

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: ELAINE DANNHEISSER (ED)

INTERVIEWER: PATTERSON SIMS (PS)

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PS: What motivated you to collect art?

ED: I think I was probably almost born with it. My mother always was interested in art in every way. She lives here in the city. She's ninety-nine, and she still paints. When I was a child, she took me to The Museum of Modern Art, though as a matter of fact she corrected me because when she read the recent article about my gift of my collection to The Modern in the *Times* she said: "Elaine, I didn't take you to the Modern I took you to the Guggenheim Museum, but you probably didn't want to give them press."

PS: Do you think that she really took you to the Modern and she's forgetting?

ED: Yes, I think so. And then she used to take me to the National Academy of Design for Members' shows in which she used to put her pictures in competitions. I painted myself for many years.

PS: How does your mother feel about the things you've collected?

ED: She's very thrilled with the whole thing.

PS: And she's proud of you.

ED: Yes, yes very much.

PS: And has she seen the collection at different times?

ED: Yes, and until a few years ago she used to visit Duane Street. She's been here, and I remember when the Robert Ryman was hanging in the living room she just didn't get it at all.

PS: Were there particular artists she liked very much?

ED: Oh sure, the abstract, pretty, easy ones. I don't think she understood the Bruce Naumans, the [Robert] Gobers, or even the works by [Jeff] Koons for that matter.

PS: But generally she was...

ED: Supportive, yes.

PS: When you have your show at [T]he [Museum of] Modern [Art] are you looking forward to bringing your mother?

ED: I think I'll bring her, if she wants to come.

PS: Just as she took you when you were a child to the museums do you take her to museums now ever?

ED: Well she has a card to the Museum. I sometimes begged her to go in the garden because she had someone that could wheel her there, but she didn't go. She said she would at the beginning, but she doesn't go. She goes just around in her garden in her apartment.

PS: How would you describe your own paintings?

ED: When I was in my teens I went to the New York School of Illustration. I became a very good copier. I could make excellent depictions of satin and mink. I have a [Paul] Cézanne I made hanging at my place in East Hampton; years later I saw the work I copied in Copenhagen. But I wasn't committed. I wasn't a seven-day a week painter.

When I got married in 1952 I was still painting for about a year or two. After that I gave it up and started to just be involved with the art world rather than painting. Werner took me to Europe and it suddenly dawned on me that I wasn't that highly motivated. I was a once-a-week painter. In Europe I got very involved with art history, especially the whole era of the '20s with Gertrude Stein and [Pablo] Picasso. I used to say to myself, "oh, would I have loved to lived then." Then I realized that art is happening now; art history is always being made. So that's how I really became involved with trying to become a part of the art world. I immediately got involved as a volunteer at the Whitney Museum. There was a woman there, Berta Walker, who helped me. I realized that I wanted to be involved in art, not make it.

PS: When did you acquire your first work of art?

ED: Well, the first work of art we owned was one that had been acquired by Werner, who was a collector when I met him. He bought all French School of the '20s, like Henri-Félix Chenaud and Edmond Céria.

PS: Let's talk a little bit about Werner. Clearly you became the more driven collector. Was he also involved in the choice to give the collection away? What role did his being a collector -- someone who cared about art -- play in your relationship?

ED: Well, we both really loved art very much, but he was much more conservative with money than I was. He was the one that had to be concerned about our financial security, and I didn't care -- those things just didn't enter in to anything for me. I left the money matters all to him. I was always the one that would always push him about art. And sometimes he would hold me down because...maybe he was too

conservative, maybe he wasn't... I don't know.

PS: And how conscious of other art collectors were you as you were beginning your own collecting?

ED: *Very*, very conscious... that was my mentor. I used to cut out every article on art collections and collectors that I could find. I used to search through all the magazines when I was in the dentist's office. I kept the pictures and stories about all these collections. I remember I had a piece on the Burton and Emily Tremain collection. These collections were models for me when we did buy a painting. I got to know Vera List; her New York apartment was in this building. I always used to refer to these collections to see how they were installed and looked. I was very interested in everybody else's collections.

We first acquired an [Maurice] Utrillo for \$1,500, and we bought a [Moèise] Kisling for \$1,000, because it looked like a[n] [Amedeo] Modigliani; they had shared a studio.

PS: Are both works sold now?

ED: Yes.

PS: Were you the one who was the most deeply involved in the whole idea of collecting right from the beginning?

ED: Yes, very involved and fortunately Werner obviously supported that. Soon after we were married, we started to go to all the auctions. It was fun and quite social. Things were quite reasonable. We used to go to the auctions when there wasn't a good movie playing, and we didn't buy at first. I always want to buy something, and he would hold me down and it frustrated him [laughter]. He would be the one that would keep his hands on the seat. Probably rightly so.

Then we were lucky if we bought two or three paintings a year, because I didn't have my own money and Werner was very conservative with money. I remember going to Leo Castelli's in the 1970s and wanting to buy all those [Roy] Lichtensteins and Jasper Johns, but Werner wasn't ready, and I couldn't do it on my own. Werner made the decision whether we could afford to buy a painting. Later in the '80s I used to walk out of Mary Boone's or Pat Hearn's galleries in tears because I didn't get a painting. I always used to try to talk to myself and say, "it doesn't matter what you didn't get, it's the involvement that's important."

PS: Do you still believe that?

ED: Yes, it was the involvement with the art of our time with its cast of dealers and critics and a changing group of artists that has always been important to me.

PS: What was your first definition of an art collector? Because it seems as if you moved on from that. From that first period of collecting we can see that Picasso there. Are there other works from that first period of collecting that are still in your life?

ED: Yes. The paintings by [Jean] Dubuffet and [Willem] de Kooning. But around 1980 I got this idea in the middle of the night that I would like to open up a downtown space to show the collection. I had created a foundation. I thought that at least for a year I would have a semi-public space to show the emerging artists I was collecting. Thomas Messer, director of the Guggenheim, and his wife were coming to stay with me in the country around that time, and he said, "oh, let's do it together," we will get some great curator like Dick Bellamy. I was already on the board of the Guggenheim. I thought at first we would get a great advisor, but when the dream became possible with the sale of Werner's business in 1981, I realized I wanted to do it on my own.

At the same time he sold his business I had cancer. With the sale of the business he became more liquid and following my illness he gave me a budget, not that big a budget, for art and bought me the loft on Duane Street.

In the beginning Duane Street was empty, and I worked hard to fill it. I mean in the beginning I had a couple of paintings up on the wall, a Keith Haring, a Kenny Scharf, and a Vernon Fisher, and I thought it was fantastic. Then I started buying big pieces of sculpture like Tony Cragg and Richard Deacon. In the beginning it looked very sad, I don't know how anyone paid any attention to it.

PS: What can you say about the start and purpose of the Dannheisser Foundation?

ED: The Dannheisser Foundation was created by my lawyer in the middle 1970s. I found a man who saw what we wanted to do and was able to influence my husband to do it. My first gifts were a Mark Rothko, then an Agnes Martin and a Robert Rauschenberg paintings to the Guggenheim Museum. I had a lot to say about the selection of these works. The only gift I am ashamed of is the Kenneth Noland. Diane Waldman selected it for the Guggenheim and the Foundation paid for it.

The purpose of the Foundation was to support the visual arts. I gave smaller contributions to BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music], The Drawing Center, Artists Space, and many other alternative spaces. I also gave a lot of money to the New Museum, where I was on the board. My loft on Duane Street was underwritten by the Foundation. Now that I have given the works to the Modern, my lawyer and accountant want to close the Foundation.

PS: Did you go down to your loft on Duane Street every day? Was it like an office for you, an alternative space, or a gallery?

ED: I would go a few days a week and most of the weekends. At the start I thought anything that anyone paid any attention to was great. A lot of people would come by, and I was very excited about it. Friends, artists and groups would visit. Right from the beginning I had two artists to help me get things done there. I was always lending things for shows so there were things that were constantly coming in and out. The artist assistants took care of all that, and I let them have the basement as their

studio. One of them was the artist Joseph Netvetal and the musician Rhys Chatham, and from there I went on to a few others. Then I ended up with the artist Jim Hodges, who became one of my best friends and ended up having his studio there for nine years.

PS: How many works of art would you say you acquired during that period?

ED: A lot, yes a lot.

PS: Did you end up working with any particular dealers or advisors?

ED: No, I didn't. I realized I might ask advice, but I would do it on my own.

PS: Did you have a set budget or did you just buy whatever you wanted?

ED: Oh no, I had a budget, but it wasn't really very big. As a matter of fact, most of what I acquired wasn't that expensive. I remember that at one point for a period of more than six months or so I was buying paintings on an almost daily basis. I would go to the East Village and elsewhere all the time to look at art.

I realized I was a collector when I was called one day by a professor at Columbia to ask if I could talk to her class. I told her, "I don't know how to talk, but maybe you can make up some questions." She said, "fine." When Werner called me and asked what I was doing, I told him I was going to Columbia to give the talk. He said, "this I gotta see." He called up his office and told them he wasn't coming in. Afterward he was so impressed he raised my budget.

PS: What kinds of things were you buying for \$1,500.00 to \$2,000.00? Are there any of them here?

ED: No, no, no. They're all gone. They were works by [Jean Michel] Basquiat, Jedd Garet, Louise Chase, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and a lot of people from the East

Village and also Annina Nosei Gallery. I would come home every day with a couple of works.

But around 1984, I walked into my downtown space and I looked around and said to myself this is ridiculous. By that time I was going to Europe for the art fairs, and I had become more sophisticated. I started buying the work of Joseph Beuys and a lot of conceptual art. Buying the way I had in the East Village didn't interest me any longer, I don't regret what I did, everything is supposed to happen and is important.

PS: And do you have an inventory or a listing of those works that you once owned?

ED: Yes. I have an inventory. I acted as registrar. I had a file uptown, and then I had cards on the works downtown.

PS: And how many works do you still own of that phase?

ED: Very few.

PS: Like approximately... fifteen? Twenty?

ED: Yes, yes.

PS: And out of several hundred?

ED: Yes, yes.

PS: And how did you choose to sell those works of art?

ED: I sold them by dealer or by auction.

PS: Now were you beginning to develop some close relationships with dealers at that point?

ED: Yes.

PS: And did you at that point have anybody whom you felt you could trust as an advisor or whatever?

ED: Oh, you know it changed. Some of the dealers I worked with are very nice. I used to talk to Marian Goodman, but she was really difficult. There was a time when I used to want to buy from Mary Boone, but she had her "priorities." Then that changed too, and it kept changing. There was a point when I used to call Konrad Fisher to see what he had. I've always liked Lawrence Luhring. He was very nice, though I'm sure he wanted me to buy a lot of his artists, which I did and some of them were a big mistake. But he also helped me buy the artists he knew I was interested in. Like if he saw a Goyer in Europe that I might not have been aware of he would tell me about it. That's how I got many of my Goyers because Goyer's gallery was not selling Goyers to me; they sold them to Charles Saatchi.

PS: You had started going to Europe much more regularly?

ED: Yes.

PS: Now were there other particular critics or writers who influenced you? I mean people you got to know through some of these contacts you were making.

ED: I think all the good critics had an influence on me. I read everything that was going on. Some of the critics and writers I didn't have as much respect for as others.

PS: But you clearly did this on your own.

ED: Yes, yes. I absolutely did. Then one day I walked into my downtown space, and my mind changed. I finally realized I needed to rethink who were the top artists, the

ones who were going to last, and that's how I choose. That list would constantly change; it used to change a lot.

PS: Now were you conscious you were buying art on the edge or how would you describe the third phase of your collecting?

ED: I remember starting one day in Michael Werner's gallery after having lunch with Georg Baselitz and other artists. We were playing that game of "who is the best." The names and the list constantly changed, but now I had a conscious list that I would work through. I began to buy certain artists in depth. For instance, I used to be crazy about [Anselm] Kiefer and then that changed, and I was more interested in [Sigmar] Polke.

PS: So at this point do you have any Kiefers?

ED: One, an early work that he requested be in Mark Rosenthal's retrospective of his work. It's upstairs here. I had more, and I sold them.

PS: You never had any reluctance to sell something you stopped liking?

ED: No.

PS: As you had become more intensely involved in forming a definitive collection of art that would last, that was on the edge, at this point what role was Werner playing?

ED: My husband wanted me to do what I was doing, but he was not the kind of a person who would go overboard. Well, in the beginning when we went to galleries, we sort of agreed about what I bought. I mean he gave me my budget and let me buy what I wanted. Though he would not tell me what to buy, he sort of kept the strings on me. I kept pushing, which was always the case. I didn't let him to get too involved with the collection, because I don't think he liked much of what I wanted to buy, he'd get jealous. He wanted to be more involved. I mean Werner was interested in art and

all that, but he was also very much a businessman. But until he was very ill, he did support my collecting art, even when I started to spend a lot more money. He wanted to keep me happy. Things were going very well, and I was making money for the company by the increase in value of the works that I was buying.

PS: Through the '80s you had a very close relationship with the Guggenheim Museum. Would you have given your collection to the Guggenheim? In other words, was your intention always to form an important art collection and give it away?

ED: You should realize that through most of the '80s I never thought about giving things away. All I thought of was where am I getting the next painting, am I going to be ahead of someone else because that was the way the game was played. I was frenetic, frantic in the '80s. You just thought of trying to get the best painting. I mean you had to go to every opening. You were involved twenty-four hours a day. You had to get up early and get to the gallery at 8:30 in the morning to be absolutely sure you'd get the work that you wanted.

I remember going to Pat Hearn's gallery for a show and being there at 8:30 in the morning and everything was sold. I put a car phone in my car, so I wouldn't miss a call. Sometimes I'd be on my way uptown, I'd get a call, and I'd turn around and go back. I'd go to Europe and all over to get what I wanted. I remember one frantic trip to the Basel art fair to be there before the opening, so I could get in early to see what the dealers had, but Charles Saatchi always beat me to it. I recall going to auctions where dealers would just keep their hands up the whole time, anything they bought they could resell. It was unbelievable, no, it was absolutely mad. Oh, it's amazing to watch, it was like a movie.

In 1973 I remembered going to the Robert and Ethel Scull auction. Then I saw the changes in the art world, which quite suddenly made art into a commodity. But at the end of the '80s, I had put a lot into the collection, and I just didn't see myself selling everything and having nothing to show for it. Ultimately I didn't want my collection

sold. I wanted to leave it to a museum, but I also needed to be sure that I could be financially secure.

PS: You sat on the Guggenheim board for a while longer though right?

ED: Yes I did. But when Tom Krens became director it didn't take me very long to question his whole operation. A lot of people like Ileana Sonnabend and Barbara Gladstone think he's very good and that he is such a visionary. I wasn't sure, and as I got more involved with Krens, I found him to be a very rude and abrasive person. He did a lot of slights to me that were uncalled for.

PS: Can you give me a history of your relationship with The Museum of Modern Art? Who were the people who brought you closer to the Museum?

ED: When the Chicago collector Jerry Elliott [Gerald S. Elliott] went on the MoMA Painting and Sculpture Acquisition Committee, I became more interested in going on. When Jerry Elliott was around he always used to say to me, "what are you going to do with your collection, who are you going to give it to?" And he's the one who raised this in my consciousness. Jerry would keep the idea of donating my collection in my mind, but then the more I knew about Tom Krens, the less I realized I wanted the collection to be there.

PS: Given Jerry Elliott's influence on you, did you ever consider giving your collection to the Art Institute of Chicago or the Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art?

ED: No, because I didn't live there. As I became more involved with the Modern, everybody there was very friendly. They really wanted me to be involved with them. But I didn't realize they felt uneasy about me being on the board of the Guggenheim. As soon as I resigned from the Guggenheim board, everything changed with the Modern; they breathed a sigh of relief. The Modern board is great, they are a very warm group of people. I have been on a few boards, they all work in a different

manner. The Guggenheim board comes from all over the country and the world, and there is a much more removed kind of relationship than the board at the Modern.

PS: Were you ever on the New Museum of Contemporary Art board?

ED: Yes. Being on the New Museum board that was entirely different. A lot of the people that were on that board were my friends... my friends before I went on the board. Which, of course, is the case to some degree at the Modern, but not as much as on the New Museum. But you can't compare the New Museum to The Museum of Modern Art.

PS: Besides Jerry Elliot, were there other people associated with the Modern who were important to you?

ED: Rob [Robert] Storr and Aggie [Agnes] Gund really had a big impact. Both Aggie and Glenn Lowry were very supportive as we went through this whole amazing, tough negotiations about my gift. My lawyer and my accountant needed certain assurances for my financial protection and flexibility.

We had to sort out what was mine to give, what was the Foundation's, what was in Werner's estate; what the Museum wanted and needed. I still don't understand it all completely. As far as the staff was concerned, it was really Glenn Lowry, Aggie Gund versus Beverly Wolff.

PS: What do you mean by that?

ED: I mean she was at the other end of the spectrum. The whole thing almost fell apart with her. She's a very abrasive lady.

PS: Well, obviously you had to make some unusual and very special relationships or arrangements with the Museum in order to allow the collection to be transferred.

Now were there other staff or board members you dealt with? I know you have a relationship with Rob Storr, and you've gotten to know Kirk [Varnedoe]...

ED: Well Rob was involved more than Kirk. Rob was very good in sorting out what I owned which was very confusing to both Beverly Wolff and my lawyer and Rob knew the art, he was very good at that, he helped a lot. You see it was complicated.

When Werner made his last will in 1989 he was already very sick with Parkinson's and his mind wasn't completely clear. I had a lawyer whom I thought was my best friend, but he was manipulating Werner to give all his money to the Geriatric Institution and charging exorbitant fees. We were manipulated by his lawyer, who was stealing us blind.

PS: Were there any collectors beside Jerry Elliott who had an influence on you?

ED: The collectors in New York City, with whom I was friendly, didn't have the same taste.

PS: To me it is unusual when an American collector buys in depth one artist or a small group of artists. Clearly that is the way your collection evolved, becoming more and more refined. Is that to some degree what you are speaking about when you isolate yourself from other of your New York contemporaries as collectors?

ED: No. Everyone one of them was different. They all did it differently. Some of them collected Pop art and some of them had so much money that they just bought everything and now they are stuck with a lot of junk. I had to be very discriminating.

PS: Do you think that the limitations you felt in terms of the economic resources helped you or improved you as a collector?

ED: I think so. It gave me more discipline.

PS: Also, you are unusual among collectors because you actually sold the vast majority of your collection as your taste became more and more refined.

ED: Yes, oh yes, that is absolutely true. As soon as I wasn't interested in a work I didn't have any compunctions about selling it.

PS: Now from the very start, in your collection you looked to Europe for artists that interested you. Can you describe a little bit the dichotomy of America and Europe in terms of how your collection developed?

ED: We used to go to Europe at least two or three times a year. And that had a big influence on me. If you just collected in New York City, you wouldn't have many facets. Going to Europe makes the whole situation much clearer.

PS: When you were collecting in the '80s, you were collecting in a very competitive period, did that make you a better collector?

ED: Oh yes.

PS: Or a more frustrated collector?

ED: Both, both. I used to be extremely frustrated. When I tell you extremely... it became so competitive that there were things that I wouldn't have bought, but I got caught up in this thing that I just had to do it because somebody else would have gotten it. It was a vicious cycle.

PS: And now in the '90s you are obviously either taking a rest from collecting or you may not collect with the avidity that you did before. Do you wish it were still the '80s?

ED: Who's to say? The '80s were a fabulous time when you look back at them. Yes, I think I wish it were then, it was very exciting, it's quite different now.

PS: Do you think the period of the '70s through the early '90s when you were perhaps collecting the most intensely will be seen as an important period in art?

ED: I don't know, you'll have to wait. You have to wait ten years and look back at it. You really need time. I don't think anything else says it but time.

PS: And as a collector, do you want to have the opportunity to live long enough to see how your taste measures up?

ED: In a way I do and in a way I don't. There are so many frustrating things in my life and my health and stuff like that. My mother is going to be a hundred in May, and I hope I don't live that long.

PS: But of course if you lived to be a hundred you would have a pretty good opportunity to know how your taste will hold up.

ED: Right, right.

PS: I think it's fair to say that your taste got tougher and tougher as time went on.

ED: Well, I don't know. Maybe it got tougher in the contemporary field as time went on, but for instance before I started buying contemporary I always loved Dubuffet, which is very tough work. So I think I always went in that direction, but I never liked *pretty* paintings. Before I started buying contemporary art the next thing we would have bought would have been a Francis Bacon.

PS: Most of that earlier phase of your collecting is not reflected in the Dannheisser Collection at The Museum of Modern Art...

ED: No. The collection the Modern is getting is from the '80s, and I don't think the other work even means anything.

PS: To you or in the world at large?

ED: To this collection.

PS: Is there anything else you would have liked to have in it?

ED: The only thing I would like to see in the collection is more of what I have. I wouldn't want a Julian Schnabel; I wouldn't want a David Salle. I would like to have more Brice Marden and more Ryman in the collection. Whatever is in the collection I would have like to have more of it. But I can't think of another additional artist from the '80s.

PS: Let's just talk more about what you felt your collection could do within The Museum of Modern Art.

ED: Well it turns out, just maybe by luck, that the things I have in depth, they didn't have. I had numerous works by Nauman, Gober, and Polke that the Modern really needed. What I had and they didn't were complementary.

PS: Do the works that have been selected by The Museum of Modern Art and will enter the collection of The Museum of Modern represent your collection and your taste in the way that you had hoped?

ED: Yes, they picked the best pieces, but they did have to forego certain pieces for my financial security, and I think it was very difficult for them to decide which ones.

PS: Were there any works that left the collection under these circumstances that you wished had been able to stay?

ED: Oh yes, definitely. The Robert Gober *Urinal* and then there was an abstract Polke painting.

PS: And do you think the ones that you wish were in the collection are the same as the ones the Museum wished were still in the Dannheisser Collection of The Museum of Modern Art?

ED: Yes, I think so. There were some works that they didn't take, but they couldn't take everything. There were a few pieces that were not important for my financial security that they didn't take that I think are interesting. One of them was slightly damaged, and they didn't think they wanted to restore it. There was a great Krzysztof Wodiczko photograph which they said needed a lot of restoration.

PS: Were you ever conscious of buying things *for* the Modern?

ED: *No*, no way, I always played the game of who is important. That always seemed to go through my mind every couple of months. Who was up there and who wasn't, that's the way I thought of it. I used to be *frantic* and crazy about David Salle, and I suddenly sold everything. When I found Polke, David Salle went right out the door.

PS: Can you say a few words about the work of some of the artists you have collected in depth and that you have given to the Modern like Robert Gober and Polke, and Nauman, and even if you would, go into some of the specific works and what it felt like. One can't help think, for instance, of the Bruce Nauman installation piece with the rat...

ED: Yes, I thought of that one too.

PS: Would you say a few words about that work and what it means to you?

ED: Well, it's a very, very strong work and it has so much to do with the society we live in today. With the jazz bands and the rats running around in the maze going crazy. It's a metaphor of modern life in the world.

PS: Can you describe a little bit about the impact the work had on you the first time you saw it?

ED: No, I mean I liked it immediately and it has a same impact on me today as it had on me then.

PS: And did you know when you saw it immediately that you would buy it?

ED: Oh yes, oh yes. As a matter of fact, I saw it, and I bought it from Konrad Fisher. I think I saw it when I was over there six months before. Then I bought in on the telephone, having only seen it that one time before.

PS: But you knew right away.

ED: Yes, yes and I'm very fast at reacting like that.

PS: Why were you drawn to a urinal by Bob Gober?

ED: I never intellectualize. By the time I got the urinals I had already bought Gober's work, and I was sort of hooked on him you see. So, I thought they were very strong examples of someone whose work I already owned.

PS: So one purchase fed another?

ED: Exactly, exactly.

ED: If I don't love a work immediately, I never buy it.

PS: If there's any equivocation you don't buy the work?

ED: No, no. It happens very quickly with me.

PS: If you had to do an analysis of what emotion you went through when you saw a work of art that you loved, could you do that for me?

ED: You just know immediately. You could see first of all that it's not derivative, and that it's a strong work, and it usually is, for my taste, it's usually very tough.

PS: Do you sometimes wish there would have been a way of including one early Dubuffet and one Bacon.

ED: No, no. Oh, you mean that early work?

PS: Yes. Your collection is distinguished as much for what's in it as for what isn't in it.

ED: Yes, in '84 that's when I decided that I was not going to buy one of each, but buy in depth. I kept a list in mind, never on paper. If I had unlimited money I probably would have [Hans] Richter. Early on I had one abstract Richter painting. I didn't realize that I never could go back and buy early Richter, and so I decided not to have any works by him. By about 1987, I became uninterested in Salle and Eric Fischl. You know the story about Eric Fischl...

I had this great Eric Fischl that I bought at Ed Thorpe Gallery. It was called *Inside Out* and I paid a lot of money for it. Remember, I was buying paintings for \$1,200 and this one cost \$12,000. But I decided to buy it, actually the Foundation bought it, because I didn't want to pay tax on it. Everybody oohed and ahhed it, and loved it. But then suddenly I changed my collecting, and I wanted to buy Bruce Nauman and Robert Ryman and I didn't have the money. The Fischl really didn't fit in anymore. Another thing that influenced my getting rid of the Fischl was his dealer who said to me, "how come you never ask me for another Eric Fischl?" I knew it's generally customary if you don't want a second one of an artist, you shouldn't have the first. I never wanted a second Eric Fischl.

Some of the things I wanted I didn't have the money to buy. So I decided to sell the Fischl, and I called Larry Gagosian, who was in Europe. On the phone he offered me a million dollars for it, so I knew I could get the Nauman and pay back all my debts. I also knew I could get more, so I spoke with Larry again, and he said he'd pay 1.2 million. I said 1.3. We ended up agreeing at 1.3. But instead of just taking it, I decided to be more conservative like Werner, and I said let me think about it. I went home and called Mary Boone and told her somebody offered me 1.4 million. She knew who it was immediately, whatever Larry Gagosian wanted she wanted. Then she called me back and said, "Elaine if I give you a million four I owe you a big favor, and you'll have the check tomorrow morning."

I wanted a Robert Ryman from Larry Gagosian, and he had two Ryman's from the Saatchi collection and one of them was coming in. I wanted to wait to see the second painting. I thought that it was terrible. The one he had in his townhouse in New York was the one I wanted, and he kept raising the price. I never got the Ryman, but I had all that money from the Fischl to buy with, and I brought a lot of very good things. I bought Nauman, Polke and all those things.

PS: You have a wonderful group of works by Bruce Nauman, a great group of works by Robert Gober, fantastic Sigmar Polke paintings. Have you gotten to know any of these artists?

ED: Yes, I used to know Eric Fischl very well. I got to know Jeff Koons fairly well and Bruce Nauman a little bit. But I really didn't seek them out. I'm not a believer in knowing the artist, I think knowing isn't a good idea. You can like the person, and then you have to buy the art, and you regret it. I'm not interested in getting to know the artist at all.

PS: Once you made a decision that something had to go, it went, but was it a situation where something came in and something had to go out?

ED: No, no, no. It was a question of me not being interested in the artist anymore and getting rid of it and then looking for what I really thought was interesting.

PS: And you never seemed to have any trouble getting rid of any of the things you acquired.

ED: No. You mean trouble financially?

PS: Well, you never had any difficulty selling anything.

ED: No, because the '80s worked like that. I mean you went to a big auction and it seemed everything got sold. It was unbelievable, no matter what you sold would go for double what you paid for it.

PS: And so you would usually use auctions as a method for selling whatever you had to get rid of.

ED: Yes, yes.

PS: So things were coming into downtown very frequently, but they were also going out very frequently.

ED: Right.

PS: And there was never a time at that point in your life when you thought about giving works of art away as opposed to selling them?

ED: No.

PS: So what caused you to reach the stage in your life when you said I want to give things away?

ED: Because I had health problems. Werner had died in 1991. And going down to Duane Street, which I used to get a big kick out of, wasn't any fun anymore. I suddenly realized that there were so few people who really understood what I was doing. They would ask me where I got the frame for the Picasso. Gradually I gave more responsibility over to Jim Hodges, to take care of the place, but also give the tours. I had a lot of health problems. I don't have the energy that I used to have. I used to go down there by myself, and it didn't phase me. Then there was one incident when the lights went out for some reason, and I fell over a Goyer. I was afraid to go there by myself anymore. I always had to have Jim or the other fellow who works with me there. It was time for me to get out.

PS: Now are you still buying works of art?

ED: Not at the moment, no. I think I'll go back to it.

PS: Do you see yourself collecting those artists that you have already collected or collecting the next wave?

ED: I don't think I could. New exhibitions of the work of Bruce Nauman are being shown next week at the galleries of Leo Castelli and Angela Westwater, and I would love to be able to buy, but I don't think I can possibly afford to buy that work anymore. The only work I would go back to would be to buy the work of young artists in a very modest way... like drawings. I wouldn't buy big pieces anymore.

PS: When people in twenty-five years from now, say in 2020, look at the Dannheisser collection what do you think they are going to feel?

ED: I don't know. That's an interesting question, it might be nothing. I think at this point you know to a certain degree which artists are going to hold up. But who knows whether Polke will hold up or not. You are sure that Richard Serra will, and you are sure that Bruce Nauman will. But someone like Polke, I mean to me he is a very

interesting artist, but you don't know, he might not... In this country they are not so engulfed with Polke.

PS: Now Goyer, Cindy Sherman, these are other artists you have collected, where do you think they'll fit in 2020?

ED: I don't know. I mean everyone has a different opinion, like whether it's Koons or it's Goyer. They always put those two next to each other, and it's very hard to say. Only time will tell I think. You have to wait a while. Look at the Minimalists, nobody even looked at them until ten years later and then they knew what was the good work.

PS: Have you sold any works of art recently?

ED: Well, I sold a few things in May, basically what the Museum didn't want and anything that couldn't fit into this apartment. A lot of things will be sold in November.

PS: What impressions would you like the people who will come to see your show at the Museum to leave the exhibition with?

ED: Feeling excited and stimulated. A lot of people won't understand it, but I just hope it looks strong. It could look awful. I'm really putting myself on the line with this because I know that the Parrish Art Museum did an exhibition of my small works about four years ago, and it looked terrible. I remember before Jerry Elliott had his show at the Art Institute of Chicago he ran around and spent a fortune, a couple million dollars, bracing up his collection so that it would look good.

PS: You probably aren't in a position to do that.

ED: No, not at all.

PS: And what would you like them to feel, if anything, about you as the person who collected and gathered all these works and then gave them to the museum?

ED: That it was very nice of me [laughter], which it was.

PS: Is there anything else, I don't mean to push this too hard, but are there other things that you would want people to know as they look at those works of art?

ED: Well I would like them to realize that I did it all by myself, and that I had no help and that I just went with it. I hope that when the Museum's new building opens they will be up all the time, but who's to say; it all depends on how the work stands up, don't you think?

Art's such a fragile thing, and it is a reflection of our time. In every era there is always a myth. We had the Renaissance, with the Madonna and the religious art, and it always has to do with the myth that we are living by and the reflection. It's going to be interesting to see what going to happen and what they are going to do with this new building. I think they have a big responsibility because the world is changing so fast who is to know what a museum is going to really be, what the needs of a museum will be ten years from now. The world is changing so quickly that it is very, very scary and to build something that will be old hat so quickly. The world is moving so quickly.

PS: Can you say what is the myth of the time that people might take away from your collection?

ED: Well it might be nothing because things will have changed so radically. It will have less to do with painting and more with conceptual art. My collection is more Conceptual than anything else. Even Sigmar Polke is not a traditional artist in this sense.

PS: Finally, what did your collecting art mean to you in that part of your life, which to some degree is over now?

ED: Everything has changed. It's amazing how as you get older you realize how nothing stays the same. Everything changes, and a curtain goes down.

PS: And a new chapter begins?

ED: Yes.

PS: Well I'm very happy that you gave the Museum a chapter of your life.

ED: Yes. I am too in a way. I hope it works out.

PS: Is there any way you hope this collection will prove inspirational as the Museum begins its expansion?

ED: Well, I think it was given at a very appropriate time that the new expansion might stimulate other collectors to do what I did and it sort of gives... it shows the kinds of things we will do in the new expansion.

PS: So many of the greatest works in the collection of the Modern have been gifts from collectors. To any degree did their gifts spur you to give?

ED: No, it had nothing to do with that. It had to do with the fact I felt I just didn't want to die with nothing left of my intense efforts of ten or twelve years. Yes, I just wanted to have it go down in sort of a history of what my life was for twelve years.

PS: How do you occupy your time now?

ED: I play bridge. I meet a couple -- Frank and Nina Moore -- who live in this apartment building. He is a famous brain surgeon. They are buying art-photography and

drawings like crazy. They are completely dedicated. They show me what they buy and they like my opinion, but otherwise I do not have the energy to look.

END INTERVIEW