THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**WILLIAM S. RUBIN (WR)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**EAST 58TH STREET NEW YORK, NEW YORK**
DATE:	**OCTOBER 5, 1993**

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Bill, I will start as I now always do and ask you to tell me where and when you were born and to tell me a little bit about your family's background, whatever comes to you.

WR: I was born in 1927 in Brooklyn and lived in Brooklyn until I was, I think, eleven or twelve years old.

SZ: What part of Brooklyn?

WR: Near Ebbett's Field--Lincoln Road. I started going to public schools in Brooklyn, then we switched to an offshoot private school of the Ethical Culture Society in Brooklyn when I was in about third or fourth grade, I think it was, and from fourth to sixth grade I went to that school. Then the family decided, for the purposes of being near the Fieldston School, where my mother wanted us to go to school, that we would move to Riverdale, or Fieldston--the same place, really; more or less the same. We lived just a few blocks from Fieldston School until, I guess, I went into the army, or pretty close to that. I went through from first through sixth form at Fieldston. At that time I was primarily interested in football, girls, music and art, in that order [laughter]. I had the good fortune to take an art course with Victor D'Amico, who at that time was already director of the education system at the Museum, but his department was such small potatoes that even being director of education he only worked three days

a week at MoMA, so he had two days to be director of the Fieldston art program. He encouraged me. They gave a very interesting kind of course, and he encouraged me, since I was interested in music very much, to lead a class on the relationship between Impressionist painting and Debussy and so forth and so on, which in retrospect was all wrong. But I think that educators see that sort of thing more in terms of getting people impassioned about the subject than whether a thirteen-year-old is going to give a horribly accurate appraisal of these things [laughter].

SZ: Fieldston had a particular reputation at that time?

WR: Fieldston had a reputation as one of the best private schools. It was in competition with Horace Mann School for Boys. Then there were some others: Lincoln, Trinity, Barnard School for Boys and so forth that were sort of in the same football league. It was a school small enough that you didn't have to be a professional football player to get on the team. My brothers and I were all co-captains of the football team in our various years. I'm the eldest of three. All of us went to Fieldston, all of us played football there. The youngest is now an art dealer who runs Knoedler's contemporary--Larry--and the other one is a professor at this very fine college near Philadelphia--it's a fine liberal arts coeducational college.

SZ: All I can think of is Haverford.

WR: No, there's a place that's even more prestigious. . .

SZ: Swarthmore.

WR: Swarthmore, that's where he's a professor. He only works half a year and pretty much he's an investment counselor--he's a professor of political science but he's also an investment counselor. He had been in business before he cut out to take his Ph.D. and go into the academy, so he still has old connections and he spends some of his time clipping coupons and things like that. He's brought up five children. They live sort of up near Katonah, something like that. So that accounts the three of us.

SZ: Fieldston wasn't Ethical Culture, it was....

WR: It was run by the Ethical Culture Society, but it wasn't...they had an ethics class, which was always taught by a member of the Ethical Culture Society, but beyond that there wasn't any apparent relationship, except that the funding must have been all connected in some way.

SZ: I guess what I was really asking was that as a family you weren't avid ethical culturists.

WR: No, not at all. I don't think my mother or father would have known what it meant. I'm not sure I do [laughing]. That was not the point. The point was that it was known that the teachers were good and the students were good. I studied physics with the same professor as J. Robert Oppenheimer did. You can't do much better. Augustus Clock.

SZ: Did you like school? Were you good at it?

WR: Well, I enjoyed it, and I did quite well. I was in a special English seminar which was sort of a selected thing that was taught by Elbert Lenrow, who was a remarkable man, had been a student of Wanda Landowska and was a real professeur manque that was somehow teaching in this high school. He gave a seminar for selected students in the senior year that was so much better than the kinds of humanities courses you get in freshman year at college that I almost didn't have to crack a book the whole first year I was in college because I had this extraordinary preparation. But since I was most interested in football, there was a certain energy that was deflected from pure studies [laughing].

SZ: And the second greatest interest, I would assume, was....

WR: Girls [laughing]. That was...somehow you could work that in.

SZ: In terms of your atmosphere at home, did your parents love music? Were those the kinds of things that you had there?

WR: No, as a matter of fact, curiously, my parents were very supportive of anything the kids wanted to do, but they had themselves no particular interest in music or literature. They weren't well educated at all. My father had two years of high school and my mother had no high school. Though they were both born in America...well, actually, my mother was brought here when she was six weeks old. But they were brought up in America. My father went to work early. While they read bestsellers and had a certain decent level of cognizance and respect of things cultural- for example, I think when I was twelve, they got opera tickets, simply because other friends of theirs from Fieldston were subscribing to the Metropolitan Opera at that time. The opera was in a bad way and was sort of proselytizing. Even at school I can remember someone giving a talk about how we had to support the opera, they were selling little pieces of the gold curtain for contributions and so forth. So I went with my parents one of the first nights, and I liked it. Since I didn't want to go through the ridiculous ceremony of bar mitzvah because I didn't know any Hebrew and they themselves didn't have any interest in anything religious, but sort of wanted it for grammas's sake, I made the price of cooperation a subscription to the Metropolitan. I still have that subscription now. I must be in my, what, about fifty-third year or something like that. You know, if you liked records, they'd buy you records, if you liked football, they would buy you footballs. They were very generous.

SZ: And visually?

WR: They really had no sophistication in that. I can remember that what hung over the fireplace in Brooklyn was a hand-painted copy of what I later discovered to be a Bonington landscape. It was pretty much middle-class taste. I got my mother a little bit interested in painting later on; in fact, when I was a young professor at Sarah Lawrence college, I convinced my parents to buy a couple of pictures, and they bought some very good pictures at my suggestion--a very beautiful early Nabis Bonnard and a Feininger and a Magritte and so forth. Needless to say, these cost

nothing in those days. Later, when for whatever reason my mother sold the Feininger for eighty times what we paid, my father for the first time got impressed [laughing]. His attitude was basically helpful but he didn't really believe in the “value” of any of these things.

SZ: He was a successful businessman.

WR: Very successful, yes. At the end of his life he had four factories going—known together as Delaware Industries--in Delaware and in New York. It was sort of wool processing and reprocessing, as well as wool importing and all that kind of stuff. I did a brief stint in the family business in 1949, when I was sort of trying to figure out what to do with myself. I went, in fact, to Australia, to be on a sheep farm for a certain length of time. But in the end it wasn't really what I wanted. My father was very remarkable in the sense that, though he built up this business, he didn't ever feel that any of his sons had to go into it. He said that he wanted to give us each enough money so that we could do anything we wanted and take jobs that we might otherwise not take for lack of remuneration. One such job is, of course, teaching -- and that's precisely what I did do. I must say that if I had not inherited a quarter of a million dollars -- at a time when that was really big money -- my life would have been much harder. What I was paid when I was a young professor at Sarah Lawrence would probably not even have paid for my car, not to say my apartment.

SZ: It's unusual. It seems to me that he only had desire for you to do what you wanted to do.

WR: He didn't care about building up the business, making a dynastic thing out of it.

SZ: Education--did he care about that?

WR: I think he supported what was essentially somewhat more my mother's position, which was that you must get the best possible education. And we did, I think. After Fieldston I got into a number of colleges, including Yale, but I didn't want to leave

New York because I was then in music, and was studying with the then conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, an Italian named Cesare Sodero. I was serious, so I didn't want to leave the cultural life of New York. So I went to Columbia, which is like a commute deal, and actually I only spent in all two and a quarter years there -- interrupted by the army -- and as they were giving courses over the summers, you could get an A.B. in much less time than today if you loaded up your program sufficiently.

SZ: That was because the war was on?

WR: The war was on when I was beginning there, and was over when I came back. But it was full of veterans and other people anxious to get on with their lives. College was not a place to dawdle around or have a good time, anything like it had been, and is now again.

SZ: Let's just go back to music a little bit, because I think I read you said really before you got interested in the plastic arts that music was your main passion. You started with clarinet?

WR: Yes. I played the clarinet in various places. I played in the 245th Army Ground Forces marching band and concert band and also conducted that concert band. We did some interesting things in band arrangements, things that ranged from Wagner and Verdi overtures to Morton Gould's "Cowboy Rhapsody" and things of that order. We played concerts over the Allied Expeditionary station in Rome, where I was stationed, and we were around to pipe off various dignitaries. We also played concerts for the assembled diplomatic corps and stuff like that. Then, when I came back and I was finishing up college, I played clarinet in the Columbia University chamber orchestra, which was a nice group. But I don't play anymore because you really have to play in an orchestra or something to keep up the clarinet.

SZ: But I see you did pick up the piano along the way.

WR: Well, yes. If you wanted to be a conductor, which is what I wanted to be, you had to play a certain amount of piano. You didn't have to be a virtuoso pianist but, you had to bang out and to sight-read scores and so forth and so on. Now I just play piano to amuse myself, and to sing lieder. I'm a great fan of French and German lieder composers. So I accompany my croaking [laughing]. I was really quite entirely in music, but I had painted semi- seriously ever since I first got involved with it back at the age of thirteen with Victor D'Amico. I felt an affinity for it. Victor, in fact, tried to get me to write things for The Museum of Modern Art when I was sixteen years old. I didn't know what he was up to, and I didn't do it of course, but he was very encouraging. When I came back to college, I painted a little and took one of the studio courses. It was always secondary and marginal. Then I guess my life went through a period where I came to...well, I can't call it a crushing realization because I'd suspected it all along, but the realization that I was not going to be a great conductor. Music is one of those businesses where, if you're not absolutely at the top, you're nowhere, and I didn't want to play clarinet in some small orchestra or end up conducting the Philadelphia Opera Company. I could have done that kind of thing, but it didn't interest me.

SZ: You wanted the New York Philharmonic.

WR: Or at least the Metropolitan Opera or something like that. When you're a big frog in a little pond at the beginning of your life, you're a sort of local, matched off against the local talent, you get to think you're a pretty big frog. But then, when the talent starts pouring in from the other cities and from the sticks, and you start getting into these youth orchestras where you've got everybody coming in, you realize that your status is really not what every Jewish mother would like to convince her son [laughing]. So I decided that I would not make a life as a practicing musician. For a while I specialized in musicology. I studied with Paul Henry Lang, who was then America’s leading musicologist and happened to be at Columbia. So I graduated college with honors in musicology and honors in Italian-language literature. That was partly because I'd studied Italian when I was in the army stationed in Rome and just took a lot of courses when I came back. Be that as it may, it was then that, not being sure of

what I wanted to do, I did a stint in the family business and traveled around the world. Because when my father had sent me to a sheep ranch in Australia, I went via California and crossed the Pacific. By the time I was finished in Australia, I was sure I didn't want to go on in the family business, and my father said, "Why don't you just take a few months and travel back the other way?" So I went to Thailand and Singapore and India and Egypt. I took some photographs in Egypt that I later used in my teaching of art history. When I got back, because I wasn't sure quite what field I wanted to be in, I took an M.A. in history under Jacques Barzun at Columbia, and wrote my thesis on Jules Michelet -- the nineteenth-century French historian -- and the cult of medieval studies during the Romantic period. Having an M.A. behind me, when I was working...

SZ: What year was this?

WR: It all happened very quickly because of this sort of scrunching-together of...by 1952 I was out teaching at Sarah Lawrence, and I had already completed my credits for two M.A.'s and a Ph.D. But we were talking about the period '45, when I graduated high school, through '52, when I began teaching at Sarah Lawrence. In that period I was in the army, got my A.B., traveled around the world, got my M.A. and my Ph.D. credits, then I began teaching. I had to re-take the first thirty credits for the M.A. in art history because it was a different field, so I ended up getting two M.A.'s.

SZ: When you were studying with Victor, did you go down to the Museum or was that all at Fieldston?

WR: It was all at Fieldston. I used to go to the Museum, but I didn't go to see him there. That was all at Fieldston. It was quite amusing to think that when I first came on board at MoMA in whatever it was, 1966 or 1967, there was Victor at the meetings of the department heads. I had a very warm and affectionate attitude toward Victor, though the Museum was actually winding down his practical education program with the idea that they'd continue it until he retired, and then they would knock it out or change it to something else. At any rate, I had been doing this M.A. thesis on

Michelet, and it was during this period that I began regularly auditing the lectures of Meyer Schapiro. A friend of mine, against whom I had played baseball when he was pitching for Lincoln and I was pitching for Fieldston, and who is now a distinguished professor of art history at Stanford, Albert Elsen -- he and I had gone through Columbia together and he was now going on in art history and studying with Meyer -- so I audited Meyer's classes. Then, it turned out that Meyer knew more about Michelet than anyone else at Columbia, so I went to see him about my history thesis, and he was very helpful. Then I sort of decided that...the problem with musicology had been that there was a very limited audience for serious musicology. If you really want to talk about music, you have to be talking to people who not only read music and play, but also have had some harmony and counterpoint, who knew what the different instruments were and so forth. It's a graduate school subject, so to say. Sure, it's taught as an undergraduate subject -- it was taught that way at Columbia. But all sorts of periphrases and metaphors had to be invented. To characterize the line of the melody they'd draw free-hand meandering lines on the blackboard...I felt that musicology wouldn't be an interesting subject to teach, because the cultural part of it, the broad cultural-historical aspect of it, wanted students who knew languages, who were interested in cultural things, while the musical part wanted people who were well trained in music. Well, the two don't often go together. People trained in music often aren't too knowledgeable about anything else. So it occurred to me after hearing Meyer's lectures that one could talk to the uninitiated more easily about painting. One could talk about painting and its cultural context to intelligent people, and they could see what you were talking about, and you didn't have to fall back on any kind of technical language, so to say, or at least very little of it. There was an even greater access, as it were, to cultural history, which is what I liked about musicology, because the relations between music and history are there, but of course they're more tenuous and less concrete than those between paintings and history. So I finally decided to go ahead and take a Ph.D. in art history. I took my first thirty credits over again – now in art history rather than history -- and the thirty more to make sixty. I was planning to stick around and write my dissertation when, suddenly, an opening occurred in June -- very late in the day -- of 1952. The woman who had been teaching art history at Sarah Lawrence College had gotten a last-

minute Fulbright, and so they suddenly needed a professor and they were interviewing. So I went up and was interviewed, and I got the job. As a result, I began serious teaching, and it took me about five years or so to get my dissertation done during the summers. I began teaching there, and then added a professorship at Hunter College, in the graduate school of the City University. I did this because the Sarah Lawrence program didn't have very much in the way of advanced course work, and I wanted to teach some specialized courses in Egyptian art and Early Christian art and so forth. Thus, I was actually a tenured professor at both Sarah Lawrence College and at the City University of New York when I dropped the tenured positions at both of them to join the Museum. At that point, I was invited to become a kind of part-time professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, and that worked out very nicely. I wanted to keep my hand in teaching, but I wanted to do it in such a way that it wouldn't impinge upon my Museum work.

SZ: Once you started studying art history, was that exciting for you, given what you just...?

WR: Oh, yes. I'd always been interested in the subject, back from the days I was studying with Victor. I remember quite clearly Victor, and Edward Glannon, analyzing El Greco paintings and doing all sorts of other analytical and studio studies that would be considered weird things for thirteen-year-olds today. I remember that we painted the same still-life in both pointillist fashion and in Cubist fashion, among other exercises. At that time, this constituted revolutionary art teaching. Today, probably everybody does these things. Thus I always associated art history with pleasure and with fun. And I must tell you -- and it isn't a theory exactly, it's just my sentiment -- that one shouldn't work at anything that isn't fun. That is, if I were going to work...I had enough money so I didn't have to work; I wouldn't have lived well but I really could have snuck by. My first job was great fun because not only was I the entire art history department, but I could fashion courses in any way I wanted. So I experimented with some peculiar kinds of art history which were not strictly chronological, and various other approaches. Also, I was twenty-two years old and the girls were eighteen or nineteen. The previous president of Sarah Lawrence College had been this

distinguished old finishing-school type--liberal ideas but basically a conservative woman--and it was her belief that unmarried young professors were not a good thing on a girls' campus. So in 1952 there were very few younger teachers at Sarah Lawrence except for two gays and myself.

SZ: Is she still the president?

WR: No, she had already left before I was appointed, and Harold Taylor had become president. But Harold hadn't made many appointments as yet; he would in time, and the nature of the staff would change. But when I arrived there--and of course I came, partly by accident, at the last minute as a replacement--I was literally the only unmarried teacher under forty on the whole place, and was constantly being taken by the students' dates as another boyfriend [laughing]. So that was great fun, as you can imagine, because there's something about the power trip that a professor has, particularly a male professor at a girls' school, is intoxicating. There's a sort of intellectually disguised sexual logomachy that goes on....

SZ: You're bringing back memories for me... [laughing]

WR: You know what it is. That was great fun. I outgrew it after about sixteen years, that's how long it took me [laughter].

SZ: That's because that was the second on your priority list, you see.

WR: I really didn't mind leaving Sarah Lawrence. I had refused a job at Brown, actually, along the way because I didn't want to leave Sarah Lawrence. But by the time the Museum thing came up, I was ready to leave.

SZ: Did Sarah Lawrence have the reputation of being a fairly avant-garde school?

WR: Yes, absolutely. The students were very interesting, and it was then a very good school. I had some terrific students there -- a lot better than most of those at the

Institute, on average. I mean, the ones at the Institute knew more, were better trained of course, but most weren't really as smart. And because my class was always over-registered, I could pick and choose my students. The students had to come and be interviewed, and then you'd pick out the class you wanted. Thus, I was able to get more than the average-quality Sarah Lawrence class out of the system. Joe Campbell was, I think, the only other professor up there who had that kind of advantage.

SZ: Bill, do you think that had to do with your youth or with your teaching abilities?

WR: I think it had to do with both and more. It had to do with lecturing ability. And with the subject, which is a very popular subject on girls' campuses. Art history is a kind of gut course in men's colleges, taken by pre-meds to lighten their program. But at girls' colleges, it's really a central subject; after comparative literature or English, it's probably the most serious kind of subject you can take. There had always been a good audience for that subject at Sarah Lawrence, but after I got there, it took off -- really very, very gratifying, and again, ego-tripping and all those kinds of things. I can look back on it and be bemused by it all. It sort of...I guess it reminds me of a poem that stuck with me from my second- or third-grade reader, which was about this kid who has a penny -- and in those days candies were a penny, you have to understand this -- and the candy store used to have these big glass-fronted showcases in which there would be all these kinds of chocolates, marshmallows, tootsie-rolls, and this and that. Each a penny. The poem was about a kid with one penny, who’s almost paralyzed because there are so many goodies, and he doesn't know which one to take. That's the association I have when I think of Sarah Lawrence [laughing]. Indeed, I could say that period was probably my most unconflicted, the happiest years of my life (until very recently). In time, I married one of the students--not my own student, but a student who happened to wander into one of my lectures.

SZ: What about your ability as a teacher? Just tell me a little bit about that.

WR: First of all, I think I knew the subject pretty well, and had had a running start at Fieldston as compared to other people of my generation. I had already begun collecting, in a small way, by that time, and was refining my eye on that level even as I was getting my Ph.D. and publishing articles and things like that. But I think part of it had to do with not only the quality of one's ideas in a lecture, but in some way also with the drama with which one can present them. So that worked out extremely well. Early in my years there, Alfred Barr came up to the campus and gave a lecture on Russian vanguard art.

SZ: At your invitation?

WR: Yes.

SZ: Had you known him before?

WR: I had met him. He had published an article about this subject, and I wanted the students to hear and meet him. He invited me a couple of years later to give a lecture at the Museum. I must have given three or four lectures at the Museum, and I was the “guest director” of a Matta show in 1958. So I had these very friendly relations with the people at the Museum, but I must tell you that it never entered my mind that I would ever have anything to do with it. I not only didn't fantasize about it or think about it, I was really interested in making it in the art history field. More than that, I'm literally not interested in museology as a subject, and I would not have accepted a job, even at the National Gallery or the Philadelphia Museum, anything like that. Until Alfred offered me the job as curator of MoMA’s collection, it never entered my mind to think about it. I must say that there was only one collection of modern art in America that – as an historian and critic -- I would have found passionate enough to sacrifice the academic life and to curate. You can't aim in life for a career where only one position exists. It's ridiculous. It's bad enough to want to be a conductor, where there are maybe twenty major conducting posts. Professors can find far more good professorial posts.

SZ: Actually, I'd like to get back to the relationship with him, but maybe what I would like....

WR: Well, it wasn't much of a relationship, just this sort of friendly...I think Alfred was a little suspicious of me insofar as Meyer Schapiro was my mentor and my doctoral sponsor. Alfred respected him enormously, but didn't like him. I can't imagine two people less alike than Alfred and Meyer, and yet they were the twin pillars of modern art in New York, or at least in America, at that time, and I had the good fortune to know both of them. Eventually, I got to know Alfred much better, of course.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

WR: I had always been a collector of modern art in a small way. I started out in high-school with Rouault prints that I bought at Kennedy Gallery auctions for a few dollars apiece. Then, I got interested in German Expressionism when I was in college, and I went to Curt Valentin's gallery. Curt had bought Kirchner's estate, and had sold to the Museum, as a matter of fact, the great Kirchner *The Street* around that time. Among other things, he showed me a very early Kirchner. It was very exciting; it had a lot of van Gogh and Munch and whatever in it. It was, unfortunately, a thousand dollars, so I told him I wasn't in that league. Nevertheless, he went and looked at his inventory card. He was a remarkable man, always interested in encouraging young people. He said, "Listen, if you can pay three hundred dollars, a hundred dollars every three months, I'll let you have this picture." So I bought this great big Kirchner portrait and, later, when, as a collector, my own interests had shifted, I gave it to The Museum of Modern Art. It was in the Museum collection when I arrived here, and I personally exchanged it -- along with a minor Cézanne which MoMA had never hung -- to acquire Picasso's *Charnel House*. That's how we got *The Charnel House*.

SZ: You exchanged it?

WR: Yes. *The Charnel House* belonged to Walter Chrysler, Jr., and he was having trouble getting the million-dollar price he wanted for the picture because it's a tough picture, especially for private collectors. And museums usually don't have a million dollars lying around. But I was very anxious to get it for MoMA. I heard that Chrysler might entertain an offer for an exchange for something he needed for his museum in Norfolk. So I called him, and I asked him how he was fixed for Cézanne works, and he said, "Well, I have an early Cézanne here at my museum but we don't have a 'classic' '80s Cézanne." Now, there was a small L'Estaque landscape, which had been bequeathed to the Museum years earlier, and which Alfred never hung in the galleries. He had said to me one day: "Bill, someday, if you want to buy something important, sell this Cézanne." At the time of the Picasso exchange, I had sold a couple of things. But not Cézannes, and I had funny feelings about selling or trading it, but then finally I felt, well, hell, trading this to get a great Picasso is certainly worthwhile. So I said, "We have this L'Estaque picture, and how would you feel about an exchange?" He flew up for a weekend, and we went through the multiple locks on the storage area--that was the first time I became aware how hard it was to get in to see this storage area on a weekend--and we got in there and he liked the Cézanne. I had previously offered the Cézanne to Picasso in exchange for a Cubist construction sculpture, but Picasso didn't really want the Cézanne, because it wasn't really that good [laughing]. But he gave us the sheet-metal *Guitar* anyway. I told Chrysler, "We have a hundred thousand in cash, and then we have this Cézanne." And he said -- which was perfectly true -- "Yes, but the Cézanne is only worth around seven hundred thousand dollars, and a hundred in cash only, makes eight...What are you going to do for the rest?" I said, "Well, what do you need for your museum?" He said, "I'd like to find some German Expressionism." Then a light went on in my head. One of the many things you have to do if you're ever going to sell a work from the collection is get the permission of the donor, which can be delicate. Since *I* was the donor, the situation was simplified. I showed him the big, flashy, early Kirchner -- and he loved it. So the deal was made. It's interesting, because Ernst Beyeler had offered *The Charnel House* to the Munich Museum, and one of our trustees from a German-American family, Walter Bareiss--very nice guy who was for many years chairman [of the Painting & Sculpture committee], actually was acting director of the

Museum for a while--Walter was back in Munich at the time, and he knew I was angling for this Picasso. He sent me a cable saying, "The Munich Museum has decided to buy the Picasso." But I had already gotten the signature of Walter Chrysler on an agreement.

SZ: So it was a done deal.

WR: It was a done deal. So that's why we have *The Charnel House*. Anyway, I don't know how in the dickens I got on to all this...I remember, it had to do with Sarah Lawrence...what I had said was that you can obviously only see older art through the twentieth-century eyes that you have, and in order to appreciate it fully, it's not just a matter of learning as much about the fifteen century that you can, it's learning about the very particular ways in which, as a twentieth-century person, you're going to *see* this object. So I devised a course at Sarah Lawrence in which there was a constant counterpoint of modern art with ancient Egyptian, modern with this, modern with that, and kept coming back to modern art. The art history was chronological, but it was constantly being counterpointed by modern works. I also tried to stay away from textbook readings, trying to have as much as possible, original literary material. So the students read Egyptian poetry and Egyptian funerary texts, and they read the gospels. I was shocked and amazed to realize how few people in this modern Judeo-Christian culture had read the Bible. So anyway, that was the nature of the course that I gave at Sarah Lawrence. As a collector, as a person of my own time, I was naturally interested in modern art. Meyer had been involved in modern art, but also in medieval art. I did my Ph.D. with him in modern art with a second concentration in Early Christian. I wrote a dissertation that was published by Columbia University Press on a church on the Plateau d'Assy in the French Alps. Just after World War II, under the tutelage of a very enlightened Dominican monk named Couturier, some individuals attempted to decorate a modern church with works by great modern artists. There's an altarpiece by Bonnard, an altarpiece by Matisse, stained-glass windows by Rouault--other works by Leger, and by Chagall and Lipchitz (in the baptistery). So that was what my Ph.D. was about. In fact, that was a subject that interested Alfred; What are the possibilities and the limitations of a religious art in the

modern world? And that was one of the subjects that I was invited to give talks about at The Museum of Modern Art while I was a professor at Sarah Lawrence. So, between these talks, and knowing a number of the Museum people, like Bill Seitz and Peter Selz...

SZ: And you knew them just because...?

WR: I knew them because, you know, you're going to the same galleries, you're going to the same lectures, the same events. I was very friendly with Bill Seitz.... Long before I came to the Museum, I was collecting work by Frank Stella, and Bill Seitz had been one of Frank's teachers at Princeton. In fact, it was Bill Seitz who first put me on to Frank, before Frank had shown anywhere. I went down to his studio and bought a black picture. There weren't that many people in those days--I'm talking now about the '50s--interested in Abstract Expressionism (not to say later art) that you didn't get to know people. I got to know Frank, and I got to know Barbara Rose, because she was married to Frank, and you read Barbara Rose, and you got to know this person and that person and so forth. The “art world” was still pretty small.... In fact, Barbara Rose was chosen, at my suggestion in part, to replace me when I left Sarah Lawrence, and she had a very successful stay up there. There are a number of people in the gallery world, in the museum world, in the art history world, that studied with Barbara at Sarah Lawrence.

SZ: Let me go back to your early visits to the Museum. Do you remember your first visit to The Museum of Modern Art?

WR: I don't remember whether it was my first visit or not, but I have a very clear vision of the Museum when it opened in its new [building] in '39. I can remember the *Girl Before the Mirror* being behind the cashier's stand as you went in, and I remember also the members' dining terrace with the holes in the ceiling and the light coming in, and I remember some of the installations quite well. Alfred was certainly the greatest museum man of his generation. He was the nearest thing to genius that I've ever seen in that profession. I can't say that I think anybody in the museum profession is a

true genius. Meyer was a true genius, but Alfred came about as close as you can come. The one thing Alfred was not, was an installateur. He loved the paintings so much and felt it was so important for them all to be seen that he crowded everything he could get into what was then a horribly limited space. One would be shocked to go back and see. (Even when I arrived at the Museum years later, there was pathetic little space for the collection.)

SZ: But you have a memory of that....

WR: I have memory of that, and of the kind of pictures that were frequently hung there. There were certain favorites that anyone thirteen or fourteen would...I don't know that these were my first visits, but certainly when I was young there was a Jack Levine picture full of social satire and commentary, there was the picture of the Jack-in-a-box Mussolini by Peter Blume called *The Eternal City,* and then there was Tchelitchew's tour de force...sort of tree of life where all the babies are metamorphosized out of the leaves....

SZ: Is that *Hide-and-Seek*?

WR: Yes. And, of course, the Picassos one remembered, and the Matisses. All those memories are now a jumble. I can't remember what year I saw this or saw that, whatever...

SZ: When you were studying art history at Columbia, what kind of a presence was Alfred in that? Was he talked about?

WR: Alfred was the founder of The Museum of Modern Art. He was a man of almost mythological importance, and very austere. He was a very austere Scotch-Presbyterian type. He *was* The Museum of Modern Art; even after he ceased to be its director, he was the person that represented the heart of the Museum.... I wasn't aware at the time of the terrible political battles that were going on at the Museum throughout all those years. I only saw the residue of it when I arrived in the '60s, and

I saw the bitterness that Alfred had in his fight with various other people in the Museum, primarily René d'Harnoncourt, but also with Bill Lieberman. The whole place was ridden with politics. [Telephone interruption]

SZ: If we could go back and you could describe whatever it was you sensed about the place when you did the Matta show.

WR: When I did the Matta show I had no idea of the Museum politics. I saw that there were conflicting forces, if I can put it that way. There were very different tastes. At that time, the assistant curator for contemporary art, so to say, was Sam Hunter. He had done a David Smith show that was paired with my Matta show. I thought it was a very good show; I thought extremely highly of David's linear pieces. Apparently... [telephone interruption].

SZ: You were telling me that Sam Hunter had done the David Smith show.

WR: Yes. Sam was very anxious for the Museum to acquire *Australia*, which was arguably David's masterpiece, and the Museum didn't have the money, needless to say, which wasn't a vast amount. I think that they were hoping that Nelson [Rockefeller] would come up with the bread, but that didn't happen. I just had the faintest feeling that there were various forces vying for the small amount of available money, and that David Smith was not going to be one of the fortunate ones. And since I liked David Smith's work very much, and I later bought *Australia* for myself--I had to pay over five or six years, something like that--but I decided that I would, no matter what happened, eventually bequeath it to The Museum of Modern Art. After I began working at the Museum, I realized that I could see it as much there as I could see it at home, so I gave it to the Museum. But that's another story. The point was that there was some feeling of conflict, that, as an outsider, I picked up. You have to understand, that while some people experience such politics in the university world, I never did, possibly because Sarah Lawrence was a small college and I was the whole art history department. So I never had any problems, no struggles with the administration, nothing. And I must say that I was disturbed by the sense of political

conflict at MoMA. The little that one heard--I never really solicited much information--I can remember in my later years at Sarah Lawrence when I would see Bill Seitz and other people--this is now some years after '58, it would be the early '60s--saying that things were tough and whatever, and I think some of this conflict had to do with changing tastes, older and younger, turf, authority, which artists you liked, and what artists you didn't like. There is a natural and inevitable difference of opinion that takes place. In any event...

SZ: I would like to ask you, did you get the sense that Seitz and Selz were either together or separately a strong presence there, or were they caught in a...?

WR: First of all, I had the impression that Seitz was much better than Selz. Peter [Selz] wasn't unsympathetic, but, I don't know, somehow he wasn't my favorite creature, and I also didn't like some of the shows he did, whereas I thought Seitz had a much better eye and so forth. I felt that both of them were amazingly treated like abject slavies. Once, when I was writing a review for *Art International*, [of] which I was briefly the American editor, a review of Selz's show called "New Images of Man" [1959] or something like that, which was a show of figurative art, but by people who did a lot of abstract painting in some cases. It purported to be the “new figuration,” the new image of man. I was wandering through the galleries one morning when Alfred showed up with a group of trustees, or maybe they were members of the acquisition committee who were being shown the works as potential new [acquisitions] or whatever. The impression I had of Selz and Seitz was of them somehow being told what to do. It was not a very pleasant impression.

SZ: But at that time I guess Alfred was still pretty much compos mentis.

WR: Oh, yes. Alfred was more than eighty percent compos mentis when I arrived at the Museum, but he deteriorated rapidly over the next two or three years. I think that when I first arrived, his only problem was remembering names, and since *I* had had that problem since I'd been twelve [laughter]....

SZ: It didn't impress you.

WR: I know that Bill Seitz had felt enormously overworked and underpaid. And I think this was partly because Alfred was enormously overworked and underpaid. But he asked for it, so to say. And the trustees established a certain salary level with Alfred, and then everyone else had to be that far under. So that the people at or near the bottom of the pile were really exceedingly poorly paid.

SZ: That came out of what, do you think?

WR: I think it came out of the chintziness of the trustees, up to a point.... Even Alfred was always -- and he struck me of being very conscious of that fact -- a *servant* of the trustees. They recognized his importance, his brilliance and everything, but they could buy him and sell him, so to say. I think that he was treated just that way by Nelson when the great axe fell. This is not to judge whether the decision was the right or wrong thing. Probably it was the right decision to get René in there. With the exception of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim, and then later some people like Louise Smith, Florene Marx and so forth, Alfred, had a certain distaste for and lingering feeling of suspicion about the big power trustees. Alfred lived very parsimoniously--he would take you to these obscure little places for lunch that you had never heard of because one could get a whole meal for $1.25 even in the late '60s [laughing]. He was the son of a Scotch minister, so I guess he came by it naturally--but the fact is that he obviously didn't press the trustees about his salary, and his view of working at the Museum was essentially “evangelical”: why should anyone want money to work at the Museum? Well, Alfred was horribly underpaid, at least to the extent that I could size this up, but he never did or said anything that I know about--I may not know enough about it--but some of the other, younger people, like Seitz, were very pissed; they were burning the midnight oil and they weren't being paid what their counterparts in the academic world were getting.

SZ: Which wasn't great either.

WR: No! So you can imagine how low it was [laughing]. All that has changed significantly.

SZ: What happened when they offered you the job?

WR: When I was offered the job...well, there were two things: the salary wasn't too bad, but I had some money. In the course of my labors at MoMA, I pushed it up to the point where I was probably the best-paid curator in the country. I felt that the chief curator of The Museum of Modern Art should be making *more* than a full professor anywhere. You have to buy and sell (or trade) pictures worth millions of dollars, where the slightest glitch or mistake or anything could cost the Museum (or cost you your head)...Nobody who has decision power over that kind of money fails to be paid at least a reasonable salary in any other profession. So I ended up having a good salary. Dick Oldenburg supported me enormously in this, but Dick, you see, suffered from some of the same thing that Alfred suffered from in that Dick came from a family of public servants. If the crest of his family in Sweden wasn't "We Serve", it had to be something pretty close. Dick was embarrassed to ask for more for himself. So at a certain point I was actually making more than Dick was, which is preposterous. He was spending virtually all his nights as well as his days at his job. I protected myself so I could have a life. That salary scandal didn't last for too many years because I think Blanchette [Rockefeller] saw the folly in it, and they adjusted Dick's salary upward without his having to ask [laughing]. I finally got up to the point where, when I retired, I was making, I think, $160,000, and if I were still there, it would be over $200,000 by now. That's a substantial income. It's not exaggerated when you think of the risks you take.

SZ: What you're saying is and therefore the expertise that's required.

WR: That's right, and they want a peculiar type of being. I wouldn't tell you who they are, but I have seen curators around throw away fortunes in their museum's money by selling things for the wrong price. I had Bill Lieberman breathing down my neck on every single little thing I did. He would have made a big fuss about the least faux pas. In the end he was never able to make any fuss. But it was a lot of pressure,

buying this, selling that, doing this and so forth with Bill heavy-breathing right behind me. I just felt that for this – to say nothing of the millions in art gifts I brought in -- I ought to be paid a decent salary, and Blanchette absolutely agreed.

SZ: That's interesting. Where you came from was different than from where Alfred came from. You think about things differently.

WR: I felt there was something wrong in a situation where you have very wealthy trustees, a selfless director who's paid a pittance, then new young people coming in and also paid pittances because this is the sort of gospel idea of MoMA. It's all a little sick, and it also couldn't last beyond the generation of the founders.

SZ: Imagine in fact what was happening.

WR: I think that Bill Seitz --and I want to say this right up front--should have been Alfred's successor, the second director of the collection at The Museum of Modern Art. In a way, I was Alfred's successor--not in all of his roles but in the most important of them. In the same way, Kirk Varnedoe is mine. The person who *should* have been Alfred's successor -- and to anyone with half a brain it was so clear --was Bill Seitz. Now, Bill Seitz left the Museum out of a combination of fatigue and disgruntlement. And I think that should never have been allowed to happen. He died not long after of cancer, and he couldn't have taken this role, as it happened, anyway. But I remember talking with him when I was offered the job, and *that* was the beginning of my education into the politics of MoMA. He told me where some of the bodies were buried, and what I could expect from some of the people that were there.

SZ: This was when you were considering taking it?

WR: No, when I had just taken it, when I was just beginning. From the point of view of "eye", ability to write -- all the good qualities that one wants in a curator -- Bill Seitz had more than anyone else. And he really would have been terrific in that role. In any event, he did some wonderful shows at the Museum while he was there, and then

they squeezed him dry. He was the image of what I remember--and I'd heard it once before--some movie actor said about George Sanders: that Zsa Zsa Gabor, to whom he was married, “had left him like a squeezed lemon” [laughing]. And Bill had said that the Museum left *him* like a squeezed lemon. I don't think that the departure of Peter Selz constituted any great loss to the Museum. In fact, Peter had been told to find another position. But I think the loss of Bill Seitz was enormous. Even in the few years that remained to him between his departure and his death, he could have done a lot for the Museum, had he been given the possibility. One thing was perfectly clear. So long as Alfred was active, nobody else worth his salt was going to be able to do very much. Alfred was absolutely sure of himself, and he was right enough of the time to sustain this -- if it can ever be argued that such an attitude is warranted. Alfred just peremptorily would say no, yes, no, yes about whatever these other curators *wanted* to do. There would be no discussion. This led to considerable frustration. I remember Bill Seitz saying it had been incredibly hard to get the Museum to even buy one work by Hans Hofmann. Bill made the having of a Hofmann show virtually his life’s work at MoMA, because [Hofmann] was simply not liked “upstairs”; he was thought of as being too European, but also inferior to the European product. I don't think Hans Hofmann *is* one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century, but he certainly was a very fine painter, more than good enough to be in the Museum (especially when that collection featured the like of a Hofmann follower like Grace Hartigan). These were the kinds of things that Bill suffered from.

SZ: How did Dorothy Miller fit in in this whole thing?

WR: Dorothy was to some extent Alfred's “shadow”. Dorothy was a very beautiful woman, who was also intelligent and nice -- and she had her likes and dislikes. But mysteriously, these always resembled pretty closely Alfred's [laughing]. Alfred often would say, "Oh, Dorothy feels" when he was really talking for himself. From a combination of a kind of chivalry, but also from a desire not to make it look as if he was making all of the decisions, he would say, "Dorothy thought we should buy that picture." Dorothy herself never had any illusions about her position, so there was no struggle surrounding it. Dorothy was Alfred's second in command for whatever Alfred

wanted to do. She had a certain voice in the selection of the artists in her group shows, and I think she had good antennae and good connections with the world of art. She no doubt brought in certain things that Alfred wouldn't have come upon himself. But whether these were bought or shown was certainly Alfred's decision after she had brought them in.

SZ: Well, then, last question for today: if Alfred was running the show, certainly during the time that Seitz was there, and Alfred you described as being eighty percent "with it" when you took the job, why did you take the job, what did you think you were going to be doing?

WR: But you see, when I took the job, Alfred was retiring – I was taking *his* job with respect to acquisitions, publications on the collection etc. All this was spelled out in so many words in the minutes of the board of trustees.

SZ: That's right.

WR: I don't think Alfred would have dreamt of offering me that job, nor would I have dreamt of accepting it were Alfred not retiring. I was not to be Alfred's No. 2 man, I was to be his successor. The way this happened is: I was invited to be a guest director for a show on Surrealism; as I was writing a book [on the subject], that seemed eminently logical. I'd been guest director there before. I still gave no thought to any idea of working at The Museum of Modern Art. To me, Alfred was the Museum--he was there, he was lively, things were going on. There it was. After I'd been down there working on that show for about eight months or so, however, Alfred called me into his office one day and said--this is roughly what he said--"I wear many hats in this museum. The most important of them is the care and feeding of the collection, so to say. I'm very concerned with it because I'm going to be retiring in another year." In fact, in less than a year.

SZ: That's right, because you started in '66 on that show and he retired in '67.

WR: Yes.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

WR: Alfred called me, and then he said, "I'm going to be retiring" --whatever it was, in six months or so --"and I'm very concerned with the future of the collection. Dorothy will be staying on for one more year, but then she will be retiring." Dorothy wasn't an art historian, and Alfred said, "Basically, as I see it, the job needs, first of all, an art historian with an eye--it needs an eye, it needs art history and it needs an ability to write"--Dorothy also was not a writer--"and it needs some knowledge of the art market." He said that he had given a lot of thought to it, and he felt that I was the person. He said that if it were up to him, he would propose that I simply take over his position within the department (that is, including responsibility for loan exhibitions), but that he couldn't do this because of policking by Bill Lieberman. Lieberman had been his apparent successor for some years, and then there had been a falling-out, years before my arrival at the Museum. Alfred seemed to have an almost paranoiac suspicion of Bill. This is because he must have had the same sort of experiences that I myself had later on, where Bill stabs you in the back, or wherever. But I can remember how shocked I was. I was in Alfred's office on one of the first discussions with him, and I must have been talking a little loud. He pointed to the radiator. I couldn't figure out what he was getting at. Then he quietly explained: Bill Lieberman's office was right underneath. This was like Russia! [Laughter] The whole thing was just so awful. One of the things that I did feel good about was René's attitude toward all this. René was somehow so secure, politically speaking, and he was also such an able politician and manipulator of people that he could take a relaxed attitude toward these kinds of things. But Alfred was always up-tight. The sense of high drama going on behind the scenes there was incredible. I was so happy when Dick Oldenburg finally got named director, because he was a cheerful guy who had no axe to grind. He wanted to help every department head, and, basically, the Museum suddenly became a very different place. John Szarkowski also had no axe to grind, you know

what I mean? Arthur Drexler, on the other hand, was part of the old crowd; he was still highly political. But as the Painting and Sculpture Department represented some sixty percent of the program, or more, other departments felt they had to fight for exhibition space. However, once the dispute (or problem) of "the two Bills," as it was called, was settled, the whole place became a much nicer place to be, and I hope it will stay that way. In any event, to give you some idea of what the politics of the founding generation meant on a day-to-day basis, let me recount a lunch I was to have with Alfred in the members dining room shortly after my appointment. Alfred, who was a very punctual, very precise man, arrived fifteen minutes late. He was infuriated and very upset, and he said, "I'm sorry to be late, but I had this conversation with René," and this and this and so forth.... Alfred had this absolutely remarkable way of characterizing -- whether it was pictures, people or anything else. He said of René, "That man has no edges!" [Laughing] If you knew René -- he was this great, big, bearlike, somewhat amorphous figure; I think if you pushed him in here, it would come out there, you know? And that's why no one could ever *get* hold of René.... He was always eluding you. Arthur Drexler told me once he had gone in to demand something from René--I don't remember what it was he was going to demand--and René soft-soaped him to the point that not until after Drexler got up and left, did he realize that he hadn't brought up the topic [laughing]. In any event, there were giants in the earth in those days. These were really great characters, and I've never had the illusion that I functioned on their level. In many respects I wouldn't have wanted to function on their level, and I'm sure it took a lot out of their longevity. I am absolutely convinced myself that while, genetically speaking, Alfred may have had a certain tendency toward what we now know -- but was not known at the time -- as Alzheimer's, that the terrific pressures and struggles and everything that were daily meat for Alfred had to wear him down in the long run. To understand Alfred you have to understand that he felt the Museum was his creature, his creation. I was once in a men's room and I saw Alfred checking the rolls of toilet paper [laughing]. He considered everything about the Museum to be his responsibility. The only thing I've ever seen comparable to that was at Sarah Lawrence. There was a large new building, which was the theater. But it had a big lounge where there was a café at one end and a sitting area with couches on the other. One day as it was darkening

outside and there was hardly anyone in the building, I was up in the café and I looked down to see the college's president, Harold Taylor, boffing the cushions and straightening them out [laughter]. Alfred felt that way about every single thing in the Museum. Nobody from a second generation of staff could ever interest the proprietary feeling that not only Alfred but certain other people in the first generation felt about the institution. You have to see their struggles in part in that light.

SZ: Let's see, who was still there? Monroe Wheeler, although he really wasn't there in the beginning.

WR: Monroe was there, but Monroe, you see, was not there in the beginning; he was also really out of those struggles in the sense that he opted out and to the extent that he worked behind the scenes, it would have been very distant. Monroe always had hope that he might do more than the occasional show that he was given, but it didn't work out that way. But Monroe was actually a tremendously witty and very nice man, and he continued to be very helpful and nice to people of my generation. I enjoyed Monroe enormously in many different ways, and he gave good advice. He was quite a nice man. He was the only older staff person around – though he too had retired -- that had been part of those events. Aside, of course, from Dorothy. But then Dorothy left at the end of my first year. Let's see, who else was there? Arthur, although he was not old enough to have been at MoMA at the beginning, of course, had nevertheless been there long enough to have been infected, if I can put it that way [laughter] by this politizing virus. After René retired and Bates Lowry was fired, Arthur positioned himself to become director of the Museum... The board went through an elaborate charade, in which Arthur was asked to draw up a plan for what the Museum should become.

SZ: This was during that interregnum time?

WR: Yes, when Arthur was anxious to become director. Arthur was a very smart guy but slightly maniacal. John Szarkowski had the advantage of being basically just interested in doing a good thing for his department, and I had an instinctive liking for

John in the beginning. I didn't dislike Arthur, but I always felt that he was a little too verbal, a bit of a talmudic hairsplitter. René was a charmer and a lovely human being, and his death was a great tragedy for the Museum. He was a man not above admitting a mistake, and I think he would have seen that Bates Lowry was a mistake had he lived, and he would, above all, have known how to handle Bates's departure. As a result of René's not being there, it became a big trustee blowup in which, among other things, we lost a lot of wonderful paintings because Bill Paley fired Ralph Colin as CBS's lawyer for his support of Bates...I'm not criticizing Paley, mind you, here; Paley was very generous in the end with his own collection. But we stood to get a number of interesting pictures also from Ralph Colin. But these things happen in museums, and if you go back and look at the catalogues of the exhibitions of promised gifts from Alfred days, you see things like Seurat's Parade and Cézanne's Card Players (now in the Metropolitan) or the Picasso First Steps (now at Yale) and so forth...

SZ: But there was a whole issue of Stephen Clark being unhappy with any interest at all in Abstract Expressionism.

WR: Not just Abstract Expressionism: Clark didn't like Surrealism, and one of the big blowups came when Alfred spent all of two hundred dollars to buy ten works on paper by Max Ernst....

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SIDE 2 BLANK

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**WILLIAM S. RUBIN (WR)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**EAST 58TH STREET NEW YORK, NEW YORK**
DATE:	**OCTOBER 25, 1993**

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1

SZ: I wanted to pick up on a couple of things from last time and then see how far we can get. You talked to me a little bit about the difficulties with Bill Lieberman when you came to MoMA. One of the things I realized is that for a period of time -- I mean, Alfred really picked you for the reasons that we discussed last time -- and I really didn't ask you how you think that made Bill feel and how that manifested itself in whatever kind of interaction went on, because for a while he was the director of the department, so that you must have had....

WR: Bill was the director of the Painting and Sculpture department *after* Alfred gave me that job, not before.

SZ: Right, so how did Alfred see that, if Alfred did in fact see these split in duties? How awkward was that?

WR: What you have to understand is this: that Alfred could only pass on to me responsibilities which he had, though his recommendations were that the responsibilities that he did not have – namely, for the exhibition program--should also be passed on to me. However, I was quite happy to have primary responsibility only for the collection and everything that related to it--acquisitions, documentation, loans and so forth. As I said, all that was actually introduced into the minutes of the trustee meeting where my appointment was approved. It was important because Bill

Lieberman always claimed that this primary responsibility for the collection didn't exist somehow, so at some point we had to actually go back and get the minutes of the meeting. Alfred was, by then, totally non compos mentis. So you had a situation which was essentially split between Exhibitions and Collections. Now, the Museum had run that way, off and on, for some time; that is to say, when Alfred came back after being fired, there was an Exhibitions Department here that ran concurrently under various other directors. Now, Alfred was in charge – at least nominally in charge--of *all* collections--photography, film, everything else. De facto, the only thing he paid any attention to was painting and sculpture and, to some extent, drawings. At the time that I arrived as a guest director for the Dada and Surrealist exhibition, Bill Lieberman was the head of the Drawings Department--Drawings and Prints, I think it was then. The difficulty arose from the fact that Bill Lieberman had at one time or another seen himself, and perhaps even was seen by Alfred, as a possible successor -- though Alfred claimed not -- later. By the time I arrived here, a great hate had developed between Alfred and Bill, and Alfred was almost paranoid on the question of Bill somehow doing subterranean things, if I can put it that way. I think I may have mentioned to you this absolutely weird incident that occurred in Alfred's office, didn't I? Well, Alfred's office was, I think it was the next one over. It was a double-sized office; it was right in this row of offices. One day I was talking with him about things and he said, "Shh, shh," and he pointed to the radiator. I didn't tell you this story?

SZ: Yes, you did tell me this story.

WR: And I thought like it was something out of Communist Russia or something, where the walls have ears, or something like that. Apparently there had been some incident where things in Alfred's office had been overheard. He really was almost paranoid on that question. Bill, for his part, had, through his many years in the Museum, and since he's a very entertaining fellow and a knowledgeable fellow, and spent a lot of time charming people, had developed a real following on the board. I realized later that Alfred really wasn't in a position "politically" to do what he would have liked to have done, and that all he could do was to give me these collection responsibilities,

and in effect establish that I would *not* be a subordinate, in any way, to the person who was in charge of exhibitions or administration. The Museum, of course, was anxious to avoid having two wholly separate departments; they really wanted to have one department.

SZ: The Museum being...? Because when you first came in....

WR: When I came in, Alfred was still here and René was still here. I would say that René's death--René's tragic death--made this situation much worse because René was a great kind of resolver of problems and things, and he would have been some very fair-minded third party who would have been able, I think, to see what was going on with Bill and me and resolve it. Without René, there was obviously going to be some problem. I myself didn't feel that way, but Bill did, apparently. What had been decided before René's accident was that, if they wanted one department, I was willing to take the title Chief Curator of the Collection, which I always thought was a more professional title, anyway, rather than being a Director--we weren't museum directors, we were curators--so I thought Chief Curator of the Collection, that's what I am. I didn't care to have authority over the exhibition program, though I wanted, obviously, to do exhibitions, and it was always understood that I would. Bill was given the title Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, but with the clear stipulation that, as regards me as Chief Curator of the Collection, he had no authority over me; he had authority over the department in a kind of general, administrative way, with the understanding that he had to resolve things with me if they affected me. And that's really all I wanted. He participated in meetings of the Acquisitions Committee and I participated in meetings of the Exhibitions Committee, and the idea was that somehow we would work things out. When Bates Lowry came in....

SZ: This preceded Bates Lowry? I thought this came afterwards. Because Bates Lowry came in in....

WR: Yes, he came in before he [René] died.

SZ: Actually, he came in--and tell me if I'm wrong--but my understanding is that he came in with the idea that he would be everything, not just director of the Museum but that he would oversee Painting and Sculpture as well.

WR: No not in that way. He came in with the assumption that he was going to oversee the Museum in a general way – after all, he was a Renaissance architectural scholar, not a modernist, and I think it was decided that René would figure out the best way to have him adjusted into position. But not long after he arrived, he got very friendly with Bill, and he at one point wanted to arrange things in such a way that I was really a subordinate to Bill.

SZ: Lowry wanted to arrange that.

WR: Lowry, yes. I pointed out to Lowry that I had been given a job and it was clear-cut and it was described in the minutes of the board, and that as I had sacrificed two life-tenured professorships to accept it, I wasn't about to give it up. So Lowry decided that he himself would “resolve” the problem by becoming director of Painting and Sculpture as well as Director of the Museum. That was really intended as a sort of stop-gap thing until this could be resolved. Now, the irony was that, despite his inexperience with modern art, he began to take seriously his role as Director of Painting and Sculpture. He and Bill at one point flew over to France and they visited some galleries and lived it up a little--this very much to the distress of the trustees, who had brought Bates in here as an administrator, not as a curator. Nevertheless, he put on a small acquisitions show--they weren't his acquisitions, they were mostly my acquisitions--but he put on this show, with completed “architectural” carpet-covered panels, and it cost a fortune. He had carpeting going up the walls...and it caused a bit of a scandal. He [Bates] began to enjoy the “art part” more and more and to spend all his time on that rather than on the administration and fund-raising for which he had been hired. One of the requirements that he had made when he accepted the job was that the Museum get him – at its expense -- a large Park Avenue apartment, ostensibly so he could entertain correctly. So he got this apartment. But he did precious little entertaining -- certainly of anyone whom the

trustees considered worth entertaining on behalf of the Museum. That led to a lot of criticism of Bates within the Museum, and especially on the board. Nevertheless, we somehow managed to function. I did obtain some very important works of art, and I worked on certain exhibitions. Bill worked on an exhibition, and things were sort of functioning. But Bill was obviously uncomfortable, and I think it wasn't only because of the division of labor; it was that the acquisitions were almost entirely my proposals and the exhibitions I was making -- since I had had the ideas for them -- were becoming the core of the exhibition program. Bill, up to that point had had only one suggestion for an acquisition -- for a Munch -- which was voted down by the trustee committee, led by Bill's good friend Walter Bareiss. Anyway, with René no longer there to resolve matters, things heated up a great deal on the trustee side with regard to Bates. Now, I'm telling you my personal opinion. Bates apparently misunderstood something about where he was located in the great scheme of things. When you get a high job in the Museum, it's traditional that David and Peggy Rockefeller invite you to dinner, other trustees do this and that by way of making you feel at home. That happened to me, too, but I didn't draw from that a conclusion that I was one of their friends [laughing], do you understand what I mean? I think that Bates was acting as if he really moved in their set in some way, and I don't think there's anything the trustees like less than that. They like to entertain the Director occasionally, and be entertained by him. They like to feel that he feels warmly toward them, that he's interested in them, and they're interested in him. But he still *works for them*. He's an employee, okay? I think that misunderstanding was his main fault, actually. In some ways Bates was quite intelligent and did some good things--I don't want you to get a totally negative impression of Bates--to the extent that, when the going got really rough for him and they were about to “can” him -- maybe when they had already taken a vote to can him -- I went along with the other department heads and we were unanimous in a recommendation to Bill Paley that he *not* can him. That was a unanimous vote.

SZ: Because?

WR: Because we still felt the situation was salvageable.

SZ: So that tells me something, and you tell me in your own words, about you felt about him as a....

WR: My feeling about Bates was that, though he was sort of confused as to what he really wanted to do, the real problem with Bates was not *my* problem. It was only secondary, insofar as I think Bill Lieberman had a kind of “in” with Bates that I never had, and that might have in time become more problematic than in fact it did while Bates was here. The big problem for Bates was that they had got him in essentially as a fundraiser. The thing that had impressed the trustees was the money he raised for Florence, I think, during the floods. That was the sort of thing. They expected him to be out in the hustings, which he was not. There was also a lot of personal animosity towards him among the trustees; Philip and many other key people didn't like Bates. I don't remember, frankly; there were a few scandals, things he said or did that caused the temperature to rise enormously. Finally, Bill Paley -- and Bill did this at the behest of a certain number of trustees – fired him. Bill was, I think, not particularly taken with Bates, but I don't think he was one of the people that were most disturbed. But Bill was a very decisive--you might argue overly decisive--fellow. I got along with him extremely well, and had over many, many years a good relationship with him. I even got him to give his collection here, instead of to his Museum of Broadcasting, which had been one of his thoughts. This took a phenomenal amount of nudging, cajoling, one thing and another, and Dick Oldenburg was of enormous help in this. Bill somehow...it sounds funny, but Bill was one of those guys that I liked because of his handshake -- there was something straight [about it]. You knew that he might blow you away, but there was nothing devious about him [laughing]. He had no need ever to be devious. Anyway, we department heads went over to his CBS office as a group, all of us, to urge him to reconsider, and we hit a stone wall. So Bates was out.

SZ: Two things about that before you go on: one was that I have been told or I heard that a lot of P&S staff members were very unhappy with Bates and had something to do

with the [trustees' decision], and I think part of it may have revolved around the Study Center.

WR: Ah, there might have been a shtick about the Study Center.

SZ: But you don't remember?

WR: No, and as for "P&S staff members"--I don't really know who, at that time would have really counted with the trustees among staff members beside Bill Lieberman and myself. And I can tell you -- I know from having talked with Philip and Eliza and other people at the time – that there was a real feeling that Bates was a beautiful example of the confusion of roles. One of the people that he brought into the Museum, who was eminently unsuccessful here, was the new head of Publications -- a sweet man, Gray Williams. He later wrote a novel, which was a roman à clef, in which the Bates figure becomes the romantic hero who sweeps away the Eliza Parkinson figure [laughing]. This kind of thing...

SZ: It didn't go over.

WR: Yes. I'm not sure when that occurred. I think it was after this. But there was a question of confusion of roles somewhere along the line. Also, I think there had been some P&S objections, from Alfred and Dorothy. What their objections were I don't remember, but basically, probably that he was meddling. Dorothy was a beautiful and elegant woman, and very much a stickler for correctness in all things. I think she probably found Bates peculiar. Then somebody -- I don’t remember if it was Dorothy who pointed this out to me, I can't think who else it might have been -- but somebody pointed it out to me that, after Bates had been here for about a year, he had changed his hair-do, and had gotten somewhat feminine. There was some sort of feeling that he had gone “artsy” at the very least, or gay at the most [laughing]. So that didn't help his situation, and no doubt also didn't help him with Bill Paley, who didn't go for the fey-handshake kind of thing.

SZ: The soft handshake.

WR: Yes [laughing]. So you had this situation, then, where there was still the problem of "the two Bills." After Bates left, it was resolved, we hoped, by having the department structured in such a way that it would be a single department, in which I would be the number-one person for collections, acquisitions, documentation of the collections and so forth--just exactly as it read in the minutes of the trustee meetings--which appointment I got while Bill was still director of Drawings, mind you. And Bill would have the last word on the exhibition program.

SZ: As director.

WR: Yes, that's right. I was quite content to be known as Chief Curator of the Collection so long as it was clear that I was not in a pyramid under him. It was like two pyramids that joined at a certain height and overlapping at the bottom.

SZ: So from your point of view it was an acceptable arrangement.

WR: Absolutely.

SZ: And how do you think it was from his point of view?

WR: I thought, frankly, that it *was* acceptable to him because he got the more high-falutin'-sounding title. It was clear that Bill -- to the extent that he wanted power -- wanted less to make use of it than just to enjoy the possession of it, if I can put it that way. I had had a set of ideas that I wanted to realize in the Museum -- pictures I wanted to acquire, exhibitions that I wanted to see get done, even if I didn't do them myself. So I was quite content with this arrangement. Now, we toodled along for a number of years; I don't remember how many years, but until...what year did Bates get fired?

SZ: In '69, then from '69 to '70 you had the threesome of Walter Bareiss and Dick Koch and Wilder Green, then from '70 to '72--but it was not two years, it was less than that--you had [John] Hightower.

WR: It was under Hightower that the thing came to a head. Hightower was an interesting situation, and I think you'll find if you ask Dick [Oldenburg], who was then in Publications, you'll get the same impression of Hightower. When Hightower came in, I thought it was a disastrous appointment; though the guy was perfectly nice, he was naive as hell about art. The New York State funding thing [the New York State Council on the Arts] that he had done had impressed Nelson and it was entirely on Nelson's say-so, so far as I can see, that it [Hightower's appointment] was just railroaded through. He had had some absolutely stupid things to say. But a funny thing happened. In the first months that he was here, in the meetings of the department heads and everything else, I was his *bête noir*, because every time he unloaded one of these stupidities, I responded to them, and I wondered why some of these other people didn't. But I...

SZ: You would say something.

WR: I stuck it in his face. One thing he had said in a *The New Yorker* interview was, "Everything is art. Even putting a turkey in the oven is art." Anyway, we would have these knockdown-drag out battles. But a curious thing happened. Meanwhile, other people in the Museum started undercutting this poor kid strictly from behind the scenes, whispers of this and that and the other thing.

SZ: Because?

WR: Either they thought he was stupid, or they didn't like him, or they had designs on his job -- which was certainly the cause in Arthur's [Arthur Drexler] case. I'm sure Arthur wouldn't have wanted to be seen outwardly as the agent of Hightower's demise, because that would have probably taken away the possibility of Arthur becoming his successor. So Arthur never took issue with him publicly, but he certainly stirred the

pot up a lot. John Szarkowski's a very fair-minded guy. He probably had his deep reservations about Hightower, but I think Arthur, who was very close personally to a certain number of the trustees, undoubtedly recounted some of the insane things that John [Hightower] would say in these meetings. Well, a funny thing happened on the way to the forum, and that was that, after a while, John Hightower began to feel that I was the only one on the upper staff who was really being straight with him. He was getting it in the neck from everybody else, but they would never admit giving it. So after a while I was his good friend [laughing], even though, ironically, I objected to almost everything he said. When problems started coming up with Bill Lieberman, John understood the nature of the problems, and he was very sympathetic. The definitive drama with Bill Lieberman began with a series of events that took place over a period of at least a year if not more. Bill did untoward things that he shouldn't have done and that affected me negatively, undercut me, whatever. Example: I had published -- even before I came to MoMA-- six chapters of a still unfinished book on Jackson Pollock. These six chapters were, I'd say, four times as long as the only book on Pollock that had as yet ever come out. Thus, I passed for a leading, if not *the* leading, scholar on Jackson Pollock's work. One day--Dick Oldenburg will tell you the same story--I'm having a drink with Dick to discuss some publication question and Dick says to me something about the Pollock catalogue raisonné. I said, "What Pollock catalogue raisonné?" And Dick said, "You mean Bill [Lieberman] hasn't discussed with you the Pollock catalogue raisonné?" This is what had happened. Without so much as the word "boo" to me, Bill Lieberman had set up an agreement with the Marlborough Gallery, with which he was very close. When Lee Pollock let Marlborough sell some of the Pollock estate pictures, one of the commitments they made was that they had to publish a catalogue raisonné. They didn't really want to bother with it, but they were willing to pay for it. So Bill Lieberman, entirely on his own hook, set up an agreement whereby we, The Museum of Modern Art, would publish the Pollock catalogue raisonné, and, as it turned out, the author was to be his former assistant curator of drawings, Bernice Rose. Now, since my job involved final control over all publications having to do in any way with the Collection of Painting and Sculpture, on that score alone I should have heard about this project before the agreement was made. But in addition, as sort of best-known Pollock scholar around,

I should have also have been told about it. Never a word. So I said to Dick, "This is preposterous." First of all, as I pointed out to Dick, where do we, The Museum of Modern Art, get off publishing a catalogue raisonné? We have never published a catalogue raisonné, and I personally would never *dream* of publishing a catalogue raisonné because, to me, what that is saying is that the Museum has some conviction or stake in regard to a particular artist that it doesn't have about all the other artists. I mean, I think we should only publish what we do exhibitions about or what we believe in, but never something that puts one artist in a special category. I was totally against having any such thing as a catalogue raisonné published by us, nor did I see that there was any point to it. What was in it for the Museum? This was really going to be a favor to Marlborough, aside from which, I didn't think Bernice knew the Pollock oeuvre well enough, and I would really hate to think that she would have to make the decisions as to what was a fake and what wasn't. The whole thing was insane. Now, mind you, I heard about this by pure chance in a conversation about another subject with Dick Oldenburg *after* the whole arrangement has been made. So I went to John Hightower. Dick said, "You've got to go to Hightower with this baby, this is too hot to handle." So I went to John and said, "This is preposterous," for all the reasons I just said to you. And it was rescinded, much to the anger of Marlborough and, obviously, Bill Lieberman. Now I'm going to tell you something that very few people know, and it cannot...I think maybe you ought to shut that off.

[Tape interruption, Interview Resumes]

John Hightower was shocked beyond belief, and you can check out all the details of the story; I can probably find the letter for you, all that kind of stuff. Hightower was privy to it all. So I decided to sort of deal with this head on, and I took Bill to lunch at Mercurio's, an Italian restaurant down the street, and I said in effect, "Bill, this shit must cease. If we're going to work together for the good of the Museum, I can't be looking over my shoulder to see if you're about to shoot an arrow in my back." And he said, "Bill, it *can't* stop until and unless you accept the idea that *you are my number-two man*"--and those are the exact words that he used: "my number-two

man." So I said, "Bill, that's not the way it was set up, that's not the job I took." If it *had* been the job I took, I would certainly have accepted it; but it wasn't. And Bill said, "Well, in that case, I'll have to go to the trustees." So I said, "Fine, take this to the trustees," and I reported back to John Hightower the substance of our conversation. So, weeks go by, and nothing happens. Finally, I said to Bill, "Bill, I thought you were taking this to the trustees." And obviously he had made no such move. So finally I went back to Hightower and I said, "Look, Bill said he would take this to the trustees; he doesn't seem to be doing that. Something has to be done." And John said, "I will take it to the trustees myself," which he did, and the trustees proceeded to name a committee of three, which had Jim Soby, Armand Bartos and George Hamilton. George Hamilton had been an old and long-time friend of Bill's. He was just an acquaintance of mine insofar as he was on the Painting and Sculpture Committee. It could hardly be called a committee that was in any way biased, especially towards me. This committee took testimony within and without the Museum for about six months. They interviewed me, and I told them my story, but they spoke to lots of people. Then they came to their conclusion, and their conclusion was that Bill should be removed from the department, and that I should become the Director of the department in charge of both Collections and Exhibitions. Bill was to be offered the Drawings Department once again. In order to cosmeticize the possible embarrassment for Bill, they would give it a new name...The Department of Works on Paper. Bill finally accepted that new job, extremely grudgingly -- as was to be expected given the situation. In the newspapers, they released a statement about a wonderful new idea, namely that all works on paper were to be gathered in a single department, and for this wonderful new department Bill Lieberman was chosen as Director. They didn't say anything about what was really going on. Obviously, you don't want to make it any more hurtful than it was. From that point on, Bill continued to fire arrows at me, but from much further away, so that it really didn't bother me at all. Then, finally, after a certain amount of time, Bill got another opportunity, and he took it and left, and that was that.

SZ: Do you think that Hightower believed that this was the optimal resolution of this situation?

WR: You'll have to ask him. I'm sure he liked the outcome; but I'm equally sure that he didn't have anything to do with the outcome.

SZ: Okay.

WR: I'm sure they took testimony from him, but he was not part of the committee. And I think that his own stock was very low. These three special committee people had all observed both Bill and me at work, from close up. They were all members of the Painting and Sculpture Committee. Jim Soby was a writer on art and former Director of P&S himself, and George Hamilton was an art historian and museum director, so...it was okay. Hence, we had a new situation in which I became head of the department. I can't remember what year that was.

SZ: I think you really got the title in '73. Bill was removed in '71, which was when Hightower was still there, or at the time he was leaving.

WR: By the time he left, there wasn't any question of what was happening.

SZ: That's what I found in the records, but this is fine.

WR: Right. A lot of things had happened in the meantime. We had gotten some very important acquisitions, not the least of which was Picasso's *Guitar*. I then discovered what a bullshitter Bill was. When I first came to the Museum....

SZ: Maybe I should cut off the tape for this.

WR: No, this one isn't too bad. It's nothing like the other thing [laughing]...

END TAPE 3, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 2

WR: In one of my early meetings with the Painting and Sculpture Acquisitions Committee I remember proposing a 1908 Picasso which was called Repose. Anyway, it's a 1908 painting; it's our only 1908 Picasso work. In any event, at the meeting Bill said, "Oh, I think Pablo would be overjoyed if he knew we were getting this work," and everybody said, "Yes, I'm sure you're right, Bill." Bill had given out that he knew Picasso quite well and he always referred to him as Pablo. I realized later that this was the sign that he didn't know Picasso well, because *very* few people ever called him Pablo [laughing]. When I got to know Picasso, I realized that he had only the vaguest notion of who Bill Lieberman was. He was the son of a woman who knew Picasso in passing; It really turned out that the only time Bill Lieberman had met Picasso was in a restaurant, [where he] was introduced to him. Such is, at least, what Picasso and Jacqueline told me -- and they had no axe to grind. When you set this aside the remark, "Oh, I'm sure Pablo would be overjoyed...," it's just a kind of bullshitting thing that just doesn't cut any ice with me.

SZ: Do you think that's what set Alfred against him?

WR: I think that he's a fantasist to a certain extent, and I think Alfred saw through him at a certain point. Bill was neither a scholar nor a real eye; he has a sort of decorator's eye that's pretty good and he's knowledgeable about works on paper. But he doesn't know much art history and, though he can write, he’s given precious little evidence of it. Bill works through people. He got where he did in part through contacts and connections, and sort of social contacts -- all this kind of crap -- and all of his life he's been a “walker”, if you know what a walker is. I was perfectly ready to live comfortably with Bill, since my main interest was the collection anyway, and not the exhibition program, but Bill wouldn't let me be. I think you can see this with the Pollock story, but there were many other examples. The Pollock story is ridiculous enough. And then this other thing. After Bill went into Drawings, he still tried occasionally to do things to annoy me. For example, it had long been established that anything the Painting and Sculpture Department wanted in the way of drawings for the P&S galleries-- we had a Boccioni charcoal in there, for example, as well as

other things-- that the use in our own galleries took precedence over loans to other institutions. Anything that was on exhibit in the P&S galleries had to be approved by me if it were to be lent. Apparently, the idea that Bill would have to consult with me in order to lend a Boccioni drawing elsewhere was something that didn't sit very well with him -- so he just didn't do it. Suddenly I noticed that works were disappearing out of the Painting and Sculpture galleries without my knowledge. What broke the camel's back on that one [laughing], was when he was about to lend Souvenir d'Oceanie, the ten-foot-square Matisse cut-out (which I had purchased for the collection in my first year at MoMA), which could hardly be called a drawing, (it was huge, made with scissors, and on canvas) without a word to me. So I had to stop it. Oldenburg and I resolved that issue by making a list of seventy-five works on paper that I considered susceptible for various reasons (such as being a sketch for a painting or sculpture, as was the Boccioni) to being needed in the P&S galleries. For loans of these, Bill would have to consult me. In all of his remaining years at MoMA, he never once did. That's what one was up against. Anyway, I don't like to see anybody hurt, and I must say that I realize that for Bill being demoted back to Drawings was not an easy thing; but then, when I thought what I had gone through for four or five days (the matter we haven't put on the tape), when it looked like my entire career was going to end up with a smear in *The New York Times* about having betrayed the Museum's interest or something, it lessened my anxieties about his feelings, I have to tell you. So that's about all I have to say on that score.

SZ: That's great. Do you want to stop for today?

WR: Yes.

END TAPE 3, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**WILLIAM S. RUBIN (WR)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART 11 WEST 53RD STREET NEW YORK, NEW YORK**
DATE:	**NOVEMBER 10, 1993**

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 1

SZ: In the course of what we talked about last time, we touched on Bates Lowry and his stewardship, and we talked a little bit about that interim period....

WR: Revolving doors.

SZ: Yes. We really didn't talk very much at all about Hightower. You made a couple of comments. I don't know if there's anything else you want to add.

WR: I think I did tell you that I had this peculiar experience with John that when he arrived there were a lot of people critical about him, none of them more than me, but I was the only one in meetings willing to speak up and oppose him; other people did it sort of behind his back, and around the edges, and more or less torpedoed him. I just thought he should be blown away. Peculiarly, after about six or eight months, we got to be friends, because Hightower appreciated the fact that I was giving it to him head-on. There is a certain irony in the situation, because Hightower was a very intelligent young man, and while he was utterly unprepared for this job, he was a quick learner. So he was really learning something about it, and I think, myself, that he was salvageable. But just about the time that he got to be salvageable, the trustees decided that he really wasn't right, and they asked him to resign... I haven't seen him since.

SZ: There were a couple of other things going on at this same time. One was that there was a lot of staff unrest. There were moves to form a professional staff union.

WR: I've sort of forgotten when that came in. Was that under Hightower?

SZ: Yes, and the first strike was under him. I believe there was also the incident where there was an antiwar protest, and that he just allowed it to go on and hadn't consulted the trustees. I don't know if any of that rings a bell with you.

WR: It does and it doesn't. There were a lot of problems that had to do with the Vietnam war protests, and some of those had begun even before Hightower came. The Art Workers Coalition was the big thing. They had “irrevocable demands,” and that kind of stuff. But Hightower, I think, was more open by nature and background to a kind of political correctness. I just assume that he made certain decisions that didn't sit well with the trustees.

SZ: What kind of place do you think that kind of political involvement does or doesn't have in an institution like this--specifically in this institution?

WR: My personal view is that one shouldn't let politics get mixed up with the Museum--that is, national politics--in any way. And I don't think it is the Museum's job to develop black artists, or women artists, or what-have-you. On the other hand, if it really were true that this or that black artist or woman artist were not getting his or her due as an artist because she was black or a woman, I think that would be terrible and one would have to do something about it. I have to tell you that I myself had a tendency, when it came to acquisitions, to lean over backwards, since our judgments are not a precise thing anyway. You might say that I tended to give the benefit of the doubt, particularly to black artists. We bought many works by woman artists, but not because they were women. There weren't many major women artists in the Ab Ex generation; but there got to be more and more in the younger generation, as more women took up that career. And we bought more and more of their things. I was

never aware that *anyone* in our curation ever looked differently at a Helen Frankenthaler or an Eva Hesse, say, or what-have-you, because it was made by a woman. I think that it was natural that black artists should have read into the Museum situation something which is generally true of life out there, and no doubt there are inequalities. But it seemed to me that the place they had to be corrected was in the area of aid to black artists, aid to education for black artists, making sure they had a chance to develop, and that the Museum, insofar as it showed things and bought things, was the place only for those who were already accomplished. On the other hand, since there were a certain number of such *good* black artists, I felt it was important that we represent those artists in the collection and in some cases have shows of them. We had a few retrospectives of artists who were black, and we wouldn't have shown them if they weren't good; on the other hand, there were probably some good artists who are white who were as good as those black artists and who *haven't* been shown at MoMA. If anything, I'd say that -- in particular in connection with black artists -- I wanted to feel, since there are good black artists, that they could be role models, that there are black artists whose work is shown in of the Museum and exhibited by the Museum. But the larger questions of national politics, and the use of the Museum as a bully pulpit for this or that -- against the Vietnam war and so forth -- it didn't strike me as a good idea. . . unless, of course, artists of real quality had started making pictures about that, which is a different thing. It's not that I'm suggesting for a moment that a work with a political impact shouldn't be in the Museum; it should simply be that it should be on the level on *Guernica* rather than the *Massacre in Korea* -- to pick two Picassos which demonstrate how a work can be a great work with a political connotation, and also a bad painting. So that was my attitude, and I think the board's attitude has always been the same. Even though quality judgments can't be proven, they're there, and even those critics or curators who pretend that they're not there, or would like to pretend that they're not there, find themselves making them. I haven't any sympathy at all with the idea that quality is something that should not be an issue. I think that's precisely the issue. Since the Museum is a selective organism, it's what the thing is about. I don't think that this political correctness thing ever got very far in the Museum, largely because the staff of professionals – almost all politically left of

center -- basically agreed with the trustees. Now, their politics may have been different, and certainly were different, than many of the trustees'. But they did not want to turn this place into a political institution.

SZ: Either that way, or I think there was a division of opinion about the place of a professional union in a [museum].

WR: I wasn't really thinking of the union. I didn't have anything to do with that. It doesn't seem to me that the union has damaged the Museum; by the same token, other museums have gotten along well without unions. I don't think that the staff who work at the Met – which has no union -- are any worse off than the people who work at the Modern.

SZ: So there you have it. The other thing I wanted to pick up on in a different way, because you talked a little bit about it, is, why do you think after all this upheaval, what was it about Dick Oldenburg that made him the successful candidate in 1972?

WR: Well, I think there are a couple of reasons. First of all, the right director for *this* Museum is not a curator who inevitably comes into conflict with the department heads and the curators. The right director is a person with a broad cultural knowledge, with a knowledge of the art world, capable of defining a broad policy and having the ability to deal with the world out there on behalf of the Museum -- the "world out there" being Washington, being the foundations, being other museums, being the public and so forth and so on. Dick had an extra advantage -- he had two extra advantages. One was that he was already here, and had impressed Bill Paley in the way he had taken over the troubled Publications Department, so that Paley made him acting director. And then it just seemed that temperamentally he was the right person. So Paley confirmed him. The second of Dick's advantages, aside from having his foot in the door, so to say, was that he was Claes's brother. That wasn't an advantage simply because he was Claes's brother, but because, as Claes's brother, he had had a lot of exposure to different people, situations, dealers, collectors, artists and so forth, and it just added a certain gloss to him. He was not an

unknown quantity when he took over. Then I think there is the fact that Dick is very self-effacing, almost to a fault, which, in a situation where the department heads have traditionally been the operative figures in their areas, didn't hurt. I, myself, always urged Dick to get out and appear more responsible for everything that was going on. But he loved the role of *Pater Familias*, happy to see his children shine. There were many times when certain public statements regarding painting might have been made by Dick, but he tended to defer to me in that regard. In Europe, I had somewhat the reputation as the director of The Museum of Modern Art, because Dick only went there occasionally. The Museum directors, of course, all knew that he was the director. But a lot of people in Europe didn't know he was the director. I had the feeling that there was an area – let's call it "showing the flag" -- that, had Dick been of a different temperament, he might have found more interesting. And it wouldn't have made for any conflict. As Dick was, he constituted a very peaceful, calming force. While there will always be critics -- even if you had the most perfect director in the world, there will be people who were rubbed the wrong way and were sniping. But, by and large, Dick had very much the kind of effect on the Museum that René d'Harnoncourt had had. And since he didn't have an Alfred fighting against him the way René did, it made for a rather peaceful period. The big thing at the beginning of it, for me, was the Bill Lieberman thing. But that didn't penetrate much further. The Museum became relatively peaceful. This Museum, before I got here, had had a reputation of being a nest of vipers. I say that during Dick's stewardship -- while there were a couple of department heads that were a little bit "political", if I can put it that way (mostly Bill and Arthur Drexler) -- basically, between me representing the largest department, and with John Szarkowski, with, later, John Elderfield, you had a number of people who just wanted to do their job, you know. And it became a place which was a pleasure to come to. Nothing more than minimal back-office sniping. None of the *Sturm und Drang* which had affected the revolving-doors years. From what I understand, the situation had been extremely intense in the years before I arrived because you had Alfred, who was unique in that it was in a sense *his* museum, and he had been deprived of its directorship. And he never forgave the board for that, and never really accepted the notion that there was a need for someone to deal with the larger institutional and budget problems. René was very

understanding, and did everything he could to make Alfred happy, but Alfred was not to be put off [laughing].

SZ: And Arthur forgave Dick for having gotten the position that he wanted?

WR: No. Arthur remained, always, a troubling figure. But he really didn't have any power, because even his best friends on the board would say, "Oh, that's just Arthur." Arthur concocted this report early on about what the director should be and do -- this was before Dick got appointed. Naturally, the board asked for that report as a sop to him. And, of course, the report on the ideal director described Arthur [laughing]. But I think Arthur was a very intelligent man, and he probably knew the realistic limits of his chances. There was just no way to undercut Dick during this period as Acting Director, since we had a number of very successful shows, and things were running well. There was nothing Arthur could really latch onto. As the trustees got to know Dick, they became tremendously fond of him. Arthur was a hangover from those early years of *Strum und Drang*, and he was the only one. Bill was a hangover too, so I shouldn't say [Arthur was] the only one.

SZ: You're really describing Dick as a....

WR: A benign leader. I think that Dick is an unusually ethical person, and I think that he and Blanchette Rockefeller together embodied the ethos of the Museum. That's a very important thing, especially in an art world that is, on the one hand, being intensely politicized, but also one where money was looming as a more and more important factor. The phenomenal rise in the value of pictures, the appearance of "power collectors", the abuses that people are capable of -- all this somehow called for a level of ethical nobility and disinterestedness, which Dick and Blanchette embodied very well. I also think Dick got along very well with Bill Paley, then director of the board. Indeed, he got along very well with most people. In the end, he managed to live through the enormous fundraising drive. But I just don't think Dick could have lived through another one. David [Rockefeller] is clearly very anxious to leave a major personal mark before he dies, to leave the Museum bigger and better.

There's a real question in my mind whether Dick should want to even continue into that kind of thing. In any case, I know his basic feeling was, "I hope it [the idea of a new drive] will go away." But it couldn't go away because there are real needs.

SZ: We're talking about tunneling under the sculpture garden?

WR: No, I'm talking about now just the recent....

SZ: No, I mean another possible expansion.

WR: Well, there are lots of possibilities, such as tunneling under the garden and there are possibilities to the immediate west, and there are off-site possibilities. Dick, after all, has had the longest-running career of any director that MoMA's ever had, and I think there are very few directors anywhere that have had as long a tenure as he has had. Directors are not known for their tenure in museums, because they get used up. The demands made on them are so phenomenal. Dick had no life of his own that I could make out because, more nights than not -- I would guess five out of seven nights a week -- Dick was at work in the sense of having dinner with a trustee, going to an event at the Museum, an opening here or there, showing up at something that's important. What kind of life is that? It could never have been done by anyone with children. The demands made on museum directors now are so phenomenal that there is something wrong. For us, of course, it was just wonderful, because Dick was like a shield. He blocked off a lot of static and other stuff, did a lot of things that we might otherwise have had to do. The thing is, luckily, he's so gregarious. He loves meeting new people, loves going to dinner parties, he gets an adrenaline charge from these things. So he was a right choice for the job he had.

SZ: The right man at the right time is what you said.

WR: Yes.

SZ: What about now, what do you think?

WR: I haven't the faintest. My own feeling is that they should get somebody with a wide cultural knowledge who's tremendously imposing and will function well in the broader, outer world of culture, fundraising and people -- certainly not a curatorial type, and not necessarily even a professional museum man. Anybody who's smart enough to be director here would be smart enough to grasp the organization of this place from top to bottom in two months. You look at the table of organization, you study it, there's no trick. This isn't IBM, you know. My own feeling about it is that it's very hard to find the kind of people that are right for this kind of job. The chemistry has got to be right as well. The trustees all want a piece of him, and if the piece tastes bad, his days are numbered. That's the way it was with Hightower, and the way it was with Bates Lowry.

SZ: So the plan that may or may not continue to mimic the Met's structure of having a paid president and director....

WR: I don't know whether that really is going to take place. I think that to some extent that was cooked up for the purpose of allowing Dick to go on and still having somebody to do the dirty work, and I think what they found out is that nobody wants to do the dirty work if they can't also have the prestigious position, so to say. It's one thing to be expected to fundraise if you are also in charge of the broader policies of the Museum, it's another thing if there's a professional with you. I suspect that when they find the director, that they may go back to just having an unpaid person.

SZ: Because what you're describing, what you're saying is that because of the way this place is really structured, that doesn't make very much sense either.

WR: No. For example, Aggie [Gund] is a very good choice for president. I think as president there are very few paid people that I think would be as good as Aggie, and yet, if you had a paid president, she has to become chairman of the board, which is really a distant kind of position. I don't have any secret pipeline to what's going on. I don't think that there's a consensus yet on the board, and I don't think that any of the

candidates they have been talking about are driving them up the wall with joy. There may be a kind of wild-card candidate out there somewhere, and I personally think there is a very good wild-card candidate who has nothing to do with The Museum of Modern Art--I can't say who with--and his name has been thrown into the hopper. That's all I can say. The first decision they make may be wrong, and then, you have to not hesitate to correct it. The Museum may go through yet another period of *Strum und Drang*. That's too bad, but think of how many museums have gone from the frying pan into the fire. But I think Dick . . . it's sort of sad that he couldn't run out his few years that were left, but I think forces that really are beyond him have produced the kind of pressure for an expansion situation. The new young generation cannot make do with the Museum as it is and I understand that. Ten or fifteen years ago, we took the attitude that doubling the gallery space would be such an improvement, we said “that's great”. But it really wasn’t enough. People like Kirk all feel, quite rightly, that they've got to do something.

SZ: Does that surprise you, though, having gone through this big expansion process?

WR: No, because living institutions like this have expansions every ten years or so. Let's face it, when did we open the expanded Museum?

SZ: Eighty-four.

WR: Eighty-four. Okay, if they begin now, it would five or six years minimum, *minimum*--probably more like ten--before anything ambitious would come to fruition, so you would have had almost twenty years between -- even more than twenty years. If you look at past history, before I got here, the periods between building the Johnson wing, and the "13" building, and this and that -- the Study Center was new when I came here – but it seemed like that Study Center was only a year or two old when we were talking about further expansion.

SZ: It was one year old.

WR: Yes, when we were *talking* about a new building proposition. There's never a time when some planning isn't going on, and I think that so long as The Museum of Modern Art remains a living institution it's going to be that way.

END TAPE 4, SIDE 1

TAPE 4, SIDE 2, BLANK

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**WILLIAM S. RUBIN (WR)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**EAST 58TH STREET NEW YORK, NEW YORK**
DATE:	**MARCH 25, 1994**

BEGIN TAPE 5, SIDE 1

SZ: I thought today I'd start by asking you about the collection. I guess one way into it is to ask you how it changed under your directorship, what it was when you found it and what you wanted to do with it.

WR: I think that the collection changed in what would be the natural way for any successor to someone who had done a monumental job, as Alfred had done, in the sense that you're going to be involved with two things, essentially. One is moving it ahead through time, since, inevitably, every decade brings changes and new ideas; and the other is catching up with the errors and omissions (if such exist, and inevitably, they do) of your predecessor. I should imagine that that description would be just as good a description of what Kirk Varnedoe is involved in now as what I was involved in then. What Alfred --not only Alfred, to be sure, but Jim Soby, Jim Sweeney and others -- have accomplished was the creation of the most balanced, and finest collection of major works of 20th century modern art in the world. I think it is still the finest collection, though in some ways the Beaubourg museum has a depth in various areas that we lack. They don't have quite as many of the “key” works, let us say. But if you consider the national museums of France as representing the Picasso Museum, as well as Beaubourg and this and that other museum, they can field pretty mighty collections. This was much less the case twenty-some-odd years ago, and speaks well for what the French have been up to, particularly over the past ten or fifteen years. As far as we're concerned, I felt, when I came aboard just after

the middle '60s, that there were two kinds of problems I had to deal with aside from the problem of getting new works that were being made in the '60s by artists who had only recently emerged. One set of questions was raised by the historical collection, that is to say, an analysis of the works from the turn of the century, essentially, up to 1960, showed that we had, in general, superb quality, but we also had what we could call lacunas, and other situations we could describe as unbalances. Now you couldn't even use such words with anything but a collection that was already extraordinarily well developed, because most collections -- as Tom Messer said to Dick Oldenburg once about the Guggenheim, "Well, our collection is mostly lacunas" [laughing]. To be sure, some of these perceptions (or judgments) as to lacunas or unbalances resulted from different perceptions about the way modern art's history had unfolded. Hence, certain works that were of great interest to Alfred were of less interest to me, and vice versa. Then there was the question of simply those things that Alfred *would* have liked to have acquired but somehow, because he couldn't do everything, he didn't succeed in getting. There's no question, for example, that Alfred would like to have had a Franz Marck painting. He would have liked to have had one by [Egon] Schiele. Above all, he would have liked to have had a Cubist construction by Picasso. Those are among a number of objects which represented "holes" or lacunas in the collection, as far as I was concerned. Happily, I have been able to fill them in one way or another. There were other areas where I judged the collection unbalanced. We had, for example, two of the four panels of the Four Seasons of [Wassily] Kandinsky. But relative to the number of Cubist pictures we had -- indeed, compared to many other areas of the collection – that was an inadequately thin representation of Kandinsky. Even though we were going to receive a great picture called The Archer from Mrs. [Bertram (Louise)] Smith, I still thought it was important to build up the Kandinsky representation. So I negotiated an exchange with the Guggenheim that got us the two remaining panels of the Four Seasons, which is really now the heart of our Kandinsky representation. And we also managed to pluck out a picture from the Nelson Rockefeller collection that was not destined to the Museum, a Murneau-period Kandinsky. We had earlier also arranged for a promised gift of a very different -- perhaps the greatest -- Murneau picture, which belonged to Richard Zeisler. Thus, by a number of different acts and methods,

we were able to enhance the Kandinsky situation. We had also picked up two later Kandinskys from the gift of Sidney Janis. I think we talked about Sidney's gift, didn't we, at some length at some point? No?

SZ: I don't think we did.

WR: Sidney's gift remains in my mind in part because it took place in my first days at the Museum; but it was certainly the first important gift that I was able personally to negotiate. I had known Sidney's collection for some years. It was a hot-and-cold collection, but it had some absolute masterpieces in it, and it was a big collection. He had, for example, what I judge to be one of the two finest of [Salvador] Dali's small Surrealist paintings. He had arguably the greatest [Umberto] Boccioni ever painted, the [Dynamism of a Soccer Player, 1913] which came from Mme Donna Benedetta Marinetti. He had Picasso's Artist's Studio picture, which was not only a great masterpiece but had had a lot of influence on [Arshile] Gorky and other Americans in the '40s. He had six [Piet] Mondrians and six [Fernand] Légers. It was a collection of incredible richness. Two of the [Paul] Klees were superb. And then he had a few [Jackson] Pollocks, he had [Willem] de Koonings and so forth. It was a big, big event for the Museum to get that collection. In some cases it enriched areas that were already rich; in other cases it filled in things where we had nothing. For example, we had de Kooning's Woman, but we had none of the landscape-type paintings that followed after that, and Sidney's collection contained a very good one. It had Mondrians of a type which we did not have, it had Kandinskys of a type we did not have, it had Légers of a type we did not have. So it filled in a lot of “holes” in our representation of painters already well represented. But it also gave us some exceptional works from painters who were either hardly represented or not represented at all. But to come back to the larger question of what my attitude was toward the collection: Essentially I had to make my own judgment of Alfred's job, realizing, of course, that what I was seeing in the galleries and reserves was not what ideally Alfred would necessarily have wanted, but what he was *able* to acquire, and to say, okay then, these are the things where we have to work to fill in, these are the things that need balance, and these are things that Alfred perhaps undervalued,

which we should go for. I think in terms of things in the “historical” collection that were missing, two of the most important -- and I think they're an interesting pair because the first was one that Alfred had tried very hard but failed to get, and the other was one he simply just passed up -- were the Picasso Cubist construction sculptures and the Matisse paper cut-outs. With regard to the former, Alfred had tried a number of times to get one of these objects, but Picasso personally prized them. There were not many constructions, and he *never* put any of them up for sale. The only one that ever got out of his studio had been given as a gift to Paul Eluard. Eluard later sold to [Roland] Penrose. With the exception of this wood construction, then in Penrose's collection, and now in the Tate’s, Alfred didn’t have anything he could even take aim at. The Museum tried to get help through [Daniel-Henry] Kahnweiler, then through [André] Malraux, and others to put pressure on Picasso to sell one of these constructions. It never worked. The other major historical lacuna was Matisse’s late paper cut-outs. Alfred --and I think this is inevitable in regard to anyone's eye, however remarkable -- Alfred had certain artists, styles, and areas of art history that, as time has made clear, he overvalued. And others that he undervalued. One that he undervalued was –ironically, in view of this artist otherwise-- the late work of Matisse. Despite the fact that he is known for being such a Matisse scholar, Alfred did not in fact, much care for the paper pictures of Matisse. The Museum had a big show of these, which was arranged by, if I remember correctly, Monroe Wheeler. At the time--and this was long before I came to the Museum--the family had offered the Museum the great cut-out called The Snail, now in the Tate and which is arguably the greatest of all those *decoupages*, for [around] $60,000, and Alfred felt that was too much. Despite the pleadings of, Bill Seitz, who was a young curator in the department at the time. Alfred passed up the offer. When I arrived at the Museum, about 1966, the only late paper cut-out they had-- aside from a few maquettes for church vestments, which the family had thrown in as gifts to the Museum, along with the maquette for the cover of Alfred's book-- the only thing they had was an unsolicited gift from Time Magazine. Time had commissioned a stained-glass window from Matisse, which they didn’t know what to do with. The window was called Nuit de Noël [1952], and now we have both the window and the paper maquette for it. This representation struck me as intrinsically-- both in terms of

Matisse's oeuvre and in terms of the collection-- way below par. So I went about filling those two voids. There was, of course, also the question of such artists who were not represented at all. With Schiele, Alfred may have made a judgment that, well, with limited resources it's probably better to go for Schiele watercolors than for oils. However, in a collection like ours, ultimately you need both. We were able eventually to get a great early Schiele portrait. It was one of the last historical lacunas that I was able to fill. With Franz Marck, Alfred no doubt had great trouble finding anything worthwhile for the collection because there are so few works. I solved that one by an exchange with the Guggenheim, which got us a great Franz Marck of a desirable type that I hadn't seen on the market myself during my whole lifetime. Moving further ahead in time, I felt there were certain areas, particularly in Surrealism, where the collection needed some strengthening, both on the illusionist side, with [René] Magritte and Dali, but particularly on the abstract side, with [Joan] Miró and [André] Masson. I went about doing what I could in those scores. We acquired, for example, any number of Mirós, including the Birth of the World [1925] and the big bronze sculpture Moonbird, which Miró gave me for the cost of the casting, and so forth--just slews of stuff. My friendship with Miró led him to give us the marvelous studies and drawings for a number of paintings already in our collection, such as Dutch Interior and Mistress Mills, and so forth. Advancing even further in time, I think we can say that the main problem that I had to face, and it was that to which I devoted the largest segment of my time during my first few years, was the Abstract Expressionist collection. Taken as a whole, Alfred had undervalued the Abstract Expressionist generation. He had collected a certain number of very fine pictures. We had the beautiful snowy white "classic" Pollock, we had a single very beautiful Still and two superb [Mark] Rothko's. In a few cases, the things we had were gifts of Philip [Johnson]-- or in some way made possible by Philip. Philip had emboldened Alfred and given him support in the acquisition committee. I would say he was a good psychological influence. Philip's intents also led Alfred down a few paths that did not pan out. But I think Alfred's old injunction that errors of commission are much less serious than errors of omission, was quite correct. So we put out our net to try to develop an Abstract Expressionist collection really worthy of The Museum of Modern Art, as the leading modern museum in the very city and nation in

which this movement had developed. That meant treating it with the same importance that Alfred had treated Surrealism or Cubism, which Alfred had never done. Perhaps because they were here, the American painters, never had a certain kind of mythical stature in his eyes which Europeans had enjoyed. He was satisfied to have one fine example of most of these people, whereas he would never be satisfied with representing Léger, Picasso, Klee or Miró on anything like that basis. The result of that position was, for example, that although he was offered David Smith's masterpiece, Australia, in 1958, at the time that Sam Hunter did a David Smith retrospective – and for a very modest price – despite Hunter's pleading and the knowledge that at that time David believed it, and I think rightly so, to be his greatest work -- Alfred didn't bite. After all, the Museum already had a Smith. Sometimes his failure to bite on these offers had to do with a problem that arose on a psychological and philosophical level for Alfred when it had to do with money. Alfred, who had paid relatively little for works throughout the 1930s and early '40s, was very perturbed by the rise in the market, beginning in the 1950s and continuing through the '60s. He was the proverbial Scotchman to his core when it came to money. I mean, Alfred inevitably found the restaurants in the neighborhood where you could get a sumptuous lunch for seventy-five cents. He was very concerned also about art dealers as a group who might be out to in some way hurt rather than help the Museum, to use it for their own purposes. I feel sure that Sidney Janis, for example, who had, after all, been a member of the original collectors' committee with Blanchette Rockefeller, would have been more than delighted to give the gift of his collection, had Alfred Barr asked. But I think he considered Sidney, after he went into the art business, as just another shifty dealer. Who knows? I remember that when I first told Dorothy [Miller], that Sidney was giving us his collection, she said, "Bill, watch it now. He's probably up to something. This doesn't sound right." They had these preconceived ideas. As I say, Alfred was particularly pissed about high prices, and when American paintings began to sell for reasonable prices, – which were then, as compared to what would happen in the 70's and 80's, quite low -- that pissed him off far more than when the European product sold for high prices, though he was certainly pissed at that, too. You have to realize that this was a man who bought the Girl Before a Mirror [1932] for $1,000 and who bought the Demoiselles d'Avignon

[1907] for $24,000. He also bought a clutch of Max Ernst works at an average of $50 each. Somehow, Alfred was not sophisticated about money matters. He didn't really understand that money was getting cheaper, and to some extent, at any rate, you weren't paying more, you were just paying in cheaper dollars. But there was also the fact that the market for modern art did, indeed, go up. When pictures began to be a little more expensive, he resisted it mightily. When it came to new work, like the early [Roy] Lichtenstein, for example, if he were agreeable to having Lichtenstein in the collection, the idea of spending $800 or whatever it might be for a key picture bothered him; he'd rather pay $200 for a little one. So when I got at MoMA we had one Lichtenstein, and it was called Flatten-Sand-fleas; it was a small picture – not especially good -- about this big, and obviously not a picture with which to represent Lichtenstein in The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: But it was a bargain.

WR: Let's say it cost less, and you could say you had a Lichtenstein. A classic example of Alfred's rage at these high prices -- and the cost to the Museum as a result -- has to do with the painting now at the Metropolitan Museum called Autumn Rhythm, by Pollock. But before I tell you the story of Autumn Rhythm, and these are stories that very few people know about, and the few who know aren't about to tell them, I'd like to give you some sense of what the price perspective looked like back in those earlier years. I'll never forget that once, when I had Bob Motherwell over for dinner, this was, I think, maybe around 1958 or 1960, he began talking about galleries and money. In those years, well before coming to MoMA, I had been collecting some works by American artists--I had a Motherwell, a small Pollock, and I had a big Rothko; and I also had some Surrealist things and some [Jean] Dubuffets--and Bob came over for dinner and we talked afterwards. He had been represented by the Kootz Gallery till then, and he was just moving over to Sidney Janis. He was telling me how Janis was describing the possible future for his generation of artists. Motherwell said to me, "Bill, you won't believe it, but Sidney told me that someday our [the Abstract Expressionists'] big pictures would bring $5,000 apiece." That seemed to him like a staggering sum. "Our big pictures will someday bring $5,000."

By the time Bob died, he wouldn't have taken $5,000 for a little collage, nor $800,000 for a big *Elegy* picture. This is simply to give you a sense of how differently it looked from the perspective of that time. What happened with the Pollock thing was that Alfred... There was a consensus among critics and collectors, such as they were in the early '60s, that the two greatest Americans were Pollock and de Kooning. Forgetting now the question of how de Kooning was handled -- because I think there were problems there, too, very real ones -- Pollock was even more a problem for Alfred. I think that is because there is a certain painterly something that de Kooning dealt with, and that belonged to motifs that were originally visible and so forth, which made de Kooning much more accessible to younger painters -- that made him the highly influential painter he was -- that also made him more accessible somehow to Alfred. There was a certain *belle peinture*, even in the seeming coarseness and roughness of de Kooning's handling, a certain kind of “traditional painting” involved in that. When Pollock got into pouring the paint, it was a bit of a shock for Alfred, though he had to admit that the pictures had a certain beauty. I think that his qualms about Pollock were intensified by the very fact that Pollock was being championed by Clement Greenberg. Clement Greenberg and Alfred form an interesting pair of poles within the critical and modern art community in the '40s and '50s. Alfred was by far the figure of the greatest power. Clem had very little power but he had the in-group prestige as the critic who was really the champion of this generation of painters at that time. Clem grudgingly admitted that Alfred had done a pretty great job. But it was very grudging, and I remember he once grudgingly admitted to me that he would have to call Alfred a great man if pressed. But unfortunately, there was a side of Alfred Barr that Clem, who disliked Surrealism, (though he liked Míro and Masson) could not accept. He thought that a lot of what Alfred liked was “novelty art”--that was a term he tended to use. Clem thought that Alfred was a sucker for anything that looked new. Or outlandish. For example, there was a show in which Alfred had put something by some guy who had made a shoeshine stand into a work of art.

SZ: Joe Milone.

WR: Yes. This mightily offended Clem, who considered it kitsch. He also thought, of course, that painters like [Yves] Tanguy and Dali -- that all these people were disguised academic creeps that didn't know what painting was about. And so, on one occasion in an article, Clem referred to Alfred as -- what was the phrase now? -- You'll have to check this out, but it was something to the effect of "that inveterate promoter of minor art" [laughing]. So there was no love lost between Clem and Alfred. I believe, personally, that Clem's championing of Pollock had a negative effect on Alfred [laughing]. In any event, the bottom line was that we had -- aside from one good very early work and a little pastel that was just a gift -- we had basically one Pollock when I arrived. But it was a very good one; if Alfred was going to choose only one, he nevertheless chose a very good one. What we *did* not have was a very big one. It was big, but it wasn't one of the handful of wall-size Pollocks, of which there were only four classic ones and, then, one later one, Blue Poles. I felt The Museum of Modern Art certainly should have one of these few. They were, all of them, masterpieces. The black one, now in Düsseldorf, is called No. 32, 1950. And, then, Lavender Mist, which is now in Washington, D.C., at the National Gallery. And Autumn Rhythm, which is now in the Met and which was in Pollock's estate when he died, as was No. 32, 1950. The last one to remain in private hands – the only one by the time I got to the Museum -- the picture that we now in fact own, called One, then belonged to Ben Heller. Any one of the others could have been bought by Alfred, but he never wanted to reach. Moreover, there was the whole issue of Pollock's black pictures, the Rorschachy-type, blotted or stained (as opposed to poured) pictures: we didn't have one. We now have the best, which is called Echo, [1951]. We did have an early picture which came less through Alfred's efforts than those of Jim Sweeney: that was the She-Wolf [1943]. But we lacked any black pictures of 1951-52, we lacked any picture from 1946, which was the transition period into the allover style. So we didn't have one of the wall-size Pollocks. It had transpired, however, that, in 1958 or thereabouts, long before I came to the Museum -- at that time I remember I bought a huge Rothko that I paid $5,000 for, and it was considered like a new price thing – we were offered Autumn Rhythm. Most American paintings by the big-name Ab-Exers were changing hands for about $2,000 to $3,000. But Pollock had died and Lee Krasner picked Sidney as the representative for the estate, and

she had identified certain key pictures that she didn't want to go anywhere but to museums. As I said, she had at that time two of the great big pictures. She had No. 32, 1950, the all black one, now in the Nordrhein-Westafalen (Düsseldorf) museum; and she also possessed the one called Autumn Rhythm, widely considered even better than No. 32. While Pollock was still alive, in '55, Janis had sold Blue Poles, which was a wall-size picture from a later date, for $6,000. The question then arose for the estate: we have these two big wall-size pictures left; that's very little. Pollock is now dead; what should be asked for these pictures? I don't know for sure what she and Sidney thought would be right for No. 32, 1950--I would imagine around $18,000-$20,000 or so--but for Autumn Rhythm, which was considered the consummate work, they put a price of $30,000. Well, Sidney wrote a letter to Alfred, saying that he represented the estate, and that they wanted The Museum of Modern Art to have first choice from it and there was a general consensus that Autumn Rhythm was the finest picture left in the estate and it was one of only four wall-size ones that Pollock made etc., etc, and that after consultation with Lee, he felt that this unique work should be $30,000. Alfred was evidently so furious at the idea that anyone could ask $30,000 for such a picture that he did something which -- given the very kind of correct person Alfred was -- can only be considered as phenomenal: he never answered the letter. He never bothered answering, and after a certain number of months the estate realized, as the German proverb would have it, no answer is also an answer. And so they went on to the Metropolitan, which bought it. The Metropolitan couldn't get up the $30,000, but it got up about $20,000, and they traded in a black picture which they had owned to get the credit for the rest. So the deal was made. Now $30,000 was a large amount of money at the time for an American work, but if you were to observe that it is arguably the greatest, or one of the greatest, paintings by arguably the greatest painter of the American Abstract Expressionist renaissance, $30,000, which didn't buy you much of an apartment or whatever at that time, doesn't sound so ridiculous; certainly it doesn't sound ridiculous next to the $375,000 that I had to pay for One, which is the sister picture, not that many years later. That in turn sounds like nothing next to the $30 to $40 million that the picture would be bringing today. So this is the amusement of the whole situation. When I came to the Museum, therefore, within the larger framework

of netting us a real Abstract Expressionist collection worthy--and that meant, for example, something more than the small black vertical by [Barnett] Newman called Abraham [1949] to represent him in the collection, which we had by virtue, not of Alfred, but of Philip--I felt we needed a great black picture, and we got the best of them, which I bought from Ben. I bought Echo and One from Ben, as I also....

END SIDE 1, TAPE 5

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 5

WR: Vir Heroicus Sublimis [1950-51], the red Newman, is listed as a gift of Ben Heller, but that was simply for tax purposes. The fact is, we agreed on a price for a package of pictures that included the six-by-eight-foot Gorky drawing.... [telephone interruption] So where were we?

SZ: We were talking about the first bunch of stuff you got from Ben Heller.

WR: That's right. I would say the center of the drive to develop an Abstract Expressionist collection was the acquisition of a group of pictures which Ben Heller had that I highly admired. This included a big horizontal [Franz] Kline, I think it was called Number 2 (1954), something like that; the huge tinted drawing by Gorky; the Pollock black-and-white picture called Echo (Number 25, 1951); then the big red Newman, Vir Heroicus Sublimis; the big wall-size Pollock, One (Number 31, 1950). We actually bought One first, then we bought the other pictures in groups thereafter, as we were able to get the money together. All this transpired before Ben Heller sold his other large picture, Blue Poles, for $2 million dollars, which started a new wave of Pollock prices going up. I was able to buy through a dealer named Robert Elkon a wonderful transitional picture of 1946 called Shimmering Substance [1946], and we got a very important late picture called White Light [1954] in the Sidney Janis group of pictures, so that we were on our way toward having a really worthwhile collection [of Abstract Expressionist paintings]. Then finally, years later, I negotiated a purchase and gift with Lee Krasner through which we got about twelve pictures from all moments of

Pollock's career. By now, we have a really incredible [collection]; we could put on our own Pollock retrospective. With David Smith, Alfred had not only missed out on Australia, he had never bought any Cubi. Regrettably, I arrived at the Museum at a time when my favorite Cubi were already spoken for. But there was one very good one left--it's not, to my mind, the best, but it's very good--so I bought that immediately, and I gave the Museum Australia, as much as an example to other collectors as the fact that I just felt this piece had to be in the Museum collection. So by hook or by crook, this way, that way, we managed to put out the net. With artists like Rothko, they were willing to give me anything I wanted. I picked out seven Rothkos which eventually made their way into the collection, that were promised gifts. The same from Motherwell, the same from [Adolph] Gottlieb. We often bought one object; we bought one beautiful Motherwell, but we got seven or eight Motherwells as gifts. So from a collection which was one-deep, let's say, we were now a collection that was four- or five-deep; actually, now we're deeper than that. With Clyfford Still, there had been one Clyfford Still, and that was the region where I was most stymied, because Still and his wife were very difficult to handle and wouldn't sell. I still managed to add one major picture to the group, so we have at least two Stills, but I tried to buy from Mrs. Still later yet another picture, to no avail. Someday we'll get another Still. We also got a lot of other things. We didn't have any middle-period Sam Francis. We didn't have, as I said, hardly any Newmans; we got in a whole slew of Newmans, not just the big red picture, but I got Sidney to buy for us, as part of his gift, the big white-on-white picture by Newman [Onemenet III, 1949]. I got the frame maker...who had bought early on for very little, from Barney, that narrow zip picture that's just as wide as the zip in ours; it's kind of a two-inch-wide picture. He gave that as a gift. One way or another we put together a very...I got a gift later from [inaudible]. We got some pretty wonderful Newmans in the collection. So we now have what is unquestionably the only historically diversified and rich major collection of Abstract Expressionism anywhere in the world, which is nothing less than what we should have. If we're a collection that prides itself on the best Futurist collection in the world, why shouldn't we have had the best Abstract Expressionist collection in the world? So that took a lot of my energies in my five or

six years at the Museum. I also did want to upgrade and fill in some of the still-later material.

SZ: From that period, a large number of these works you've repeatedly stated you bought. Did you have acquisition funds for that, or did you have to sell other things [from the collection]?

WR: Mostly we had to sell things, but we did have some acquisition funds. For example, I bought with cash Matisse's great découpage Souvenir d'Océanie--Memories of Oceania [1952-53]; that was $125,000. And I bought a few other things with cash. That was more than a year's money, $125,000, but with this rising market I was able to get some extraordinary prices on some really second-rate stuff that had been hanging around the collection that we could easily do without. [telephone interruption]

SZ: So you basically told me you were lucky because the market was so good that you could sell stuff that was really not that good.

WR: Yes, we were getting exceptional prices. The market was moving up fast, with the result that, if you bought something, even at a very high price, because it was a great thing, by the time you paid for it, the price wasn't that high. People didn't know the value of pictures in a certain sense. We held a number of closed auctions where the bidders did not bid against one another but made written bids, seeing the pictures separately. You'd be amazed at the range of bids for a pretty standard thing like a very difficult or abstract Dora Maar head oil on paper, which we sold; the prices ranged from $15,000 to the winning bid, which was [Galerie] Beyeler, which was $85,000. Now, when dealers themselves are that spread apart, you know.... One picture we sold was a rather awful, what I would call a kind of Fifth Avenue matron's picture, by [Kees] van Dongen, and it was a late van Dongen, of the '30s, that showed a view of the Place Vendôme in Paris, with the Vendôme column. It wasn't a very interesting picture. You could see the Ritz, and it had Knoedler's gallery--it used to be they had a branch there--so, though Knoedler's wasn't usually one of the

people we brought into our auctions, I made sure to bring Knoedler's into that one. It's interesting that we had three bids by other dealers; most of the dealers didn't want to even bid on it. Those three bids clustered around $4,000 to $6,000; Knoedler's carried it away at $45,000 [laughing]. That shows you the kind of madness that goes on. If ever I were to release the story of this, there would be a lot of red faces among those dealers who are still alive. Be that as it may, it worked out very well as far as we were concerned, since it allowed us to really get some good things. Meanwhile, we were able to fill in other things with gifts. I got Picasso to give us--remember, I talked about the two things that I thought we needed to get historically, the Cubist construction and the [Matisse] découpage--I bought the découpage from Pierre Matisse, and later we got The Swimming Pool [1952-53] as still another découpage, but I would have preferred to have gotten The Snail, but this was still a pretty great one. Then we got the construction from Picasso.

SZ: That was a bit of work, wasn't it?

WR: Yes. That would take an hour to recount, just that by itself, but that was, in effect, a lucky idea I had, namely to approach Picasso directly and to offer him, since money obviously was not an object to Picasso and he had refused offers, a Cézanne, which piqued his curiosity and got me in the door. Once I got in the door, he didn't like the Cézanne that much, and I don't blame him, but he was so struck by the whole thing that he gave us the Guitar [1912-1913] [laughing].

SZ: Was that the beginning of your relationship with him?

WR: Yes, that was the beginning of my relationship with Picasso, which then, subsequently with him and even more after his death, led to our getting eight or nine great masterpieces, like the big plaster head of Marie-Thérèse and the plywood bull and various other things.

SZ: Did you like him?

WR: Very much. I had a very good relationship with Picasso, who obviously could be a bastard. But I was of the generation of his grandchildren, so it was easier for him to like me than it was for him to like Alfred. There was still some kind of, I guess, Indian wrestling going on between him and Alfred, but there was none with me. He was bemused that Alfred's successor should be this young kid who marched in, because when you're ninety-eight years old, anyone who's thirty-eight looks like a mere infant.

SZ: And of course you became fairly close to Jacqueline.

WR: Yes, very close to Jacqueline. In fact, Jacqueline became a very dear friend of ours. But I saw a great deal of Picasso while he was still alive because I had built a house, which had no connection to Picasso, because I was building it before I met him, that was only an hour away from him. Since part of the problem for seeing Picasso, for anyone, was that Picasso didn't want to be interrupted when he was at work, and you never knew whether he was going to work or not work. If you came from America, you could, as Alfred Barr did on his last visit, cool your heels in a hotel, waiting to be summoned. So being an hour away, I would often get a call from Jacqueline or from Miguel, Picasso's secretary, who'd say, "Listen, the maestro would love to shoot the shit this afternoon, why don't you pop over for lunch?" and whisk off, so it was much easier. Also, I spoke French with Picasso--he had two people who spoke good but imperfect French--whereas with Alfred, Alfred, although he knew French to some extent, he was too much a perfectionist to ever speak it, because he wouldn't want to be caught up in the errors and probably the bad accent and so forth. So Daisy [Marga Barr] had to translate, and whenever you work through translators, it's not the same thing. Also, I can't imagine two personalities more opposite, two physical makeups more different, than Alfred and Picasso. They're Mutt and Jeff and they're Latin and Nordic and they're Presbyterian and Catholic [laughing]. Everything was different. Picasso had this very ambiguous, mixed attitude toward Alfred. On the one hand, he respected him immensely and he was fully aware how much Alfred's work had done for him, but what you have to understand is that Picasso is the last fellow who would think that anyone's work really made any difference. That's the first thing. The second thing is, Alfred's very alienness was

something that kind of troubled Picasso. Picasso always expressed his attitude toward Alfred in little digs. Of course, Picasso loved to joke at the expense of everybody. I remember one little remark about Alfred. Picasso and I were sitting in the living room and a bird tweeted out on the veranda outside the living room. Somehow, the veranda reminded Picasso of Alfred, because Alfred had evidently gone out there to watch birds on one occasion. Picasso said, "How is Alfred?" I said, "He's okay. He's not too well." He said, "Tell me, does he still go out and look at birds?" I said, "Yes, I think he does." Then Picasso said, "Does he still wear that funny little hat when he goes out and looks at birds?"--Alfred used to have a baseball hat that he wore--and I said, "I think he does." Then Picasso leans over and he says, "Hey, you know, I think he likes birds better than pictures." That sort of little dig was typical. It was affectionate and yet cutting at the same time. Typical of the kind of run-in that someone like Alfred might have with Picasso that I never had because the chemistry was different. When Alfred went over in '39 or '38, whenever it was, to pick out the pictures for his first big retrospective, Picasso had spread a whole lot of pictures out around the room, face out, and Alfred was there with Daisy, who is the one who recounted this story. According to Daisy, who recounted everything to Leo Steinberg, who recounted it to me--I think that's the way it came to me; I don't think Daisy told me herself--Alfred studied the pictures, and then he turned one in toward the wall, meaning that one he wasn't interested in. Then another and another, and after he had turned about a half a dozen of these pictures in to the wall, Picasso said, "Why are you turning these pictures into the wall?" Alfred said, "Those are the ones I'm not taking for the show," and Picasso said, "You'll either take this whole group or you won't get a thing." That sort of thing never existed with me. Picasso was more bemused than anything else. At one point, just to sort of kid me along, tempt me, he said, "If you can leave this house with anything you wanted, what would you take?"--meaning for the Museum. So I made him a little list of four sculptures and four paintings that I would want. When he looked at the list, he was very pleased, because he saw immediately that the list was not the eight most important works in the house; they were the eight things we needed most to round out our collection. One of the things was something which through another route entirely we eventually got, which was a picture called The Kitchen, which is now out on the landing.

Picasso looks at the list, and he thought he'd catch me up. He says, "Ah, The Kitchen. But there are two Kitchens--which Kitchen?"--thinking that I was [Rubin makes “coo coo” noises.] So I said, "I'll show you which kitchen. Let's go up and look at the pictures." So we went upstairs, he pulled out the two Kitchens, and I said, "That one," which was the one we actually have; there's another version in the Picasso Museum in Paris. So Picasso said, "Well, you're lucky, because that's the one I painted" [laughing]. Actually, that was an exaggeration, but if he had said, "That's the one I painted entirely," he would have been correct, because the one in the Picasso Museum was partly painted by Françoise, the mother of Claude and Paloma. What had happened was this: Picasso had painted the picture that we have, and he was tempted to put in a little bird and some other stuff that he was thinking of adding. He couldn't make up his mind. This was a period, the late '40s, when the question "When is the picture finished?" wasn’t always correctly answered. I think he failed to make a good decision in the case of The Charnal House, where he did some more work on the picture and, I think, weakened it. The last work done on The Charnal House did not help it; it hindered it, and we can tell that by the pictures, photographs, that exist of the picture at various stages. In this case he stopped work and he said, "I don't want to ruin it," and he asked his assistant to stretch up another canvas exactly the same size and paint in the whole composition, and then he would paint over it and work it and he would add the things, and that's precisely what there is. That composition, which has some sort of bilious yellow in it and a little bird and some other stuff that ours doesn't have, is, I think, a much weaker picture, and not simply because it was painted partly by someone else, but because the picture should have been stopped when Picasso stopped the original, which is our picture. Anyway, I was pleased that he was pleased that I picked the right picture. By pure luck, when the Picasso Museum people and the committee and the people who made the decisions made their choices--and they did a remarkable job, they made a really extraordinarily good choice; they made, as I could see, only really two errors, one of which was they chose the wrong Kitchen. The reason they did was because, while Bozo liked the one we have better, the other one had been picked by Jean Le Marie for the big Picasso retrospective at the Grand Palais, so sort of tipping the hat to Jean, who was a member of the committee, the committee chose that picture,

which left this one to go to one of the heirs. Fortunately for us, it went to Marina, since at that time Cruzet was selling, and I was able to get this set aside for us in advance, and we bought at a really quite reasonable price, probably Cruzet's last reasonable price. To come back to the topic at hand, there were these historical acquisitions. I wanted to get Miró's Birth of the World. There's no point in my going through all of the things in the collection that I've added, because there are an awful lot of them, and they fell into every category. My critics would say, and they may be right from their point of view, that I didn't do as much as I should have for the Pop Art generation or the generation that came after. As far as the Pop Art generation is concerned, I probably should have done something more on [Andy] Warhol than I did. We had three Warhols, and I didn't think that much of Warhol, and I still think less of him than most people do, so I wasn't in any big rush about Warhol. With Lichtenstein, I not only unloaded Sand-fleas and got the Drowning Girl [1963], which I think is one of the great Lichtensteins, but I bought an entablature picture and I got Sidney to give us a moderne, Art Deco-type picture. Somehow, for Lichtenstein, for [Ellsworth] Kelly, for all those kind of people, I left the collection six-deep, whereas I found it one-deep.

SZ: So you don't really think it's a valid criticism.

WR: No, I would say that it is for some people. For example, the Museum owned one [Cy] Twombly. I bought a second Twombly, a gray one. I wish now that I had bought a third, a fourth and maybe a very, very big one. So I would say that that is an area now where Kirk Varnedoe, who is a Twombly person, will ensure the Museum a better thing. In other words, each person has to make a critique of what comes next. It wasn't that I was insensitive to Twombly--I had Twombly in my own collection at the time--it's just that in the big picture of what I was trying to do, it didn't seem to me as pressing. As far as [Jasper] Johns is concerned, Alfred had gotten all these incredibly early Johnses. I might well have contented on getting a middle-period Johns. I didn't really like the "Terrazzo" pictures. We did get one later Johns that is a very nice picture. With regard to [Robert] Rauschenberg, we bought two Rauschenbergs, but the picture that I really wanted was the Bed, and even though it

came to the Museum after I left, it came because I had gotten Leo [Castelli] to promise it as a gift, only I hadn't strong-armed him enough to make it come true. So put it this way, I would see my record for Pop Art and Minimal art as a mixed bag. I bought a beautiful [Richard] Serra; one could always have bought another Serra. They had one black Stella when I arrived; I got this great thing called Impress of India, I got a couple of other gifts, I bought a metal one, and so forth. So, depending on what the particular artists of that generation that you want to mention, where I make no claims to have done anything but where I kind of let Kynaston [McShine] and other people have their say-- and I gave them as much support as I possibly could-- was with Conceptual art, which just doesn't interest me from the word go. I mean, I felt that it would be foolish of me to try to legislate on which Conceptual artists to have, and I was happy that Kynaston and others would pick out these people. After all, we were seven curators, and I did not have the job of getting everything for the Museum. We got a lot of contemporary things that other curators proposed, and my job was essentially, if I felt they had conviction and they weren't doing it by ear but that they really believed in what they were proposing, then I pushed very hard for us to buy the things.... We got a great many collections and gifts. Some of these had been set up long before I got there. Soby's collection was always going to come to The Museum of Modern Art; it happened to come in during my time, in the way that I wined and dined Louise Smith and...Florene Schoenborn all the time, and their collections are going to come in now, but the work on those collections has been going on for years. That's the way museums function. [William] Paley's collection, I can say, is my own thing. Paley was going to do something quite other with his collection, which I think would have been a disaster. It took us right down to the finish line.... He had different projects at different times. One project was, somebody who was flattering his ego said, "This collection should have a museum of its own," which is simply ludicrous. Then he was going to have a floor of his new broadcast museum set aside for this collection, and various other projects, all of which I had to squelch in favor of the deal whereby we got the collection. It's a collection that has a handful of really, truly major things, and then some very nice things; and then it's got some tchochkes [laughing]. The idea that we would not get the collection of the chairman of the board, that would rub me the wrong way. Dick

Oldenburg and I worked very hard on that during the years. We had a good relationship with Bill, which is what eventually won it over. In the last years, I said, "Bill, we've been offered this other Gauguin"--I mean, the Gauguin is the great masterpiece of that collection--and I said, "it isn't as good as yours and it'll take millions of dollars and we'd have to sell this and that. Tell me, are we going to get your things?" And he said, "Do not worry." So I took him at his word, and that worked out.

SZ: Any of the others? The [Nelson] Rockefeller [collection]?

WR: I picked out a number of works in the Rockefeller group that are works which he didn't have but that I didn't have the money for --for example, the Matisse, Girl Reading; the Braque, Fauve Landscape; the Cézanne, the famous Cézanne which had been owned by Gauguin and which appears in the background of some Gauguin pictures--of the Knife on the Table and so forth--that Cézanne was a picture I picked out for him and arranged the purchase of. There are a number of pictures that fall into that category and others that fall into the category like picking out which of the pictures from the Gertrude Stein collection we were to take, which came from David and we got some wonderful things there.

SZ: That was all set back in '69, I think, right?

WR: I was there when it was set, but I was the one who decided what the Museum would get out of that group. You see, each fellow had to give one picture according to his share; but David had two shares, so he had to give two. I got Bill Paley's first picture that he committed early on, but the second one we only got when we got the Paley collection, which is this marvelous Fernande of 1906. There are so many different kinds of things. Pictures came in that Alfred had arranged with Bill Burden, and when Burden died we got some wonderful pictures--the big Trafalgar Square [1939-49] of Mondrian; a Gorky, Diary of a Seducer [1946]--so that the collection, as it has changed, contains a tremendous number of things which sort of came in during my reign which were predestined, but also a tremendous number of things that were not

predestined, and then there are the things that I predestined that will be coming in in the next ten, fifteen years. I should say it's simply this: even though what grabs attention is the exhibitions you do, by far, for me personally, the most important part of my job has been with the collection. The exhibitions come and go-- they'll be remembered and there are catalogues and so forth and so on--but the pictures that you get for the collection that are really major are there forever, and that's what makes the collection. I'm very proud that, as people go through the Museum today, many of the things they assume have been there from the beginning or that Alfred Barr got are actually things that I brought in myself, things that are now considered icons of modern art, so to say. So that's a good feeling. One could go on indefinitely with this kind of baloney about the collection....

SZ: I think this is good.

WR: Okay.

SZ: I'm wondering whether maybe we should stop for today?

WR: Okay. This is a good spot to stop. We can do the exhibitions next time.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 5

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

DATE: **APRIL 4, 1994**

BEGIN TAPE 6, SIDE 1

SZ: Bill, since we were talking about pictures last time, I just wanted to get a little bit of your version of Guernica, and how you felt about exactly the way it was going to Spain.

WR: My feeling about Guernica was simply that we New Yorkers were incredibly lucky to have had the picture for as long as we did. This was a picture which Picasso intended to eventually be in Spain. It might well have ended up in London or any number of other places during the war; it ended up here in New York, where I think it had an enormous influence on Pollock, de Kooning and other painters, along with other works by Picasso, like the Demoiselles [1907] and the Girl Before a Mirror [1932], in providing roots for Abstract Expressionism. It also, I think, influenced painters who were on the New York scene who were not Abstract Expressionists, like Matta, who was influenced by Guernica when he moved from these sort of molten landscapes by which he first made his reputation into the more cinematic things with [inaudible] and all sorts of relationships. I think that it provided a model of a large, somewhat narrative picture which is exceptional, except for the Mexican muralists, who were doing something totally different, but of a really vanguard large modern picture that would still have narrative values. From the time that I met Picasso, through till when the picture went to Spain, he raised the question more than a few times, and I always reassured him that we would follow his instructions in the matter. During the time he was still alive he did not feel that it was yet right for the picture to go to Spain, and he in fact left instructions with his lawyer, who later

became a foreign minister under President Mitterand--[Roland] Dumas. I worked with Dumas and later with the family, and there was a consensual agreement on when it should go back. That time arrived around 1980, and so it was decided, since we were doing this big Picasso show, to keep it just for that show so it could be seen once and forever, as it were, in the context of a large part of his oeuvre, and then send it off to Spain, where presumably it would be seen in relative isolation, at least in terms of Picasso's oeuvre, since the Spaniards had, and have still, relatively few Picassos. When the picture got back to Spain, they had a real problem with security and various other kinds of things. Their solutions were not necessarily anticipated. I think over the years this has cooled down and whether one still needs the incredible kind of protections for the picture I don't know. However, the crucial thing in my mind has been that Picasso made it very clear that this was to be a gift to the Spanish people and in particular to the Prado, of which he had been the director during the Spanish Civil War. He expected this picture to be seen essentially in the same building in the context of something like Goya's Third of May. The Spanish, and there is a tremendous amount of political and other stuff that goes into this, have now moved the picture to their new Reina Sophia Museum of modern art, and this was done, I believe, largely because they didn't have very much to show there and they wanted to guarantee some kind of public for that museum. When we gave the picture to the Spaniards, they signed a written contractual agreement with us saying that it would be the property of the Prado, which they have gotten by in two ways. First, they have made a claim which cannot be really seriously argued, that the payment they made to Picasso for materials and everything constituted payment for the picture, when their own documents at the time show that they did not take it that way. The second thing is, they consider it is still the property of the Prado, though it is on extended loan to the Reina Sophia, but practically speaking, they have thwarted Picasso's wishes. They did a great deal of entertaining of the Picasso family, even, I think, provided them with some fancy awards or something, to get them on their side for this thing, though after my exchange of letters about it, Paloma, for one, had regrets and in an interview said maybe this was the wrong thing and let's hope that it eventually goes back to the Prado. So that's about what there is on the score of our relation to the picture.

SZ: There was never any pressure that his wishes initially were not going to be fulfilled on the part of the Museum?

WR: No. There was a time when Alfred, many, many years earlier, asked if it were possible to buy the picture, and he [Picasso] said no, and after that it was here on Picasso's wish.

SZ: I think maybe today the main thing we can talk about are the important exhibitions that you worked on and what your motivations were. I have a list of them, but I'm sure you don't need me to supply that.

WR: I'll tell you, one does exhibitions here that go from the so-called blockbuster, and the only one that I would use that word for that I've ever done is the Picasso show of 1980; the others, some of them were large exhibitions, but no larger than--in fact, quite a bit smaller in many cases--than you might see at the Grand Palais or Beaubourg or the Tate, what have you. I think the smallest exhibition I ever did was Gerald Murphy's show, which contained six pictures and some photographs, but that was his whole oeuvre [laughing]. It was a retrospective. I have fond memories of that, not only because I've always felt that Murphy's work was much less known than it should be, and it's partly because there's so little of it--he needed to be more known--but also because I recently discovered, over the last ten years or so, that in fact his wife Sarah figured very prominently--I may have mentioned this to you; let's keep it confidential for the time being--in the life of Picasso and is, in fact, the model for the Woman in White and a variety of other things. Be that as it may, that was the smallest. The biggest was the Picasso exhibition, which was an exhibition conceived while Picasso was still alive. I was able to see at Picasso's home so much incredible art that I didn't know, and if I didn't know it a lot of other people didn't know it too--some of it I had seen in the Grand Palais show that was put on in Paris, which was a very big show, but there was a lot that was not in that show, and anyway, that was in Paris--I felt that we really needed to show a Picasso that was more than just the sum of major works, because there were so many major works that you could do a big

show with nothing but major works, but that would be like having the skeleton without the cartilage, the nervous system and everything else represented by lesser works, by drawings, by prints. The sculptures had been shown only once, at the Grand Palais...sorry, they had been shown once more here in New York, but they were relatively unknown--most artists knew them from photographs only--and they had never been shown in the context of the painting, which I thought was very important, especially since there is a give and take between the two. In fact, there's a show now on in London which is based exactly on that principle; it's called Sculpture into Painting or something like that--a Picasso show. So to get Picasso to empty out his house of all these things was obviously not going to be easy, so I felt I needed a kind of shocker to get him interested. I cleared this with Mrs. Rockefeller and with Dick Oldenburg before proposing it to him, of course, but I said to him...look, we were going to have this building project and there was going to be a point at which the Museum would have to close anyway. I didn't mention that part to Picasso. I simply said to Picasso, "Obviously a show is not enough to really make this [inaudible]. How would you feel if we emptied out the whole Museum of Modern Art and then really did justice to your work?" And that sort of caught Picasso's fancy. He said, "In principle, that sounds good. We'll talk about it some more." That was the last time I saw him. It had always been my hope to be able to do this, but there was obviously no chance to do it before the resolution of the various problems that surrounded the inheritance and the selection of the works that were to go to the Picasso Museum. So what I did was I structured this as a co-production with the Picasso Museum, which hadn't yet opened. It was just in construction or it was just an idea. Dominique Bozo and I did the exhibition together. This is often forgotten, because Dominique obviously did less, but in the crucial things, the selection of the show, he played a very big role, and he installed it with me. Anyway, there was a lot of feeling in the Museum that this was a sort of outré project and that less was more and so forth and so on, and would Picasso stand up to this kind of massing of works? I know that that was the attitude of a number of reviewers before they saw the show; in fact, one of the interesting things, if you go back and look at it, I forget who wrote it [Mark Stevens] but the Newsweek review was obviously pulled out at the last minute and rewritten. The one that they had prepared, you can see in what remained that they

were going to say that it was too overloaded [laughing]. But in fact, we got no criticism to speak of of that order. Because Picasso has this popular side that's partly a result of the fact that as a personage he's of interest to people, but partly also because his work has a popular dimension, which, let's say, Mondrian and Matisse do not have, something which is on a life level and within human activity I'd almost say banal, but which when raised by great genius, that is the event in Picasso's life may be banal, but in his art it becomes something else. I think it can be argued that the greatest--and I've always made this argument--that the most universal art is really made out of the most commonplace experiences--eating, loving, sleeping--not out of the more esoteric, more highly specialized kind of experiences which a lot of modern art is made out of. So you had this thing where, what with the cover of Time Magazine and so forth, the Museum was literally besieged, and it was a new and I think unsettling experience, as well as a happy one, because it drew good attention to the Museum and we made some money out of it. The money was not made in the entry charges, which at the end of the show tickets were selling for hundreds of dollars through scalpers, but we weren't getting any of that money. The show cost more-- naturally-- than we had budgeted and, what with the extra guards required because of the mobs of people and so forth, it ended up costing us almost as much as took in, with a very slight difference, as we took in at the gate. However, we made large amounts of money on the catalogues and posters, and that money helped pay for the [Richard] Serra show and any number of other projects which the Museum was to do down the pike, so it was a real shot in the arm.

SZ: And that hadn't happened with the Cézanne show [Cézanne: The Late Work, 1977]. This was really the first time that....

WR: I think the Cézanne show was very successful. For that matter, the Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage exhibition [in 1968] was very successful. But the success of the Picasso show has to be measured on another order. For example, in most shows you get something like, I think it's one out of every thirty visitors or so buys a catalogue. In the case of the Picasso show, one out of twelve visitors bought a catalogue--much to the distress of Dick Oldenburg, who thought it was unethical, the

little percentage that the curator gets out of this turned out to be a very large sum in the case of the Picasso show. But in any event, any big, successful show is a shot in the arm for the Museum and does something for the budget. But in this case we really were able to run on that tankful of gas for a while.

SZ: Were you surprised by the enormity of its success?

WR: Surprised might not be the word for it. I was gratified. Very often things which you think are deserving don't get what you think they deserve. In this case I felt that it did get it. For example, I think the best show I ever did, which was the most fun for me and in many ways the most interesting show and the one that added the most art historically and had without question the most beautiful catalogue, was the Primitivism show ["Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, 1984-85]. And yet, because that got caught up in the politics of the new anthropology and this, that and the other thing, it was a successful show--we got very good public and so forth--but it never got what it deserved. I think that show was the most original show that I ever did by far. If I could redo a show just for the pleasure of doing it, that's the one I would do; if it were for the pleasure of looking at the pictures, I would redo the Picasso show. I thought Cézanne: The Late Work, it seemed to me, was a kind of area that had not been explored. My feeling is, if you put on any kind of good-sized show, the show should expand our experience. It's immoral to transport these great masterpieces from one country to another if the putting of them together doesn't reveal something that you didn't already know. So that I've never liked the idea of people having a Picasso show, or "son of Picasso." What you have to do is have an idea in a show. In the Picasso show the idea was, our image of Picasso was wrong. It doesn't have all the things that are in-between the bones. We see him as a series of great masterpieces. We don't see how the ideas evolved, we don't see how they pass from drawings into sculptures into paintings, and how one period evolves into the other. So these things all have to be in a certain things corrections of art history. In the case of Murphy, it's the correction of simply making the public aware of something they didn't know existed. In the case of Cézanne: The Late Work, which had certain fundamental differences from the

Cézanne of 1880-1895, was relatively unknown by the public, and even by artists. Nobody had ever, certainly in America and not for years in Europe, shown many of...well, nobody had ever shown many of the late works together, but even the single motifs, like the Mont St. Victoires, where we had this huge wall of Mont St. Victoires dating from the '90s through to his death, nobody had ever put these things together. Since I was interested in the late Cézanne in particular because this is the Cézanne that was actually being made when Cézanne first became visible in Paris, because he was relatively, though he participated in a couple of exhibitions, relatively invisible in Paris until the [Ambroise] Vollard show of 1895, and that he became of interest to twentieth-century painters at the turn of the century and in the first years of the twentieth century, so that my essay for that catalogue, which was called "Cézannism and the Beginnings of Cubism," was directed toward the role of these late Cézannes, which could certainly stand apart on their own and didn't need Cubism as a support, but which nevertheless had played an important role. My essay was about, in a certain sense, the influence of this art. We had a lot of other essays of great interest in there--notes by [John] Rewald, essays by different people who were Cézanne scholars. So that was a kind of scholarly compendium, in a certain sense, that catalogue, and I was very gratified by that. The first show that I ever did here, which I really came to do as a guest and stayed on for twenty-five years, was Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage. There I wrote a book in part because I felt a lot more had to be said and known about Dada and Surrealism, and I think the Museum around that time sort of got the same idea, and since they knew I was doing the book, they invited me to do the show. I only became aware later, gradually, that there was a second thought in there, namely, that I might be somebody that they could use when Alfred retired. So after I was here for a little while I began to get the sense that it was more than just doing the show, and it was therefore not a total surprise to me, though it was quite a shocker, when Alfred called me into his office and said, "I wear many hats around here, but the one that's most important is my hat of the Museum of Modern Art collection, and I'd like you to take that over." We went into all that with the Bill Lieberman story. I don't know what other shows.... I think that the Primitivism show was a natural for us, first, because that aspect of twentieth-century art history was primitive--it was in bad shape--and we virtually created the literature. One might

argue from the anthropological point of view how tribal art should be shown and what the meanings of the various modes of showing it are, but our position was that we're not showing tribal art; we're showing a chapter in the history of modern art, and of course that was felt to be, by people who had no interest in modern art but in anthropology, appropriational, and it is appropriational, but that's the nature of life. There's just no way you can argue over the gulf of people, when you're saying, Look, we're doing the show because these artists were interested in this stuff, and we don't feel that our role is either to make anthropological points; that would just confuse the whole issue. Be that as it may, since the first time, to my knowledge, that there had ever been a big show of tribal art, seen not as anthropology but as art, was when...the great Irish curator...Sweeney....

SZ: That kind of Irish.

WR: Yes, that kind of Irish. When Sweeney put in, in 1936 or '37, a show called African Negro Art and The Museum of Modern Art showed it as art...today, that's commonplace, but it wasn't, even in the 1930s.

SZ: What may be part of it too is that you got caught in the beginnings of political correctness.

WR: There's no question that the whole thing got caught in the political-correctness business. If I had it to do all over again, I would have put in certain kinds of denials ahead of time, that we're not doing this and we're not doing that, and don't judge us by this. I might have somewhat altered the title of the show.

SZ: Would you have left out the word primitivism?

WR: No, because primitivism is a chapter in modern art; it is not a chapter in tribal art, and that's, of course, where a lot of people go wrong, because they think the word primitivism refers to tribal art. But you could say that in the nineteenth century, before the tribal thing even got into this thing, that the interest of Gauguin in Javanese art or

whatever was a form of primitivism. The whole vogue of Japanese art in relation to modern art was a form of primitivism. It's just that the people who became the primitives changed in the twentieth century.

SZ: What about the [Giorgio] de Chirico show?

WR: I'm glad I did it.... It answered a need, but I don't think that it really made much difference. Perhaps it was the wrong time for that particular show. But I was thinking of some other shows. I've done some shows of contemporary artists that I've believed in a great deal, notably the two shows that I did of Frank Stella. I'm very proud of those two shows, because I believe that Frank will be one of the very few artists of this generation that will survive. As a matter of fact, I was down at his studio this morning, and he's doing some fantastic things. I think that politically speaking the second show was up against it, first because it was the second show.

SZ: They were seventeen years apart, weren't they?

WR: Yes, seventeen years apart and there was a whole other oeuvre, and we didn't repeat the first part. Nevertheless, since there are an awful lot of people who haven't had one show at The Museum of Modern Art, there's a certain amount of grumbling that goes on. Now, of course, that people like Pop artists and Rothko and de Kooning and all of these people have had two to three shows, it's not the same as it was ten years ago. I also liked very much the show we did of Tony Caro's work, early work, which is what our show was about; it remains for me a major statement in modern art. Unfortunately, I think Tony has become a more conventional sculptor--a very fine one, but a more conventional one--over the years. You don't know how things are going to turn out in someone's art, but I think the ten years of work we showed is still really of enormous importance. I'm trying to think of what other shows I might have done. I did some collection shows. That was a special kind of show, the purpose of which was twofold--one, to have a show that interested people, but the second part was to do a catalogue of our collection in those areas--say, Miró in the collection, Picasso in the collection--and to use the occasion of the show as an

opportunity to garner gifts, promised gifts, whatever. The Miró in the collection show was the occasion for getting from Miró himself a gift of a large painting, a gift of the big sculpture which you see down in the lobby most of the time, all the drawings he had made for certain of our major paintings, like the Dutch Interior and so forth--gorgeous, rare kinds of works on paper which were all a gift of the artist. In addition, we were able to get a few other gifts of friends and trustees of the Museum, and to put together a really quite interesting thing. I didn't do it, but we had a [Alexander] Calder in the collection show and Matisse in the collection, which was a very beautiful exhibition that John [Elderfield] did. It gives you an opportunity to sort of consider the collection group as a thing in itself. Since those shows had much smaller budgets--most of the work was either here or could easily be gotten--it was a boon to the economy of the Museum, as it were.

SZ: As director of the department, what was your input into exhibition planning outside of exhibitions that you yourself were doing?

WR: I had a lot of input into what was being done by others in my department. I would say total input in the sense that, if I didn't think it was good, it wasn't done.

SZ: But generally the idea would come from a particular curator to you?

WR: Sometimes I proposed the things. For example, I had proposed and was going to do the Fauve show that we held many years ago, but then I hired John Elderfield and it struck me that that would be a very good thing for him to do. I had proposed, and had worked on for years, the Vienna turn-of-the-century show [Vienna 1900], and then when Kirk was sort of being tested out and coming aboard, it seemed like a logical thing for him to do. There were other shows that were done by other people that were also my idea, and then there were shows, like some of Kynaston's shows that were very good that were really his idea. I encouraged people wherever I thought there was a good idea for a show, and I helped them try to clarify it in their own minds. I also encouraged them in proposing acquisitions where they had real conviction and I felt that the work, even though I wouldn't want to propose it, it wasn't

my cup of tea, was good, and I would give them my support in that regard. And I'm glad I did, because Kynaston over the years proposed quite a number of works for the collection that I'm now very glad we have that I would not have proposed, but that's one of the reason you have more than one curator. I think that was one of the problems under Alfred, because I know that Peter Selz and Bill Seitz felt that they were cut out of the...they did not sit on the acquisitions committee, even though they were doing shows and were active and so on. We changed all of that. The whole curation in Painting and Sculpture sat in on the acquisitions committee. Anything else about exhibitions?

SZ: [inaudible]

WR: Some kind of what might be termed--what's the term they use in Washington?

SZ: You read my mind [laughing]. Conflict of interest.

WR: I'll tell you an interesting story about the Stella show. The first Stella show was early in my career here and it was one of a group of three or four shows that included an [Claes] Oldenburg show, a [Ellsworth] Kelly show, a Sol LeWitt show and I think one or two others, which were on a list that I worked up in collaboration with the curators. [Helen] Frankenthaler was on it; that show never took place. When the shows were determined--you know, we will have a Stella show, we will have a this show or that show--it was not said who was going to do them; it was just this is what we should do. The feeling of the curators was that since I knew Frank's work better than other people did and liked it enormously, that I should do that show. I felt that I didn't want to put myself up to potshots at it. There was a good deal of discussion about it at the time, and whoever was director of the Museum--I can't recall whether it was when Dick was a temporary director.

SZ: I don't think so. I think it was 1970, so it would either have been....

WR: Maybe it was Mr. What's-his-name, who had been on the committee, but the consensus of the director and the board of trustees was that this was idiotic, and if we cannot have a curator doing what he does best simply because his brother happens to be an art dealer somewhere that shows this artist, then we shouldn't be in business. They wrote me a letter saying we understand your reservations, but we feel very insistent about this. It got to the point where if I had pressed not to do it, I might have endangered my own position at the Museum. In any event, it's interesting, we had the show and there was no buzz about that at all. There was a buzz, largely generated by one individual on the occasion of the second show, and there I think that had to do in part with there being a second show. There's hardly a curator who has lived and worked with an artist that can be called disinterested. By the same token, I know of curators who secretly were very interested in things, to the point where they were taking money from artists and dealers. So the question of whether you're going to be honest or not, it doesn't matter whether your brother's a dealer; you can be a thief without that. That's, I think, the only occasion I've ever had. Maybe I'm wrong, but I can't...can you think of an artist?

SZ: Sometimes it just pops up in articles.

WR: It's one of those things. It would not happen in a smaller museum in another place. It's partly because this is The Museum of Modern Art, and then you just have to face down the thing. What is the motivation? It is probably true that having a show at The Museum of Modern Art has some influence on the market, though you'd be surprised at the number of people who have been shown at The Museum of Modern Art whose markets have gone plop, very often right after their shows. So it's not always true. But to the extent that it is true, the question that has to be asked is, is that why you're doing the show or are you doing it because you think it's a good thing and that's just one of the accessory facts? Let me put it this way: it was no fun reading a really bitchy piece written by some creep, who I think is now dead--I think his name was Taylor or something like that--who saw the second show as some kind of plot between myself and my brother. There are paranoid people all around us, and the question is, are you going to live your life according to their lights or not. In a world in

which museums are accepting huge contributions from dealers to put on shows and so forth and so on, things that I think really are questionable, the fact that my brother, from whom I never bought a picture for the Museum, and if anything, as my brother would be the first to point out, he was disadvantaged by my being here. So that's the way that worked out.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 6

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 6

WR: I think that there have been sufficient, more serious scandals in this and every other institution than that.

SZ: Let's talk about some of those now [laughing]. You mentioned Kynaston and John Elderfield, whom you hired.

WR: I didn't hire Kynaston. Kynaston was here when I came. My hirees are few and far between. I hired John Elderfield. I hired Linda [Shearer], and to the extent that I proposed him, I hired Kirk; that position was not for me to hire, but I certainly think that it was my proposal that....

SZ: Linda's hiring came about as a result of...?

WR: There's always been a certain amount of criticism, and this is, I think, inevitable, that The Museum of Modern Art isn't doing enough for contemporary art. My view was, in a city in which you have 200 or so galleries showing contemporary art, in which you have other museums that don't have historical collections of modern art showing modern art, that our segment of history, which is, say, 1890 to the present, was such that contemporary was only part, and not the major part, of our mandate. We are mandated to buy contemporary art when we think it's good; we are mandated to show it up to a certain point. The question of what that point should be is very debatable, and remains so. The program as it is evolving over these next few years

has an awful lot of post-World War II art. Well, of course Johns and Twombly can no more probably be considered vanguard art. But let's say there's hardly anything, except for this Picasso show, that is pre-World War II. If you look at the shows I did--Dada, Surrealism, Cézanne, Fauvism, to the extent I suggested it, Picasso/Braque [Picasso/Braque: Pioneering Cubism, 1989-90] and so forth--I consider the whole of modern art as something where we can do something that no one else can do, right up to the point that no one else could have put the Picasso/Braque show together, because you have to be major lenders to the other museums in the world in order to get their pictures. So that the Guggenheim Museum could not have put it together, not to mention twenty other museums around the country. Now, with that fact that this is a unique possibility for us to do, it's arguable just what percentage of the program should...I think at a certain point there was, in fact, and I felt it myself, where the contemporary was not getting its due, and...partly it wasn't getting its due because I wasn't getting pressure from my curators to do these shows. But that's no excuse for me. If we didn't have enough, then you get the curator who will do it, and in a way, that's what I hired Linda for. This argument will continue forever, as every new generation wants in and there's a longer and longer backlog of what is already there. But I feel that for myself there was a point at which it tilted a little too much toward the historical. I would say that there are liable to be moments in the near future when it will tilt too much the other way, but as long as over the long haul a certain proportional balance is maintained, I think that is what is important. In order to do justice to contemporary art you have to have a certain variety in the curation, and you have to sometimes use guest curators, which we've done. Barbara Rose did our show of Oldenburg, and any number of other people, Tom Hess, have done shows. I think of the contemporary shows which I proposed, one of the ones I was happiest with was Serra. Someone else might have had the Serra thing five years before. I think we had it at a very good time, and it was a wonderful show. I don't think we could have paid for it five years before because we didn't have the Picasso show. Every time you move a Serra from one place to another it's $20,000. The craning of the things into the building is itself enormous, and not surprisingly, we got no corporate support for that show, and what we got from the [National Endowment for

the] Humanities, which was a small grant, didn't come anywhere near our expenses. But it was a great show and the right thing to do.

SZ: So one hand should wash the other.

WR: Yes, and I think you have to try to keep a certain balance in it, but I think the appointment of Linda certainly came...and it was a little delayed, because in fact, we had gone through a very long process of selecting somebody that took two years, and we picked this somebody who seemed very anxious to take the job, and then after we picked her she refused the job--she didn't want to come down from Boston because of her private life. She's now the director of the...Walker [Art Center].... She's quite well known. So we had picked her out, and she'd have been terrific, but then we had to start from scratch again and we came up with Linda, which I think was a good choice. I think Linda got tired of the situation in New York and she also--this is purely speculation on my part--she might have been disappointed that she was not named director of the department. Linda I had known for years. She had been a student of mine at Sarah Lawrence, I'd watched her career unfold at the Guggenheim and so forth; but I felt, given the historical responsibility of the collection that the director of the department should be an art historian. This is what Alfred felt, and I felt he was right.

SZ: How do you think Kirk feels about that?

WR: Kirk is an art historian and I think he feels the same way, which doesn't prevent you from having people like Rob Storr, who I think is an excellent addition to the staff, come in and be part of the thing. Anyway, the rank that people hold in departments is really sort of beside the point. You are judged on what you do. Kynaston does his shows and his acquisitions and he's judged that way. He has now the title Senior Curator; a lot of difference it makes from having been called Curator. I frankly didn't like the term director because it made me sound like I was a bureaucrat, and for years I tried to get Dick to change us all to Chief Curators. Dick finally managed to do that after I left. It was because, Arthur [Drexler] never wanted to give up [his title]. I

don't know how John [Szarkowski] felt about that, but I know Arthur was the main obstacle.

SZ: I was just looking at that picture of you and Alicia [Legg], speaking of your staff.

WR: Alicia was a wonderful girl. I first got to know her when I came as a guest to do a little Matta show in 1958 in a series called "Artists in Mid Career." They showed two of these shows together. The Matta show went on with the David Smith, which Sam Hunter, who was then working for The Museum of Modern Art, was doing. Alicia was the curator who sort of saw me through what was the first museum show I ever did. She's a wonderful girl and one of the sort of wonderful people at this place--it must be twenty years I worked with Alicia, or close to that, anyway; you lose track of the time after a certain amount--but Alicia was a real trooper, and she did some beautiful shows. It's never remembered that Alicia did a very beautiful Matisse show that had a very direct influence, partly because it was the first time that a picture which I later bought, Matisse's 1914 Notre Dame, was ever shown, and that picture changed the course of [inaudible] out in California, where the show went...Dick Diebenkorn. That picture, you can just see the moment that the show opened out there, Dick Diebenkorn changes--not that he isn't a wonderful painter on his own. The other person that was carried away by that particular picture here was Bob Motherwell--two very clear examples of the influence that a single painting by an artist who was actually quite well known by the '50s [had]. She did that show, and she also did a very beautiful show of...I mentioned him in the group of artists we did, who does the sort of open cubes and things.

SZ: That you just mentioned?

WR: I mentioned before that we had made a list of artists--Kelly, and one of the artists in that series she did this show of.

SZ: Sol LeWitt.

WR: Sol LeWitt. She did that show, which was a gorgeous show, which came up back-to-back with the Cézanne show, as I remember, and it was a wonderful shift--Cézanne and Sol LeWitt. That show she did was just incredible, and the book was wonderful. But mostly, Alicia toiled to do sort of more the hard work for people like Tom Hess and other people who were doing guest shots, and she of course also was the curator of this whole sculpture side of things.

SZ: But that came later.

WR: Yes. So there you are.

SZ: Carolyn [Lanchner] was here when you came?

WR: Yes. When I came, Carolyn was working for the...I think she was in the Publications department or something. I guess to the extent that I was in command, or partly, because I think Bill Lieberman may have been in command when she actually came into the department. But certainly I would like to take credit for Carolyn's appointment [laughing]--certainly for her promotion through the years. I think one of the wonderful things about this place is that with few exceptions it's been such a pleasure to be with the people that I've worked with. I think it really had, and still does have, some kind of familial quality. It's still not so big an institution that you feel like you're anonymous. Though it's getting there [laughing].

SZ: Bill, how are you for time?

WR: I've got a little time--just a little.

SZ: Why don't I ask you this one last question, and I'll save the rest for next time, which should be the last time.

WR: Okay.

SZ: Since we've been talking about staffing and all, what factors went into your locating Kirk as an appropriate successor to you?

WR: I think what went into locating or knowing any of the people I appointed, whether it's Kirk or John Elderfield or whatever, is in the first instance partly chance. In the case of John Elderfield it was an article I read in Art International that impressed me very much. I said, "Who is John Elderfield?" I investigated a little, and I found out that he was an Englishman who was hanging his hat at that moment at Yale, where he had some kind of grant. So I said to him, "Listen, when you're in New York"--I called him--"I'd like to talk to you." A couple of years later, I appointed him. He got his Ph.D. in the meantime, and he went back to England. I had really envisioned him as a possible replacement for me, and while I think John is a great scholar and a great curator, in the end I think there were certain things that I felt would get in the way of his being director of the department. They might strike you as peculiar things, but, for example, John doesn't speak French at all, and I felt that many of the things which I had to do could not be accomplished. He didn't have a Daisy Barr to translate for him, and I think that, had Alfred spoken French, he would have been able to get even more done than he did. So I felt that that was crucial, and I asked John to study French, but he never did. The other thing was that I think that since you have a responsibility for the buying and selling of works, particularly the selling of works, that you have to know the art market. You have to be around art dealers', you have to go to the auctions and so forth, and I said to John, "If you want to be director of this department someday, you're going to have to," but John never went to the auctions. I think, and I say this...I shouldn't even say this.... No, I'd rather not even say it. I just think you have to have a sense of money and how business operates. So when I finally decided that John wouldn't be the right successor, terrific as he was, and I could say that I really like John--I hardly knew Kirk--I began looking around, and there by accident just one day my old graduate school and college chum Al Elsen was in town and we were talking and he talked to me about this exceptional kid that he had as a student out there. I must have met Kirk not long after that, and there were years passed before this became an issue, but he was obviously a man of extraordinary intelligence and intellect, and I think he has a very solid and good eye,

as is represented by what I consider to be some quite wonderful things he's done in the exhibiting of the collection. In the end that may be the most acid test of all, because in a way the job that Alfred gave me, and the heart of the job as I see it, is what you make out of the collection of this Museum. Though his specialty was in the late nineteenth century, he was obviously plugged in on many levels to contemporary art, and I thought I ought to sort of take a look at him. The Primitivism show was by way of doing that, and I was very impressed with him in that situation. Then, when he did this terrific job on Vienna, on like six weeks' notice--he wrote that whole catalogue in no time at all, and it wasn't an area that he was a specialist in. I was myself fed up with the anti-Semitism in Vienna at that time and I didn't want to do the show--not that the anti-Semitism was directed at me personally; it was sort of part of the atmosphere there.

SZ: In the Kurt Waldheim atmosphere?

WR: The guy who was the director of the major museum there, the Belvedere, where you'd have to get most of your loans, Mr. Adolph--very appropriately named--was so infuriating that when we went there with our French colleagues who were to have this show, the fellow who later became chief of the Louvre, Michel [Laclotte], was so infuriated by the behavior of this man that he said, "If we were living in the time when you slapped people with your glove, that's what I would have done to him." It wasn't just anti-Semitism; it was a kind of provincial disagreeableness that I finally didn't want to have any part of. Yet I felt the Museum should have this show. So, since Kirk was willing to kind of take up the cudgels, he got a chance. I think it was beautifully installed and it came out very beautifully. I had some criticisms for myself of Kirk's first big show [High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture], and I think their nature almost goes back to a thing which--I don't know if I shared what René d'Harnoncourt told me that I've never forgotten? This summed up his view of things. He said, "Bill, make sure that you have a show and not a book" [laughter]. The book for High and Low was magnificent, superb, and make its points much better than the show did--not that the show wasn't enjoyable, because there was a lot of good art to see. A lot of it was fresh, although it's in the nature of Pop Art to always think that

you've seen it [laughing]. The Lichtensteins, some of them had not been seen by anyone in New York for ages, but everybody thought they had seen them before. Be that as it may, I think also it was very hard for Kirk to come into this job, and he made some mistakes in profile, if I can put it that way, in the transition period. But downtown was laying for him in any case, and a great deal of the criticism was slightly masked personal criticism. But I think it speaks immensely for him that he saw that through. I would have been devastated. Never in my career did I get one ounce of that kind of criticism; I've led a charmed life, comparatively speaking. I don't know that I could have taken it, and I think he showed a great deal of stamina and courage, and I've been very, very pleased by what he's done with the collection. I'm looking forward to this show that Kirk is doing now...he shows at Castelli, did these paintings in Italy--Cy Twombly. I think Twombly is just the right show. I think the large Twomblys, some of which I've only seen in photographs, I think it's going to be a gorgeous show, and I think that it's a very good decision. Entre nous, I don't feel as optimistic about the decision to do a Johns show down the pike, though in a way I'm glad we are because I should, perhaps, have done that show myself--not me personally, but had it--but there were so many other shows of Johns parsing him, and then there was the Whitney show, it seemed like too much Johns. My fear is, and I'm hoping it won't be the case, because some years will have passed, that it won't seem like too much Johns even then. A lot depends on what the late work is going to look like in the context of the show. Not everybody feels as strongly about it as the Johns amateurs. Be that as it may, as someone who bought Gray Numbers out of the first show at Leo Castelli's for $700 for myself, I feel that I can speak a little about Johns [laughing]. We have to see. And we have a Mondrian show coming up. But there will always be criticisms, but that comes with the [territory]. I was very lucky to take this job and have it for at least fifteen years before art became big and expensive and the subject of a certain kind of interest which it wasn't before, because it allowed one, really, to do a lot of things without worrying about what people thought, what the ramifications were. Right now you're in a glass house.

SZ: It seems that no matter what you do, you're open to some kind of attack.

WR: Yes. It's like being President of the United States, whereas when I had this job people were basically...Hilton Kramer wrote good reviews [laughter].

END SIDE 2, TAPE 6

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **EAST 58TH STREET**
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

DATE: **APRIL 25, 1994**

BEGIN TAPE 7, SIDE 1

SZ: Bill, I thought we'd start today and talk about the 1984 expansion, the jockeying for space, how space was planned, and then the reinstallation, your thoughts on it.

WR: I don't really know much about the jockeying for space. Early on in that expansion it was clear what part would be for Painting and Sculpture, and that the Drawings thing had to be cut out of that somehow. A lot of the jockeying that had taken place in earlier expansion projects which didn't come to fruition had involved Architecture and Design and Photography and Prints--areas which to one degree or another felt, and were, underrepresented in space. So, since the division of space that they finally presented was fine with me and appeared to satisfy the others, I wasn't involved in any jockeying.

SZ: The reinstallation--in fact, there was an earlier one that you did, in '73?

WR: You mean of the collection?

SZ: Yes.

WR: I rehung the collection. We didn't change walls or anything: I rehung it. I think that's when they got to the [inaudible] the Alfred Barr Galleries or something, and there was a little opening. The only thing I remember from that whole thing is that I got a

letter from Douglas Cooper, whom I had met only once, with Bill Paley, many years before, saying that he was delighted to finally see this collection shown beautifully now that it had been taken away from the hands of that--and I remember this phrase of his--that "art-hating Protestant, Alfred Barr" [laughing]. You have to understand he was a madman, in effect, Cooper, and he was probably hoping I would become an acolyte or something, which of course didn't happen. Later, when he was unintentionally embarrassed when an error...not an error, actually; Carolyn had followed my instructions. This had to do with the Picasso retrospective, just before 1980. We were torpedoed by a friend of his. This fellow started writing letters to Dick Oldenburg in which he demanded that the Museum fire this "whore," that was the word he used--it was Carolyn--and in the second letter, when he was even more furious, he said the fact that she was still there means that she was protected by that, and I remember this phrase, "club-footed monster" [laughing]. So that was my name. Anyway, I think that the collection needed to be reinstalled. Bill Lieberman had touched it up slightly at some point, but it was basically Alfred's handling. I'm not sure it wasn't when we took everything down for a show of promised gifts and objects in our Abstract Expressionist collection. I don't know what caused that early rehanging, but naturally, with additional space it meant rethinking the whole thing.

SZ: You mean the second reinstallation?

WR: Yes, the one that involved the expansion. That I felt I had introduced some good things into, but every installation is just another personal reading of art history, and I think that Kirk has made some excellent changes in that. I think he's also lost some things, but you can't have everything. As with the case of Grace Glueck, who called me recently about framing, because she was going to write an article, in fact did write an article on framing, for the newspaper New York Observer, I think she expected me to be very upset by the fact that Kirk was putting wide frames back or whatever kind of frames back on pictures. First of all, I have great difficultly explaining that first of all, when you give up a job, you give it up. Everybody has to do it their way. There's no right way; there are ways that reveal this and ways that reveal that. Granted that some reveal less and others reveal more, but somehow, I don't have,

perhaps because it wasn't my museum to start with, the kind of personal stake in these issues which Alfred had. He really was tortured by the idea that anyone else but him would set up these pictures, though he never said anything to me, was very nice to me, in fact. In return I invited Alfred, the first time I rehung the collection--he was still mentally able to deal with this--to participate, to come in and make suggestions and so forth. It's amazing to think that they didn't even know what Alzheimer's was back in those days.

SZ: They knew what senility was.

WR: Yes. Alzheimer's was known, but they didn't know this was Alzheimer's. When he still had some recall, he probably would have lost that, but he was sent to Switzerland for an operation, which when he came back, he was a total vegetable.

SZ: You mean it didn't help him, it hurt him?

WR: He went from being two-thirds of the way to the ultimate phase of Alzheimer's to being the total, ultimate phase.

SZ: You said you had trouble explaining to Grace, but I think one of the things that was said when the reinstallation was done, and this went hand-in-hand with the way the galleries were constructed, that you had a very specific way in which you wanted to present the collection.

WR: Well, I did. For example, where it worked best, and one example of that was the room as you look through the room that had the Cubism of 1912, '13, '14 --that is, the Guitar and the Synthetic Cubism--you saw framed by the doorway what was kind of the ultimate state of that, the Three Musicians. It wasn't until you got into the room with the Three Musicians that, as you turned left, you saw it paired with the Three Women at the Fountain [Three Women at the Spring], and that dealt with another thing and that was the simultaneity of these two very contrasting styles. Both those pictures were painted in the same garage in the summer of 1921. The walls and the

arrangement were designed to bring out and draw attention to various other kinds of things. In the room that had the Guitar [telephone interruption].... In the room with the 1912-15 [inaudible] to '18 Cubism you proceeded to the large room that contained the Three Musicians. We had installed the Guitar in such a way that as you looked into that room from the room that contained the Demoiselles d'Avignon you saw the Guitar and you saw it in relation to a later collage, a harlequin with a guitar, where the guitar in the collage and the harlequin with a guitar had a comparable flat structure to the three-dimensional one of the Guitar. Then that symbolic harlequin was echoed on the other side of the doorway by the 1915 Harlequin by Picasso, which had next to it one of the earliest really personal sculptures made by [Jacques] Lipchitz of a figure reflected his visit to Picasso's studio in 1915, when he saw that very painting, the black Harlequin. So all of these things were woven together, and then as you looked up through the doorway, the Guitar, the Harlequin, all of these things came together as part of the motif of the Three Musicians. It was this kind of historical, morphological, iconographic set of threads that I was trying to weave together. There are places where it wove together very beautifully; there are places where it was less successful. I think some of the rooms where we had to really in effect show a whole career in one room worked out well, particularly the Mondrian room, which looked very beautiful, at least as far as I was concerned. I very much liked the German Expressionist room, with the interrelating of the Tietze double portrait [Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat] by [Oskar] Kokoschka and the [Wilhelm] Lehmbruck sculptures and so forth. That room is one I think, though Kirk made many improvements, but the German Expressionists got somewhat shafted; they're in a much less gracious, much less interesting space, and there aren't too many pictures up. On the other hand, I think what he has done with the four Kandinskys is better than what we were able to do. The problem is that only a part of that space is really malleable. The first galleries of the collection gallery are fixed. You can change the doorway from left to right or center in some of them, but you can't change the size of the gallery; they are fixed-wall galleries from the old building of the Museum. I think galleries one through five must be like that. Then you have the gallery space which was in the East Wing that Philip Johnson added; that is all malleable, and that's why I was able to do this thing with Cubism. But then you get

back into this rhythm on the other side of these fixed rooms. There was really no other choice but to continue a line of rooms that didn't have to be fixed in the new space. The Matisse room could be bigger and so forth, but they had to be in line, because the core of the abutment building was rising through them. So in all of these things you're working with architectural limits which in a new museum wouldn't exist, because new museums don't build fixed walls that way--or they shouldn't build them that way.

SZ: Which brings us back to part of what we started talking about. Did you work closely with César Pelli and his people?

WR: No. I would say this, and I think this must happen very often, there was a lot of kant and rhetoric in the Museum's talk about Pelli and how he would work with the curators and this and that. I don't think I said three words to Pelli. I tried to get him to change this awful thing of keeping that stairway. It's a stairway to nowhere, that piece of stairway that goes from the second floor of the collection to the third floor of the collection.

SZ: You mean the old Bauhaus stairway?

WR: Yes. Well, the point is, that stairway he treated as an antique, and it wasn't worthy of being classed as an antique and is a real disturbance. I couldn't get that changed. I don't think anyone had much discussion with Pelli. First of all, I don't know how much Pelli actually did; he certainly did the larger outlines of it, but mostly it really didn't matter in one since, because once they established the general contours of where the galleries would be, they were entirely up to me to design. Pelli didn't have any hand in that. The limits of what you could do were established by the older architecture of the buildings and the new architecture, with its core of elevators that went up from the tower.

SZ: Did Arthur help you with any of that?

WR: There wasn't much help that I recall. It was a pretty simple question of what to do. You had a certain number of [inaudible]; they were fixed. The door was going to be here and this was going to be the gallery space, and there were piers here and elevators there, and there's this, that and the other thing. You just had to work within that, which is what I did. There were places, I think, that were less successful. On our third floor I had a room for The Swimming Pool. The need to make that room, and make it so you passed from one end to the other and there was no other way out, kind of bolloxed up the space of some of the things near it, but it was the price I had to pay for The Swimming Pool. Kirk has unscrambled some of that space; the price he had to pay was to put The Swimming Pool away, and I think that the absence of a thing like The Swimming Pool is felt. I mean, it isn't that the things that are put up instead aren't worth showing. It simply means that we don't have enough space for everything that we should show.

SZ: And the temporary exhibition space--how do you think that works?

WR: I think it was pretty lousy, and I think it was pretty lousy in part because decisions were made that there didn't have to be any connection between the two floors and that one floor would be an adequate space for a show, which has turned out not to be true for a great many shows. That the entrance to the new space is so narrow that you couldn't have a coming and going in it, so that when you've made the circle of the new space you have to come back through the galleries you've already been in and then you have to go all the way out in the lobby and go downstairs, and that breaks a show in two. I think that all that could have been better, though possibly only at huge expense, since again, there were a lot of givens in this, and it may very well be that, since they didn't want to spend any more money than they had to, they just went with this. But I don't think it has worked out as well as one would have hoped. I also think that there's a kind of downer associated with going into galleries that are below street level; there's a secondary psychological thing. I've noticed that even if you close off all the daylight from the main-floor galleries, people are more comfortable in that gallery--they know they're aboveground. Or they're even more comfortable up in the collection, where they don't see much daylight. But down in the

basement there's a kind of downer that I felt very strongly in a number of shows I've done down there. The only show which I think was really successful down there was Primitivism, and that's because it was a dark show in which things were lighted from inside little boxes, so that in some way, being underground was not a disadvantage. The Stella show just wanted to be aboveground, and I think a number of other shows--the Ad Reinhardt show and so forth--they all suffered from that. I think the unsatisfactoriness of those galleries, and also the fact that they are incapable of taking certain heights of pictures and so on, is what led Kirk to want to put Twombly and a number of others, [Robert] Ryman and so forth, on the third floor, which is fine, except it wipes out your whole contemporary section. I think probably until the Museum can get another expansion, that kind of compromise will be necessary. Ultimately, they need to rethink it and expand it. They need more space and they need to reconstruct in some way. As you know, there's been a lot of hope that there would be a further expansion. I think the time is slowly arriving and that will be the case.

SZ: I just wanted to ask a little bit about some of the trustees who have been particularly supportive.

WR: I have never had the kind of friendships among the board that, let's say, Bill Lieberman had with that lawyer...he resigned...Ralph Colin. I have never been particularly concerned with building up support with the board for the simple reason that I had support from the board when I came without trying to cultivate anybody, and I had it all through the time I was there. I would say that I can't think of one project or idea or acquisition that really mattered to me that I couldn't get past the board. There were a lot of people whom I knew a little bit and had very cordial relations with, like Gifford Phillips and with [Armand] Bartos. I also, back in the days when Jock Whitney was there, he was very straight and I enjoyed him. I had heard horror stories before I came to the Museum of the board standing in the way of this, trying to do that, and I certainly had heard those stories in other museums and I think that they are true in some cases, but they have certainly not been true at The Museum of Modern Art during my time. There hasn't been a single time that the

board ever proposed something that they wanted in the way of an exhibition or anything--all the things which you hear about at other museums. In Paris, they put on exhibitions where ministers' girlfriends are given shows at the Pompidou [laughing]. But they do nothing like that [here]. I think it's worth saying a word about the board as it was. I don't know this new board. All these real-estate types and other people who are in there now, I don't know them. But the board that was Philip and Blanchette and Louise [Smith] and Gifford--the board that I had for roughly twenty years--was not only an amiable but extremely supportive board. Dick cultivated the board, as is proper for the president to do. I mean cultivated them in the nice sense that he took care of them and if they had any problems or questions he dealt with them. There was always a very warm feeling that I had, that the board members were interested in the success of the Museum and we were interested in the success of the Museum. So unless you have some particular question, I would say this, that just at a distance, and it may be unfair to the newer board members and certainly would be unfair to [inaudible], I would say that the change in the board in very recent years has mirrored a change in the kind of people that get engaged in museums. The way I would describe these is to paraphrase [inaudible]. I would say that the people who were there for most of the time I was there and are still [inaudible] were people who asked the question "What can I do for The Museum of Modern Art?" Today we have in some of the younger people on the board, one of our recent presidents, they ask the question "What can The Museum of Modern Art do for me?"

SZ: That's what it's about.

WR: Yes. You have more social-climbing types and gung-ho, fast-money, fast-reputation types. The '80s has had its influence on the board. Certain '80s ideas have crept in, and I guess that's fatal...it's inevitable.

SZ: That was a Freudian slip [laughing].

WR: [Inaudible]. That was fatale, meaning inevitable [laughing]. I don't think it really is fatal; I think it was fatale. Boards are ultimately constantly changing abrogations, and

a lot will depend in the next ten years on the types that they are able to find. But certainly, as compared to certain boards I've heard of, such as what was in Houston when Bill Agee was there, or in this place and that place that you've heard these stories about, I never ran into any of that at The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: Did you enjoy what socializing you did have to do?

WR: No, I didn't have to do a great deal, but we had dinner from time to time, my wife--wives--and I, at the homes of various trustees. Naturally, I saw more of the ones who were involved in painting and sculpture than others. But I never cared much for the whole social side of the art world, and starting when I came to The Museum of Modern Art I stopped going to openings at galleries or other museums or what have you. One reason is that if you went to gallery openings, it seemed to me, you could offend someone because you went to this guy's, you didn't go to that guy's, and so forth. So, since I didn't like going to openings anyway, it cut all that out. I cannot be found in any of the places where art-world denizens are normally found. I was kind of horrified and shocked when at one point my local restaurant, Mr. Chow's, became very popular with the art world, and I found what's-his-name, his wife was a kind of designer--I guess he's gotten rid of her now--the neo-Abstract Expressionist painter whose catalogues are like Picasso catalogues because he shows you his wife and his children and photographs, the big, sort of heavyset guy. He's very famous. He's really a talented guy, though I never thought he was as good as his PR [Julian Schnabel]. But suddenly he was sitting next to me at Mr. Chow's, and I got terribly worried. But, as happens with these kinds of migrating colonies, they've moved on, so I can go back to Mr. Chow's without worrying about it [laughing]. Anyway, as I say, I have not been a walker, and I've had a certain amount of social activity with Museum trustees and collectors--it's never been too much; it's never made a big dent in my life--and I've never been asked to do any more. I think in the twenty-some-odd, twenty-five years or so I've been there, I've never been at one of those garden parties or anything like that. They have a big one in June, I think.

SZ: I just thought of one other small issue, and then I can ask you some rapid questions. The press. You've sort of been cited as being very glib with them.

WR: I have?

SZ: Yes, you have.

WR: I wasn't aware [laughing]. By whom?

SZ: I don't know. I've heard. Is that part of it that you enjoy?

WR: Not as much as I enjoy a lot of other things in the job. I think that the press, that the main thing there is if you're doing something that you think would be interesting for them, then you try to give them an exclusive or something; but the most important thing is the press you get for the shows, and there's no way I've ever tried to manage any of that. I've had good and bad reviews, mostly good, but I haven't been aware that I handle the press in any...I mean, I'm verbal, so I'm not at a loss for words if they ask a question.

SZ: You had a decent relationship with Grace Glueck, for instance.

WR: Yes. I think it's based on mutual straightforwardness and respect. Grace was the person who interviewed me when I was hired, so the first time I ever got my picture in a metropolitan newspaper since I was a high-school football player was when I got this job. Grace wrote a very nice, clean, straight article, which is what she specialized in. I felt that that was very nice, and if she ever called me to get some information about something which even had nothing to do with me, that she was researching, I would try to help her out--as I would with anybody who called me. I can't think of any problem I ever had with anybody in the press. I can think of things I didn't like which they wrote, but you just sort of have to take that. The nearest thing...let's see, did I ever have a problem with the press? No, I didn't do anything on the occasion when I clocked Hilton Kramer's predecessor, what was his name? He used to be at the

Philadelphia Museum education department, then he became the chief critic of the Times.

SZ: There was John Canaday.

WR: That's it--Canaday. I clocked him going through, we had a show called something like the Pioneer Generation, it was Abstract Expressionists, and it took the whole second floor. He made it at the speed of about three miles an hour, then wrote this review. I could have embarrassed him by writing the Times and saying, "Somebody who goes through the show at this speed has no right to write a review." But it was not worth the trouble. I can't think of any blowout I've ever had with the press. I was more concerned with the press. Probably my greatest concern with the press was in the days of the Art Workers Coalition. There was a lot of politics involved in the situation, and I didn't feel really capable of handling politics in some way. No, I don't have much to say about the press. I think that [Robert] Hughes is a terrific writer, and I think I've gotten less good reviews from him, on average, than from a lot of other people. Hughes was not more than narrowly moved by the Picasso/Brague show, and he was distinctly unmoved by the Caro show. I think he liked the Picasso show in 1980.

SZ: Yes, he did.

WR: There I had a funny experience. I think I may have mentioned to you earlier that you could tell in the Newsweek review that you could tell they had broken up the text in a hurry of a review that said, "It's too big, there's too much," and changed it, but some of the old words and lines were still hanging around in what was a positive review. They had to rewrite it so fast [laughing].

SZ: That was in Newsweek, and we were trying to remember who it was, but I remember their critic at the time was Mark Stevens.

WR: Yes, I think it was Stevens, yes, if you check back. You had to know what they were gunning for, to the extent, I suppose, that I knew what criticisms would be, I always tried to put out our PR in a direction that would counter them in advance. If the criticism was going to be, "What do we need another Picasso show for?"--I mean, I heard these criticisms when I proposed it at the Museum, from the other department heads and so forth. "Big isn't good," "Why do you need so many works?" and so forth, and I explained to them that the image we have of Picasso, which is based, really, on a series of masterworks and then accidentally what you happen to see around, was inadequate because it didn't show all the connections between bones and muscle and sinew and the whole thing. Finally, they said, "Well, he must know something I don't," which I did. I had seen all these things and they hadn't. So they went along with it, but any number of people were beginning to be troubled by the sizes of shows, so I knew that this would be troubling to them and that the question was, "Is this trip necessary?" I think they felt when they saw it was yes, that it was necessary, because it really gave you a Picasso that you hadn't seen before. I would say that to the extent that you can psych out what are liable to be the criticisms, you have to try to sort of deal with them. I think the most fun I ever had was when we did the Picasso show and I was interviewed by the national television people. That show is the only show I've ever had anything to do with that ever got coverage by the 6:30 news, not the six o'clock news, as I distinguish those two. So I was interviewed by, among other fellows, the fellow who is now on Channel 4, Tom Brokaw, and a few others. I knew that I would be edited down to about twelve seconds, so I gave it to them in bursts that were self-contained. They used more of it than I would have thought, because it was sort of also pitched to the public. It had a little bit of autobiographical slant with Picasso, and it was humanized, if I can put it that way. It was amusing to see what they used and so forth. The only press which I felt, and I understand in a way, because you can't do everything and they really consider themselves involved in things that count today, meaning politics, is [The] MacNeil/Lehrer [Report], which I had almost enormously respected and which did do a very nice little piece on Primitivism, but that was the only time that I ever did a show that they ever did anything [on]. Now they're doing more, I have a feeling. But I always felt that that was the audience that I personally would rather have addressed.

We got much more from the people that go to ballgames or from completely other sources.

SZ: It ran an extra couple of weeks, the Picasso show.

WR: The Picasso show was kept open as long as it could humanly be kept open. That was made possible in part, I think, by being the cover story of Time Magazine. Even more than a Time Magazine cover story would matter today, in 1980 Time was still...you know. Somehow that came as a complete surprise to me. I don't know why, because they had had Dali on the cover. But fortunately for the Museum, no huge international event took place that week that would have forced Picasso off the cover. That happens in some cases.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 7

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 7

SZ: What about this whole idea of the popularization of culture, and certainly a show like the Picasso show had to contribute to that?

WR: To me, on the one hand, I feel about popularization about the way I feel about education, that the only time it's too much is if one is educated beyond one's abilities or beyond one's interest. The Museum puts out these things, and if people come and they want to see it, and if it changes the lives of some of these people even a little bit, it's worth it. I think the popularization issue, though, has been much more a result of money and the need for money and the use of hard sell and all that kind of stuff, which isn't what I mean by popularization. It's always been my feeling that there was something inherently popular about Picasso that was very different from Matisse, let's say, or Mondrian. Many people for whom Mondrian and Matisse would have no meaning at all could relate to some Picassos, if not many Picassos, and the reason for that is that, though Picasso is probably the greatest genius that painted a picture since the Renaissance, since Leonardo and Michelangelo, he was, as a human

being, and this came into his art, certainly, and intentionally, different from most of the modern artists, because he was essentially banal. I've argued this a number of times, that it is when the most banal things are treated by genius and emerge as new experiences--eating, fucking, sleeping, joking. Picasso is capable of saying all sorts of naughty things that Matisse would never be caught saying; even if he said them, he would never be caught. Picasso is capable of simplifying things. If it's got a moustache, it's a man. These Picassos, the symbols in the Guernica, are not like the symbols in Symbolist art; they're like Dante and Homer. The bull is like Dante's wolf. And it's the genius that propels those banal things into being the great things that they are. That also has to do with Picasso's willingness to not favor abstraction over representation, or vice versa. It's all treated as one, equally available. The public picks out what they can understand most readily, but there's always a way that can progress in Picasso. We have lots of people who came to that show, and you would think these people will only like the only things which are academic and the neoclassical things and so forth, but because they were warmed up by an artist that didn't stick it to them, they suddenly found themselves liking a lot of other things. So I knew that show would be popular, and that's why I wanted to have enough space to do it right and have it run long enough so that we could get a substantial number of people in to see the show. It's not a once-in-a-lifetime experience, it's a once-in-a-world-time experience: that show can never, ever, ever be reconstructed again. There is no way in which Guernica will ever leave Spain. There is no way in which all those other masterpieces are going to go to Spain. You might get something beginning to approach it, but there's no way, now that the Picasso Museum exists, that so many works that are in the Picasso Museum could possibly be sent at once to some other place. So it was a one-time thing. I must say, among trustees I haven't mentioned, one of the ones I saw most of, because he was president and then head of the board, was Bill Paley. I really got along very well with Bill because we both felt that our handshake was right, you know? It was a no-shit handshake. Bill was tough, and you couldn't con him and you couldn't push him beyond a certain point. For example, with respect to the gift of his pictures, when we were trying to get him to kind of fix the gift of the Gauguin because we would have gone out and tried to get another Gauguin and one was suddenly available, he said, "Boys, I'm just going to

tell you this: you've got nothing to worry about." That's not like signing on the dotted line; we had to take his word for it, but he was as good as his word. Thus far, the trustees have been pretty good as their word. We've had a few backsliders, and there were certainly some before my time, some pretty big fish, but that was another thing and I think you'll hear about that from other people.

SZ: Your official position at the Museum now is what?

WR: I have a title. My official position technically and legally is as a consultant. I have a secretary and an office, as you know, and my title is Director Emeritus. The actuality of what I am is sort of like part-time. I come and go as I want, but I have projects which have to be completed when they have to be completed. I was already part-time and in this situation when I did Picasso/Brague, when the show actually came about, and [Ad] Reinhardt and now this other show.

SZ: Did you feel you had accomplished what you wanted to, were you tired?

WR: When I left?

SR: Yes, because you certainly weren't of retirement age.

WR: I was only two and a half years from retirement age. The reason that I did it--well, there were a variety. We've never talked about why I retired when I did?

SZ: No.

WR: Well, that, I think, is fairly important. If I had stayed till I was sixty-five, and the department heads, we were given to understand that that was the age limit--not that it would have made any difference in my case, because I wouldn't have wanted to stay head of the department beyond that, in part because I felt that after a certain period of years, which probably would differ from person to person, the head of that department should change. Be that as it may, having given a good part of my life to

the Museum and loving it as I do, and also feeling a concern for its future, not that I wanted to have somebody who was going to keep my hanging of the collection or this or that. It was important to me that my successor be a collections person and be an art historian, because there's nothing in the rules that says the person who becomes head of Painting and Sculpture should be an art historian. That was a tradition established by Alfred, and it was reflected in Alfred's choice of me as his successor. I felt that I very much had to ask the same thing of the future and have someone who was a legitimate art historian in charge of the collection. If I had stayed until I was sixty-five, I would have had much less influence on the choice of my successor. I could not choose a successor, but I could vastly influence that choice. Alfred chose me [laughing]: he simply told René and it was put before the board. But things have gotten much more sophisticated since that time, so I couldn't just choose. I had to lobby this, that and the other thing, and it would have been much less effective once I was no longer director of Painting and Sculpture. After looking around a good deal, I felt that, despite the fact that he hadn't published in twentieth-century art, Kirk Varnedoe was the best person for a whole variety of reasons that had to do with the ability to speak on your feet to the board, to understand popular culture in relation to art and just be smart, to have an eye for painting, and Kirk has a very good eye, you can see it in some of the things he's done with the installation of the collection. So I finally said that, as far I was concerned, I would choose Kirk Varnedoe as a successor. At the same time, I had some operations which very materially--actually, I was getting to the point where I was going to have those operations--and my own ability to walk and therefore to cover the scene was materially lessened, so that while I still go around and see shows, I don't go around and see nearly as many. For the last few years I was director, I might not have seen as many as I should have. Anyhow, I felt a pressure from that point of view. I also felt the pressure that you always feel...I would rather leave while I was still ahead, and I had the feeling that, you get past twenty years in a job like that, you build up a certain number of critics, if not enemies, and there had been a lot of fuss about the period, and some truth in the criticism of the period just before or just after the Picasso show, that we weren't doing as much contemporary art as we should, and we've talked about that. That wouldn't have made any difference to staying two more

years, obviously, but I felt that the combination of the pressure of getting around, the fact that I had pretty much done or had on the books to do the kinds of things I wanted to do, by drawing attention to what I considered to be the best candidate--the board then had to make its mind up on that--and by drawing Kirk in so he was my associate on Primitivism and then he did--and a real quick-study job he did--an excellent job he did on Vienna, turn-of-the-century Vienna. So a lot of people on all levels of the Museum, for good or for bad, got to see Kirk, got to feel about him and so forth and so on. So my feeling was that I would be happier [telephone interruption].... I just felt that I had done a large variety of things, the Picasso/Braque show was about to come, and it seemed like a good time to get out, you know? I don't have this feeling that you have to stay in control or anything. As I've said to you before, this is one of the things that what's-his-name from Time Magazine, [Robert Hughes]--as I say, I think he's the best writing critic in the country--popularizes this image of me as a Bismarckian type. I keep reading about myself as this tough, Bismarckian guy. In any case, I associate with Bismarck a need for power and control. I need it when I'm doing a project so that the project is good, but when I'm through with the project I don't need to hold onto it, and I must say, I've been enjoying...the first year was a little bit of a shock, but since then, you know, I get to do a lot of things now that I couldn't do through all those years [telephone interruption].... So the thing went through, and I think David Rockefeller was particularly impressed with Kirk. Kirk has had some bad luck and he's made some real mistakes, but I think he's learned from his mistakes. He's basically very good tender, so that I should think that he could do this job very well. I think he understands the responsibilities and the power of the director of the department insofar as loans have to be manipulated so that the proper reciprocity is established between institutions. You can't just indiscriminately lend things and you've got to make the loans count in relation to the favors you're going to ask later on; he's grasped that very well. He's also, I think, a born installateur, and when this museum gets additional space, I have no concern that the collection will be well shown. So fundamentally, it just worked out nicely for me. I think I will regret it when my ten-year contract as a consultant is up, because I don't know what the devil I'll do then [laughing].

SZ: You still have a while [laughing].

WR: Maybe I'll die and I'll be out of it. No, it's actually in about four or five years or something. I've always had a project, and of course one can always make a project out of a book, but writing is painful. I'm the most constipated writer on the face of the earth, so the thought of sitting down at the age of seventy-three or -four and writing a book is not exactly my idea. I think I'll just become a social butterfly at that point. So I don't know, is there anything else?

SZ: That's it.

WR: If you ever need a reprise, I'll be glad to.

SZ: Thank you.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 7

END INTERVIEW