exciting time, too.

RO: It was a very exciting time. It was the whole emergence of the Pop Art movement, even though most of them didn't want to be called Pop artists, but that was what they were christened. Also I remember going to the early happenings my brother was putting on at the Judson Church, and at other galleries: Jim Dine and these people performing. My wife never forgave me, actually, for forcing her to go to one of my brother's happenings the night we were married.

SZ: [laughter] Is that true?!?

RO: Yes. That's true. We had dinner at Luchows and then went off to one of his happenings. I remember it was one with Lucas Samaras in it, and also my sister-in-law. But that's just an additional point to note that I hadn't been completely walled off from the art world when I came there.

SZ: What about other kinds of art? I never asked you if you studied art history at all in college?

RO: No, I didn't, oddly enough, but I'd been pretty well exposed to it. I'd done a good

deal of reading, and I did go to museums a lot. But formal history, no. In retrospect, I'm not sure why. Maybe because I felt that I didn't need the survey courses, and I was too busy with the big government and philosophy courses. I never wanted to take the big survey course in fine arts because, from what I saw from my friends, it was pretty much wandering through western civilization, which I'd done partly on my own, through my brother.

SZ: Do you remember the first time you went to The Museum of Modern Art? Or do you remember an early visit?

RO: Yes but I can't pinpoint it. I remember going to The Museum of Modern Art when we would occasionally pass through New York on our way to Sweden. I can't really say that I remember any particular show or anything of that sort. I think I just remember going there and seeing the permanent collection. Then, when I came to New York, when I went to work for Doubleday, Doubleday had corporate membership, or whatever it was called in those days; it was one where they had certain number of employee memberships, and I, because I was involved with the design department, I was allowed to have one of those. I certainly remember when they showed Picasso's sculpture.

SZ: Now, this, you know, I didn't ask you yesterday. During the whole upset before you were named acting director and then director, several people have mentioned to me the fact that they felt that Arthur Drexler wanted to be director, that that was a palpable issue at the Museum.

RO: I sort of inherited the statement from a number of people that Arthur had wanted very much to be director and had tried. This was, I guess, post-René. So, in other words, it wasn't a case of him wanting to be director directly against me when I was being proposed; it was and -- I might be wrong on this but my memory was that -- he had chaired the committee that was asked to do a kind of study for the Museum of the

future, and this was part of that kind of representation of Arthur as a viable candidate for the directorship. Obviously, the trustees knew nothing about the internal politics of it, but the trustees weren't prepared to do that, and then they named Bates.

SZ: Yes.

RO: I think it was fair to say that I always had the feeling that Arthur considered himself someone who understood the Museum better than anyone else and, therefore, he was always judging very carefully what people were doing and whether he could have done it better and so forth. But I never had any unusual problems with Arthur. He was very consistent [laughter].

SZ: So I guess we can, we could just go to when you took over as director, and talk a little bit about what you felt the issues were facing you and the challenges and what you set about to do.

RO: Well, I remember plunging into the whole thing. The program was going along. The great tradition that existed at the Modern that I inherited, and that kept it going through all these problems, was the whole concept of curatorial authority and autonomy. So that no matter whatever else was going on about directorships or about union things and so on, the curatorial departments were working on their shows and acquisitions and exhibitions and so forth. So there was a continuing momentum on that. And, thinking back, this again was. . . when they thought of me as acting director and then when they made me director, I've always considered the logic of that, just to elaborate a little more on what I said. . .

SZ: . . . yes. . .

RO: . . . yesterday that, if you think about it, even though people had varying degrees of

involvement with the arts, it had almost been the tradition at the Museum, when you think of René d'Harnoncourt, who had never been an art historian or trained as such, that what the Museum had often operated best with, was a director who, in effect, was coordinating the curatorial programs, not dictating them, and was translating what the curators wanted to the trustees and back from the trustees to the curators. Plus, of course, fundraising and all the other things that came in. It was often said to me -- although I never really understood because I didn't experience the Bates Lowry period -- that one of the major reasons that Bates got into such trouble was that he had chosen, against advice from a number of people, to be the head of the Painting and Sculpture Department, as well as director of the Museum, which was probably not only too heavy a load, but also put him in a kind of funny position vis-a-vis the other departments. And needless to say, in my case that was not a question. And it wasn't in René's either. Obviously René had something far different. He had the presence of Alfred Barr, who was the whole guiding spirit of the place. So René, on the one hand, had a larger problem, but also had this different kind of tradition. But I think that's the way I continued to be director, and I think whatever success I had came from that, because I was, in no way, competing and was without an agenda, a curatorial agenda of my own. I was trying to balance the program as best I could.

Picking up where we were, I remember running very, very hard during this period. What I hadn't foreseen, obviously, was this tremendous confrontation with the union that was coming eventually. When I became director most people greeted it as time to settle down. And we had a good year. I remember going off with the International Council to the show in Venezuela. And then we had a big show, too, in Holland. I also remember having, initially, a very good relationship with the existing PASTA people. You know, Susan Bertram and these people. I think maybe one of the problems was that they -- because a lot of the difficulties had died down; there was a new group of people, and Mrs. Rockefeller was the new president, and I was the new director -- I think maybe we all had been lulled into kind of feeling that some of these problems had not necessarily gone away, but were now more soluble than they had

been. And that proved not to be the case a year later.

SZ: Can you just back up a little bit and give me whatever you can remember about the formation of the union?

RO: Well, I really don't remember the sequence. I'd have to really review the material. Of course, I inherited the union.

SZ: Yes.

RO: The union had been recognized; it already existed. During Hightower's time, they'd reached, in effect an agreement that left a few issues open, and those had to be dealt with, such as the famous so-called disputed titles and there were other things. I can't exactly remember which issues rose when. Those issues existed, but what really proved to be such a terrible, hopeless issue was the fact that the whole strike was really much less over financial issues, economic issues, than it was over comparative power within the Museum.

SZ: Right.

RO: And the argument, the insistence of the union that they wanted representation on the board, which was something that I think, quite rightly, the board was not prepared to accept, as well as representation on a lot of key committees as a union. It wasn't the fact that members of the union weren't on those committees. In fact, most of them were, but they wanted representation as the union, which is a very different thing. And, then the "disputed title" things, which basically came down to the level of top management. In other words, you were talking about the curators in the departments.

And the long and the short of it was that the trustees -- and I agreed with them -- felt

that if we ceded to those demands, it would shift the whole balance of authority within the Museum, so that, in effect, the Museum would have been hamstrung on any kind of disagreement, because of the inability to have confidentiality in terms of policy decisions, to be able to continue if there were a strike, and so on. It just wouldn't have worked. And those were the issues that, in the last analysis we didn't give in on, and that's why the strike took so long.

On the other hand, there were a lot of compromises made on the financial issues, and a lot of very good things came out of it in terms of guarantees about promotion reviews and so forth. Certainly, the formation of the union had a lot to do with sloppy or insensitive procedures that had gone on. I remember, when I knew very little about this, when I would attend some of the meetings when John would be dealing with them. There was a lot of quite understandable criticism of things like one curator being much more prone to promote than another. There was no kind of regular procedure or regular authority, nor was there in terms of the raises. Sometimes the raises were hard to justify; they just meant that one person did more for his or her staff than others did. So I think there were a lot of things that were reasonable. Those were comparatively easily resolved. It was the big issues, concerning management structures, that weren't.

One thing I do remember was, when we had the guard strike, which was very early on, I think in the fall of my taking over as director, that was pretty much purely an economic thing. The Museum was, as you know, in bad shape financially and was trying to avoid a much higher settlement than it wanted to give. But my greatest memory of that was we had the senior staff manning the guard positions in the galleries and at the admissions desk, and I was standing there taking tickets one day to set a good example, and an artist friend of my brother's came through, and she said, "Oh Dick, you're working here?" And I said "yes," and she said, "And, so, what are you doing?" And I said, "I'm the director." And she looked at me as though I was obviously nuts, and she thought that was too bad, and she said, "Oh" and bought her

ticket and went in.

SZ: Well, do you think that the issue of having split the curatorial staff, did that that end up really causing a lot more pain later on, just in terms of staff cohesion?

RO: Do you mean would it have been better to have the whole curatorial staff? No. I don't think so at all. I think it was essential, maintaining some power with which to operate. No, I don't think that would have improved anything. It might have made the union happier, but it would have, in effect, pitted the whole curatorial staff against the poor director or anybody else who was trying to run the place, which I think would have been a mistake.

SZ: What was it like to run a place for seven weeks under those circumstances?

RO: It was very horrible. And, it was, I think, the single most unhappy period of my time as director. There's no question about that. The strain was enormous. You were jockeying for positions in the press too. The Museum was in a much less good position. The union was always able to cite the lowest salary level and make it look as though the whole thing was a plot. We never managed to get people to understand that it was not about the money issues, because that was not an advantage for the union to make a big deal out of it. And it was extremely painful. Obviously there were the picket lines. They came down and picketed me at home, but my neighborhood was so terrible that they didn't want to stay. People threw bottles at them on 12th Street. They picketed Mr. Paley's apartment, and Blanchette's. And they were very unpleasant to Blanchette, and to those people who came to work. No, it was a very bitter period.

SZ: And you actually had some union members who broke strike?

RO: Yes, there were about, I think, a third of the union almost, if I remember correctly,

that never did go out. The awful thing about all the union confrontations wasn't simply the day to day awfulness of taking care of it; it was the split of what really was a cohesive staff with shared values and so forth. And that one strike was, of course, the most bitter and unhappy one. But it was also something that, unfortunately, haunted us every three years; then, before the negotiation date, the propaganda would build up, and there would be every attempt possible to win people over to one side or the other. It was just like a kind of perpetual civil war at those times, and then you'd breathe a tremendous sigh of relief when you finally reached an agreement, which we did, after all, in most instances. There never was another strike after that.

SZ: Just threats of strikes.

RO: Oh, sure, constant, and the tension was terrible. And, as I said, it did divide the Museum every three years, and that was a very sad thing. Obviously, there are two views on this, and I'm sure that a lot of people feel that the union was a very positive thing for the Museum. But I think the only fair view, really, would be to say that some positive things were achieved, but that the general effect on the Museum was a kind of fit every three years, which continues.

SZ: Yes, but it's interesting to reflect on the fact that while, I guess there was an attempt to unionize the curatorial staff at the Met, for instance, it never was achieved.

RO: I think it's very possible that if all of these issues had been dealt with more openly at the beginning, some of this might have been avoided. On the other hand, I think so much of the union creation was connected to exactly the kind of problems we're talking about, that you see in the other areas, the art workers' coalition, the My Lai poster and so on. It was the temper of the times, and it was a time for militancy and a time for student revolt. Some of the people who were really militant in the union turned out, later on, to be quite conservative staff members. It was the temper of the times, I think.

SZ: You mean they got old [laughter].

RO: Yes, they got older, yes. I think that had a lot to do with it. In other words, I think it's easy to say that gee, if we'd handled it better, it [the union] might never have developed, but I don't think so; I think the general spirit of the times was such that it was one that encouraged confrontation.

SZ: It was just that it got, for whatever reason, a foothold. Maybe during this very rocky period when there was trouble with directors, that was what happened.

RO: Yes, that's what happened. And there were, as I said earlier, I don't question that there were legitimate gripes.

SZ: Yes.

RO: I think that there were a lot of things that were improved. There were things that when the management of the Museum really considered them properly, they were more than prepared to repair the mistakes. I'm not saying they didn't exist. They existed long before I got there, obviously.

SZ: We don't need to beat this horse to death [laughing].

RO: It is also, of course, each end of the negotiation is also partially determined by the temperament of the people who are at that moment running the union, or for that matter, are the lawyers for the union, or the parent union. I think that there were times when we reached a settlement, where that was affected by the people running it rather than that the issues had changed.

SZ: Yes, because you did have these go-for-broke union extremists who were leading

the way.

RO: You know, it really does depend on people, as so much does, and particularly in the Museum with very personalized. . .

SZ: Yes, but once it was settled, it just sort of settled into this pattern of every three years?

RO: Yes, it settled into that pattern, and every year some basic issues would always be there. There would always be wanting a shorter contract, which is the one thing I was never prepared to agree on, because I couldn't stand doing it every year [laughter]. I didn't care what else was resolved because it was so disruptive. It wasn't only that the union negotiations took an immense amount of time from everybody on both sides, but it also engendered such nervousness, because you didn't know whether there were going to be problems with presenting a show for which you were bringing in loans and all.

SZ: O.K., enough of that. You, and your board, when you first became director: if you could just talk a little bit about it and how you worked with them.

RO: Well, the board -- I didn't know it at the time, because it was only after I'd come into more contact with boards at other institutions when I became director -- the Modern's board, or at least the tradition at the Modern is just amazing in terms of the degree to which the trustees accepted the idea that they were not supposed to dictate the curatorial program, or say what was to be done, and so forth. And that's very different, I found, when I talked to my colleagues who were always, in one form or another, struggling with the better ideas that the board members thought they had about almost everything, whether it was about acquisitions or exhibitions. There was from the very beginning, this kind of hands-off the curatorial policy. They were responsible for financial policy and so forth, but they were not going to tell us what

kind of shows to have, even when the shows were very controversial, as was Kynaston's *Information* show [which was shown when I wasn't director yet]. There were a number of trustees who were not happy with that show. It included a number of spirit-of-the-times things. They grumbled about them, but nobody suggested that this was a show that shouldn't be had. Basically, I think the board genuinely respected the curators, respected what we were up to, and I didn't have any problem. Most of the problems I had with the Board --and they weren't really problems, they were problems that we shared -- concerned how to get the finances in line.

RO: Finances were in terrible shape. I was reminded that the whole budget of the Museum was, the operating budget, was $7 million in those days. We had a deficit of over $1 million at one point, which, if you took it literally, would have been a seven-year suicide campaign. They, of course, spawned a lot of the pressures that also helped generate the union because they were cutting back on staff and so forth. But, the trustees did rise to the occasion. They launched a campaign -- it was at least a $20 million effort; I've forgotten whether it grew to be $25. I got, of course, very much involved in that. Walter Thayer was directing that whole effort, and we made that goal. That did a lot to help. Then there were other developments that I worked a lot on. It was a period when, thanks largely to Nelson Rockefeller, that the New York State Council [on the Arts] was getting enormously increased funds. And so, for the first time, museums started getting significant government money.

SZ: Through them?

RO: Through the State Council. Over $200,000 a year, which seems not, not very much today, but it was a lot in the budget when you were dealing with seven or eight million dollars. Then, the National Endowment started getting increased funding, too. It was one of the transitional things for that period. We started getting significant sums from the government and the IMS, the Museum Services, and so on. And,

then above all, there was the growth of the whole corporate support aspect, which, in my early days, had all come from corporate philanthropic foundations such as the Alcoa Foundation which sponsored the Gertrude Stein show and so on. But, in my time, it started to shift to what it has become now, which is really a kind of branch of the marketing department. Now, it's gone so far in that direction that it's a problem. But at the time, it was great to have sponsors like Mobil and Exxon and IBM and SCM who saw that identifying with the Museum lent a high-quality standard and got attention among the kind of people they wanted to impress. After the shift away from the whole Vietnam period you started again to get a different kind of corporate world, a corporate world that wanted to be seen at social events and wanted high profiles for its chief executive officers, and so forth. That changed when the economy took a turn down. It was no longer anything that anyone wanted; quite the opposite. But during that time, it was a period of growth. It was also a very difficult year. It's hard for me to remember the economics. The inflation rate was terrible, so that no matter where you stood at raising funds, you were always losing . . .

SZ: Yes.

RO: And, of course, that put pressure on salaries and on everything else. It's hard to remember those times now, when the inflation rate was ten times what it is now.

SZ: The whole growth and change in the corporate support stemmed, I guess, from what Mobil did by starting Summergarden in '70?

RO: Yes. Mobil came in with that. Alcoa was the first major corporate grant we'd ever received and that was for the Gertrude Stein exhibition, and that was a great achievement. But that was from their foundation.

SZ: Yes.

RO: And we always had to make the argument, in the old days, that this was an educational function and so on, because that fit the definitions of these philanthropic entities. But, gradually, more and more companies got into it purely as a promotional thing. Mobil, of course, was the pioneer, in that because Herb Schmertz and his people really made it a major arm of their advertising. But a lot of the companies came in as big players, like IBM with *The Late Cézanne* show [1977]. Most of those companies have now disappeared from corporate support and you have different companies you've never heard of. SCM doesn't even exist anymore. Very often, it was the chief executive officers' interest that was crucial.

SZ: So how was that cultivated? I mean, did you play a large part in that?

RO: I did, necessarily. Mrs. Rockefeller and I would go call on Frank Carey, who then subsequently became a member of the Museum's board. Needless to say, the Rockefeller involvement with Exxon opened some doors. Someone who was very good at this was Jack Limpert, who, when he came in as director of development, would identify companies that he thought would be likely prospects, and we would then approach them.

SZ: You hired him?

RO: I hired Jack, yes.

SZ: Before Jack came on, I think that understanding is that there wasn't really a position like that?

RO: Well, there was a director of development.

SZ: Yes?

RO: Jack's position was different. Before, it was Charlie Hesse who was the director of development, and there was Emily Stone, who was director of membership. When Charlie Hesse left and Emily Stone retired, Jack Limpert came in to be director of a merged department, which made sense, because it was all part of one major effort. There have always been arguments over membership and development, who got credit for what -- the donors in one category or another. So, that was a sensible decision, which I think most people have followed, still to this day.

SZ: But, was the growing pool of available funds from these corporations, was that something that was discussed among various museums?

RO: Oh, sure. I mean, it's like the old joke of about when artists get together, they discuss the price of paint, and that's what museum directors, when they get together discuss -- museum finances. What they don't discuss, or they didn't then was the museum program half as much. No, it was the government funding thing, it was the question of where we were going to get the funding. Foundations, annual fund efforts. The Museum's annual fund, which was virtually non-existent, became a major factor, thanks to Gus Levy and others. I remember when they originally set a goal of $1 million, and nobody thought we'd make it, and in fact we got far beyond that. But, if you adjust these figures to today, they were pretty ambitious. A million dollars in 1974 was more than it is now.

Basically, the formula began to work. However, the Museum was still in very bad shape when the whole plan of the expansion came up. By bad shape, I don't necessarily mean that the deficits had grown. In fact, they'd been getting better and we had reduced them. What was quite obvious was that the Museum desperately had to have more space, that it was getting ludicrous to have the amount of space we had for the permanent collection and the exhibition space. We had really great pictures that we never showed. It wasn't enough just to say the old thing that you say that we were showing only five percent of your collection. A lot of museums

show only five percent of their collection, but we weren't showing pictures that any other museum would have made centers of their collection. People don't remember, I think now, how tiny those gallery spaces were, those old small gallery spaces and the carved up area where you had one little cubicle for photography, one little cubicle for architecture and design; they were just minute. Not to mention the exhibition spaces. And then, the additional problem of contemporary art getting larger and larger. One of the things we used most effectively was Arthur Drexler's calculation that the entire gallery space of the Museum fit in the central rotunda of the Metropolitan Museum, just the area where you came in and left your coat. So, there was that.

But when I say the Museum was in bad shape, I mean that you had on one side that recognition, and on the other, a struggle to keep even that small operation going without ruinous deficits. So the bottom line was that there was no way in which the Museum could accomplish an expansion without getting some sort of new source of income. And, by a new source of income, I mean, theoretically, if it could have put together a $200 million campaign, that would have been fine, but nobody thought that could be done. Times were not that good, as people have forgotten, in the '70s.

SZ: Well, that's right.

RO: Times were terrible.

SZ: Yes.

RO: In fact, building in general in the city had come to a halt. In any case, that was the environment in which this plan was begun.

The key person in all of this was Dick Koch who I thought never got enough credit. I tried to give it to him, but in the larger picture, I don't think everyone really kept

remembering that it was Dick who first came up with this plan.

SZ: Dick, before we get to that, I'd like to go back, because you were talking about the various elements that you were having to deal with when your, during your directorship. What you said was there was really quite a deficient financial picture, although, museums had long histories of running a debt.

RO: Oh yes, we weren't alone.

SZ: No.

RO: At the time, there were very serious discussions about how museums were going to survive. Remember, the big difference for the Modern was that it was getting not a cent from the city.

SZ: Right.

RO: The Metropolitan [Museum of Art] had its security staff and its building and everything paid for, and that was true of most of the major museums in other cities. But, we and the Whitney and the Guggenheim were all in the same boat; and we were all having serious problems. And so were a lot of other museums because, as I said, the times were bad. Inflation was rising. The trustees -- I had a very tough finance committee.

SZ: Which means what?

RO: Well, they had the idea that deficit was anathema, and on principle you didn't run a business that way. I had, in fact, a couple of trustees who should have known better, who were more than willing to think about selling pictures to off-set the deficit. You had a lot of ideas coming up about either cutting costs without realizing what that

would have done to the programs, or kind of “pie-in-the-sky” marketing plans that weren’t too plausible and that really didn’t recognize that there was a kind of limited market for modern art. So, it was a continuous struggle. But the struggle was basically on the financial realities side -- how to increase membership, how to build the annual fund, how to build the endowment, and so forth. We’d also had a bad time in the stock market. There’d been a time when the Museum trustees had invested in pretty high-flying stuff that had come down very quickly, just about the time I was there.

SZ: And then the city’s finances were collapsing, too. Right?

RO: I was about to say, we had one continuing hope which was to get direct support from the city. We certainly had the arguments for it: the importance to the city, and all that business. And at one point, Mr. Paley and I went to see Mayor Lindsay, and Lindsay said, “Well, you know, I’d love to give you support, but I can’t give you support because you’re not on city land.” And he thought that ended the conversation, whereupon Mr. Paley said, “Well, we’ll give it to you.” And Lindsay looked stricken and backed away in horror, because he didn’t want it. Of course, at the moment, it would have been very, very odd if that offer had been accepted. A lot of things would have been different. On the one hand, we would have gotten the on-going support from them, but the building would never have gotten enlarged or the tower built. But the city might have sold the air rights.

There were other issues, too. I should say that there were a lot of people who had special concerns. Obviously, for Mrs. [June] Larkin there was the whole issue of education which she single-handedly pursued. She was just a tremendous supporter through the Noble Foundation.

SZ: Well, did she bring that interest to you? Because Victor d’Amico, maybe we could talk about, you could talk about it a little bit. There had been d’Amico and the

Children's Art Carnival. There had been some attempts, I guess, at. . .

RO: Basically a lot of it, again, as always, had to do with money. Victor's school, again this was not my decision, but with Victor getting close to retirement age anyway, the feeling was that Victor's school, while it had been famous and had produced a lot of people, such as Bill Rubin, was dealing with so few students that it was a luxury, both in space and in funding, that the Museum couldn't afford. And what they wanted was a program that reached out more, and there again, you were, it was the spirit of the times that you wanted to serve a larger public and the public school system and so forth. And the trouble was that in the midst of this, they had just created the Lillie P. Bliss International Study Center, with great ideas that they then couldn't afford to carry through. That was part of the Bates Lowry thing, and again, something I wasn't involved in. But there was a lot of criticism that that had been allowed to grow into a kind of mini university that was draining funds. Basically, a lot of it had to do with funding. It wasn't that anyone was doing anything bad, it was just that they had to cut back in some places. And by the time I got there, John [Hightower], who was very seriously interested in education, there was no question about that, had inherited an Education Department that really barely existed. It was operating independently and basically was making portfolios of reproductions and so forth and sending them out to the schools. And occasionally having people on staff to go out and give lectures or something, but it was really a modest, a very, very modest program.

SZ: Let us turn the tape over.

TAPE 2, SIDE 2.

RO: O.K., again, my memory may be faulty, but I remember John hiring Susan Steadman, who was supposed to do more than that and started working on it. So, John was certainly interested in it. But it was during John's time that discussions

began with June Larkin and the Noble Foundation to obtain a major grant that would allow us to set up a real office of education and do more than we were doing. I picked up that, I inherited the beginnings of that, and managed to carry through to a happy conclusion; we got a $1 million grant from them, I think. I suspected, that that was something that probably had a good deal to do with my being named director. That became an example that impressed Blanchette and a number of other people, that I would be useful as a fund raiser. It wasn't really deserved, because I was dealing with June, who had such a commitment to doing this that it was really she who brought it about, though she was dubious because she wasn't happy about Hightower's departure. But we worked out something very good, that allowed us to begin. We didn't have a lot of money. It began with my being able to appoint a special assistant to the director for education, which was supposed to a) indicate that it was important, because the director was directly involved and b) it was also an effort to see where we could best expand. All the past educational activities including, as you reminded me, Bates Lowry's, had been to some degree resented by the curatorial staff. It's an old story in almost every museum that the curators think that the educators don't know enough about the material, and the educators think that the curators don't know how to present it. So, the whole idea of their trying to work together was a tough one.

What we tried to do was set this up so that, in effect, the special assistant would be coordinating the educational programs that were designed around what the curator wanted to do with an exhibition. And they would, in theory then, translate what the curator's views or what he or she was presenting in the exhibition into various forms of how we dealt with the public coming in. And over the years, happily, that expanded, so we had a Department of Education, and we had the Noble Center after the expansion was accomplished. Now, it's really quite a big operation, one that's now quite accepted by the curatorial staff, but not a parallel empire in any sense.

SZ: Well that issue has extended itself to other areas as well, I think. Resentment is

really not the right word, but certainly, you know, curatorial questions about other areas of operation. From my own experience, I remember the whole issue of press coverage.

RO: Yes, it's built in. The curators tends to regard themselves as the producers of this event, usually an exhibition, and then how it's presented, how it's perceived, all of this is something that they feel they should have a say in. But this is nothing new to any museum.

SZ: No.

RO: In general, I think that when the curators are dealing with people they respect, they're more than happy to hand it over. It's when they have a press office, for example, that they don't rely on, or they think is less interested in their area than somebody else's area, then you get some of the conflicts.

SZ: But the curious thing is that I hear a lot now about the idea that education is the area that's going to really be emphasized in the next generation in museums, and yet, when you really try to sort of pin down what that really means, it's still kind of nebulous.

RO: Well, I think it begins with the idea that if we don't educate new generations, we're not going to be educating new audiences. No one, I think, could have predicted the fact that there's been this great boom in museum attendance. At the same time, however, as you know, the art in the schools has been cut way back. The cycle has changed now, and now Mayor Guiliani and Rudy Crew are appropriating a great deal of money to put art back into the schools. And, obviously, Aggie [Gund] has a great commitment to that; she's been very much involved with it in the Studio in the Schools program on her own, and also through the Modern. I think we were certainly leaders in trying to establish the idea that art in the schools was important, and we

would try to woo the art teachers that existed to try to give them some status. And I think, in general, we did a lot of things right.

The big question now -- I think the reason that maybe it's a little uncertain, more uncertain is, where with new technology do you go? You can't just continue to just take tours around the place or receive school children, which we never really did, but the Met does, and tramp them around and move them in buses and so on. I think, a lot of people are worried that the technological thing will take over. And I sometimes do worry when I go to a museum and I see the machines there showing images of what's upstairs and the kids sitting there because they think it's more fun to play with it. On the other hand, there's the analogy in publishing of serial rights: there used to be an argument of whether you'd ruin a book's sales by publishing part of the book. I think the ability to put images and whole programs about museums on Web sites and into schools and into private houses, I think will just expand the market. And I think that's going to be very exciting, if we don't get overly entranced with it. The software, after all, is what the Museum produces, so I think that's what we should be emphasizing.

SZ: But, in any event, the whole effort in establishing a Department of Education and then the Center has just made that function grow enormously.

RO: It has grown enormously, and one of the reasons it's grown is also a very practical matter: the most effective tool for raising money is the educational tool.

SZ: Yes.

RO: When you approach corporations, they're much more prone to support something that they can present as an educational initiative rather than as an artistic initiative.

SZ: But that wasn't true fifteen years ago?

RO: It was, to some extent, true because we always tried to remind corporations when they said, when they had their philanthropic organizations, they would say, "We're not really supposed to be supporting anything but educational things." And we would remind them that the Museum was chartered as an educational institution and that everything we did was educational, but it never quite sunk in. No, the old appeal and the major appeal to corporations during the period of the heyday of the corporate support for exhibitions, was publicity and visibility. Now, however, I think that people are somewhat reverting, particularly if it's a controversial show. If it's a Monet, no one's questioning it, but if it was a show that just might not get great press, they would much rather be seen as doing something in the educational area. I'm not saying that's the only approach, but I think it's one of the reasons why you see much more emphasis on education in all the museums. Plus, as I said, the real goal is the need to expand the audience. And within that, of course, you have the other big challenge, which is to try to diversify the audience, which no one has really found the right solution to. A lot of people are trying, but it's worrisome, particularly in other cities where you have the suburban flight, and the whole museum is surrounded by people who rarely go to the museum. In a way, the Brooklyn Museum is sort of pioneering efforts to make itself more a part of that neighborhood right now.

SZ: With some success.

RO: With some, yes. [pause] But, I'd say, that probably broadening the audience and the use of technology are two of the major problems that all the museums are worrying about or focusing on at the moment.

SZ: Did raising the admission price have much of an effect on this?

RO: It was raised several times. It was always an agony. I remember various issues about whether we could raise it to $1.75; then it was $7.00, something like that. I

mean, now it's a price that no one would believe. The interesting fact about it is that whenever we did this, we found far less drop-off than we expected. There seemed to be a pretty steady demand and, of course, as all the surveys would tell us, we were dealing with a pretty affluent public. So, it wasn't as though they couldn't afford it. But, of course, we always balanced it off with "pay-what-you-wish" and with free days and things of this sort, and student tickets. We would also figure that when we would raise the prices, it would also encourage people to become members because it was a better bargain. When we were trying to figure out what the market could bear, we would tend to look at movie prices and we stayed behind them for a very long time. We used to also cite the Elvis Presley Museum in Nashville as being twice what the admission of The Museum of Modern Art was.

SZ: For which people happily paid, I'm sure.

RO: In the best of all possible worlds, obviously, you would have either no admission or a voluntary admission, which most British museums had for years, but everybody's abandoned it. And I don't really see anything wrong in the sense that every cultural endeavor has a selective audience; I don't see any reason, in other words, why museums should be free if the opera isn't free or symphonies aren't free and so forth. I think that if you, if this is a way you choose to learn and to enjoy yourself then I think it's fair enough that you contribute to its health. Which is obviously necessary; it's not a question of making a profit on it.

SZ: When you were looking at all these problems, were you having fun, too?

RO: It's hard, remembering back. I don't remember too many. . . it was pretty stressful. The fun came from the intellectual contacts and the people. I really became, obviously, immensely fond and stimulated by the curatorial people. And not only the curatorial people, but a lot of others. Everybody – in publications or publicity or -- they were an interesting group of people. Which, going back to what I said

yesterday, was interesting because it wasn't that different from publishing. It was sort of the same appeal: you were in a slightly unreal world, compared with my friends who were working in law offices or at brokerage houses. Since the work was innately more interesting than their work, I always felt privileged to be doing it. Fun? Only [laughing] on a few occasions.

SZ: Which were those?

RO: Well, there were the highs of the opening of a show that really was very well received and successful. And meeting and dealing with the artists. It was fun when things worked well. But you were always under the gun with the financial problems. And, of course, for almost a ten year period, so many of the energies had to go into the whole expansion plan. It took so many years to get it off the ground because there were so many things to be cleared up, the whole question of the legality of it: the constitutionality of it was challenged at the last minute. We had all these problems. But, that certainly was a high if there ever was one, that day -- almost fifteen years ago to the day now -- when we opened the Museum with that special preview, and we felt we'd really accomplished something.

SZ: I'd kind of like to save that as a whole separate thing to talk about next time because I have many questions about that. So maybe, we can just do a few other things. The various constituencies when you became director: well, we've talked a little bit about the board; we've talked a little bit about the curatorial staff. I don't know if there is anything else, you know, whether you'd like to run through the list of people, and say anything specific about them, or not.

RO: No. Only, obviously, the curatorial are more visible than, than the others because you think in terms of the exhibitions. But, as you well know, there are now a huge number of other departments, whether it's the International Council or Public Information, the Junior Council and the Library. There were terrific people in all of

them. I was working a lot with their problems, too. And one of the problems, one of the difficulties with the Museum was that, certainly in my time, it was not very layered in structure. Everybody, unfortunately, wants to report to the director because it gives them status and they want direct access and so on. And so you had that problem of so many people reporting to the director that sometimes that was not manageable. In most cases, however, I found it worked pretty well because people would bring me the big issues, not the small ones, and we could usually resolve them. We had committees and so on. But I enjoyed and learned a lot from the direct contact because I didn't have a deputy director to run everything underneath. Dick Koch came closest to it, but Dick and I were so close working together that it was almost like we talked over all the problems ourselves. Later on, when we got into the expansion and the Museum got much bigger, it was necessary to restructure. But you still had something where the director had to allow -- even when I had deputy directors for the first time -- you had to allow people to come directly, particularly when they were unhappy or felt they weren't getting the message through. That's just the way the Museum works.

SZ: Yes. I was going to ask, in terms of the power structure, how the Junior Council fit in at that point?

RO: Well, the Junior Council was sometimes very helpful, and sometimes a problem because they, obviously, felt themselves quite independent. They would occasionally have projects that weren't very realistic, and you'd have to tactfully suggest that the Museum didn't want to gamble on producing this or that. At other times, they would come up with something very good, whether it was an event, or whether it was a publication. And, on balance, I think they were very, very helpful to the Museum. Then came the problem that they were getting a little too old to be a "Junior" Council and the organization went through those manifestations -- the Associate Council, and then the Contemporary Arts Council. I can't even remember the sequence of all of those. But there were indeed some Junior Council members

who were pushing sixty, I think, at one time.

SZ: They were waiting to become board members.

RO: Yes, waiting to become Board members, that's right. It was the waiting room, so to speak. But, in general, I think they were very supportive. That's another thing where the Modern was lucky because a lot of museums are cursed with volunteer groups that are empires unto themselves and really resent any kind of intrusion into their programs. Both the International Council and the Junior Council had followed a tradition where the whole purpose, while they were independent in membership, was to serve the Museum's outreach or whatever. The International Council, I think, on balance, was one of the really great things the Museum had developed and evolved, because it involved so many people around the world who were potentially important lenders to shows, and gave the Museum a kind of presence that it never would have had otherwise.

SZ: Did you enjoy those trips? Or were they work?

RO: I did. I enjoyed the trips enormously, mainly because they were one way to get away from the daily telephone. It was marvelous. But no, they were terrific trips. The people were fun to travel with. It wasn't as though you were really vacationing, because almost every trip was built around a Museum exhibition that we had sent to that country. And so I had official duties, obviously. I had to speak at those events. We met the museum directors and got to know the museum people in those countries. And it was very important to us, when we were planning exhibitions, that I could actually pick up the phone and call someone when that museum had refused loan, and then we'd remind them we had actually met and so on, or I'd get my collectors to do it. I have very fond memories of them. I don't think I was ever able to go on a whole trip, but I would always go for a few days, anyway. And my wife, Lisa, enjoyed them enormously. She loved them.

SZ: You don't go on them anymore?

RO: I don't. It's not that I don't as a matter of principle, by any means. I have a job, so I have to do that. Plus, some of them I have been less interested in than others. I would have, if my wife hadn't been sick, I would have loved to have gone on the India trip, because I don't think I'll ever get there. I have no other excuse to go there, unless I were to go entirely on my own. They do a wonderful job of arranging things. I'm sure it would have been better than any trip I could have taken. On the other hand, they are also rather expensive, so that's a second consideration.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **RICHARD E. OLDENBURG (RO)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

DATE: **MAY 17, 2000**

TAPE 3, SIDE 1

SZ: I thought that today we ought to talk about the project that culminated in the reopening in 1984. I thought I'd start by asking you what your memory is of how the whole idea surfaced.

RO: The real unsung hero, incredibly unsung, of all of this, is Dick Koch, who conceived of the plan, and I think a lot of people thought it was bonkers when he first proposed it. Then it became a reality after it had been examined. It originally began, remember, during what was a very bad time economically for the Museum, and, in fact, for the entire real estate industry, back in 1974. The Museum had a big deficit and needed additional space, but could not figure out how it was going to do that without locating a new income source. And, making it very brief, Dick Koch had seen the success, which was one of the few successes in New York, of the Olympic Towers, which was not too far away from us.

SZ: Because that was a special?

RO: Actually I'm getting ahead of myself, because it wasn't that. The original plan that Dick conceived of, or that he was working out, was a business building, an office

building, and the idea was to sell the Museum's air rights for an office building there, that then would be, it was the same basic plan. It was not that the Museum would be running it; we would, in fact, sell the air rights to a developer that could benefit from that, and then the question of tax abatement would come up at a later point. He started working with people like Richard Weinstein and so on to explore the possibility. Eventually, because the market was very bad for commercial development in New York at the time, and for also a much more mundane reason -- that an office building needed a large bank of elevators to service the floors -- so it really didn't seem like a feasible idea, because we wouldn't be getting back a gallery space out of the expansion, much less a lot of income.

And that's when the Olympic Tower example came up, because here was a building that had proven to be highly successful in a tough market, dealing primarily with rich offshore people who wanted a pied-a-terre in New York, and so then we proceeded on that course.

SZ: The idea of selling the air rights, for a cultural institution that was a first, right?

RO: Yes, it was.

SZ: But air rights in general were something that was available?

RO: Yes, it was an old established concept. The Museum was in a special position because even without the nonprofit aspect, it had the Garden which was virtually inviolable. So the air rights of what could have been built on that plot were huge. No one conceived of how much they'd be worth because it was a down market at that time. But it was definitely Dick Koch who came up with this whole concept and then drew in the [recording inaudible], the lawyers, and Weinstein, and so forth, and worked on it. I think the first time it was Dick who broached it to me, I think it was 1974, when we were heading off with the International Council to Australia, and I

remember telling a couple of people about it and getting kind of disbelief [laughing]. And the idea that it finally came to pass seemed unlikely at the beginning. I told Dick Koch that if it ever worked I would raise a statue to him in the Garden, but that's a promise I unfortunately didn't keep. [Laughter]

SZ: Was there pressure from trustees to expand? Is that where the main impetus was coming from?

RO: Well, I think there was a recognition on the part of all of the trustees. It's hard to remember how absurd the space was back in the early '70s. We had, as Arthur Drexler liked to point out, all of our gallery space in the entire Museum would have fit in the Main Hall comfortably of the Metropolitan. And for a museum of our stature, with a collection of importance and size, we were really so far behind. And, in fact, that's been proven now; we doubled the space and yet, only ten years later, we find ourselves again with not enough space. We did all we could at that time. As far as pressure from the trustees, there was, on the opposite side, a reluctance because the Museum's finances didn't look very promising, and people were very wary. We had just had a fund drive, a capital campaign, mainly to shore up the endowment, and people were quite dubious whether we could afford to do a big expansion plan and raise the money for it.

What intrigued them was, of course, the prospect of the air rights as a major income item, and then the prospect of a future income from the building that would shore up the Museum's long-range finances. And I have to give a lot of credit, enormous credit to the lead trustees, notably Bill Paley and Mrs. [Blanchette] Rockefeller, for really embracing a pretty radical, unusual, and innovative plan. A number of the trustees were much more dubious about it than Bill and Blanchette, but then it gained momentum and everyone realized that it was really quite a good idea.

SZ: And the arrangements that had to be made in order to do this?

RO: Well, here again, you know, my memories are not as clear as they should be, after all of this passage of time, but it was certainly not an easy process. As we explored it, we went through one developer that didn't work [Arlen Realty], and then we found Charles Shaw after looking around. We spoke to a number of people. Arlen was the initial, prospective developer, who was, in fact, the developer of Olympic Tower, which was why we had turned to them originally. But the person who really can give you the details on all this, is, of course, Dick Koch.

SZ: And the choice of architect?

RO: The choice of architect was: the first difficulty that was faced was the acceptance of the fact that several of the key trustees were wary of using Philip [Johnson], even though he had such a claim on it. They felt, I guess with some justice, that it would be difficult, because of Philip's terribly close relationship with the Museum, to control what might be done there. And one of the essentials in all of this was that the Tower had to be developed as a commercial venture, and, therefore, cost controls had to be very tight, and the developer himself would have to approve of the architect, and so forth.

We looked at a lot of architects. There was a search committee. We went out, traveled around, just as they've been doing now [with the upcoming expansion] to a number of sites, considered a number of the usual suspects at the time. The major appeal of Cesar Pelli was not only that we thought we liked the work that we saw, but that he had a very good track record of working with commercial developers doing first-class architecture, while at the same time recognizing the needs for cost controls and commercial development.

SZ: And coming in somewhere close to what the cost is supposed to be?

RO: Something close to budget, and also recognizing what the necessities were. And, leaping ahead, I admire Cesar very much and I think he did an excellent job for the Museum. Some of the criticism he's gotten lately for the Museum is undeserved, because, in fact, what he really did was to do a marvelous job within very strict controls, not only controls but limitations of what we could do in a space the Tower had to occupy for its own purposes. It wasn't Cesar's idea to build around the galleries some of the disadvantages that we have. Those were the conditions, that's how you could build the building. It also would have been easier, of course, to just rebuild the whole old building, but nobody wanted to do that, either, so what you got, of necessity, were these long galleries.

SZ: And also there was a desire to maintain the original facade.

RO: Yes, to maintain the original façade. Later, I think, the escalators got so much criticism; I don't know how better one could move the kinds of crowds we have between these rather small floors. And I think the Garden Hall is really a very ingenious solution, where it sort of translated and softened the effect of the huge tower next door coming down to the building.

SZ: So there was the developer, the selection of the architect, and then there was the Trust for Cultural Resources.

RO: Yes, and there was the Trust for Cultural Resources, which, of course, was the entity that made it possible. And then we had to deal with community groups.

SZ: Because that [the Trust] was sort of a controversial?

RO: It was very controversial. And there were real questions of how the expansion would affect not only the neighborhood, with this huge tower, but also there were questions about tax abatements, even for a nonprofit organization. All of the institutions like

the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] and so on were all interested in direct city aid, and it was only appropriate that an institution as important as ours to New York should receive a different kind of aid, but some aid. It was a long process. I can't remember myself when we actually got the go-ahead, but there were a lot of times when we seriously wondered whether the project would come to pass.

SZ: It was approved but then there was the whole court case with the Dorset [Hotel].

RO: Yes, the Dorset was the next big obstacle. I remember flying out to California with Mrs. Rockefeller to try to get the Dorset owners to go along with all of this, which they ultimately did not, of course, and I remember coming back from that trip on the night of the blackout. Mrs. Rockefeller and I came back in a taxi to One Beekman Place with all of the lights out. She had to knock on the door of a first floor neighbor and spend the night there.

SZ: That was July 1977.

RO: So that gives you some sense of timing.

SZ: There was criticism in the press, too, that you had to manage. Wasn't it Lee Rosenbaum, for one, who was really on the Museum's case?

RO: Yes, there was a lot of press coverage, most of it negative, because it was an unusual plan, and obviously, the Museum is an interesting target from all points of view. And there was also questioning of whether this was a profit-related type thing and, therefore appropriate for the Museum to engage in, this kind of, in effect, a business venture. One of the beauties of this whole plan was that it was an arm's length arrangement -- basically, we were selling the air rights. We were getting the tax advantages subsequently but we had nothing to do with renting the apartments or running them or operating the building and so on. And we were in fact very lucky

to find Charles Shaw, who proved to be a very good and sensitive and decent partner.

SZ: From Chicago.

RO: From Chicago.

SZ: Has he subsequently done a lot of New York work?

RO: He has. I don't remember the exact addresses, but he did a refurbishing of a building on Madison Avenue, and then I think his major thing in New York is up on Madison Avenue in the nineties. But his major work is in Chicago.

SZ: At the time, the pros for the project, as expressed early on, in some article I read, were 1) that it would secure the tenuous future, the economic, the financial future of the Museum, which you have talked about, and 2) would display the collection adequately. And then the cons were 1) it would take property off the tax rolls, and I guess 2) some people didn't think it was environmentally or aesthetically sound.

RO: We had all of those. We went to endless Community Board meetings and we were attacked by some of the architects' organizations. One of the problems also was that we were tearing down those existing buildings. The brownstones certainly were not very distinguished, but there was that rather nice Beaux Arts building next to it. Looking back, it was hard slogging through many, many months of uncertainty and there were times along the way when we seriously wondered whether this would come off. I think it was quite a triumph to have brought it off, and what has perhaps tended to be forgotten now, when people criticize the present building and so on, is that when it was finished, it got unanimously good press from everyone. It was very, very well received and it was regarded as a model for other institutions to pursue, which a lot of them did, with similar air rights plans and commercial developments

through the Trust. Then, of course, there was all of the financing and the bond issues and all of this business.

SZ: That was very time consuming?

RO: Oh, it was immensely time consuming and very difficult. The one thing was, unlike a couple of museums that tried to copy this plan later on, we were absolutely determined never to put the collection at risk. So the whole question of securing the bonds -- obviously we had these enormous assets in the collection -- we weren't going to even think of putting that up as collateral. So the collateral was the income from admissions and membership and so forth, and it all worked out very well.

SZ: But then, I guess, before the Museum closed for the construction, which took, which went in phases. It was really a four-year process in phases, parts when the Museum closed.

RO: That of course was the other challenge, to keep the Museum running. That was a marvelous juggling act, which I gather they're not going to try to repeat with the current expansion, because it's so much more extensive. I don't think it's feasible because they have to tear down the Dorset and building and so on. We were able to use the West Wing for exhibitions when they closed down other parts. And I think we did quite a remarkable job. We kept on having shows and activities and managed to maintain, to surprising degree, the membership levels and all of that. In fact, looking back at the whole experience, I think it came off very well, and I think the staff was terrific in terms of not complaining about moving from office to office and having to run the program under those circumstances.

SZ: But also, it did keep a kind of cohesiveness to the whole place, the fact that you did that. It probably would have been easier in some ways just to shut it.

RO: I think it was very important to do that, otherwise, obviously, we couldn't have afforded really to shut down entirely. We would have lost our entire membership. It was not easy, but I think it was done with reasonably good grace.

SZ: So what comes to mind is what was going on in the beginning of the construction phase of it, which was the planning for and then the execution of this huge Picasso show [1980].

RO: Yes, [laughing] that was the other great moment when we were going to do the largest retrospective that had ever been done of Picasso as our final act. We were terrified that lenders would come and see the bulldozers working in the Garden and various other things. In fact, the plan was to be doing excavating with explosives and so forth [laughter], so we managed to do that before the show opened. But that, too, was a balancing act. But that was a great event, of course, if you remember, you were there. The setup we had in the Garden with the lines and the umbrellas and the whole business.

SZ: Can you just tell me a little bit more about that? I know that you, along with Bill Rubin, had a lot to do with securing the approvals for the loans.

RO: Oh yes, we both had to do a great deal of work together because it involved dealing with governments, in some cases. Particularly the whole business of getting the commitments for the Russian loans, which we finally got, and then all that went up in smoke with the war in Afghanistan, when the U.S. refused to indemnify the works and the Russians pulled out. But still, fortunately, the show was so strong that while we all missed those pictures, the public really didn't. But it was a fantastic thing to pull off. Ninety-eight percent of the credit, of course, goes to Bill Rubin. But to get these commitments of these major pictures from so many institutions around the world and from lenders -- it was a phenomenal success.

SZ: And was that actually the first time that the Museum incorporated Acoustiguide? I think it was, if I recall.

RO: I think it was, on that scale, but oddly enough, I think we experimented with it -- I could be wrong on this -- but I think we experimented with an Acoustiguide for a modest show, Alicia Legg's show of sculpture of Matisse. I could be dead wrong on this, but I seem to remember that there was an attempt just to see how it would work out. But this was certainly the first time that we had the whole panoply of machines.

SZ: Did you have feelings about that at the time?

RO: At the time, yes. At the time, I think I, and most of the curators were dubious about this. They felt that it would, instead of helping people, distract attention so that people would be listening to facts or listening to what they were supposed to see rather than what they actually were seeing. There was a kind of lingering suspicion of the whole experience. On the other hand, it was clearly something that the public felt they wanted and needed. It was very heavily used, and I think that experience convinced most of us that this was a worthwhile thing, because it was communicating art education in a way that was obviously very effective and that people appreciated. Before that, I think the assumption of the curators was that everyone would go home and read the book from cover to cover, which, alas, never happens with any show.

SZ: And today?

RO: And today, I think it's been wholly accepted that there are a lot of people who don't use it and who feel it's unnecessary, but the ones who do find it very helpful. There have also been improvements in technology. One of the things that people objected to was the noise that you used to hear from the early Acoustiguides; you could be standing next to somebody and you would hear this voice, the way people listen to

music on a bus or something. But that seems to have gone its way.

SZ: Do you use them, ever?

RO: No, I don't. I like to self guide myself. I may not learn a lot of things, but I'd rather do it than use the Acoustiguide. What we had to do, as I remember, we also plotted several paths, because the crowds were so great that if everybody had followed exactly from this picture to that picture, it would have been a [congestion] problem. So we had several different paths or programs for them. I don't remember how many we had.

And there were other problems with the show we had to deal with. Bill had underestimated how fascinated people would be with the earliest pictures, which were right at the first galleries. We had this incredible jam as people got in and spent an hour in those first galleries rather than going on. So we had to rearrange and space out the works. But it was quite a time. You remember, people were hawking the *Picasso* catalogue on the streets.

SZ: And what about the ticketing? That was a first also, was it not?

RO: Yes, it was the first advance ticketing arrangement we'd done.

SZ: And was that a controversial decision?

RO: No, that was the ideal solution to a problem we recognized from the beginning. The last thing we wanted was to have the show be so impossible to see because of the crowds that no one would enjoy it. Although we could have made, just as happened later on with the *Matisse*, much more money by having unlimited attendance, we did feel that we owed it to the public to have a decent experience when they came. And the ticketing was a very complicated thing that was worked out. The person who

really deserves credit for that was Jim Snyder. He also handled the whole Acoustiguide business, and it turned out to be an absolute model of how these things should be done.

SZ: So as you say, it was just a phenomenal exhibition done at a time when this genre of exhibitions was kind of at its height, or at least on the rise.

RO: It certainly wasn't the first blockbuster show by any means. In museum terms, you can even go back to the Van Gogh show that they had in the 1930s, and then the Turner show, and so forth. But, thinking more in terms of the entire field, there was already established this kind of blockbuster concept.

SZ: Which also had the end effect of pulling in different kinds of people into the Museum.

RO: Oh yes, there is no question that it expanded the audience, and in the case of something like the *Picasso* show, I think it expanded the audience in the right way rather than just creating a passing fascination. But it's almost an indication of how small the old Museum was, if you think that we had actual trouble fitting in the works in that *Picasso* show, while we were turning over the whole Museum to that show. So it's a kind of commentary.

SZ: Because after the expanded Museum reopened the *Matisse* show was even larger in terms of numbers of works?

RO: I don't know. I think it was about the same. But there again, of course, we used two whole floors.

SZ: As a former museum director, what do you feel about that trend, which is now in some ways reversing itself, of having these very, very, very large, totally comprehensive shows?

RO: The key to it is the value of the show itself. In other words, I do think it's getting a little tiresome to recycle Monet and all of the magic names over and over again simply to boost attendance. [Tape Interruption]

SZ: So, you were just commenting on some of the pros and cons of these huge shows.

RO: I think there have been several of these blockbusters that were done very well recently that I think have been pointless, great flower paintings, or things of this sort. I think it's really a question of content, and I think the Museum's record has been very good on this because I can't think of a show that we have done solely to hype the attendance. It's always nice when you combine the two of them, but unfortunately, I think this is something facing all of the museums, that they have to plan on a program that at least includes one of these a year, or at least one crowd-pleasing show, hopefully a good one.

SZ: But loan shows have gotten more and more difficult to do because of the expense of the insurance and all?

RO: Yes, except the federal indemnity changed that situation enormously, and it's really a program that hasn't gotten the credit it deserves. Because without the indemnity, most of these big blockbuster shows would not be possible; the insurance would just be totally prohibitive.

SZ: I think that there's a move now -- they may still be big shows but -- toward more shows based on museum collection works.

RO: Everyone is trying to emphasize their collections, but the blunt fact is that that just doesn't seem to get the kind of attention that the big loan shows do. But that's what every museum is trying to do, is to seek to find better ways of presenting the

collection, which, of course, is what the whole current MoMA pattern of these *Making Choices* exhibition is about, to see if we can rework the collection in interesting ways.

SZ: It's been pretty good.

RO: It has in general been, I think, like everything else: some things work very well, others work less well. There was another rationale for doing this, of course, which was that we were afraid we'd be besieged with loan requests from institutions all over the world because they were all planning millennium shows that would probably put them at our front door for some key pictures. The only way to cope with that without antagonizing all of our colleagues was to, in effect, say that we were not going to make loans, we were going to use them ourselves for these shows.

SZ: So that's what happened.

RO: And that's how the plan began of trying to do something that would emphasize our own collection. I shouldn't be talking about the current events [laughing]. I remember those, unfortunately, somewhat better.

SZ: Well, maybe the last thing I'll ask you about today, because it also fit in this time period and is related, was the whole issue of *Guernica*.

RO: Ah yes, that was another major event. Well, you remember the circumstances. *Guernica* was always on loan from Picasso and we always suspected that at some point it would go; however, Picasso had been very vague about it. What he said was that it should go to Spain -- and we always had to remind people that it was not going to go back to Spain because it had never been there -- but that it would go to Spain when democracy was restored in Spain. That's what Picasso had said, and he entrusted that decision to his right hand man, Roland Dumas, who subsequently, of

course, became the Foreign Minister of France and then got involved currently in a terrible scandal [laughter]. However, Dumas was his lawyer and trusted confidant and so it was Dumas who, after Picasso's death, said that even though the monarchy existed in Spain, it was still a democracy and that the time had come. So, obviously, we were deeply unhappy to lose *Guernica*. We were able to retain it through the *Picasso* show. Then a whole group of ministers arrived to accompany it to Spain.

SZ: That was a pretty emotional thing.

RO: It was a very emotional thing. There were also conservation questions; we had never wanted to move the picture or to roll it, so the whole business of transporting it raised issues of would this harm the picture, and so on, that we had to consider.

SZ: And there were security questions as well?

RO: Oh yes, the whole thing was secret -- the whole planning of taking it to the airport with armed guards and so forth.

SZ: Because the fear was what?

RO: Well, the fear was everything from Basque separatists to someone thinking they could heist one of the world's most valuable paintings. It would have had a rather modest value on the market, if you had tried to sell it. [Laughter]

SZ: It would be a little difficult!

RO: They could have held it hostage. And then, of course, it was subsequently installed in this ancillary building to the Prado, and there I remember seeing it, with armed guards with guns standing on all sides of it because of Basque threats.

SZ: Have you been back there lately?

RO: It's now in the Reina Sophia, which was very controversial, because Picasso had made it clear that he thought Picasso belonged in the Prado with Velasquez and other great painters, and he never wanted it to be anywhere except the Prado. And now, of course, it is the mainstay of the modern museum in Madrid.

SZ: But there was never any question that it would be handed over?

RO: Dumas was clearly entrusted by Picasso to make this decision, so there was not much room for argument. The only arguments one could make would be absolute assurance of security for the work, and for the transport, and how it would be displayed and so forth.

SZ: And last question. The reopening? Anything about that that you remember?

RO: It was obviously a very moving and exciting event when we all gathered in the Garden Hall, and all of the staff was up around all of the railings. Do you remember that?

SZ: Yes, I do.

RO: And I do remember that wonderful picture of Mrs. Rockefeller looking up in the Garden Hall.

SZ: She made a wonderful speech.

RO: The remarks were very good, and it was a real moment when I think everybody deserved tremendous ovation because it had been so hard. And, above all, what

had been so good about it was the perseverance of the trustees and the staff and everybody to make this happen, and the result was really very handsome at the time. As I said earlier, the press response was almost uniformly very, very warm. It was only later that people started criticizing the escalators as being too commercial and the gallery downstairs as being too dark, and so on.

SZ: How did you feel about the way that downstairs gallery worked? Kynaston's [McShine] show was the first show that was in it, right?

RO: Yes, exactly. Well, the problem with the downstairs gallery, which actually is a perfectly good gallery, is that it is downstairs. There is something psychologically disturbing to people, including me, for that matter, of going down to a cellar gallery. It was one of the reasons why I fought tooth and nail against the idea of building galleries under the Garden, which was seriously considered.

SZ: For that expansion or for this next one?

RO: Seriously considered for that expansion, as a matter of fact. And then it resurfaced again, later on. But the downstairs gallery was just a problem from the beginning. The other problem was something that the architect had nothing to do with which was where the spine of the Tower came down; it would have been less claustrophobic if the escalator had come down into a big hall, but, as you know, it comes down to a space that faces a wall there, which is where the Museum Tower comes in, and so nothing could be done about that. But it was only later, gradually, that people began to criticize it as much as they now have. When it first opened, it was just welcomed by everyone as so much additional space that could be used; and, of course, the new movie theater was there.

SZ: Well, here is a project that was just an enormous undertaking and balancing act. It was completed and opened and was there: now, it's about to be dismantled.

RO: Well, it was accomplished in a very innovative way. I don't think that without the whole Trust for Cultural Resources, the whole plan of the air rights, and so on, that we would have been able to do anything more than just tinker with the old building and maybe build another small addition, because the trustees were too nervous at that time about the Museum's long-range economic future. You remember what interest rates were like in those days? It was a really very tough time. I think we got the best we could possibly have gotten, and I think we got it in a rather remarkable way.

What we achieved: we did double the size of the Museum, but we never doubted from the moment we started that the Museum could actually use much more space. We knew that we had problems of not having high enough ceilings for a lot of contemporary work. We knew that, above all, contemporary work couldn't be accommodated in the existing galleries as it properly should, as we continued to collect. So there was always down the pike the idea that we would probably at some later point have to build. There were discussions of moving the whole museum to different sites as a possible answer to this, because in the long run it would have to expand. What we did do, I think that we accomplished the most that we could have in that climate, and I think we did it very well.

We did manage to do one thing which, now, unfortunately, is going to be changed, but necessarily. This last expansion, even though we doubled it, did still leave a museum that you could encompass in one visit. People still didn't feel overwhelmed by the Museum. It wasn't like going to the Louvre or the Met, where you can only see a few things before you get too tired. At the Modern you could see the temporary exhibitions and the permanent collection galleries, go through all of that. That will no longer be possible. The new museum, which will be more than double this current one, will be more like the Met. You will go to see an exhibition or the

permanent collection or a part of the collection. That's a sad loss, but as long as it's a collecting institution, there's no real answer to it.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **RICHARD E. OLDENBURG (RO)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

DATE: **JUNE 9, 2000**

TAPE 4, SIDE 1

RO: Well, you asked about the International Program and my relationship with it, and I just would comment that when I became director, I really became aware of what a powerful, positive force the International Council was. Not only were there some marvelous people involved with it, but it also was terrific at presenting the Museum's face to the world and giving us the kind of prestige and even affection that the Museum enjoys. What was particularly helpful, of course, also, were the relationships that were formed through the program with individual collectors, since all of the members of the Council were either major trustees of their own museums or, in many cases, private collectors. We could literally call people we knew to request a loan if we didn't know the director; we could, in effect, prepare the way, not that they had the power to do it.

And that was very helpful on a number of occasions. I can think of quite a few, particularly with institutions in Latin America.

And then the other side of it was the fact that the Council did very generously raise money to support the exhibitions and other programs we did send abroad or carried on abroad. They also were very generous donors to our capital campaign drives and so forth. The bottom line of all this is that I certainly realized how important the Council and its programs were to the Museum, but I think sometimes they were

undervalued by some of the curators, occasionally, who felt that this was a kind of a rival program that was preparing exhibitions under different auspices and so on. But that began to vanish over the years, and I think that it was fully accepted by the time I left the Museum. Since then, I think there have been moves to coordinate it more completely with the rest of the program so that there isn't even any semblance of competitiveness or conflict, which I gather is working very well.

SZ: Anything about the trips? I recently had an opportunity to talk to several of the members of the Council.

RO: Well, the trips were obviously one of the great perks of being director and occasionally of being curator at the Modern. We went on these marvelously prepared trips with entrées to collections we wouldn't have otherwise, and of course it gave us an opportunity to meet museum directors that we might not otherwise know. And it was also plain fun. I remember the first International Council trip I went on – well, actually the first one I went was to Venezuela, but the second one, the one I was really thinking of that was so spectacular, was when we went to Australia. That was a whole new world. It certainly had a special meaning for my wife, too. Lisa loved to travel, she enjoyed these trips and enormously enjoyed the other members of the Council. So that was a particularly pleasant thing. The unpleasant part of it was that I was rarely able to take the time to go on a full trip, so I usually wound up going for a few days of the trip and then coming back. But in every way it was worthwhile. It did, since you mentioned it, also help because it provided a kind of international platform when I became a member of the International Committee on Museums of Modern Art, which was a division of ICOM, the International Council of Museums. It gave me a base. I already knew a lot of the people, and it was very helpful and cemented those relationships.

SZ: And in terms of the support of the Museum?

RO: Do you mean their support of the Museum? Well, they were major contributors to both capital campaigns that I was involved in, which, of course, is reflected in the International Council Gallery, which was a recognition of all of the help they had given. And that was support above and beyond what they were contributing in dues and in special contributions to special projects. These were direct contributions to the Museum's endowment but also to the endowment that supported the Council's activities.

SZ: I presume that that just increased during the course of your tenure as director.

RO: Yes, it did, and I can't remember a year when the Council was not balanced in its budgets and whether there were any major questions. The only time we ever had a major problem that I remember was when we had trouble collecting our bills from Seville when the big exposition there laid an egg and we had a weak show there. Even there, I managed to get an International Council member to intercede and put our bill a little higher in the pile, so that eventually we did get paid.

SZ: I presume that in this era of globalization, probably some of the distinctions are blurring at this point.

RO: They are. You talked of a time when the Museum was forming the Council and forming the program. It was really a pioneering thing. These were the first exhibitions, as you know, historically, even long before my time, of American abstract art, so there was a very different kind of role. Now, international exchange exhibitions are very common currency, so it's not much of an exploratory role.

However, it is still true that there are a lot of under-served areas, and I think the Council has recognized that their role perhaps in Europe is a lesser one than it used to be, though, obviously, when you have a very good exhibition it doesn't have any particular national significance. But when we thought we would try to bring works

that hadn't been seen in certain areas, just as there had been in early years an effort to deal with Latin American museums on a scale that very few museums were doing, and we also did the same in Australia and Japan. Now, as some of the facilities are improving, in India and other possible places, it is a global world and perhaps we are less needed than we used to be. But there are still a lot of institutions less reluctant than we to mount exhibitions and to send them abroad except in exchange for huge fees, which most of these places are obviously totally unable to pay. In most cases, we were subsidizing the shows we were sending. We would try to raise local funding, but basically, we were paying for them.

SZ: Anything about ICOM as an organization?

RO: ICOM obviously is an attempt to bring that world together, and it suffers from the usual problems of an organization that big. It is so large that they sort of get lost. It's a little bit like the AAM [American Association of Art Museums], which the Museum has never been particularly active in because of the range of everything from natural history museums to art museums and so on. It's so large. ICOM was very helpful and it is continuing to be helpful when they have the big conferences with major topics they discuss and issue papers on and so forth. But, like most people, I always found the most effective use of those large organizations were the smaller committees like the modern art committee [International Committee on Museums of Modern Art] that I chaired after Pontus Hulten had chaired it. And that was of course where the colleagues got to know each other. Also out of ICOM grew the recognition on the part of a lot of museums that the range of institutions in these big organizations was so wide that really close attention to the problems of particular museums was hard to focus. So what grew out of it is something that is to my knowledge still functioning, this International Exhibitions Committee. I believe Glenn [Lowry] has been attending the annual meetings of that group, where large institutions who have more income, obviously, than smaller art museums, get together to discuss the really global problems of insurance, transport, customs

barriers, seizure, all kinds of problems that are faced by museums on the level of the Louvre and the [recording inaudible] and all of these major European museums, including the Russian museums.

SZ: In terms of acquisitions and deaccessions, any notables during your directorship? We talked about “Guernica” going to Spain.

RO: I’d have to plumb my memory to answer that one. In general, I think the record of the deaccessioning and accessioning was really excellent. Bill Rubin felt very responsible about it and what the basic guidelines were that we generally followed -- even though they weren’t engraved in stone -- was that we did not deaccession a work to get general funds; we deaccessioned for specific purposes when a superior work might be acquired or one that the collection needed more than it needed the one that was being deaccessioned. We also continued not to deaccession works by living artists for fear of affecting their markets. When we did, it was always with the artist’s agreement, so that we would acquire a better work by the same artist, which we did on a couple of occasions.

There were some particular triumphs. I think the deal that we negotiated with the Guggenheim to bring together the Kandinsky “Seasons” was a wonderful one which worked out beautifully in the sense that we combined the series which had been split between us for complicated historical reasons, and in exchange were able to give the Guggenheim a Matisse and a Picasso, which they did not have, artists that we were rich in. And the best of all was when the smoke had cleared, all of these works were still in New York in public institutions, so it was a win situation for everyone, I think. That’s one that I particularly remember.

We also had a policy that seems -- I haven’t been talking to anybody recently but -- seems perhaps to be changing now, which was that in general, with very few exceptions, I can’t think of one in fact, we did not deaccession a classic modern

picture to buy a contemporary work. I could see the problem coming because the so-called contemporary works, when you're dealing with Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and so on, were getting so expensive. It was not like the old days when you could buy works for $20,000 or $30,000 by a contemporary artist. I was just reading recently about the deaccessioning of the Picasso which I gather has been deaccessioned to generate funds to buy more contemporary works.

SZ: "Man With Guitar," I think.

RO: I don't know the circumstances, so I shouldn't really comment on it, but since it was one of the rules that we used to use, I can perfectly well see a change in that being necessary just to acquire works of the kinds of costs. And of course there's the whole question of what's classic and what's contemporary. By this time, even though contemporary obviously means the artist is still with us, when you reach the kind of level of the established contemporary artists like Johns and Ellsworth Kelly and Rauschenberg and Frank Stella and Richard Serra and so on, you're dealing with certainly classic works by now, particularly when you're getting them from the early periods. [Tape Interruption]

You were asking about the presidents and chairmen I worked with, and I was incredibly lucky because, when I was confirmed as director after I had been acting director, Mrs. [Blanchette] Rockefeller became president of the Museum and Bill Paley became chairman. That was the team that I worked with through most of my years at the Museum, and it was an absolutely marvelous team because they were both so dedicated to the Museum and to backing up what the Museum wanted to do.

Blanchette, of course, was such a spectacularly marvelous person. She was not only marvelously nice and approachable and friendly to everyone, all of that we know, but people underestimated the real intelligence and sensitivity that she had. She was one of the best judges of people I ever encountered, and she could case

someone very, very fast as to whether she thought they were really to be trusted or to be furthered along, but she was never antagonistic to anyone. She really had a very good sense of this, whether it was in case of hiring people, or considering trustees, or of approaching donors and so forth.

Bill Paley, on his side, was marvelously supportive, not at all intrusive. It was a legend at CBS that every producer would complain that they couldn't get through to Mr. Paley, but if anyone called from The Museum of Modern Art, he would always take the call, which was certainly a flattering thing. And I found it to be true. I found that whenever I needed to call him or to confirm something that we wanted to do, he was always there. And, of course, he presided over the meetings and presided very well. I found him very good to work with. I obviously was aware that Paley had a reputation for being very difficult to work with within his company, and someone once referred to me as his oldest living employee [laughter], but he also had very good staff people. Arthur Tourtelot for years was the person who was the liaison with the Museum, and he was a very sensitive and intelligent person. So I had a very good experience with them.

When Don Marron succeeded Mrs. Rockefeller, Don was, of course, a much younger person and also reared in a different world, the whole Wall Street thing, which brought us a lot of pluses. He thought in different ways. He was concerned about bringing the management up to snuff in some ways and revising our committee structure, and most of the time his ideas were very good. He also was excellent in another way, which was that there was absolutely no question about his dedication to art. He was a very serious collector and really cared about what he collected. He wasn't doing it for prestige. He really enjoyed going to galleries and building his collection. In general, he was a good person to work with as president because he did feel strongly about major issues and some changes that he thought should be made, but he was not anyone who intruded himself into the minor things. I never felt that I had to check with Don about changes that really didn't have any long-range

impact on the institution. In general, I could get his advice -- and it was very good always -- when I wanted it, but I didn't have to seek it, or, he wasn't sensitive to that. So we worked very well together.

Then, of course, Aggie [Agnes Gund] I had known for many years, first through the International Council and then through having been one of the key people I think who persuaded her to join the board when she moved to New York. There was some question she was being wooed by the Whitney and other institutions. So I got to know her quite well, and happily she did join the board. And with Aggie, you're dealing with a very special force. She's such a strongly committed but also marvelously interested and involved person. There are similarities between working with her and Blanchette, and I saw often echoes. And, of course, one major echo was the kind of relationship that Aggie had with the whole staff. She had that same knowledge of the guards and of the curators and so on, so they felt a personal touch that was and is very important even today.

So, on balance, I think I was, through a very long period -- which in fact was why I was able to survive for such a long period -- I was blessed with a not only chief officers who were very supportive, but with a board that was trained to an old tradition that their real role was to hire and fire directors, to support the programs during that period, or remove the person if he was doing a bad job. The kind of tradition that that board had was very different from what I would hear from some of my colleagues, where they had board battles and factions and so forth. I can't think of a single instance like that during my twenty-three years there.

SZ: Kind of hands-off, is that what you're saying?

RO: It was hands-off, often hands-on in the sense of wanting to be involved, and of course the committee structure was the way of doing that. It wasn't at all that they were quiet or silent about what they thought about programs and what we should do

about them. But, ultimately, you didn't feel that you had to pacify any faction of the board. For example, I can't remember anyone ever questioning a decision to do an exhibition. They might say, "Wouldn't it be better to have done something like this?" but I can never remember any comment on the program that would have implied that the trustees felt that they could dictate the content of the program or how it was structured and so on. They might not like it from time to time, they might feel there was too much contemporary, or too little contemporary, but that comment would be all above-board. It would not be, when I read of some of these things now at other institutions where, as in Vancouver, the board forced a rock-and-roll show on the museum director who has now resigned. This kind of thing is absolutely unheard of, happily, at our place.

SZ: Did they give you a free hand with hiring and firing of staff, too?

RO: Yes, but there again, the committee structure was a way of working with that. Obviously, you consulted with a committee when an important position was to be filled. You wouldn't hire a new head of Drawings without talking to the Drawings committee, and normally you formed a search committee that had trustees on it who were most closely involved. I was actually fortunate in another way, now that you mention it. During that time, I had comparatively few major curatorial jobs to fill. The staff there was obviously of very high quality. I inherited Bill Rubin and Riva Castleman and [Bill Lieberman] and John Szarkowski and Arthur Drexler, so in my time there, it was mostly having to replace people through retirement or, in Arthur's case, death. But it generally was quite smooth, and I take a certain pride in the fact that now, having left five years ago, very few of the staff has changed in terms of there being any kind of dissatisfaction. They've replaced some people who have left for other reasons, but the basic staff is still in place.

SZ: I'm trying to think: there was Arthur's position you had to fill.

RO: Arthur's position we had to fill, first with Stuart Wrede and then with Terry [Riley]. And then, of course, Kirk Varnedoe for Bill's [Rubin] position. And the Drawings department: when Bill Lieberman left, and then we had John Elderfield, then John was only doing that part of the time. But, in general, it was smooth. The Film department also. Now that we mention it, there are probably more there than I was thinking of.

SZ: Well, it was twenty-two years ago.

RO: I give some twenty-three because I deducted seventy-two from ninety-five.

SZ: So, '95.

RO: Well, it was the end of '94 that I left. Twenty-two years.

SZ: I was thinking, they announced your departure in 1993. So, was it your decision to retire?

RO: Well, as you remember there was kind of a protracted thing there.

SZ: Before you do that, the one thing that may or may not lead into that was, at some point in the 1980s, this new administrative overlay was put in place where you got several deputy directors, which you hadn't had before. It was just maybe a different way of shuffling it around?

RO: It was a different way of shuffling it around because it was a way of directly delegating some of the authority. It didn't actually change much in practice. But what happened was that it was recognized that the director's job, particularly with all of the fundraising and so on, was getting to be more than a person could supervise on a day-to-day basis. And it was less of that the system wasn't running well than that it

looked so odd on paper that everything reported directly to the director. All of the department heads felt demeaned if they weren't reporting to the director, even if some of them I didn't see for weeks at a time. So then we set up that structure. There were suggestions from outside management firms. I remember this was during Marron's time. He felt, looking at this, that it was a very odd kind of corporate structure, where everything appeared to report there. But to the people we put in place, in wasn't as though we had brought in a lot of deputy directors; we, in effect were anointing some of the key people there with that title so that it would look more rational.

SZ: Did it make a difference to you in the way things operated day-to-day?

RO: Yes, it did. It made a difference, because it was possible for everyone to accept it because it was done to everyone. It would have been impossible if I had told Bill Rubin, for instance, that he was going to report to some coordinator. But as it was set up, everyone recognized that it had some logic, that it had already pretty much happened, and that it was just recognizing what was there. For example, Beverly Wolff had been the person handling all of the Museum's legal affairs, as well as Personnel. Nothing changed when she was given the title of Deputy Director. Jim Snyder was a great help because the administrative stuff then went directly to him, whereas often a lot of it had come to me. So that was not a big change. What I had started to say was, the change that I was thinking of more was, and perhaps in line with that thinking, there came the sort of vogue for the paid president routine, which of course the Metropolitan Museum of Art had instituted. And that had gone on to influence other institutions like the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which had adopted the pattern.

SZ: Chicago did it, too, but it didn't work.

RO: The Art Institute of Chicago did it. Well, the bottom line was that in most cases, it didn't work. It was unfortunately one of those ideas that looked good to a lot of business-oriented trustees because on paper it appeared that they would have a director who was involved with curatorial affairs, and a president who would be involved with fundraising and administration and management. It looks very tidy, but it doesn't work, and I felt strongly from the beginning, and argued openly at the board meetings, that this was a bad idea, that no decisions were ever purely administrative or purely curatorial. They were so interrelated that there was no way in which you could make tidy little piles of them. And I also felt that even with fundraising, it was not effective because the idea that the paid president would be a more effective fundraiser than the director was a wrong one; most people, when they want to give to an institution, want to talk to the curatorially-oriented side. They're not giving to another corporation.

It made more sense at the Metropolitan for a different reason, which was that a lot of the funding came from the City and it was a lot of work to deal with the City, to deal with City budgets, all of this kind of thing. So their having a paid president was a useful device.

However, there were a number of other reasons I felt that it was very difficult, and obviously, it was the built-in problem of who was ultimately in charge of the place. You could get two people who were very good at personal relations, who even got along very, very well, but this just was an inevitable conflict and people would play on it, people who were less well-intentioned. If they got the wrong answer from one, they might go to the other. So I argued strongly against it. I felt that the better formula for any institution like this would be to have a strong director, and then a strong deputy director who would, in fact, be in charge of all of the administrative things, reporting to the director. I am happy to say that, in the years that have followed, that's proven to be the pattern in almost every major institution. When Chicago abandoned the presidency, Philadelphia abandoned the presidency, and

the Met virtually abandoned the presidency, except on paper. It's very clear that the present director at the Met is the ultimate CEO, and that has been declared.

So I think that that pattern, that vogue, disappeared. It only began to disappear at the Modern when they were having a terrible problem finding likely candidates for the paid president. They interviewed quite a few, and none of them really seemed a good answer to the problem. They either weren't sensitive enough to the art issues, or they were too sensitive to the art issues and, in effect, might not even have wanted the job if they didn't feel that they were in control of that. So, happily, that went away, but it went away to some degree because of my own decision, which was that because some of the trustees felt strongly that some of the problems in hiring someone were the fact that you had obviously a director that had been director for so many years that it was always going to be seen as some kind of an imposition on that person.

And this really started me thinking about the fact that maybe it would be a better thing to leave the Museum so that they could hire a new director, since we were obviously going to be facing an expansion plan, and then they wouldn't have to play the games with the paid president and so forth. And that's, of course, what eventually happened. From my point of view, the timing of my retirement from the Museum was earlier than I had planned, but it was also not that much earlier, because I was looking forward. We were already dealing with the Dorset Hotel, closing in on that acquisition. It was clear that we had to expand, that we were going to be doing a new campaign and an expansion, and that would be, based on the experience of the last time, it could be something that would take ten years to accomplish, and I obviously was not going to be around the Museum for another ten years. I might at most have been around for another five years. So I think this was the right decision.

SZ: And the search for your successor, did you participate in that?

RO: I did. I tried to stay out of it, in fact, I wanted to stay out of it. I made some suggestions of people, both on the higher tier and on the lower tier. By that, I mean people who were already in place in major museums and people who I thought were comers and whom I knew through the Art Museum Directors Association, but after that, I stepped aside for obvious reasons. They could come and ask me about it, but for me to be on the committee would have been very awkward for everybody, so I never was. But I was kept pretty well posted, and as we all know, it dragged on and on. As I fully expected, some of the people running major institutions who were running them well were very reluctant to leave. They had established relationships with their trustees, they were happy in their jobs, and to take on a whole new museum, great as the Modern was -- it was flattering, of course, to be asked -- was not something that appealed to somebody like Jim Wood or Anne d'Harnoncourt.

SZ: Partly because the expectation of the amounts of money to be raised and the mechanics of the huge building project?

RO: I think more because they were comparatively happy where they were. In at least a couple of cases, people whom they approached, people who had possibly made their careers in the field of modern art, still found it very satisfactory to be in institutions that were encyclopedic, where they could deal with other areas as well. So the idea then of looking at the people who were running museums of modern art, most of them less distinguished than the Modern, these people often had other limitations. It was not any failure on the part of the trustees that it was protracted; it was rather a sign of the difficulty in the profession of finding people who are a right fit, who can do all of the things that they wanted them to do. The Modern, I don't think, realized how unusual it was to have directors in place for as long as Rene d'Harnoncourt was in place and I was in place. When they started looking around they saw directors changing institutions every four or five years. There was also a new factor that I was conscious of when I talked about some of the lower tier people

who I thought were potentially fine candidates: there had been a change in the profession, where curators -- who formerly were paid very, very badly and had to become directors to get a decent salary -- had become more valued by institutions, happily, and a lot of them were smart enough to realize that it was better to be chief curator at a major museum and spend his or her whole time with art, than to take on the administrative role of the director and raise funds. And as any director can attest, there is almost no time left, certainly no time for independent scholarship or research or doing exhibitions yourself. So it's a less attractive job, in some cases, and I think that affected some of the people that I had suggested potentially for the job.

SZ: Do you miss it?

RO: I certainly don't miss the job, no. I miss the place, I miss the people.

SZ: Of course, it is different now, too. Largely the people who populated your Museum have retired or left.

RO: Yes, a lot of them are retired or have left. I still see quite a few people who are still there, but I also keep up relationships with people like Bill Rubin and John Szarkowski. I look back on this with immense gratitude, not only for the opportunity and the excitement of the job, but for the relationships there, and that's what I miss. But I certainly don't miss the breakfast meetings about the campaign.

SZ: Just for the record, Dick: you left and you are doing what now?

RO: I left the Museum at the very end of 1994. My plan at that time was to run a program at Harvard University, administered by the Fogg Museum, to deal with the problems that we had faced in seeking to replace me, namely the fact that a lot of the curators were unwilling to take on administrative jobs. We thought we could do something about that, to get across the idea that if you don't take on these responsibilities, you'll

meet something worse. You'll get someone who has no understanding of what you're trying to do. We also wanted to help new directors with advice from more experienced ones. So we were working on these programs, which was attractive to me. I had a commitment, however, to go off to Russia as an advisor for five weeks to the Russian museum in St. Petersburg, which I thought was going to be fun. My wife and I had a marvelous time there, even though it was February, it was great. Just before I left, I was approached by Sotheby's as to whether I might consider becoming chairman of Sotheby's, and I originally said I didn't think so. Well, they said, "Think about it," they would keep it open until I came back, which they did. By the time I got back, my wife had pretty much convinced me that we'd be better off staying in New York and that I would be happier in this environment than I would, at my age, shifting back into an academic environment.

SZ: With all of those young people! [Laughter]

RO: Yes. It also would have been a part time role up there, and I would have been commuting, so, as much as I loved Harvard, I was persuaded that this was the best thing to do, which I have also been infinitely grateful for. I've been there now five years, and have also formed relationships there which mean a great deal to me, just as the ones at the Modern did. And I stayed in the same world. I see exactly the same art world people and the trustees and collectors that I used to.

END OF TAPE 4, SIDE 1

END INTERVIEW