

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH:** BEN HELLER (BH)  
**INTERVIEWER:** AVIS BERMAN (AB)  
**LOCATION:** NEW YORK CITY  
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**BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

BH: Before we start, could we state the rules openly, so they are there and recorded?

AB: Certainly. Mr. Heller has asked me to state the ground rules, as we talked about them before the tape began. First of all, my plan is to ask him some background questions about his involvement with art, and then go on to his involvement with The Museum of Modern Art and eventually some of the artists that he knew during that time -- most likely [Jackson] Pollock, [Mark] Rothko and [Clyfford] Still. We also discussed that the purpose of this interview is for The Museum of Modern Art's archives; it is not necessarily to ever be published, and access will be dependent upon Mr. Heller's permission to use it. He may restrict it as he sees fit, and he may use the material as he sees fit, if he ever intends to write about his life, career, or art collecting, in the future. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

BH: Marvelously well done.

AB: Very good. Before I begin, was there anything you were thinking about, or anything that came to mind as you were preparing for this interview that you thought you might like to say or discuss?

BH: Oh, that's terrible. I'm embarrassed to say I did not prepare.

AB: Okay. No problem. I have prepared questions, then.

BH: I would like to correct one thing. You were involved in the [James E. B.] Breslin book, you say, and I had to correct Calvin Trillin [Tomkins], I believe it was, in *The New Yorker* in a rendition of a story that involved Mark [Rothko] and myself. I was surprised it had become public and that it was incorrectly reported in the Breslin book. The issue is the use of the word "misery," as Breslin reported it, versus the actual use of the word "mishegaas," or "craziness." Mark was not saying it was "his misery to paint and my misery to like it," and all that sort of stuff; it was "craziness," and betokened an attitude toward art world identifications and so on. So, "misery" was wrong, and really significantly so, for the flavor of what was said.

AB: I agree, because that was a well-known anecdote. You're referring to the James E. B. Breslin biography of Mark Rothko for the tape, and I believe you mean Calvin Tomkins, not Calvin Trillin. [Note: Breslin, James E.B. Mark Rothko: A Biography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993].

BH: Calvin Tomkins. Right.

AB: Yes. Especially since Breslin went out of his way to stress Mark Rothko's Jewishness, it's strange he wouldn't use the Yiddish word.

BH: Or the English equivalent, which would be something equivalent to "craziness."

AB: Yes. Especially at that period of life, "misery" would be meaningful. Maybe he was attempting to foreshadow, when he shouldn't have been.

BH: Well, I think this is absolutely typical of the way people will read into what they write or what they think, what they know outside of the work of art and read it into what they see. One of the foremost practitioners was Clem [Clement Greenberg]. I had a big discussion with him way back that he wrote violence into Jackson's work, and I didn't see "violence," quote-unquote. I saw a variety of other things but not violence, although Jackson had his way of being on the quote "violent," unquote, side, or really agitated. Anyhow, continue.

AB: Would you please state your full name and date of birth?

BH: [Sigh] Oh, well, it's under Benjamin Theodore Heller. I use Ben Heller. October 16, 1925. In New York City.

AB: Thank you. Now when you were growing up, were you exposed to art? Were you interested?

BH: I went to the Ethical Culture School, which brought me to the Fieldston School, and there was an art program, of sorts, there. But my interests, as I first saw them -- in the arts, in the plural -- were primarily in music and writing. And to the degree that I had any awareness of art, it seemed to me more by osmosis and museum visits that I had forgotten about, because people always ask, "How did you begin? How did it all start? Why did you begin? La, la, la." And I have a standard answer by now: I can tell you when the disease struck, what the manifestations of the disease were, but I cannot tell you why. All I know is that when I was back from the army, I had my room in an apartment. I had some reproductions from the Modern and the Met. So, somehow something forced its way in, at least minimally, but I had no visual activity that I can spot, in any way, shape, manner or form nor have I ever painted. I've done everything else but not painted.

AB: Do you have any sense of when you first began going to the museums in New York?

BH: I can only tell you that I must have, because it's part of the curriculum. But I have no visual memory. The only visual memories began when I was in college, being friendly with some of the students who were artists. I did look at, even buy, two works of art, a sculpture and a painting, from fellow students. My only traceable, to my memory, beginnings were on my honeymoon, when somehow or other I wanted to buy a work of art, which was 1949.

AB: And this was in Europe.

BH: In Europe.

AB: I will not go over it in great detail, what you said, but you started with Europeans and then changed to the newer American paintings. Is that correct?

BH: The first two things we bought were a Braque Cubist still life and an African Congo fetish figure. That really, in its way, describes pretty much the duality of what I did, either in collecting or in my general approach, which is horizontal rather than vertical knowledge, which are the features I had as an ideal and retain today -- the Renaissance man concept -- as the way to go, as it were. Therefore, I was interested in multitudinous cultures, and the first paintings I bought were, yes, European, but in very short order, subsequently and inclusive, [Joan] Mirò, who is fairly modern (1950), and [Nicolas] de Stäel and [Pierre] Soulages. So, within minutes it was roughly into the contemporary, through the Parisian eye, as it were, first, which is the way most of us would have begun; including, when you went to The Museum of Modern Art, that's how you began.

AB: Well, when did you start going to the galleries? [Sidney] Janis, [Betty] Parsons?

BH: For American painting, Janis didn't come along until later. I started going in 1949.

AB: Now it seems to me, and again, this is only from what I've gleaned, that the galleries were showing what caught your eye. Were you influenced at all by the Americans shows that Dorothy [C.] Miller was doing? [*Fourteen Americans*, MoMA Exh.#329, September 10-December 8, 1946; *15 Americans*, MoMA Exh.#507, April 9-July 27, 1952; *Twelve Americans*, MoMA Exh.#604, May 30-September 8, 1956; *16 Americans*, MoMA Exh.#656, December 16, 1959-February 17, 1960; *Americans 1963*, MoMA Exh.#722, May 22-August 18, 1963; after 35 years at the Museum, Miller retired in 1969 as a Senior Curator, Museum Collections]. Did those register?

BH: [Pause] Yes. Absolutely. All of us, I would say, cut the beginnings of our modern eyes at the Modern, and the "breadth" eyes, perhaps, at the Metropolitan museum. That is, if you lived in New York. The Guggenheim was quite different in those days, and there really wasn't much else. The Whitney was de minimus. But I was influenced far less by Dorothy's shows than all the activity I was involved in. And by the time I really became aware of Dorothy's shows, I was already aware, as it were.

AB: When you say "the activities you were involved in," would you elaborate?

BH: Well, it would be going around, starting with the galleries. I had (and still have) two very dear friends, Mimi Schapiro and Paul Brach. Paul, and his brother, Roger Brach, went to Fieldston. Paul and I saw each other in the army, and when they moved back to New York and were in the art scene, somehow or other we fell in together, again. I think if there's anybody to whom I would give the maximal amount of credit toward, quote, "assisting me in my entry," unquote, it would be to Paul.

AB: So, was that when they were still living at 51 West 10th street that you saw them?

BH: Where they lived in 1950-51 is when I saw them. Yes. '49, '50, '51.

AB: I believe that's how you met Pollock. Is that how you met Rothko?

BH: No. Well, whichever you wish to address first. Since you said Pollock first. . . I met Pollock. . . I came out to East Hampton for a weekend. We went to what became our house, subsequently, which was then Ileana Castelli's house. Paul and Mimi were there, and I went to see *Lavender Mist*, at their suggestion. Alfonso and they both urged that I pick up the phone and call Jackson, which I was kind of embarrassed and loathe to do, but did. He picked up the phone, and the first thing I heard, after "Hello," was Lee's [Krasner Pollock] shrill voice in the background, screaming that he shouldn't do this and he shouldn't do that, because she thought my phone call was a repeat from a previous phone call. Anyhow, we did go over. We did spend, virtually, the weekend together. It was during that visit that I first saw *One*, which is now, of course, in the Museum; and *Echo*, etc. And amazing things happened thereafter. As far as Rothko, I met Mark because I had seen a painting at Betty's [Parsons] that I thought was beautiful. I was uncertain about it because it was beautiful, and modern art was supposed to be difficult, not beautiful. So, I distrusted myself, and I waited about six months to go back. I saw it again, it was still beautiful, but I wanted to see more, to feel more certain it was the painting which made me feel comfortable, quote "certain" unquote, to the degree we have certainty in this life, of my eye. That's when

and how I met Mark. And that particular story, and that particular negotiation, over that particular painting, which we have called *Yellow Greens*. . .

AB: And what was Rothko like at the time?

BH: Perfectly pleasant, prepared to show me things. I wouldn't say he opened up in any way, but there were several visits and with each visit, more. He opened up so that when he got to that expression -- (a) willing to give a discount; (b) listening to the story of why I resisted paying over \$1,000 (which is a whole fascinating story). . . And we came to this negotiated price of \$1,350, or he came to it, and he said that that was the price of the mishegas, \$1,350. We had gotten to know each other better. Subsequently, of course, we became good friends. I guess it was in 1955, or just before he went off to New Orleans, that I proposed to him that I buy four paintings a year, so he would be able to stop teaching. But by the time he came back, he was then at Sidney's [Janis], and Sidney had sold two paintings, and Mark resisted anything that might have been an entanglement, and so on. But we spent, oh, goodness knows. . . We'd go out with the children and drive somewhere for a luncheon. We talked about forming a foundation and looked at places in the city that would just hold his works. Or, we had some property in East Hampton where I thought maybe we could build something because of his desire to have his works grouped together. Which is why he loved to come to our apartment, which he fondly called, "the Frick of the West Side." And, of course, he was terribly proud of it. Which is another reason why he wanted us to get that marvelous, dark-wine painting that Bill [William S.] Rubin, with his finagling, had gotten Joe Slifka to buy. Bill had it, Bill was upset for whatever reason and wanted to sell it, and Mark wanted me, very badly, to have it. What ensued was Bill's bizarre story about a damage to the painting and that whole silly episode, for reasons I still know not but still reverberated. Because when the Rothko show was being prepared for [Ernst] Beyeler, I was again asked about this story because when it was sold it was a whole big thing. When it was to be exhibited the owners were very nervous about exhibiting it, and they wanted to understand what was the background, where did these rumors start and how with what foundation, what truth, and so on. And, of course, the simplest of all answers, aside from having checked with Goldreyer [Note: a conservator] or anyone else, was that all you do is look at the painting under a light.

You see what degree there was anything done to it, and it's quite visible that there wasn't, and that Bill's remarks were, for whatever motivation, inaccurate. Which rambles all around to your question.

AB: Right. Well, you also said it was a fascinating story why you weren't going to spend more than \$1,000 on art.

BH: Well, we had bought our first few things: a [Georges] Braque, [Pierre] Soutine, a butcher boy, a Mirò, and a large Dubuffet, I think it was a portrait of Henri Michaud. Things like that. But as we went around the galleries we'd dip into, say, American painting. So, my mother-in-law somehow knew somebody who knew Adolph Gottlieb. So, my first wife and I went out to Adolph Gottlieb's studio apartment one Friday night and looked at things. We decided we would buy one and take one on approval. And, indeed, we physically took them. We had a convertible, the weather was nice so we put the top down, and we took the two paintings home to our apartment in New York. They were pictographs. And when I got home to the apartment, and through the weekend, my reaction was that the pictographs related to primitive or tribal art, and that the pictograph was not of an artist within his culture, such as the African artist was, but someone outside looking in. Therefore, it didn't ring as authentic. So, I called Adolph and said I didn't want to keep either one, the one we had bought or the one we'd taken on approval, and I really apologized. I went through this experience, I wasn't happy, I didn't want to have the painting. As I subsequently learned years later, walking down 57th Street and meeting Esther and Adolph walking, Adolph told me then that Sam Kootz was behind him to push me to keep the sale, because all we had done was had a verbal agreement, and Adolph didn't want to renounce the sale. I wrote him a letter: "Gee. Do you really want somebody who's not happy with your work to buy the work?" And he said yes. So, I went in, not knowing that Kootz was pushing him here, and said to Sam, "I have a problem. I agreed to buy this painting. I didn't pay for it. I didn't this, didn't that, but Adolph wants to hold me to the deal. It's a moral issue and I'm very sensitive to moral issues. How can we resolve this problem?" And Sam said, "Well, I have a whole group of things I bought over the years. You can have anything from within what I have. Exchange it." I said, "That's a very fair thing to do," so I went looking, and looking, and looking, and looking, and never found anything that I really, really

wanted, but there was a [Robert] Motherwell. So, I selected a Motherwell in exchange, and took the Motherwell home. I guess, because I really, really didn't want it, at a given point in time I wanted to sell the Motherwell. Subsequently, I saw both the Gottlieb and the Motherwell and they were good. I had the eye. I just didn't know that yet. I picked good paintings. So, we tried to sell the Motherwell. It had been a \$1,000 purchase. And it wasn't that I couldn't sell it for \$1,000, or \$800, or \$600. We simply couldn't sell it. So, I gave it to Brandeis, and it subsequently got lost or stolen, but the lesson I learned was that it was money totally out the window! Once I started buying art I was never out of debt so I had to recognize that if I was buying contemporary work this was totally spent money. Out of my pocket. So, I set my limit at \$1,000. The Rothko was \$1,500, and he was willing to give the discount of 10%, or \$1,350, so we had this tremendous gap that was resolved because, "it was his mishegaas to paint it, my mishegaas to like it", and the price of the mishegaas was \$1,350. Who could answer that argument? It's a cute story.

AB: It's charming and irresistible.

BH: It's an irresistible story. And you know it's so true on so many different levels, about all kinds of art experiences. I have a son who's a painter. He shows his work to a gallery. . . as he tells it you. If he puts up a stick of wood and says, "This thing is about the metamorphosis of nature's chemicals," and calls it a concept, the dealer will take it. But if he shows him a beautiful work of art, and he doesn't sell. It's pathetic. No eyes, all ears and heads.

AB: That's right. No eyes, all ears.

BH: Well, you know how many people look at paintings with their ears.

AB: When did you get involved with the museum, or where did the Modern begin to take notice of you as a presence as a collector?

BH: I don't exactly remember when the Modern took notice, but it was obviously after. . . When we lived on Riverside Drive, when we bought *One*, our ceiling was eight-feet, seven and a half inches, and *One* was just fractionally under nine feet. Jackson and I



sent it in by *Home Sweet Home*. Jackson and I took it up, illegal at the time, but it didn't seem much then. Nowadays, it's much more overt between what is legal and illegal. We took the roll up on the top of the elevator, hauled the painting into our dining room, and between the molding on the right hand side of the door that went into the kitchen and the pillar on the left hand side of the structure of the building, we had exactly the width of the painting. We stapled it up to the ceiling and let it hang. Of course, it was gorgeous, but it was too big. So, again, those stupid two people who wrote the book on Pollock, whatever their names are. . .

AB: Stephen Naifeh and Gregory Smith. [Note: Naifeh, Stephen and Smith, Gregory. Jackson Pollock: An American Saga. New York: C.N. Potter. 1998].

BH: Yes. How a book like that, filled with such inaccuracies. . . Anybody who is quoted thinks it's wrong, and it almost gets the [Pulitzer] prize.

AB: It did. That's what's really sad. You should hear Francis O'Connor on that.

BH: Unbelievable. Unbelievable! I mean, the description of the harbor [Note: 3 Mile Harbor, the bay one could see from Jackson Pollock's home]. I don't care. From peeing on a rock to you name what. So, I had to build a stretcher, and the remark I made was, "Geez, look at the size of the stretcher, with all those squares within, eighteen by nine feet. It looks like a whole bunch of paintings." We built a stretcher with half rounds on the top and half rounds on the bottom, so you wouldn't have a crease mark. Then we put the painting on an angle. It couldn't hang straight up. It was slightly tilted. It took an entire wall then. And Paul said, "You know, that's like a window on the world." Within the first month or two of getting it there. . . One night I sat there. It was in the dining room, and the living room and dining room had parallel rooms, parallel sizes with an opening in the middle. I sat there for three or four hours one night, after which I was moved to go to the telephone and call Western Union, which in those days was the way you did something quickly. I sent this telegram about how wonderful it was, etc., and the Western Union operator, when I got all through, asked me, "You know, this is a painting? You like it? How did it happen?" etc., and we got into a conversation. I talked about my hospital up in Connecticut. . . the whole thing about trying to convert from a non-profit to a for-profit. I was speaking

to its PR firm in Hartford and the woman at the switchboard, when I got all through with my conversation, she, too, asked me about the Pollock movie, etc. Everybody asks me about the Pollock movie! Which I dare not go see! I don't read the books, I don't. It's all too discomfoting. I pleaded with Ed [Harris], "Please don't be too influenced by what you hear. This man had more sides than one or two." I haven't seen it. I tried, but I just can't get myself to go there. My brother-in-law said last night, "I wouldn't go if I were you. Any friend would be very upset by seeing what his friend looked like." So, I haven't gone to see it. The reason I even spoke to Ed was because I so respect him as a person and as an actor; such marvelous integrity, and purpose.

AB: He is. It's a good performance, but it's a flat. . .

BH: The script. . .

AB: It's terrible.

BH: I refused any interviews, on all scripts, for that movie. All the various ones that floated around. But when it became clear that Ed was going to do it, and it was Ed's, then I asked to speak with him.

AB: He really was good, but it was a losing cause.

BH: It's hard. It's a movie! What can you expect out of a movie? What was the movie with Kirk Douglas as van Gogh or Charlton Heston as Michelangelo. It's a movie. And I don't see movies as able to reveal, generally speaking, the nuances we're seeking when we want to present a character. Just as when we had the panel at the Modern, during the Pollock show, the retrospective, and there were six of us talking. [Note: *Jackson Pollock*, MoMA Exh.#1819, Oct. 28, 1998-Feb. 2, 1999; panel: *Remembering Pollock: Dialogue of his Friends*, November 17, 1998 with participants Peter Blake, B. H. Friedman, Ben Heller and Jeffrey Potter]. There was the idea that we were going to sit there and talk because we knew Pollock, and that that was going to help people see the painting better. I got so disgusted with the conversation I said, "You know, the splendor is upstairs. This discussion is ridiculous. Go look at

the paintings." What anybody thinks about them, however different. . . it's the Rashomon effect. Everybody sees a different side of everybody. You die, I die, three people stand up at a memorial, three different images. I saw Jackson every day one summer, when he was stuck. He loved jazz, but he didn't know much about classical music. I would bring him a different work every single day, and I'd say, "Schoenberg got stuck for ten years. You're only stuck for a short time." And the energy that was required, the fitness required of his drip and black enamel paintings. You can't make a mistake. Either it is or it isn't. The amount that took out of a person. He earned not a two- or three-year respite, but a lot longer, however stuck he was or might not have been. But he had more sides than could be revealed. Which is the way it is with everybody.

AB: Well, certainly, in movies you only get one or two sides, tops. And if he hadn't had a marriage and a stormy relationship, they wouldn't even have filmed it, either.

BH: Well, I don't know. For whatever reason, Jackson became charismatic in the way van Gogh did, and he stands, in some way, in our cultural scene, for this unread, improperly understood icon of the lonely, renegade, rebellious, crazy artist. Do we think about his being the first one to leave New York and go out on his own, and try to make it elsewhere? We all look, in our lives, for an acre or two that are ours to till. When you're young and an artist you've got to be in New York. Once you've got your two acres, you can go anywhere. Same with writers. Same with everything. At a certain time you feed off of everybody. Then when you know where you are, you can go. But Jackson was the first to go out, stand alone, and he did not quiver from standing up and showing his work. He put it up. Then he stood there, dying, on opening night. You could just see the pain oozing out on all sides. Then he'd go to a restaurant and try to eat and drink it off, and so on.

AB: You were talking about hanging *One*. And you had sent him the telegram, the Western Union telegram.

BH: Yes. Well, that's different than. . .

AB: Now would he come visit the picture there at the apartment, after it was there?

BH: Well, he didn't come to visit the picture. When he came to New York, a couple of times, he would stop. We once went. . . I took Lee and Jackson to the first summer show the Modern put on, the loan show from all the great collections [*Selections from 5 New York Private Collections*, MoMA Exh.#480, June 26-Sept. 9, 1951]. That was the most prophetic show, in an entirely different sense than a lot of people thought, because, if you looked at the quality of the works on the left side, the range of material in the middle, and the names on the right side, it was absolutely clear, for anybody who responded to those kinds of things in the air, that modern art, that art, was going to be the big way that a lot of rich people were going to express themselves. It was just going to become the thing. And it was the harbinger of the way the Council got formed, the International Council. [Note: The Council was initiated in 1953 in order to develop international understanding in the field of the arts, and especially in the field of contemporary art, through the international exchange of exhibitions and the holding of national and international conferences]. It was, in a way, the swing from the three ladies who had begun it out to a certain base, to a base that was going to expand. Until today you have a board that is so completely different from what it used to be -- which has to be, for an institution grows. It was the absolute, clearest indication I could see, or saw. So, when Jackson would come in on Mondays for his session, often I would go with him on Monday nights, and sometimes I wouldn't, but about Tuesday morning, 11:30 or 12:00-ish, the switchboard operator would put him through to me and he was generally at a White Tower, having a cup of coffee, and kind of needed to be attended to for a while. For whatever the reasons, I would drop what I was doing, go out and tend to him. He would have the night-after effects. The last couple of years he subsisted mostly on beer, which, when I spoke to his doctor, the doctor said, "There's a tremendous amount of nourishment in beer. You shouldn't worry." Lee and I had a big discussion about that. Strange. Now, it's not a diet you and I would pick.

AB: No. Well, I guess since he was going to drink alcohol anyway, I guess he would get protein and other things.

BH: And it's cheaper. And he could handle much, much more of it than straight whiskey.

AB: So, you would go and tend to him. But you were able to sustain a friendship with him.

BH: I was his closest friend, according to her. When I came to the funeral. . . I had been with Lee in Paris for a couple of days. We went to Wols' studio together and Fautrier's, a fascinating dating episode. . . All of a sudden he would show a work with a "marvelous flexibility" about dates, and a who-did-what-first type of thing. I left Lee in Paris, and we went with Michel Tapiès. I came back, and during that trip, that was the night that Jackson died. I went back the next day to pick up, to meet Lee at the airport. Patsy [Southgate] took her back out to East Hampton. I came out the next day; I flew out with A.J. Liebling, and I said to her, "Is there anything I can do?" She said, "I want you to be a pallbearer. You were his closest friend, for the last several years of his life." That kind of startled me, in a way, because if you think that I was his closest friend, you realize he didn't have close friends. It was a comment that has obviously stayed with me for the rest of my life. But we did go to the Modern for that show, which was the most gorgeous show [*Selections from 5 New York Private Collections*]. Remember, Nelson's [Rockefeller] painting burnt in Albany? Terrible loss, etc. But all the big names were there, and what a show.

AB: How did Pollock react to that show?

BH: He said far less than Lee, who was particularly responsive to Matisse. We all felt that Matisse, in many ways, had carried more power than Picasso, or, at least, in the realization. Obviously, Jackson had been relating more to Picasso, obviously, we related more to Matisse but he responded to the Matisses. He liked to see the last room, of course, which had his things. But there were so many gorgeous paintings. Even *The Moroccans* was there. Florie Marx [Florene Schoenborn Marx] had so many gorgeous paintings in there. Geez. Go back and look at the archives. When you see what was there, you can see what a startle that would be for somebody who did not see or understand or was beginning, to see about paintings.

AB: I don't know how much you can place this exactly: Jackson Pollock's attitudes, interest, or his own reaction toward the Modern, or anything like that.

BH: Jackson knew, of course, that the Modern had bought a work of his, and that was important. Jackson was not a man of many words; therefore, most people didn't think he could speak. But when he spoke, he was trenchant. He once spoke to Paul about his painting. I'm telling you, he spoke to Paul about his painting, in a few words. He knew where The Museum of Modern Art was, physically, spiritually and all other locations. It is, after all, the greatest institution of its kind in the world. When you're in New York you can bitch and moan, but when you go out of New York you have to revere what it had, what it has, and whatever have you. The fact that it's been there so long and the art world has changed, is reflected in its own, in my view, to some degree, problem, from a certain point in time on, its purpose. Its sense of purpose got vitiated. Its focus got vitiated. As with every institution today. It's very hard to stand up and take a point of view, because you have to kow-tow to who's got the money. The American museum directors look at the European museum directors with envy, because they're independent, they're there, and they basically don't have to kow-tow, and they do what they do. The European museum directors look at the American museum directors with envy because they can raise all this money, the gift laws. . . Each side has something. But the Modern is what it is. It is the principal place, and if you were to ever describe what qualifications a museum director should have, you never would have had Alfred Barr. [Note: Barr was Director, 1929-1943 and Director of Museum Collections, 1947-1967.] But he was the white priest who led the charge, and they followed. That's really, to me, what you have to do in any museum. You get a goodie, and whatever his biases are, for his period. If you can find one that's good enough, you follow his. And if one guy at someplace other than the Modern museum is good on China, let him go to China. If the next one's good on India, let him go to India. If the pickings are good, as they are at the moment, for China, then you run with China. If the pickings are good with India, then you go with India. Whatever. It's an ebb and a flow. Alfred was the pure eye.

The way the show that went to Europe came about was an interesting story. Alfred came up to discuss what we could lend, because by then the museum was sending everybody to my place, because we had more than the museum had. That's what killed me. We got about 5,000-6,000 visitors a year. Most of the European museum directors learned about American painting in our place. I could tell you the season for the South Americans, the season for the Californians, you name it. So, we were

having a discussion, and I said, "Well, where's Barney Newman?" And he said, "Oh, Barney isn't an abstract expressionist. The show is to be about abstract expressionism and Barney Newman isn't an abstract expressionist. He comes out of Malevich." I said, "Well, I don't see it that way. But let's just assume it is, the show is really about leading trump, and Barney Newman is trump. . . one of our chief trumps. When was the last time you looked at Barney Newman's work?" He said, "1951," or whatever, at the show at Betty Parsons'. So, I said, "If I hang a show for you and Dorothy Miller, if I hang Barney's work, will you come down and look at it?" And he said yes. So, I went down there, I worked with Barney and I arranged a hanging for Dorothy and Alfred.

AB: At Newman's studio.

BH: At Newman's studio. That glorious, coffee-smelling building. They came in, and that son of a gun Alfred, he went like a bird dog right up to Abraham, the black painting in the museum, and he said, "Would Barney sell this?" It wasn't trump, right? It wasn't this, it wasn't that. But he walked in, saw this painting, and went right up to the painting. I said, "Well, Alfred, that happens to be my next Newman. I'm not a dealer, but I will ask Barney." And not only did Barney say yes, but that principled son-of-a-bitch gave Betty Parsons a commission, because that painting was shown in his exhibition at Betty Parsons' gallery umpteen years previously. I don't think there's another artist in the world who would have done that. But the thing is that Alfred came in, saw the painting, the name of the exhibition got changed to *The New American Painting* [*The New American Painting as shown in 8 European Countries*, MoMA Exh. ICE, 1958-1959, Exh.#645, May 28-September 8, 1959], and for better or worse, it changed. He walked in, all theories aside, stood in front of one painting, and boom. That's an open eye and mind. Good priest.

AB: Were there any other episodes with Alfred Barr? That is a wonderful story. I wonder if there were any other ways you had worked with him, or any other interactions like that, talking to each other.

BH: Oh, yes. I bought the first [Jasper] Johns that was ever sold; I wrote the first article on Jasper. Okay. Obviously, we had conversations about Jasper when the museum

took its extraordinary position. I had *Grey Alphabets* on reserve, and was choosing between that and the big *White Flag*. But I had so many big paintings, there was no, no, no, no space anymore, so I bought *Grey Alphabets*. And gee, we were down in Houston about a year or so ago, and I saw it again. Oh! Is it gorgeous. Geez. But anyhow. That was a discussion. When Dorothy hung the show that had the black Stellas. . . talk about being clear: when those paintings went up -- boom. That was clear! Absolute boom! That's it! Important painter! Beautiful paintings, etc. But I also spoke at length with René [d'Harnoncourt], because at one particular meeting, I was asked by Eliza [Bliss Parkinson Cobb], I guess, to join the International Council. So, I was active on the Council, and on the program committee.

### **END TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

### **BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2**

AB: You were having a discussion with René d'Harnoncourt.

BH: Yes. I forget how it came about that, in discussing the museum, I said The Museum of Modern Art was a museum of "old modern art," which upset René. He asked for a luncheon and he brought with him all the planned gifts they were going to get to show what they anticipated doing, even if it wasn't visible then. And how difficult it was to get the institution to buy certain works. For example, when the museum bought the different works from us, the big, major works, I go down there and some days it's painful, and some days it's wonderful, to see my living room. I was discussing it with Bill Rubin, when he was in the hospital, and he told me that he could not get the board to go along with *Vir Heroicus*, that it just wouldn't. And I thought that was a shame, because the way I saw it, if the museum is trying to make a statement, that had to be included. This is before Barney became the sacred cow of the inner art world, like Bill de Kooning had been before. So, I decided to give the museum that painting. Barney was very upset with me. He was affronted that I gave it, because that meant that they wouldn't buy it. When he found out, he said he could have sold it for me. There I was, sitting with the sister painting and a check from Bob Rowan to buy the damned thing, and Barney wouldn't sell it to him! So, I knew Barney was, here and there, consulting, because I brought Barney back into the art



world, as it were. The board simply wouldn't go, that was something too far out. It was like Stephen Clark, a board member at the Modern, who had the most superb solution I ever saw for a trustee: he started out being avant-garde at the Modern [and] as it got more modern, he found himself in the rear guard, so he moved up to the Met and became avant-garde again. A beautiful switch. Anyhow, I introduced René to Barney. We all had lunch together. I thought they would hit it off, and absolutely, to the tee, what did they discuss? The Mound Builder culture, which René loved and had no idea. I mean, Barney was a fountain of information. Have you ever read his proclamation, what his plans were when he ran for the mayoralty of the City of New York?

AB: No.

BH: You look at what he wanted to do and it's there. He picketed the Modern to have Monet. It's there. You know today *The Reader's Digest* is a shell but I was talking to somebody the other night about it and do you remember "The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met?" feature?

AB: Yes.

BH: Barney Newman was the most unforgettable character I've ever met. What a guy. Jackson. Mark. They're all different. Everyone was different. Adolph was different in another way. Bill, another way. Franz Kline another way. Clyfford Still. You said to talk about Clyfford Still. What do you talk about, about Clyfford Still? How do you get inside that miasma that's protected from the world by a whole series of ideas that have got nothing to do with life? You sit there with him and his wife and she says, "Mr. Still" I think it was Jackson who arranged a meeting. "We should meet." And we were to meet at the bar of. . .

AB: "We" meaning you and. . .

BH: Clyff. I don't know. One of the hotels. What was the hotel on 44th-ish? Off Madison?

AB: The Roosevelt.

BH: Maybe it was there. But somehow or other he didn't see me, I didn't see him at the bar, so we were x-minutes late, one to another. He lived in such a strange world. I don't know if you've read the catalogue of the show I did for Mary Boone of Clyfford Still.

AB: No, I wasn't aware of that.

BH: And Roberta Smith said it was a very "strange" essay. But I tried to do something different, because modern art writing is, generally speaking, words with more syllables than less, more words than less, more obfuscation. Everybody's got to stake a claim to something or other. It doesn't connect. To me, I'm not interested in writing for people who know about art, to create principles and so forth. It's interesting to talk to somebody. Everybody's got a keyhole; you've got to find the key, and you find some way to get to them about what art might be, for them. I was trying to find a way, different than the normal, to have access to Clyfford's strange mind. Because it is a strange, strange mind, so bizarre that the restrictions on his estate may very well destroy a massive body of work. Physically destroy it, no less. We'll never see whatever it is that is there. [Note: The restrictions placed by Still and his estate on his work have made viewing it difficult. Paintings were donated to the Albright Knox Gallery, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Each institution agreed that the works would not be loaned out or exhibited next to the work of any other artist. His will specifies that an additional two thousand paintings and works on paper will remain in his estate until a museum dedicated solely to showing and preserving them is established in America.] His wife objected to the show that I did at Mary Boone's; [she] wouldn't help, wouldn't lend, but she came. She liked the show, and she wanted several catalogues [laughing]. I suggested to her and her daughter that maybe a way to go -- since no institution in the country could conform to the terms of the will, this was a couple years back, and there are an awful lot of tyros who made an awful lot of money on Wall Street -- if we could take five, or six, or seven pictures, conserve them, restore them to the degree that they needed, frame them and put them up somewhere, maybe one could get somebody to donate this money for that purpose. I'd raise the money to do the whole thing. She wouldn't have to spend a nickel. It's kind of

selfless. I would participate in doing it. Not even a response. You'd call on the telephone. . . This is a world you can barely enter. You talk to Clyff, and there's a strangeness. That's all I can say to you. A wildness, like the paintings. But I wasn't a painter, and I didn't have a chance to get to know him as well as, let's say, a friend of mine, Jon Schueler, who studied with him. Jon had a tremendous fondness for Clyff and a respect for him and the kind of ideas that he generated, as to what it was supposed to be. He had to have the world. I never met anybody who had to have the world so totally on his own terms as Clyff.

AB: And that's why he tried to over-control the future?

BH: Over-control is a limited device of, say, over-controlling the over-control of over-control [laughing]. Just beyond anybody I have ever met. Just totally. I think he created some marvelous paintings, but we'll never know how many. And you know, it's a funny thing. Today, if you want to have a retrospective, and if the guy's work doesn't stand up all the way, we've got to look at it that way. I don't think Jasper's work stands up all the way. Boom. Terrible statement. I think that Matisse failed his own challenge. Terrible statement. The Matisse of the teens presented such radical challenges to what a painting is supposed to be that I think he settled back a little bit from them, from those challenges. But the Master of the Pietà d'Avignon did one painting and that's good enough for a lifetime. So, it depends which way we're looking. Now maybe they think the Master of Flemalle now is Robert Campin. Now we've got a bunch. There's a possibility there may be two or three by the Pietà d'Avignon painter. Okay. That's great for historians. Forgive me, you're an historian. But I have a lot of bones to pick with how they're destroying our access to works of art. Which is the purpose of the whole thing. It's either, "When did it happen?" or "I love it because." Mostly. Those are the two basic subjects. "When did it happen?" is interesting, but it's not infallible. When you're there, and then you see the stories that are written about what happened when you were there standing at the Cedar Bar, and somebody's getting a PhD, not at the bar but down there, and constructs something like the Breslin story, or what have you, they're inaccurate. When a painting is dated. . . You may or may not go back and do it over again, think about it and rework it. A writer. It's been holding in his mind. It took him x-teen years! Or, the Beethoven Opus 18 quartets are incorrectly numbered in terms of when they were

done. Okay. The last quartets are incorrectly numbered, the way they were done. What exactly do we learn as we try to understand sequence, which is fascinating. Did you see the drawing that's coming up at Christie's of the nude? Gorgeous drawing of the painting that then follows it, which you can see is more abstracted, less human. It's just a fascinating evolution. There is a major drawing for a major work, a famous work, and you just see how these things occur. I've got a painter son (my stepson, but he's my son), and from two and a half, he's going to be an artist. That's it. Whatever happens, that's it. He's crazy the same way. It's visible. You can't stop it. The guy won't stay put. He has to keep evolving. And that's the way it is. Some will stay put longer. Some will rework. But it's all wonderful and fascinating. It depends. Do you have one acre, or two? How much room is there in the acreage? Hardly anybody has three, but a couple do, for that last period, and they keep going. Those are the ones that really get to me the most. Like late Beethoven. Late Goya. Late Picasso ain't. To me, Picasso was generated more from the outside than the inside, for a long time.

AB: Well, you could never hold him, stop him. He had to paint. He had to get up. That's what he did every day.

BH: That's what he did. That's what he needed. That's what he had to, and he used what he had to use, for him. That's got nothing to do with whether he's a nice guy or not. Or if Caravaggio's a nice guy or not. And with the murder. . . what was the murder, what brought it about, how violent was he, etc.? It's immaterial to the painting. Yet, some way there's a fascination, and sometimes it can be material. So, that if you know. . . go back to Beethoven. I give a course on Beethoven, so it's my thing. If you know how he was treated by his father and his mother, good heavens! Freudian! You can see, then, how he struggled to treat his nephew. You could understand his feelings about freedom. You could understand all that went on about the symbolism of what Napoleon stood for, and then how great the fall was, when Napoleon was not that ideal image. Of course, who is? None of us can live up to an ideal image. You know? Every child finds a parent having feet of clay; the parent only gets smart when the children have children. Then, all of a sudden, the parent gets very smart. "Gee whiz. He wasn't this, he wasn't that. I can understand that." Because we're all stupid, a little. There's only one thing I know: Next year I'm going to know I was stupid today.

You were just making mistakes right and left, try hard as you may. Next year you're going to know that last year, ah! I wrote a letter the other day, a big hullabaloo and probably ill-chosen, probably shouldn't have done it, etc. I'll look back on that letter a year from today and look at myself, because I'm already looking at myself about it. Anyhoo. That doesn't have too much to do with modern art, does it?

AB: That's all right. It's a conversation. It weaves in and out. Let's go back to some of these personalities at the Modern. Did you have any kind of relationship with Dorothy [Miller]? You described a little bit about her.

BH: Not really. We knew each other, clearly. My role with the Modern at that time, more than anything else, was to have had what I had, to display it the way I displayed it, and to make it accessible. All museums try to get involved with people who have works of art, because they hope to get them. When the Modern traveled my paintings, after the *New American Painting* show came back, there were conversations. [*The Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller*, MoMA Exh C/E 61-29, 1961-62, traveled to the: Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Contemporary Arts Center Cincinnati, OH; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH; California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA; Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA]. But I can't say that I . . . I would see her at the inevitable parties and we'd socialize, because that was a narrower art world, then. It was very small, and it broadened and broadened to this vast complex of today. So, I can't really say to you that I can report revealing conversations. We would have discussions here and there about artists, or positions, etc., but I only was active, really, in helping positions about certain exhibitions, or about certain artists or about making my stuff available to people they wanted. Nolde Rudlinger, Arnold Rudlinger, was the first European, Willi Sandberg of the Stedelijk. These were the fellows who started Europe in their understanding of American painting. I introduced Nolde to Barney's painting. When he fell for them, I paid his way back and forth to Pittsburgh, to the Carnegie because I said, "If you want to buy something, there's a painting out there you should see." He bought it, ultimately. He came back. "What's it cost?" "I don't know." I went to Barney, and Barney said, "What shall I ask?" I said, "I don't know." It got worked out. So, we were kind of around, but I was not in that inner, modern museum circle. I was

neither WASP-y enough nor wealthy enough, but I was, virtually, too dedicated enough. My circle was the artists and their friends.

AB: So, did you feel that there was anti-Semitism directed toward you at the Modern?

BH: No. I just feel that there was. . . I would say that there was a reserve. Now Eliza Parkinson. . . I don't know if you've ever seen photographs of our living room.

AB: Yes.

BH: We would have a dinner party, and down at the end, in front of *One*, would be a string quartet. After dinner we'd listen to the string quartet, and Eliza would say, "Oh, I loved that." And when we were willing to sell the painting to the Modern, she said, "You shouldn't do it. You shouldn't break this up. It's just too magical." That was kind of nice, you know? So, I knew some of the people. When I went to Chicago I stayed at Muriel Newman's. I could get up in the morning and look at *Attic* and the Pollock, on opposite walls. I knew Mark. I knew Barney. I knew Jackson. I knew Betty Parsons, de minimus. Sidney Janis, de minimus. When I went abroad Sidney would never share, and the painters wanted European shows. So, when I went abroad, I contacted all the museum directors whom I knew, from coming to my place: Bryan Robertson, Willi Sandberg, all of them, and I promised a Rothko show. I said, "I will bring the show to the shipping line, but Willi, you've got to get it on the Holland-American line, and you've got to do it from there." Six museums. And they said, "Okay, but you've got to do more." So, I came back and I went to Porter. I had lunch with Porter McCray, who was the one who helped me get *Blue Poles*. [Note: McCray was Director, Circulating Exhibitions 1947–1950 and Director, Circulating Exhibitions and International Program 1952-1961.] And I said, "Porter, I've got to have help. I've made this commitment. It's a gigantic commitment, and I need assistance on how you pull this stuff together." So, he said, "But that's a show the Modern ought to be doing." And I said, "Of course, it's a show the Modern ought to be doing, but you're not doing it!" So, that's how all those shows happened.

AB: Now this didn't become the '61 Rothko retrospective, then. [*Mark Rothko*, Exh.#679, January 18-March 12, 1961].

BH: No. It was earlier.

AB: Okay.

BH: They were traveling shows. All that stuff. The Pollock shows.

AB: It seems that you were miles ahead of the Modern in terms of what was going on, for quite a few years.

BH: Well, I don't know if that's fair. It's an institution. Now, Alfred's [Barr] first commitment was to the earlier part of the 20th-century. Clear. Alfred had a vision of a linear, consecutive development of history. Clear. And the way to explain this came from that, came from that, came from that. But when you're in history, it doesn't develop according to that pattern. It kind of erupts on the art scene. When you're a creative person, when you get in a frenzy and you're doing a thing, you are hardly in charge of what's going on. It's only later that you see, when it lets go. Christ! When you're playing golf, or you're in the zone, it's going to last for five or six holes, and when it lets go, all of a sudden you say, "Jesus Christ! How long have I been doing this?" All of a sudden, once you ask that question, you're finished. When it lets go, you can stop and look back. Then we try to reorder something, because if we can prove it happened this way it makes sense. If we can't prove what happened, then we can't say it happened. It's idiotic that we have to do this, but that's what we have to do. Now the Modern bought the first Pollock. The Modern bought the first big drip painting. The Modern bought the first Johns. Second Johns. The Modern did a lot. Didn't see Rothko. Didn't see Newman. God bless. They bought the first *Woman* [de Kooning]. It ain't perfection, and it's a function of the fact that (a) everybody doesn't see everything, and (b) there are trustees and boards. So, it couldn't buy *Vir Heroicus*, and now it features it when it goes to show the three shows of what it's got. But I go down there and I look, and at end is *One* and at the other end is *Vir Heroicus*. That's kind of shocking for me, when I sit there. It's an institution. It cannot act as freely as an individual. So, I don't think we have to hold institutions to the same yardstick that we do individuals. But, again, should we hold anybody to yardsticks? We should simply observe what they did, and god bless when they help

us with what they did. Alfred Barr was phenomenal, and Dorothy was very helpful. And that was a group of board people who were smart enough to give the bird dog the money and let him run, and let him lead them. And when it's all over, what a good run! Things don't always happen. Everybody today wants to be on the newest thing. But if you were there in 1930, there was already Picasso. There was already Matisse. There was already Mirò. But if you're looking for the newest thing? What was the newest thing in 1930 to 1935? You didn't necessarily have a newest thing that stands up. Today you can't shock anybody, you can't do anything to anybody, everything's got to be. . . It's a world that's so omnivorous it's hard not to devour itself. The feeding frenzy is the same thing that happened in the dot-com world in the stock market. Do you get the *New Yorker*? Have you seen this week's issue?

AB: I haven't opened it yet. It just came.

BH: I just opened it this morning, before you came. There are a series of cartoons on the financial world. They are so funny. When you chuckle, think of me. They even have a section going back to 1927 to 1930 something; financial cartoons in history.

AB: What a great idea.

BH: A marvelous idea. Just a laugh.

AB: Did we discuss the sale of. . .

BH: Can you stop that at all, for a second?

AB: Sure. [Tape Interruption] When we turned off the tape, I had asked you if we should discuss the sale of *One* to the Museum, and, if there was some interesting dimension to that.

BH: I was sitting in the kitchen with my children. The front doorbell rang, and there was a confirmation -- by telegram, still telegram, no e-mail or fax -- from Walter Bareiss, confirming what he had verbally said, that the Museum had agreed to buy it. I showed the telegram to my children, and they started to cry. We went out into the



living room, we sat in front of it, and I talked a bit about how it was when we bought it, and what a commitment that was for me. Generally speaking, the works that I bought each artist felt was his -- oomph, oomph --special. Therefore, whatever burden went along. . . When I first saw that painting in the studio I asked Lee, "Do you think Jackson would sell it?" and she said, "I don't know. I wouldn't. But ask him and see what he'll do." It was \$8,000: four years to pay, \$2,000 a year. And because I agreed to buy it and take such a risk in commitment, Jackson gave me the black enamel painting that is now hanging in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City. I talked to you about Porter McCray of the Modern helping me to buy *Blue Poles*?

AB: You mentioned it.

BH: It's going backwards at all these things. The mind wanders, right?

AB: I can ask you about Porter McCray after we do this.

BH: All right. I'm ahead of my time, generally speaking. So that in investment or business life, there are certain things I've seen. For me the art world was written across the brow clear. Real estate is written across the brow, what's going to happen is just totally visible. Ask me about stocks? I don't know anything. In stocks there's a buyer and a seller, so there are two opinions crossing. I don't know why mine shouldn't be the wrong one. I don't understand it. But that which I feel I understand I have considerable confidence in, and I'm willing to take a risk position based upon that. So, when I'm ahead of my time, I saw what was happening to the art world. I introduced the Sculls to the art world, and I was having this traffic. Art was becoming big, and collectors were becoming big, and all that stuff was becoming bigger than the work of art. Now if I was feeling it then, it was nothing compared to today, right? But I felt it then, and there was this burden of this collection that I had. People now talk about their "collections," you know? We didn't have "collections" at that time, and I felt very identified with the Modern. Because we cut our eye-teeth there. The Modern has done what it's done, and it's remarkable. There's no need to discuss it; it's just what it is, and it [One] belonged there. It was appropriate to break up what we had because it was getting to be such a burden, and I'm a person who likes to continue to move forward. I've never had enough money to buy. The only way I could

buy is when, from the center of the woods of total debt, I began to walk a little bit out from the center and I could see, way out there was a little bit of light. I'm not out yet but -- boom. Back into the center. It was craziness. I look today, I'm seventy-five years old, I'm retired, I live on capital. I look at the cost of a work of art. I looked at a drawing of Jasper Johns that I once owned. . . I owned eight Johns's. It was coming on the market, and the person who was getting it asked me how good it was, and we had a discussion about how to frame it. It was this big. A million dollars. When you're living on income, it's very different than when you're making money and growing and all this stuff. The money is so big, and all I want to do with what I have today is for family or to give away. I'm not interested in this other thing anymore. I cannot afford to live in the art world today. It's just immense, it's so changed. Well, back then that seemed to be the same thing to me. You can see it, in extremis, today. It doesn't look to you that back then it was extremis -- Christ! \$8,000 for a painting doesn't sound like anything, or \$1,350 for a painting, or \$100 for a drawing, or whatever, but it was! Always a top price at the time. Always a record price! I bought only one work of art "cheap" in my life, in my judgment: an Easter Island paddle, for \$250. Everything else was expensive.

AB: If you're talking about fifty or more years ago, those people were only making \$5,000-\$10,000 a year, so \$1,000 was a lot.

BH: I had \$27,000 in the bank that I accumulated. My wife got ill, and I was wiped. And I was buying from a debit position. [Tape interruption] I mean, \$8,000 for a painting was a lot then. I think that what I agreed to do, for example. . . I wanted \$400,000 and Bill [Rubin] wanted to pay \$350,000. I said, "I'll give you the other \$50,000, but it's a gift." [Tape interruption] And then finagler that he is, he called me up one day and he said, "Can we do such and such and so and so?" Because he was making the Sidney Janis thing. I never even got the god-damned tax deduction on my \$50,000, with the whole Janis whirligig. But it belongs at the Modern. Did you see the [Pollock] retrospective, incidentally?

AB: Of course.

BH: Did you notice a difference between how *One* looked in the retrospective and where it normally is?

AB: Well. All the Met's paintings, the Whitney's. . . everything looked better in that retrospective.

BH: The ceiling height was two feet higher. I worked on it with Edison Price, and the lighting fixtures are basically what the Modern subsequently bought. I have a theory about how far lights should be from the wall. Most museum lights are too far out, and they flood the painting. So, those paintings looked good because it was higher, coming down. (You'll quote my favorite thing.) But it belongs at the Modern. If it's historically what it is, and if *Echo's* is its equal, which I think it is, but it's only a black enamel painting. I spent two hours, long letter, with the Mnuchins one day, trying to explain why buying a black enamel painting, why the black enamel paintings are as important and equal, blah, blah, blah, but they're not drip, so they don't carry it right. Yet today, those are master works. And the [Arshile] Gorky. I mean -- Ah! What a thing. Those things belong at the Modern. In the evolution of events, that seemed to be the right thing for the parties concerned at the time. But it broke my kids' hearts. When I sold *Curfew*, the Rauschenberg, my wife pleaded with me -- my present wife, I lost my first wife -- my present wife pleaded with me, "Don't sell that." But I move forward. I wasn't Nelson Rockefeller. I am not Nelson Rockefeller. The price of getting something new and learning, which is what it's about for me, was that I had to let go of something old. People thought the *Blue Poles* purchase was idiotic. Strange. I'll go back to that. I'm having lunch with Porter, discussing the Pollock show that was going to go to Europe, because of all these discussions we'd been having, and he mentioned that the loan form came in from Fred Olson. And it's interesting. He said, "Where it says 'For Sale,' yes. And the price, \$32,000. Isn't that remarkable?" And I said, "Yes." Well, we keep on talking, we're talking, and at the end of lunch I said, "Porter, would you do me a favor? If that's what the thing said, would you call up Fred? I don't want to call up Fred. It's not proper. I would know something you're not supposed to tell me. Would you call him up for me, and ask him would he sell it at that price and give me two years to pay?" Lo and behold, yes. How did I pay for it? At a show at Sidney Janis, there was a four-foot by eight-foot drip Pollock that is now in the Pulitzer's collection. Nobody bought it. At the end of the

show, I said to Leo -- Leo was a minister without portfolio in the art world, before he became a dealer and before each artist -- I said, "Leo, this is ridiculous. This is a \$2,500 painting and nobody's buying it. Suppose you and I buy it at fifty-fifty. I can't really afford to buy it all. We'll split it. You look at it half the year, and I'll look at it half the year." We bought it fifty-fifty. When it came time to buy *Blue Poles*, the combination of selling the drip panel to Jacques Ullman, in Paris, and Leo and Ileana taking the black enamel painting that was given to me by Jackson when I bought *One*, plus some money, made the purchase price of *Blue Poles*.

AB: [Tape Interruption] You were talking about how you were able to get it together for. . .

BH: Well, the combination of all these things paid and all of a sudden there I was, with *Blue Poles*. Now, when *Blue Poles* was sold, everybody was shocked at the price but nobody knew that, during the course of that previous year, it was as if I'd walked down Madison Avenue and said, "This painting is. . ." Six or seven people approached me, either in groups or as individuals, all for \$1 million and more. So, it wasn't so shocking. But what a shock it was then, because that made the whole evaluation of that period. It changed the price of everything back. Just like, subsequently, the Johns sale, a further readjustment there. But that was the first American, post-war contemporary thing that did the readjustments. Well, I used to sit there in the living room, in my apartment, with Lee and Clem, and Clem said, "Well, *Blue Poles* is nothing. Not a good painting. *One* is a great painting." And Lee said, "What are you talking about? *Blue Poles* is a masterpiece." What is this horseshit that doesn't allow room in your heart for two? That one's got to be better than another, if one's different than another? It's hard to conceive attitudes. But it is the way it's gone, and it is the way it goes.

AB: What did Lee think of your selling *One* to the Modern?

BH: Well, of course, you know, after Jackson died, Lee offered *Autumn Rhythm* to the Modern and Alfred didn't buy it. It was too expensive. So, Lee felt a certain, you might say, minimal revenge -- Ha, ha! I obviously preferred it to the other, because I had a choice of the two of them. I had a terrible choice on *Echo*, between *Echo* and what I call "The Grasshopper Image," that's in the Tate. But between *Autumn*

*Rhythm* and *One*, I clearly picked *One*, which was named by Lee and Jackson and myself one night at dinner, at Tip Toe Inn. Clem wanted to call it "Lowering Weather," and I said, "Gee, I didn't feel 'Lowering Weather.' I mean, it's kind of beautiful and harmonious." And Jackson said, "Well, when I painted it, it was one of the most harmonious feelings that I've had during my life. It reminded me of back when I was riding the rails and I would see nature around me." And I said, "Yeah, yeah. It's like when you sit out in the springs, and you see the thickets of the trees," etc. So, that conversation developed into *One*, not numeric but harmonic. Maybe we should have called it "Onement," but then Barney would have been deprived of the title, "Onement." So, that's how the title came; at a dinner at Tip Toe Inn, and wanting to put a name on something, which had been a characteristic of Jackson's for quite a while, and was finally dropped when he got into the drip world. But Gothic was supposed to be my next Pollock. Imagine all these things, you know? You look back at these things -- milestones of history, of our little history time.

AB: What happened?

BH: Well, Jackson did this terrible thing. He died. His prices went up. Goodness. I made plates, reproductions of several things, including Gothic. I called Norton, who was a friend of mine, whom I was helping with collecting. . .

AB: Norton Simon?

BH: Yes. Which is why Helen Frankenthaler said, "Here is a guy starting out. Would you help him?" That's how the Weismans got involved; because he called me. "They're starting, Heller. Would you help them?" So, I tried to get him to buy Gothic, but then the Modern said it wanted to buy Gothic, so that was that. It belongs at the Modern. I mean, the Modern, if you look at what it's got, it's pretty god-damned good. It could be a little better in a couple places, clearly. Everything always could. But this was kind of our moment in history; therefore, finagler or not, Bill Rubin, then, managed to achieve for the museum in certain. . .

**END TAPE 1, SIDE 2**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH:** BEN HELLER (BH)  
**INTERVIEWER:** AVIS BERMAN (AB)  
**LOCATION:** NEW YORK CITY  
**DATE:** MAY 9, 2001

**BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1**

AB: Mr. Heller, before we begin anew, I listened to the tape from the first session, and there are a couple of housekeeping questions I want to ask you, if you don't mind, just to straighten things out. With regard to the purchase of *One*, you referred to Bill Rubin, "doing the Sidney Janis thing, the Sidney Janis whirligig." You didn't elaborate on that, and I think for the tape we should explain that.

BH: Yes, and probably for the Museum, too. I do not remember when, but at a given point in time Bill called me and asked me would I object to the designation of *One* as a gift from Sidney, as part of his convoluted fund raising efforts, Bill's efforts so often being convoluted. I said, "Well, I didn't want it to damage my \$50,000 contribution, but if that was going to make it easier for the Museum, fine. I must say, psychologically, I've never quite liked it, because it sounds different than what the truth is. It ends up, I lost my gift value, however, Bill worked out the dollars amongst what Sidney did give in contribution. I really don't know "inside," but that was what I was referring to. If that cleans up the house.

AB: A little bit. Because I thought you sold it, not Sidney Janis. It is confusing.

BH: It had nothing to do with Sidney. In fact, the purchase had nothing to do with Sidney. Nothing had anything to do with Sidney, other than the fact that he found out about it when the summer was over, and other than the fact that when I was buying *Echo*, he said if I would prepay, earlier on *One*, he would give me a better price on *Echo*. He didn't do any of it anyway. It was all Jackson and myself.

AB: Okay. Then you mentioned Arnold Rudlinger. I was not sure who that was. Is he a museum director?

BH: Nolde Rudlinger was the director of the Kunsthalle in Basel. He was the first European museum person to take an aggressive stance about contemporary New York abstract expressionist paintings. Willi Sandberg and he were the two pioneers. Willi Sandberg, of the Stedelijk in Amsterdam. Nolde, before he came over, had been familiar with Joan Mitchell and Sam Francis, I believe I mentioned. And when he came over he wanted to learn more about what was going on in America, or New York, which was virtually the same thing at the time, excepting, of course, [Mark] Tobey and [Michael] Graves, and Still, when he was in California. But then he moved back to New York, and back to California. Or, Baltimore, rather. But in any event, Nolde was an outgoing, gregarious person who was open in his eyes. Arnold was his official name, and Nolde is his nickname. And you have both the Kunstmuseum and the Kunsthalle. They're two different institutions.

AB: Then you also said, referring to Barnett Newman, "I brought Barney back into the art world." What did you mean by that?

BH: Well, this was the statement of both Barney and Annalee. When I met Barney, I think I mentioned at a party after a Jackson opening, Barney was essentially minimally known, if at all; not exhibiting, and known just to a few friends, or people who had seen him previously. When Bob and Abby Friedman and Judy and myself were invited down to the studio, with Jackson and Lee, this was like a first re-opening of the studio to outside viewers. Then, by the various things I did: a combination of (a) buying, (b) introducing, say, Rudlinger and the Tate Gallery -- various people, (c) helping Rudlinger buy the first Newman that went to Europe, (d) really insisting with Alfred that Barney be in the New American Painting show [*The New American Painting as shown in 8 European Countries*], which changed its name, I think I mentioned that, Barney became a better-known figure. Slowly he ascended to the rank of "sacred cow", I guess you would call him, taking over de Kooning's position for a subsequent generation.

AB: And you also called him "the most unforgettable character you ever met?"

BH: He surely was, yes. Barney had wide- ranging interests, was well read, was not so solely deep into himself to be narrow. He had a wide perspective. I think I mentioned he picketed the Modern about buying a Monet. He said, "Monet should be in the Modern." He ran for mayor, with a platform where virtually everything he ran on became adopted within the city. He was interested and involved in tribal art. I think I mentioned the meeting with him and René, and that they discussed Mound Builder culture. Barney had a warmth, a range of interests, a way of expressing himself. He wasn't just preoccupied, personally, with his own circumstances. He and Annalee were just, of all I could see of those I met, the people who were most 'people.' I think person after person after person who met Barney was attracted to him in a similar way, and each person developed. . . There are people with whom you find that there are a mass of individuals, all of whom think they have this special relationship with that particular person, and that particular person is able to enjoy a dozen, two-dozen special relationships, rather than one or two. Barney was such a person. He was just fascinating, warm, and we loved one another. I don't know how else to describe it.

AB: I think for the Museum and the tape, if you could elaborate on [the following]. You had said after meeting Paul Brach and Miriam Schapiro, through them you met Pollock, and, "amazing things happened thereafter."

BH: Well, I think I mentioned. . . I had a multitude, as it were, of first experiences. You might say, Level III, Level II, Level I, rising, so I don't know that it's particularly significant. My first one, with Gottlieb, Motherwell and all that kind of business that happened initially, which was kind of my own private pursuit and did not have too much to do with the Modern in any way. Then, secondly, my experience with Rothko and buying that first painting, which made me feel secure in my eye. That was a time I felt I could go forward. And very directly after that, after having seen a Pollock, for whatever reason, a 1948 drip painting, small. . . that I brought home to show to my wife. "Now this is obviously something we can get together on". But we didn't. Just like the [Alberto] Giacometti *Pointing Man*. Obviously this is something we're both going to like together, and we didn't. When it's a couple, you have a more difficult task than when it's a single person. You have to put something into a joint home. But



when I went to Jackson's, the combination of his paintings and his personality. . . [Tape interruption] In any event, the intensity of commitment of having a painting such as *One*, just physically so large and so dominating, the price, everything about it was such. . . I mean, I met Mark, and I developed a very close relationship with Mark. I met Jackson and had a very close relationship with Jackson, and deeper. The whole level of intensity just broadened as well as deepened, in every which way, and I was in over my head, as it were. It was funny. We had a small family business that I joined in 1948. Very small, and it grew and grew. If I had taken luncheons off to go to the Federation, the United Jewish Appeal, the United Way, whatever have you, for charity, my parents wouldn't have been distressed. But if I took lunches off to go to museums, to meet people, that was a little bizarre. If I went financially askew, that is, buying out into the future, buying into debt, and all this other stuff, it made my family wonder, where was my balance? Where was my sense of proportion? Was I trustworthy? I was following something which, while I was aware and had all kinds of reasonable judgments at the time about quality and value -- you name whatever it is -- it was something that had hold of me and took me places that I had to follow which was to my coinciding interest in other cultures, because I'm a person who, when he gets into something, studies it. And then this studying, let's say, of another culture would bring up a religion, or the relationship of religion to the geographical topography of the land or the climate; or one people then traveling to another people; or the comparison of maturation rights, reaching puberty, for male or female, all those things that I studied and felt communication through, the object was totally different from an experience with the people who were doing the thing as you were watching, and whom you knew as it was happening. And because of the depth of my commitment, I was then welcomed into the inner circle, as it were, and treated close to being -- always not, but close to, being -- a painter. But the depth of the commitment was such that it brought a respect that I wasn't just, gee, I wasn't somebody who was "a rich man," because I wasn't, coming along. It was somebody who was in it the same way as they were. And I always fastened on whatever. . . It was always the best painting of a thing that they wanted not to sell, or whatever have you so it was just tremendously involving, not just in the time of doing but an emotional time. . . when you're driving, when you're going to sleep, when you're in the bathtub, or whatever have you. I can't describe sufficiently the consuming nature

of it, and the comprehensions it gave into the creative process, which has stood me in such good stead all my life. So, it was, surely, changing to my life.

AB: By the way, it was fascinating when you were describing your family's reaction to this. We always hear about the artist's point on this, but I think it's very interesting to hear the collector's point of view on the kind of familial pressures that can be on somebody.

BH: Well, that particular Rothko that I loved so much, the first one, my parents called "the diarrhea painting." Alternatively, many years later, I took my mother to a Rothko exhibition or something. Whatever it was, it had several Rothkos in it, and I remember her saying to me, "Well, these are not as good as yours." When I had *Vir Heroicus*, this giant, red painting, my father looked at it and said, "My God, it's like one dye lot." To achieve a consistency of color over so broad a scale is the same thing as dying a certain number of bolts of cloth, to get a consistency of color, odd comments that wouldn't be pertinent to anybody else. But to my family, they were very pertinent, and things that I remembered. And to have had my mother recognize that, while she didn't know what it was and didn't like it, "This is better than that," is a means of knowing that it was absorbed into her through some mechanism, through some means that she didn't know. It crept up inside, through a membrane that was invisible. She, then, quote, learned something, unquote, when she wasn't looking. I used to have a friend with whom I played chess, and we would sit in the dining room in our apartment. He would generally have one seat. I would generally have the other. And his seat was looking at a [Franz] Kline, *Ninth Street*, and he didn't like that sort of stuff. But after a time, he said, "You know, that's really quite an interesting painting," and he found himself, sometimes, in between moves, looking at the painting and not thinking about the next move. So, these are all kinds of osmoses, diffusions through a semi-permeable membrane, things that happen to people when they're not looking, rather than consciously going out and looking. There's a collector I know who had the lack of wisdom to tell a painter he was not interested in this particular painter's work, because "he only collects the last twenty minutes." So, of course, the painter indignantly responded, "Well, I only paint for a thousand years." There are several different ways you come from it. If you come from it in today's world, when collecting and having paintings is so much a cultural marker, where

things are either known to be of value or, my God, look what happened to this, to this, to this, you're going to buy something that may come to be of value. Or you're all in a circle of spotting things, which can be a great thing to do, when you were doing this, when it wasn't a great thing to do, when it wasn't involved with money, when it was just your own kind of private aberration, it gets reasonably close, obviously not close the way of a painter but closer, to that level of experience, because all that other 'stuff' that came later -- which 'stuff' is what caused me to sell all the works, and which has so polluted the way you see things and do things. It was just very, very different. Imagine stapling a painting to the ceiling that was floor to ceiling and wall-to-wall. It's kind of bizarre. I look back on it today, and I was caught up. . . I wrote Jackson a letter, the last thing I wrote him. I was in Europe. I don't know if I mentioned this last time. I was trying to conceive of a manufacturing process that was continuous, that combined various pieces of equipment into a continuous flow, which has now become quite a natural and acceptable thing. I was all caught up in these contemplations that this could go to this, and this could go to that, and how you could do it, and either one force or another would be continuous on this. I was caught up in what was a creative burst, a frenzy. And it wasn't until it let go of me that I could step back and see what it was that I was really trying to do. I was writing this to him, about how it happened to him, and how I understood it from what I was doing, etc., and he, obviously, had to have this ability. Just imagine the ability to do what he did, the concentration, the focus, and the forces all at work at one thing, for as long as it took him, until it let go. Sometimes you can step back and see it a while, then you come back and try it all over again. If I write something. . . I did that Rothko essay, that little thing, on a weekend, because Ernst Beyeler needed it in a hurry. Now I look at it, and I think, "My, if I'd had the chance to edit it, I could have made it better." You have that chance, when it lets go, to step back, look at it, see if it makes sense, if it's written well, but when you're caught up, it's almost as if you have no choice. Something is going on. It's the trained intuition that you have, and it all tumbles out, all the things you've picked up, and when it lets go, aaah!

AB: Also, last time, you said to remind you that you wanted to tell the story about Pollock, Newman, also having to do with Tony Smith?

BH: Oh, the big painting. Yes. At a given point in time Pollock, Rothko, Newman and Still had all expanded into what was in those days the big picture, a giant size. Today it is no longer, of course, but then, fifteen to eighteen feet was unheard of, larger than anybody could hang, completely beyond reality. It was then totally misunderstood by the creators of viewing circumstance because, to them, theoretically, the thing is when it's big, you've got to be able to step back, like with a Veronese or a Tintoretto. With the real painters it was the opposite. You don't want to step back. You want to have that immensity of scale to relate to on a human level. So, they had the idea of creating an exhibition of big paintings, four of them, and Tony Smith was going to design it, because he was, at that time, only an architect, as it were. Not even an architect, a designer, and a friend, a colleague, and a participant. The idea fell to earth, I know not where, as it were, and then was rediscussed by us. It must have been the late '50s-early '60s, and I remember Jackson, Barney and I were in Barney's studio in New York. Jackson picked up the phone and called Mark, and then Clyff. By then each of them was a little bit older, a little bit staked out more to their own world. There is that time in your life when you need your colleagues, like Braque and Picasso, who needed to do it together, to feed off one another, at a certain point in time, competitive as they were, they will never forget what they had, they will never give up what they had, but when they separated, there was an entirely different thing. There is a competitiveness. Their lives have gone differently. So, when the phone calls were made, Rothko and Still were not quite so ready to join in. Rothko more than Clyff, but Barney and Jackson were. It broke up. It's like when you're young you've got to write with your colleagues or paint with your colleagues. When you've found your acre or two and you go somewhere else, you can do it anywhere. So, it changed, and we tried to do that, to figure a way to create that environment again. Because it's tricky. You look at *Vir Heroicus* at the Modern, or *One*, it's so critical, the relationship of the person, the height of the painting, the way the lighting is, etc. And yet it's kind of fascinating, where it's been for a while. Who knows where it'll be in the future? You sit in one place and you look down a long hall and see *Vir Heroicus* at one end, and *One* at the other, but yet, you sit, basically, in the room near them and feel their immensity in a smaller-sized room. You don't want a big room, you don't want large space. You want that sense of relationship that's immense to the person. The person is in it. Whereas, with Veronese and Tintoretto,

it's painted for a ceiling, or painted for a large place, for very big rooms, and it's a whole different ballgame.

AB: Well, now we're going to go on to questions having to do with the Modern that we did not get to the first time. Did you have a relationship with Frank O'Hara, particularly in regard to the Pollock show?

BH: No.

AB: Did he talk to you?

BH: I knew Frank, but I don't even think we talked about the show. No.

AB: Did you discuss it with Lee?

BH: Lee, I talked to. Yes.

AB: Do you remember her reactions?

BH: [Pause] My eldest daughter was in from Colorado this weekend. We went out together with one of our sons, and they were remembering a whole series of things, one after another and I didn't remember a single one of them! I'm sitting there in this conversation, looking and wondering. I'm not old enough yet to have so forgotten the recent and able to remember the way, way back. I'm waiting to remember the way, way back. I wish I could get the way, way back and still keep the present. I don't know how it's going to happen. But I have lost more than I think I've lost. When I had this conversation, I don't remember anything other than which should be in which type of thing, or that stupid *Blue Poles* versus *One* argument with Clem type of thing, or was Jackson finished after *Blue Poles*. Should the show include anything more after *Blue Poles*? What about the early work? What about way earlier? Because, I mean, the stuff that you see in *Echo* and the black enamel paintings is all in the drawings of the late '30s. All the figuration is there. If you look at the figures that are underneath the early '40s, it's all there. It keeps coming, With everybody, that stuff always keeps coming back and coming out.

AB: Well, let's talk about the traveling show that MoMA did of your own collection. [*The Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller.*]

BH: Right.

AB: How did that come about and were you satisfied with it?

BH: It came about because all the material having gone abroad, it seemed kind of crazy to send so much wonderful stuff to Europe, yet not have it in the United States. And to get a top, you'll excuse me for saying it, but to get such a first class exhibition together is very hard, generally speaking. To get people who were willing to travel large works was very hard. I mean, this was all the beginning of learning how to handle big paintings. To give you the silliest story, *Blue Poles* was shipped from the Art Institute of Chicago to Baltimore. In Baltimore it was put in the basement for four days, before they would bring it up to hang it. That was the way the schedule worked. I got a call, I think late one afternoon or night, I don't remember quite when. I think it was a late night call: *Blue Poles* is bellied out a foot from the wall, in the middle! You can just imagine how anybody would feel, getting a call like that. What had happened was that the museum had backed it with a series of pieces of cardboard. The series of pieces of cardboard didn't even go in the same direction and when it came up from a damp basement to a hot -- because of the heat of the lights -- room, the cardboard contracted from the heat, and as it contracted, it pushed the painting out from the wall. I mean, horror! Right? This hadn't occurred to anybody until this happened, because things like that don't occur. When those two works, when *One* and *Blue Poles* traveled in Europe they went in separate railroad cars, fully stretched. They couldn't take them off the stretcher. But when *One* went out of our apartment, and *Blue Poles* went out, *One* could be put on a roll, but *Blue Poles* you didn't dare put on a roll. The roll, for one, had to be a giant diameter roll. You didn't want to do it because you were afraid of the paint cracking, and sure enough, some of it cracked. I remember Liz Shaw coming. . . . When the Modern returned the paintings, and *One* and *Blue Poles* had to come home, our apartment was on the tenth floor and it had a ledge out in front. In order to get the material out in the first place. . . . There was an iron railing. We had sawed the railing off and created a thing

where you could flip the railing around, like on a door, an artificial window, that you could then take the artificial window out. . . [Tape interruption]. Where was I?

AB: About what had to be done to get the paintings out.

BH: Oh, yes. So, the Modern wanted to show, when they were returning, the good care it was taking of works of art, because this was early in the big thing of lending stuff, and all of a sudden it was lending bigger material, not just conventional-sized French painting. So, they had a whole PR thing arranged. There was a big truck, and there was a hoist up on top of the building. It was a twelve-story building with a roof above. So, they went up to the roof, the whole artificial window had to come out, then the whole gate had to swing open, and the paintings had to be hoisted up. And, of course, Liz, being responsible for PR, was making sure the press was there, and this, that and the other thing. She wanted to lean out at one point and see how it was coming, but she was so frightened of heights that I had to hold her by the waist so she would lean out. [Note: Elizabeth Shaw was Director of Public Information at that time]. Some way, in the latter afternoon, I had to go downtown for a museum meeting, I think it was the Whitney, not the Modern, and I came back late in the afternoon and I saw the trucks were still there, but I didn't see anybody doing anything. I came up in the elevator to the apartment, came inside, and there was nobody. I turned around, went into the hallway, into the kitchen. I get into the kitchen and it was a little bit after 6:00, and there are all the workmen -- because they were on TV! So, they were watching TV of the material coming back into the apartment. Well, it was so exciting. But one didn't start out wearing white gloves. One didn't start out doing all the things that became, "the way to do it." So, it was just a whole big deal. We started with how the show occurred. The idea was, my God, why shouldn't the United States get what Europe got: a chance to see a lot of major paintings? So, when the stuff came back from Europe, we added from home, and we traveled it to five or six museums in the United States.

AB: Something you would never do now-a-days.

BH: Oh, my God.

AB: Three at most?

BH: Well, I don't remember what we had at home anymore, after that. We did have other paintings. We had gotten to a point of more than we could hang. Just think of the eighteen-foot Pollock, the sixteen-foot Pollock, the eighteen-foot Newman, the nine-foot Gorky, the nine-foot Kline. And these are all numbers in width, skip the height. One of the large Rothkos. I didn't at that time have the *Dark Wine*, which was about fifteen feet in width. There was a tremendous amount of just physical duress, traveling around from place to place.

AB: You were willing to be a guinea pig. But you didn't know you were being a guinea pig.

BH: I wasn't really thinking about being a guinea pig. I was thinking about getting the message across, as it were. It's the same thing, how all these shows began. I was going to go to Europe for one of my trips, to look at equipment, and I was with Mark, and Sidney didn't want to give anybody anything, or be in any way cooperative. He wouldn't do anything, but Mark wanted his paintings shown in Europe. I think I mentioned this before, didn't I?

AB: Yes.

BH: Now that whole commitment to get that show started, and my willingness to bring everything to the boat, and then turn it over to the museum, it was part of kind of a pioneer spirit, of showing what this material was, because it was so beautiful, because it was so gorgeous, and it was our lives. I don't mean my wife and myself or our friends, but our world life at that time, so it should be seen. By now, of course, the number of shows everybody is being asked to send works out to, and the amount of travel and the amount of damage that can occur, and the number of museums now doing shows, it's a whole different ballgame. I mean, how many museums were there that were doing big shows? How many museums were doing anything, comparatively speaking? So, today it's a different ballgame, the era of the blockbuster show. That's how you raise money. That's how you get attendance, which is how you raise more money. But now you've raised more money and more



attendance, so you've got to do another blockbuster show. It's a self-perpetuating, self-feeding beast, and God forbid you look at what's inside the museum.

AB: Were you disappointed that the show was not seen in New York?

BH: Well, yes and no. But so many things had been seen in the *New American Painting* show, and the Pollock show, and the Rothko show, it was understandable. It didn't make that much sense to do it in New York. Yet ego, yes. Yes, whatever that was, yes. But the artists, quote, didn't really need it that much, because they were getting it in New York. But the rest of the country wasn't getting it. So, that seemed to me the sensible thing to do, and what's best for the work and for the people.

AB: Now there was an essay by you and a catalogue introduction by Alfred Barr. [Tape interruption] You must have been pleased that Barr wrote the introduction, or that he was the one. How did that come about?

BH: Yes, well, he said he was going to write the introduction. I wrote what I wrote, and he wrote what he wrote. It was a marvelous phrase that he used: "domesticated paintings." I think that's a marvelous phrase. I guess everybody sees the world, when you get older, as far different from the way the world was when you're younger. But we're in such a fast-paced change society. The last 100-150 years, compared to the way the world changed previously, it's astonishing. And lots of it ain't so nice.

AB: Did you feel that your pictures, by and large, did get home safely from the show?

BH: Oh, yes. Yes. And we did have. . . There was expansion. There were cracks. We fed the painting from behind. But essentially, yes, it did. I mean, one of the reasons why. . . I'm just thinking now, since you mentioned it. . . we had Johns and Rauschenberg and all that younger generation at home, so I could hang all those things, when those went out. I guess we must have had five Johns paintings and three Johns drawings. That's a large number of things. But no, it's so funny. You look at an old master and there's so much crackling all over the place. But with contemporary, people having had none, therefore, to get a little bit, it's a big deal. Look. The Boston Museum had *Lavender Mist* to buy, and the conservation department said, "Don't do

it." So, now it's at the National Gallery in Washington. They must be kicking themselves, whoever was around then and now, for not having done that. But how do you deal with these conservation problems? What do you do with [Anselm] Kiefer's straw? It's not going to last. I don't know how it's going to survive. And the combination of materials, of metal that won't move, and materials that will expand and contract? What's that going to do? But I have faith. Another generation will produce other works.

AB: Let's talk about the 1961 Mark Rothko retrospective [*Mark Rothko*]. I'd like to know if you and Rothko discussed it, or his reactions to it.

BH: Mark had a very particular idea. He wanted his paintings close together. He always loved the idea. Remember I mentioned the "Frick of the West side," and the Phillips collection? He always loved that idea, and he wanted to create that intense experience, of things close together. So, he was insisting, and kind of running Dorothy, as to how the show was going to go: what was picked, what was in it, etc. That was one side of it. The other side was nerves. I once asked him, what is it like to know, what does it feel like to know you're a great painter? He, kind of, didn't know how to respond for quite a while. Because he knows he's a great painter. He believes he's a great painter. But when somebody from the outside puts it to you, you don't know how to respond. You're fighting to be thought of as a great painter, and it's the thing that keeps you going, but, yet, you daren't approach it. I remember once I was acting as an advisor to Helen Frankenthaler, and she was going to sell the house and get one of those town house connections on the Carnegie Hill towers. She was discussing what she could afford, and Helen is always on the left side, very aware that she can only spend so much money and so forth. But, on the right side, the older her works, the more they're worth, and if you take how much there is, there's a lot of money there. Well, is there a lot of money there? Yes, then she has money to spend. Or, but how do I really get it to her? I don't really know. Is it going to last? There's always that inside/outside combination, about what you feel and what the world tells you, and what you feel and what will happen, or, what the world will tell you, that makes it very tricky.

The last paintings. I went into Mark's studio with him, the most nervous I had ever seen him, when I came in to look at anything, when he had those white edges, and the very hard, severe edge. It was certainly a startle, and I really did spend a good deal of time talking with him over on the side, getting used to the paintings over there, so I could finally get to see them. It's like when I get a record or a CD of contemporary music, one of my ways of listening is to play it several times, not listening, just letting it be in the background, so I can kind of soak up, somehow, the language.

**END TAPE 2, SIDE 1**

**BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2**

AB: You were talking about Mark Rothko, the last time you. . .

BH: Oh. Therefore, when I finally got to look at the paintings, then I was more able to address them and approach them. They were so different from anything he ever did. I wrote in this catalogue. . . I took my son -- it's an interesting story -- my son Woody, out for a period after my wife, his mother, had died. On a Saturday afternoon we went down to see an exhibition. I would take him about and say, "What's this about, what's that about?" If you're looking at abstract painting and somebody asks you what the subject is, no less if you're a child, it's not the easiest thing to respond to. But I'm saying everything's got a subject, some way or other. What's the subject? So, we went here, we went there, and we finally came to the Rothko retrospective that was at the Marlborough. I asked him the same question here and there in the place, and he was giving me, "Oh, Dad, you know they're about. . ." Whatever. We finally went into the last room, where these last beige, taupe, white-edged paintings were, and I said, "Okay, Woody, what are these about?" and he said, and I'll never forget it, "Oh, here the artist has drawn down the shade and won't let you in." Boy, is that a beautiful comment, a way to read a painting. Those last paintings, they do let you in but they let you into a different world, in a way, a different experience. So, I got very far from the Rothko show, but that's what happens when you start talking.

AB: That's perfectly okay. But in terms of the retrospective, did he eventually talk about that?

BH: Well, he was just extremely uneasy; didn't want to acknowledge he's uneasy. The usual stuff.

AB: Did he frequent his retrospective?

BH: Yes. He wanted to see, himself, how things would look. [Tape interruption]. Needful of seeing the show, and feeling what it was and then, at the same time, of course, being above it. We all have those conflicted positions. In life we have unconflicted positions about when spring and fall come, they're marvelous, the winter. Grandchildren. . . The only thing in life that delivers as promised are grandchildren. No conflicts about that.

AB: Well, many years ago Katharine Kuh told me that not only did he go to the retrospective all the time, but he was very affected. He would listen to the comments people made, and was affected by that, whether they were educated or not. Did he ever discuss any of that with you?

BH: Most artists, I think, virtually without exception, are most affected by the non-experienced viewer, as it were, the workmen. If you can communicate with them, somehow or other that makes an artist feel better. So, that was why he particularly loved to listen, and to hear oddball comments. I never did tell him that my parents thought of one of his paintings as "the diarrhea painting." I never went that far. But yes, Mark had such a need that way.

AB: Did he discuss Dorothy Miller or any of the personnel, or his relationships with them?

BH: I just know he had his insisting on what was going to be there, how it was going to be hung, how it was going to be lit, and how it was everything. I have rarely seen an artist so control a show at the Modern. It doesn't happen. And it's not always a wise thing to happen. An artist isn't necessarily the best judge. But he had a vision of the

way his work should be seen, and he got a chance to execute that. That's a very rare thing.

AB: Another thing you did when you were involved with the Modern is that there would be, I guess, tours of your house?

BH: Brrraagh!

AB: That's a wonderful sound. I wonder how the transcriptionist will spell that.

BH: [Laughs] Well, you know, it became a source of upset between my wife and myself, because it wasn't just. . . At the beginning it was like the Modern. Then it became all these charity tours. People would raise money so you'd go to five homes in an afternoon. Everybody would traipse in and out of apartments and houses. Now they do it in country visits to gardens and whatever have you. Everybody loves to peek in other people's places, just like when sites are under construction, everybody loves to go in and look. We had so many visitors. At the beginning, the Modern didn't have many paintings up, so, again and again, the European or non-New York people, who were familiar with art, would be directed to come and visit.

AB: You mean professionals.

BH: Professionals. I remember Charles Laughton came to visit once. I don't remember how it came about. Had I seen him in California, or whatever it was?

AB: Well, he was a collector, certainly.

BH: Yes. Yes. I don't think I saw him and Elsa at the Goetzes' house? I don't remember what it was, but he got there before I did. He was sitting on the back of a chair, looking, and Rothko was what he was involved with looking at. He didn't see the other stuff, but Rothko spoke to him. And there I had a chance to find out how somebody reacted to something. I remember Peggy Guggenheim coming in, with Bernard Reis, and walking around, saying, "Oh, this man doesn't read." Because there was no place for books, where all the paintings are hanging floor-to-ceiling,

wall-to-wall type of thing. And Bernard said, "Don't worry another room is wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling books, just not here." You get oddball comments, then you get people, if you are there. . . In the beginning I tried to be there. Then, after a while, I tried not to be there. In the beginning I'm a proselytizer. I want people to look and love. After a while, I'm worn, and it's, quote, invading my privacy. I had thousands of people when you add it all up and that's just a tremendous amount of traffic. At the beginning I didn't know enough. I didn't think about putting down runners so that if it was raining the carpet didn't get messed up. People don't think. My wife's brother lost his wife also, he remarried, and his wife's step-father, at the reception after the wedding, was leaning against the wall, his elbow against the wall. The only thing was, his elbow was going through a Rothko, the diarrhea painting! It didn't go through it, but it made a dent in it. As soon as the party was over, I got it off the wall, dipped wet cloth, wetted it up, dried the backside and got rid of the dent. But, I mean, how stupid can you be? How unfeeling can you be, not to see? Particularly when you're coming to see something. It's terrible. So, we had these people from all over. The California season, the auction season, the season when people come in.

AB: And this all followed from the Modern.

BH: Well, it started with the Modern and then, of course, it broadened. Then it got to the Whitney, but first it was the Modern. It was the Modern. The International Council. You know, that International Council was a remarkably powerful if not too terribly visible force. The Modern did so many marvelously creative things that were not visible on the surface. It did proselytize for what it stood for, in the very best way, in the highest definition. I don't want to call that education, unless you want to say it's the education of the eye and the spirit and the personality. But in the largest senses of the word, there is no place like it, yet, in the world. I don't know what's going to turn out in the newest place. I don't know how it's going to handle the more contemporary world, in the spaces that those things require, which are even more vast than just a mere eighteen-footer, and I don't know about historical perspective, the Barr didactic sense of how history evolved, to bringing other ideas in. All that historicism of a museum. But there was never any place like the Modern. And the International Council had to raise money to send the best of what it had, which was the best in the world, all over. It brought people in, wealthy, influential people from all

the countries, to meet with the American collectors. Americans from all over the United States would come in, and there would be an exchange of social nature and opinion nature, looking at things, same time nature, which were kind of like when you drop a pebble in water and out go the waves. You can't even say how it's going to happen, but it happens all over. That poor woman in, what is it? Venezuela, now? Who was fired? With a museum named after her? She cut her teeth here. [Note: Sofia Imber founded the Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art in Venezuela in 1973. In 2002, she was fired along with other heads of cultural institutions by Hugo Chavez, accused of elitism.] We all cut our eye-teeth at the Modern for the modern world. There is, at the finest and best level, a debt to the Modern that everyone owes who's been there, and who's taken what's there seriously. The debt is not just for the viewers, it's for the artists too. Because every artist goes there, and the artists who are there, as keepers, guards, whatever position they would have, that place, more than any other institution in this world, just as the Met and the Louvre and so forth, and the more broadly diverse collecting institutions, was a place that focused on one particular kind of narrow framework of time and achievement, as it were, because the Western European thing is kind of a narrow framework in the world of looking. There's nothing like it. And the impact it had, what it did buy and what it didn't buy. When it bought the Johnses. When it hung the de Kooning *Woman*. Whatever it's going to be, Dorothy Miller shows, in the early times, when the Monet *Water Lilies* came in, goodness gracious! I remember being at Katia Granoff's in Paris, and there was this horde of things, eight-, twelve-, fifteen-feet wide, this-feet high. You'd pull them out on the floor and there were all these *Water Lilies*, this trove of treasures that got distributed slowly, throughout the world, so it's one at a time or several at a time. And now the Modern has this gorgeous group of *Water Lilies*, that only the Orangerie had before, Jeu de Paume where ever it was for the first time. Good Lord. If you try to stop and think. . . Or John Szarkowski, in the photography world. And the proselytizing in architecture and design. I mean, the breadth and depth of its influence, and the seriousness with which it did its work. That seriousness is virtually, I would say, at the same level of an artist, and it's rare that you find that. Because, in my view, you just get a great curator and you let him go, in his field. Don't try to be everything to everybody. Get the great ones, and let them run. And when the field is running, China's running today, go for China. Another period, another. . . You let it run when it's going. The medieval world runs, let it run there. Not this everybody for

everything and buy all the cultures all the time, etc. It doesn't work that way. You get too much on and off, and museum quality has lost its meaning, or had its meaning diminished. But if you look at what the Modern has done, it is remarkable. Just remarkable.

AB: Were you on any committees at the Museum?

BH: I was on the International Council program committee. I was on the Council. I served on the program committee, I served on some other. . . Remember the whole group of things for embassies? It was not such an effective idea, but it was an interesting idea. [Note: The Art in Embassies program was initiated in 1959 as a pilot project under the auspices of the International Council. The program was dissolved in 1970 after the U.S. State Department established its own program for art in embassies.]

AB: The State Department does it now.

BH: Yes. Still. And remember, you could rent?

AB: A sales and rental gallery.

BH: The beginning rental thing. That was a remarkable effort. So, I did do some of that. [Note: The Art Lending Service [ALS] was founded in 1951 under the auspices of the Junior Council, a non-profit volunteer organization of the Museum. The ALS functioned as a public art gallery and an art library and made available a variety of media that were on consignment from galleries and/or independent artists. Artwork could be rented with the option to buy. The Service was discontinued in 1982.]

AB: Can you remember any of the more interesting activities, or what you did? Your role on any of those committees?

BH: Well, I was kind of active in all the exhibitions we've been speaking about. And I guess the two, quote, cantankerous, independent voices, unquote, at those meetings were Jean de Menil and myself. There are what I call active boards and passive boards in the non-profit world. The passive boards generally have to be active in



fund-raising, but don't take an active role in operations. And when you have as professional a staff as the Modern had. . . But there were so many serious collectors, whether it was Louise Smith, or Flory Marx; people who not only had to be cultivated, but who had to be listened to. I would meet with Porter frequently, and schmooze about whatever the topic was of the day, because it was fascinating to try to present, at that point in time, what was already 100 years, and to selectively pick out of 100 years what to show the world. If you and I just sit in a coffee shop and say, "Gee, we've got 100 years. Let's start from scratch. The world doesn't know. What are we going to do?" What a fun game. What an interesting game. I found that very much so.

AB: You mentioned, of course, René d'Harnoncourt bringing you together with Barnett Newman. What was your relationship with d'Harnoncourt?

BH: Me? Myself?

AB: Yes.

BH: I knew René simply because I was in and out of the museum, and because I had these paintings, therefore, he would come up to the apartment, or whatever have you. Then I made this, quote, fatal, unquote remark to René that The Museum of Modern Art was the museum of "old modern art", which got his dander up. He appeared with two books of photographs of paintings, what they had, what they hoped to have, what they were promised, and everything else, to show what was going to be. So, that was fun. We discussed the Rockefeller things, the tribal arts, which was a big fascination of his. The idea to have luncheon with Barney that was a perfect expression. And, of course, at various meetings. But I was not part of the inner social circle of the Museum. I did not have the funds to contribute. I was in over my head, as it were, in the sense that I was someone in his 20s and early 30s, who was being listened to by people in their 50s and 60s, because of things that he bought, and because he had a fluid, fluent way of being verbal. But I didn't have the wherewithal, other than through the force of, as it were, my convictions or eye, or thoughts on different subjects. But I wasn't a big hitter in any other way. I was only a big hitter in the possibility of future donations, which, of course, everybody always

thinks about in the museum world. So, I cannot represent myself in any way as inside the Museum in all those deliberations.

AB: Well, I think this is interesting. It's something honest, the extent, or the degree. . .

BH: Well, I didn't have. . . It wasn't my game. I gave \$25,000 to the building drive, you know? That was a big thing for us at the time, way back. Way, way back. You know, when money was money. I retired. I left the company in 1971, when sales were over \$1 billion when a billion dollars was a billion dollars. Nowadays, even a billion dollars isn't money. Last night I pulled out to pay for the taxi a twenty-dollar bill, and I said to my wife, "You know, a twenty-dollar bill today is like a five-dollar bill." It's true.

AB: So, at a certain point when did your involvement with the Modern lessen? I know you eventually became involved with the Jewish Museum, among other things.

BH: [Pause] I was on the Friends of the Whitney. I acted as an art advisor to the Art Gallery of Ontario, and helped them get started. I advised the Cleveland Museum, etc. I advised Norton Simon, I helped Rick Brown get started when he went to the Kimbell Museum. I wrote a twenty-two page letter to what's his name? Jesus Christ. The Getty. Norton's friend who became president of the Getty. I called John Walsh: would he be a curator? Sometimes I was asked by different museum people to call people, but I was not inside the Modern, which was a fairly closed, tight world at a certain point in time. It never opened up, that kind of place, until the economic scene, the Christian-Jewish scene changed, the whole scene changed. At the same time, it was a time when the Modern really began to fumble, because, how to present itself, after its tight, clear view of history. Once they outgrew that, they've had trouble locating who and where they are, and how. In my view, and I've been a person free to express his view, if asked, so I don't know that -- I guess, really, when so many other people had things, or they had mine -- because I stepped back. I thought it was a pernicious disease. I see things too damned early. So, I see when trends are coming in, sometimes I get out before they've gone even more banal. If you think the price is going up to here, it's going to go up so much higher, in, let's say, real estate, I'd like to know. Someone like myself, with the intensity and spirituality of my convictions would have a hard time, has a hard time, in the present art world. It's just

corrosive of what I'm about. It interferes with what I'm about. And on top of that, physically, I can no longer get around. So, you put it all together and I've been out for quite a while.

AB: Now, is there anything else you'd like to add about the Modern, or any thoughts or things you might like to say? Specific memories and impressions?

BH: [Long pause] I hope they do better on their lighting. It's a funny thing. Museums are very big on what they buy. They're very big on what they exhibit. They're very big on the funding and the space. But on how they display works of art, they hurt them again and again and again. Victoria Newhouse and I have had several conversations, because she is writing a book, and all of a sudden, up at the Met, comes a show of Ingres, the Ingres a portrait show. Did you see that show?

AB: Of course.

BH: I can't stand more than forty-five minutes, and some days I can't get to thirty. So, I went in a wheelchair, and you can't see the drawings in a wheelchair because everything's hung, small works, at a height. The Tilman Riemenschneider show [at the Met] was great, because the sculpture would be way up high, and you can sit in a wheelchair. So, you go to this stuff, and you're going, going, going, going, and all of a sudden you come to the last room, of those four great portraits and the three self-portraits, and all of a sudden, instead of filling up every space, as it were, or trying to get everything in, there was a focus on a series of paintings, highlighting, and space around them. That, in a way, is like architecture. We all have learned to love all glass, but sometimes a lot of glass and a lot of wall makes a focus on the glass, and not just all glass. Museums, in my mind, pay minimal attention to how they exhibit. Worse yet, how they light. I sometimes wonder. . . They're all faced with the same thing: how can we not show? We have so much already in storage etc. But what is the experience we want out of people, coming in? What do we really seek to do? How much is numbers? Okay. We're caught in this bind between raising the money. . . We can't raise it from that few, wealthy group anymore. We've got to get it from broad bands, we've got to get it from corporations which have to have numbers, governmental groups which have to have numbers, and big corporate types that

respond to research and numbers. So, it's a different ballgame. And how much, then, do we lose the focus of what this experience is supposed to be? Yet, hordes of people come in. They're looking for something, and what they're looking for. . . What you deduce in psychiatry and psychology, or in life. . . If I take away Catholicism, I've got to give you Marxism. Or vice versa. If you take something away from somebody, they're looking for something to replace that which was taken away. At this moment in our lives, we're looking for something larger than ourselves, but our society and our political structure doesn't give it to us. In my view one place people are looking for it is in museums, and we're not giving it to them the right way. . . yet. Not just the Modern, and not just my own, particular, personal meanderings.

AB: Well, but, just to focus on the Modern, do you feel that the Abstract Expressionist collection in general, or the paintings that were formerly yours, in particular. . .

BH: I thought the recent displays were lovely. But I did mention the first time, when they had two feet more of ceiling, how different the paintings looked. That was simply because. . . same distance from the wall but more height changed the angle of the light. Instead of flattening, it got more glancing, like a north light, the classical light that all painters have wanted.

AB: I thought that *Autumn Rhythm* never looked so good in its life over there. Much better than at the Met.

BH: Why? The Met's got it too big. They've got these giant rooms, and what are they doing? They're trying to fill them with giant paintings. It's all wrong. Lincoln Center is all wrong. The opera houses are all wrong. You can't have one hall that will do chamber music and piano to orchestras. But it's the corporate approach. So, you can listen to music in Alice Tully but how can you listen to music in the Metropolitan Opera House? How can you do anything in the State building? You go back to the European places, you go back to Carnegie Hall for better sound, which they managed to mess up. But that's the intense conviction of somebody who's involved in the arts, really, and not what it is in our social life, our other life, that I'm giving money, and how I've got to buy my way into stature. People come in today, "I want a collection. Buy me one." Or, "Fifty million dollars a year. That's what I want to spend."

That's kind of bizarre." I want it right away," but the only way you don't do it is right away is to do it without discipline. You must bide your time. Joe Hirshhorn and I went to a Fairfield Porter exhibition years ago. We were both having a good time. He liked several paintings, and I liked one painting in particular. His solution: he bought three. My solution: I managed not to buy anything. Purify it down. Purify it down. Purify it down. It's the pressure of choice, the pressure of that intensity of demand. I demand more. I'm willing to give more. I want more. If it's not that important for other people, fine. It was just that Hirschorn had to buy. It's like eating a lot. He had to eat a lot. And, you know, when he looked to negotiate, it filled his needs.

AB: Well, thank you for helping to document the museum. You've been very patient, and I think this contains a lot of things nobody knows, so I appreciate it. Thank you very much.

**END TAPE 2, SIDE 2**

**END INTERVIEW**