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Oral history interview with Robert Motherwell, 1971 Nov. 24-1974 May 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Motherwell from November 21, 1971 - May 1, 1974. The interview took place at the artist's home in Greenwich, CT, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. In 2017, the fourth reel of this interview was transcribed; the interview transcript was reconciled with previous versions.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's November 24, 1971—Paul Cummings talking to Robert Motherwell in his studio in Greenwich, Connecticut. Could we just start with some kind of commentary about the family background, and brothers and sisters and everything like that. Place? You were born in Aberdeen, Washington, right?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. I'm trying to think how to say it simply.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just something general about the family background and things.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: My father was born in the Middle West, in Ohio. When he was a very young man, for whatever reason, his aspiration was to be a banker and to live in California. He was as determined about that as later I was to become a painter. Through a series of events he ended up as a very young man working in a bank in Aberdeen, Washington. And my mother who was very young—twenty, I think she was when they met—was the daughter of one of the two local lawyers. And they got married. Ultimately my father succeeded in his dream and became president of Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco. How he did all that I don't know. He had no connections, no anything. Which also gave rise to the legend that I must be very rich. But the fact is that he was ruined in the Depression and died before he could really recover—at a relatively young age of cancer. So that in one sense I grew up in and I always went back to Aberdeen in summers. We had a barn on the seashore. I'm sure it's one of the reasons why I go to Provincetown now, where I have a barn on the seashore. It's very much the same kind of life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it's something like this building.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. Very much like this building. So that in one sense I grew up with all the sense of great expectations, went to great universities, had convertibles in college, and so on. And yet in another sense it was all absolutely taken away. So that what people don't realize is that I lived in New York, married, trying to become a painter, having my first shows there, for ten years on $50 a week. And it's been a continual annoyance to me that because of my personal extravagance—partly as compensation for all of that—that everybody thinks that somehow there are stacks of money around. Though actually my success that way has really meant a much greater capacity to borrow money when I was younger.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, isn't that often what happens? You know, you can always borrow more money.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But there is one beautiful thing in it. My father couldn't understand my wanting to be a painter. Of course, this was during the Depression. So there was one beautiful thing about it. In the same way that his fantasy was to become a banker in California, and he succeeded, he believed it was possible to do what one wanted to do and he said, "If you want to be a painter and New York is the place to be a painter and originally in Paris then go to Paris and then go to New York and be a painter." And even though he couldn't have liked less my being a painter, he could understand very well one having a north star that one wanted to follow and in an indirect way there was a tremendous moral support.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your family moved to San Francisco when you were very young really.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The summers in Aberdeen—what was Aberdeen, Washington like in those days and what interested you about the place?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, it was in the 1920s. You see, I was born in 1915 so from 1920 to 1930 I would have been from five to fifteen. Aberdeen was the greatest lumber port in the world. It was a town of about 20,000 people surrounded by virgin forest and with a magnificent harbor. And all my childhood in this relatively small town, there would be 100 or 150 lumber ships from Japan, Finland, Russia, Greece, France, from everywhere loading up with lumber to take all over the world. So though in one sense it was a small town, it was a highly active, internationalized—well, in the way that, say, Provincetown is a very small town but a very sophisticated one. Aberdeen was too.

Actually our summer barn was on the seacoast about 15 miles from Aberdeen in a small place called Westport. You see, everything was Scandinavian there on account of all the lumberjacks, and everything was built in Scandinavian wooden style. And there had been a small inn that my mother had gone to as a child with her sisters. It had been abandoned and the local doctor's wife had bought it. Around it were half a dozen houses. My grandfather had one, my father had one. The local artist, who was a professor of art at the University of Oregon, and who had studied in Stockholm, and who had been a childhood boyfriend of my mother's. He was the first artist I had ever met and was one of the loveliest men I ever met.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was his name?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: His name was Lance Hart. Then several other families had houses. And they all had girls. I was the only boy in all of these houses. So it was ravishing from every standpoint. There were all these girls around and these fantastic beaches, isolation, this marvelous artist to talk to, and who taught me how to play poker, and taught me how to make glüg, which is a Scandinavian hot drink. So it was a kind of real beautiful holiday from the world. And then the real world was growing up in California, going to Stanford, and going to prep school when I was young.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like in San Francisco? Because that's really where you grew up until you went to college, wasn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, yes and no. At first my father was in Southern California with the Federal Reserve Bank. Then we moved to Northern California maybe when I was 10. But when I was 12, I developed horrible asthma, like Proust. It was really ghastly. They thought I was going to die from it. So when I was 13, I was sent to a prep school in the desert in California. From the prep school I went to Stanford. From Stanford I went to Harvard. From Harvard I went to Paris. So that, though my family lived in San Francisco, actually I was there very little myself. And never liked it because it was stiff and reactionary like Boston or Philadelphia; and, too, the fog was just literally death on me. So that what I remember is all the time being cold, damp, struggling for air.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was the family interested in literature or music or the arts or activities like that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: My mother was very literary. Also she had one of the greatest collections in America of 18th-century French Provincial furniture. Which she used to haunt auction houses for. And I often used to go with her as a boy. And there was a time when I could date any piece of French furniture within two years. I think it was a marvelous training of the eye you know, because in the end the difference is the exact undulation of the curve, the materials, and so on and all the rest of it. All my life, I've used earth colors a lot, especially yellow ochre and raw umber and so on; and I wouldn't be surprised that a lot of it comes from constantly looking at waxed fruitwood furniture. She didn't like the chichi town kind, you know, with gilt and all that, but the beautiful waxed fruitwood country furniture. Where that comes from I don't know. And my grandfather was an intellectual—my Irish grandfather, her father.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was his name?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sean Hogan. He was a lawyer. His library was filled with the complete works of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Darwin. As a child he used to tell me stories all the time. I realize now that he was telling me *Paradise Lost* or a Greek trilogy, or stories from

the Bible; but he would tell them to me as though they were stories.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you read a great deal? Were you interested in literature?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Always. All the time. In Aberdeen there was a little bookstore run by a Russian Jewish woman. When I was 10 I started going there and using my allowance to buy books. She seemed to me to be an old woman then when I was 10. Several years ago, maybe in 1967 or something—her name was Anna Blume—I got a letter from her saying that in Russia she had known Chagall or someone, and was I the same little boy who had become the famous artist, and if I was could she buy a lithograph for her grandson. I sent her one signed. So she's ninety or something now. I used to spend long afternoons in there and we'd have Russian tea and talk about all the books. Actually I was buying ridiculous books like Sabatini and Dumas and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But did you read other things? I mean were there — ?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: For twenty years I read a book a day, from the time I was seven until I was 27. Now I don't have time to. I learned to sight-read.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you learn that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: In school. There was course in it and I took it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which school was that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: That was a public school

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's extraordinary for that time.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. You learned to read scanning the whole page instead of reading word by word by word. It's terrible for poetry but it's marvelous for long things because you get a sense of the whole.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the other schools you went to, the prep school, for example? What kind of atmosphere?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You see, California in those days was really very Western and much more democratic than the East and nobody went to a prep school unless they were in trouble. So that all the other guys in prep school were either delinquents, or their parents were divorced, or in some cases—because California has a pipeline to the Orient—their families would be working in China or Japan. I mean everybody was sort of dumped there rather than going there, as they do in the East as preparation for Harvard, or Princeton, or whatever. I was there because of my asthma. And they did a terrible thing to me: they used to post all the grades. My average would be 96.5 or something. And the next highest in the school would be 61. The general average would be 50—because most of the guys were either emotionally or mentally upset in one way or another. So all the other guys tormented me on account of this. So in self-defense, I became a football player and the best tennis player and all the rest of it. It was not pleasant but it did make going to college much easier.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any teachers or instructors that you remember or who made some impression on you?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: There was a teacher of English, I've forgotten his name. Two of them, both homosexuals, who were highly intelligent. One I used to talk to literature about. The other had a passion for opera. He was an Irishman named Kiernan. He'd wanted to be an opera singer really. This was in the midst of the Depression and you found all kinds of people teaching in schools who might not have otherwise but just had to get a job. He was crazy about Mozart and from him I learned what is still a passion for me, the operas of Mozart. I remember my mother saying once that he had written her saying though I was only 16, I had the mind of somebody of 40 and to let me develop in the way I wanted to. But she typically said, "Of course I didn't believe him."

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did your parents like your progress in school? Were they involved with it, or disinterested?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, God, I don't know. In many ways they were quite brutal to me. My mother was a hysteric and used to beat me terribly as a child until the blood ran out of

my head. And my father would on occasion, too. So that I grew up terribly nervous and anxiety-ridden and suffocating. You know, I got asthma; what's asthma but not being able to breathe? I couldn't breathe at home. And so, again, everybody knows I went to Stanford, Harvard, Columbia, Grenoble and they think: Oh, God, this civilized, marvelous education. But actually I grew up like somebody in a high-class waterfront, you know, going from school to school and rooming house to rooming house and making my own life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did they have interest in your moves and changing from school to school? Did you do this on your own?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: My father used to say to me, "There are only two things I ask of you, that you pass your grades and that you don't get your name in the papers, because that might hurt me." My mother used say to me as a child—she used to call me her Spartan child and she used to say to me from the time I was four, "Come home on your shield or carrying it." You know, really it was an appalling thing to say, as if to say: Come home dead, or make it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, it's interesting—that's not really a Western American image if you think about it.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. Well, she was highly literate. I can remember at the dinner table reading Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, you know, while we were having roast squab or something and weeping over this scene. You know it's Irish blarney. But it's vivid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. And it's interesting this whole contrast of your world and their world and the things you were interested in and the things you were told to be interested in, or this is what's important.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. And what was very clear to me was the grown-up world—what to me was the grown-up world—which nowadays would be called the WASP world, was a bunch of crap. That was very clear to me by the time I was seven. And I wanted to have nothing to do with it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? How id you see that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It was all externally-directed, status-derived, puritanical, materialistic; that everybody was forced to become a fraud, that everybody was playing a role, and that they were getting no enjoyment out of the role. In face, I think I became a

permanently-arrested adolescent for years because I didn't want to grow up if that's what being grown-up was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For example, you went to the Los Angles Art Institute. Did you have a reason for going there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I won a scholarship. We were then living in Beverly Hills and the LA public school system awarded a scholarship to a boy and a girl from all the public schools every year. And I won it as a boy. But my father had a very negative reaction, and my mother used to have to drive me in a car, you know, miles. Finally they made it so disagreeable that I gave it up. I was about — I don't know how old — 10, 11, 12, something like that. And I wanted to paint the nudes. They wouldn't let me in the nude class. They made me paint still lifes. I didn't want to do that. So I finally gave up, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you get interested in drawing and painting?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: When I was three, in kindergarten. Yeah, I'm tone-deaf. I can't carry a tune or recognize one. And in kindergarten, a lot of it is dancing and singing and all of that, and I couldn't do it. So they would leave me in a corner with the coloring books or with paper and paints. They had a beautiful blackboard—I still have a feeling—a real slate one and every day at eleven o'clock the teacher would make sort of Miróesque diagrams of what the weather was that day; if it was sunny with an orange oval; if it was raining, with blue lines and green grass. And I can still remember at three suddenly grasping that forms are symbolic, that it didn't have to look like rain but that blue lines for rain were even more beautiful than an actual photograph of the rain, and so on. And I determined on the spot that somehow I would learn how to do that. And in public school in about the second grade they taught me a schema, like Raggedy Ann, for drawing figures in an abstract way. I also think

that there must be psychologically some revulsion against realism, I mean I must have found reality realistically rendered unbearable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because it was—what—too much like real life?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I found real life horrible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've often wondered why there's so little early figurative

work of yours.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: There isn't any. I started as an abstract artist. But, you see, also at Harvard and at Stanford I studied philosophy and logic. In those days it was at the height of the development of mathematical logic on the one side from Whitehead and Russell, and on the other side from Wittgenstein. And it became very clear to me that what structure is, is the relations among the elements and that elements related are meaningful. Which is to say that abstract structures can be meaningful. And for most artists without such an intellectual background, in those days they were very dubious about making abstractions just for fear that they really didn't mean anything. But I knew, metaphysically, that by nature they meant something, so that I never had the inhibition about it. I mean whereas most artists of my generation are older, it was a moral crisis to move from figure drawing and all the things that one had started, into abstraction. But I took to it like a duck to water.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've mentioned before something about visiting the Stein collection and how that happened in San Francisco.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: In Palo Alto.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Palo Alto. Had you seen many paintings before that in going to museums out there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I used to collect books, little Italian books of all the old masters. I really learned to draw copying Michelangelo and Rembrandt and Rubens' Baroque paintings. But I didn't know modern art existed except from some Cézannes that I had come across in the Encyclopedia Britannica, which I also copied. You see, I was only seventeen when I saw the Matisses and they were literally the first 20-century pictures I ever saw. And I fell for them at first glance, and to this day *au fond* Matisse moves me more than any other 20-century painter. But I also think there are families of painting minds quite apart from history; that there are about — I don't know — five or six basic psychological types; and that whatever the type is that Matisse is, I think I naturally belong to that family anyhow.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How would you describe those? What is an example of a family?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: For example, Vermeer is the family I feel the most alien to. I was very pleased to discover several years ago in the College of Art Bulletin in a very learned article that he used a machine—the camera obscura. And I would say that, say Norman Rockwell, and Wyeth, and Meissonier, and all kinds of people belong to that objective eye who love to work with photographs or machines and look at everything in a very retinal lens-like way. There's another family like the Caravaggios and the Spaniards—Murillo and so on, and one aspect of Rembrandt that loves dramatic contrasts of light and dark and blackness and so on. And there's certainly a linear type like the ancient Greeks and the Siennese and the Florentines. And there's another kind that's very sensual, that if you look at the picture from a distance, it's very beautiful in its way and if you look at the surface very closely, you know, your eye just two or three inches away and just looking at a square inch or two it's intrinsically beautiful just as a painted surface, the way when you're having a beautiful meal if you look at the food, you know, you're sitting at the table and you're looking at the plate, there's something marvelous about all the textures and colors and so on. And I think Matisses are par excellence that kind. And it's that kind I like. And Rembrandt has it. Titian has it. Most classical 20-century painting has it. The Impressionists had it, although the Impressionists are less clear-cut in their shapes than I like.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Going back to the university, was there a reason why you went to Stanford or no? Or was it there and you went there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. In those days everybody in California went either to Berkeley or to Stanford. I really wanted to go to Berkeley, but Berkeley had subject requirements as well

as grades. Stanford only cared about grades. I had very high grades, but because I had gone to a very small prep school with a limited faculty, I didn't have all the courses that Berkeley insisted on. So I had to go to Stanford. I don't know, maybe in many ways I was better off. I didn't like Stanford, but it was smaller. I think I might have been quite lost at Berkeley.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any people at Stanford that you found interesting among the academic world or even among the students?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. There were several professors who I learned a lot from. There was a professor of Romance languages named Frederick Anderson, and I took a year-long course in Dante's *Divine Comedy* which made an indelible impression on me. There was a Frenchman named Albert Guerrard who gave a year-long seminar for graduate students in "Art for Art's Sake." He ultimately published those lectures as a book. As a sophomore I forced myself on him. And he couldn't believe it. He said, "You're not eligible." And like a bulldog I'd say, "I'm going to come anyway." He couldn't believe it. Finally, out of a kind of stupefaction he said, "You're not qualified; if you come after a few weeks I'm going to have to show you you're not qualified." I said, "All right, then show me." And I came and actually I got an A in the course. I wrote on Somerset Maugham. There was somebody else I also took a course from on André Gide. But the main thing probably was my roommate during the last couple of years who was a transfer from Reed College named Henry Aiken. And we studied philosophy together and went to the school of philosophy at Harvard. He stayed at Harvard and for many years was head of the department at Harvard. Lately he has moved to Brandeis. We taught each other. Each term we'd take a subject like—oh, I don't know—Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Hegel's theory of tragedy, or T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," or Russell's theory of knowledge. And both read all the books and argue for 10 weeks about whatever the subject was. It was a fabulous education.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you think you selected philosophy as a major?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Because the painting departments were impossible, the English literature was Victorian literature, the psychology at Stanford was behaviorism, and I was very interested already in psychoanalysis. And in those days the philosophy department was very small, very intelligent, that in a way philosophy included everything, so that it was a way of transforming a big university into a small tutorial college. Which is what I like best as a teaching situation. When I teach myself, I teach the same way. And also I learned very early in college that it was much less important what subject you were taking than who was teaching it. It so happened that Stanford when I was there had a brilliant philosophy department, small as it was. Just as Harvard did when I went there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that that led to your interest in psychoanalysis? Or did that come before philosophy?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It came before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that, again, a quest for a solution to life problems that you seemed to have been having?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. And ultimately I did get analyzed. Which I think saved my life, saved my sanity. You know, most of my generation are dead through self-destruction directly or indirectly. And I had many of the same characteristics. I was just as wild, just as drunken, just as alienated, just as everything. You know, this is something I normally don't talk about, but I have a feeling that if Rothko or David Smith or some of the others had been properly analyzed they would not be dead now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think it seems to be that people who go into the creative world tend to have so many of these problems, that sometimes they work them out and sometimes don't? Or is it just that they tend to be aware of them more than people who are in other activities?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think the second is true. You see, I think most people are held together by necessity, by daily routine. And if you're self-employed, so to speak, there's not that external routine discipline, et cetera, of having to relate to your co-workers, et cetera. And so if one has the same degree of neurosis as somebody who has a nine-to-five job but is self-employed it's apt to become much more visible, much more something to be contended with, plus the fact that in the end the only thing that really does an artist any good is an expression against very high standards, against standards of permanence really. And that in

itself is such a beastly problem that only very few people in a generation are able to contend with it. So that even if one were perfectly, quote, unquote, normal, one is still dealing with a kind of problem that brings hundreds of thousands of people every year to their knees, and one has that as a lifelong preoccupation: to make a statement that is so true, so exact, so exactly a reflection of both one's self and the world that its authenticity is indisputable. That's a problem.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mentioned before about the life in San Francisco and how it kind of got you interested in French culture in a way because of the wine and the atmosphere and the countryside and all that sort of thing. Did that start in school or before? The whole interest in kind of French—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know—the main interest in French culture in one sense had nothing to do with France. It had to do with that I used to wonder all the time—as every modern artist has to—about: what is art? You know, before modern art, art was always tribal; it always belonged to social context. In a way everybody in the society knew what art was. But starting with the Romantic Period it became something highly individual, not collective, not tribal. And if you were going to make art, in many ways it's a big puzzle, what is art at any given moment? And what I discovered in trying to find out about what art is—because the philosophers didn't know, they simply interested in the eternal nature of it—American artists to me were mainly corny, European artists either hadn't talked much or hadn't been published much or I couldn't read it. But I discovered the French poets from Baudelaire on: Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Paul Valery, André Breton, Apollinaire. All of them were talking all the time about what is the nature of art in modern times in its broadest sense. And that was my interest in France, in France as the embodiment of modern culture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting that you list the poets who all grew out of the Symbolist movement.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. Well, I think modern art is the Symbolist movement. And in that sense it was started by an American—Edgar Allan Poe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. I often think how many people realize the influence he's had the long way around...

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: They don't, because he's held in very low repute in the English-speaking world. But in France he's a hero, the way Walt Whitman is in Germany. And, you see, my historical role was really to be so convinced that modern art is, so to speak, the Symbolist movement, and with the greatest passion and enthusiasm to insist on it when I finally got to New York among all of those guys, browbeaten, low, depressed, on the WPA. And I think that as much as anything was the catalyst that led to Abstract Expressionism. Which was the first sustained American effort in painting to make a symbolic art in the sense of French Symbolism. It came out differently from French Symbolism because Americans are not Frenchmen. But that was the whole thing. And I think I was right. I mean I think it changed the history of art. And I don't mean it egotistically: I just mean it as an objective insight that hundreds of people could have had, should have had, and for some reason didn't have, or only half had.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about your first trip to Europe—to go back to our chronology for a second here—which was in 1935 when you were 20?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: That really had to do with my father. After years of struggle was finally in an established position. He had never himself been to Europe. He was a very classical, traditional Scotsman. He thought it would be a very nice idea, every five years, to make the grand tour of Europe. He planned it for my mother, my sister and myself. My mother decided that she didn't want to go, that she would rather take her share of the money for the trip and partly remodel our barn in Westport. So my father and my sister and I went. We made the grand tour of Europe starting in Paris and going all the way to Amalfi, all the way up Italy and Switzerland, Germany, the Low Countries, London and ended in Motherwell, Scotland. Then came home again. Then, of course, 1940 would have been the next trip but the war had begun. And by 1943 my father was dead.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do during this trip? Did you go to museums?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. He planned it very carefully. We were gone—I don't know—two months. We would stay three days in each city. And he did something very intelligent. The

first day a car and a driver and a guide would meet us at the hotel and take us all around the city in the morning. Then we would stop and have lunch. The car would pick us up again and either take us to more places or take us back to something that we wanted to see more of. And having done that in one day you had a terrific sense of the whole place, and then at leisure the next couple of days, you would do what you wanted to do. And, of course, my father was stunned at my knowledge of art. For some reason, traveling is mainly looking at art, though most people hate art. But I really liked it and knew about. I knew often better than the guides of what we were looking at. They'd make terrible mistakes. But not speaking any of the languages I couldn't explain to them very well. I couldn't even pronounce some of the names. So for me it was a feast of the eye and a sense that I still have of Europe of its being much more pleasurable, agreeable, comfortable, and food and wine. My father was a great gourmet, and there's where we really met. He was looking at it from an entirely different standpoint—he was very interest in agriculture, in the manufacturing, in all modern techniques of doing things, he was also very aware that the war was coming and, as an international banker, he was very concerned about it. So he was looking at Europe all the time economically. I was looking at it all the time aesthetically and humanistically. So that he liked Germany, and Switzerland and England, that he didn't get any fake money, and that the bathrooms were clean, that people were well-organized. And I liked France and Italy. I mean the food was much better, the art was much better, and the people were much juicier, the climate was much sunnier, and so on. It was very naive really; it was the Innocents Abroad. But a real revelation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then, of course, you came back and were at Stanford again. Was there a particular reason why you then went on to Harvard? Was it to pursue philosophy?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. When I graduated from Stanford my father, to my shock, said, "Now you're going to be a lawyer or a doctor or a banker or whatever professional man you want to me; and what do you want to be, and where do you want to study it?" I said, "I won't and I can't." And it was literally true. I couldn't have. He said, "You're very well-educated, you're very well-dressed, you speak very well, you get along with people very well, you could have a marvelous career." I said, "I don't want it." He said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to be a painter." He said, "That's impossible," et cetera. And finally after months of really a cold war he made a very generous agreement with me which was—and you have to remember all the time that this is in the context of the depths of the Depression—he made an agreement with me that if I would get a Ph.D. which is to say I would be equipped to teach in a college as an economic insurance, he would give me $50 a week for the rest of my life to do whatever I wanted to do on the assumption that with $50 I could not starve but it would be no inducement to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —Relax.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. So with that agreed on Harvard then—it was actually the last year—Harvard still had the best philosophy school in the world. And since I had taken my degree at Stanford in philosophy, and since he didn't care what the Ph.D. was in, I went on to Harvard.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who did you study with at Harvard?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: With Arthur Lovejoy from Johns Hopkins who happened to be the visiting professor that year; with a great aesthetician named David White Prall; with C.I. Louis, who was an expert on Kant and ethics; and with somebody else. But probably the main influence was Whitehead who had just retired, but was still lecturing at—what's the girls' college next to Harvard?—not Radcliffe but 10 miles away? Wellesley. Where I heard some of the lectures and who was around Harvard all the time; and many of the graduate assistants, et cetera, were filled with him, and I knew him. So that even though he wasn't literally teaching, his influence was everywhere there. Then the next year I went to Paris for the year to work on Delacroix, which I had started under Lovejoy and Prall. Then Whitehead left. Prall dropped dead of a heart attack. And suddenly this place that had been a citadel for fifty years of humanistic philosophy became pure mathematical logic. So I decided not to go back because that was my least philosophical interest. In Paris I had met an American composer named Arthur Berger who was studying with Nadia Boulanger. We were talking one day. He knew of my agreement with my father. He said, "Well, actually you're more interested in art, and your father doesn't care what your Ph.D. is in, and in New York at Columbia there's a guy named Meyer Schapiro who knows all the things that you're really interested in. If you're not going back to Harvard"—where Berger had been, too, with the

same people as I was—Leonard Bernstein and Harry Devin, a lot of brilliant guys—"Why don't you going to Columbia and study with Meyer Schapiro?" And so I did. And that's how I got to New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A long, roundabout way.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. And that was the end of my youth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was life at Harvard though? How as it compared with, say, Stanford?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, I was miserable there really. I mean it was my first encounter with the East, with the snobbism, the anti-Semitism, the Yankee Puritanism, the hierarchies, the formalities. To me, it was unendurable. Actually the year after when I went to Paris—though I didn't know a work of French, which was one of the reasons I went to Paris—Paris seemed much more familiar to me than Cambridge and Boston did. I mean I immediately understood the people better, why they were doing what they were doing. I remember at Harvard I used to go out with Radcliffe girls. I remember if you were at a party, say, with 12 or 15 people you could immediately tell the people who were not from the East. You know, when they came in and shook hands they'd smile and say "How are you?" or "I'm delighted to meet you." And the Easterners never did. They shook hands and looked at you. Now I feel differently but now I'm a powerful person so that if I enter Cambridge they smile at me. Which they didn't do to a student.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to the University of Grenoble at one point, too. Was that for summer school?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. To learn French and stay in a pension. It was the year of the Munich crisis. A very dramatic summer. And then after that summer of learning schoolboy French, I went to Paris and lived for year until the war began.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were at Oxford in England. And where else?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I visited Oxford. I sailed on the last voyage of the Queen Mary back to America. In Grenoble at the pension where I stayed there were four Oxford Fellows. We all knew that the war was going to start and that they would be in it. In fact all four of them were killed in the first year. It was between terms at Oxford and they invited me to come and spend two weeks before I sailed back to America. It was a very strange, tense, melancholy, beautiful time, those two weeks with those four guys.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things happened? Or what was the milieu that caused that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Looking at it now, knowing what happened, it was a little bit as though I had spent two weeks in a very luxurious prison with four guys who were under a death sentence, and you talk and behave in an entirely different way from normal human discourse in a circumstance like that. So it was very intense, very real, and very unreal, too. I mean one of the guys wanted to be a jazz musician and thought he might be dead in a year, and was. One was a South African who wanted to be a barrister. It was so—I don't know—how do you describe things like that? Maybe it was then that I began to get some of the tragic sense that I have that was rare in America then. Or in Grenoble I went out with a Czech Jewish girl. She got a thing from the Czech government ordering her home just before the Munich crisis. I remember putting her on the train and her weeping. She was a beautiful girl from a great family. I knew I would never see her again, that maybe she'd be dead. And I'm sure she never did survive the war. It was a very funny way to grow up. I mean when the kids now talk about the bomb and so on as though nobody ever lived under the threat of death before—actually in the late '30s young people in Europe much more inevitably lived under the threat of death than anybody does here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything was more real and closer. The bomb is a very abstract thing.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Somebody pushes a button somewhere and it happens. You went out to teach at the University of Oregon after that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. That was when I really didn't know what to do and there my friend Lance Hart from Westport was a professor at Oregon and there was a teaching

assistant, or probably an instructor, who was on leave of absence and they needed somebody. He realized that I didn't know how to move from the academic world into the art world, which was what I really wanted. And he proposed—and it would only be possible in a small friendly university like that—he proposed to them that they give me the job even though I wasn't ostensibly equipped. And they did. And it was there that I really began to paint all the time, and taught courses in art. I did know the history of modern art. I gave a course in aesthetics, which I knew, philosophical aesthetics which I knew, and so on. It was then that I really began to paint all the time.

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PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side two. What kinds of things were you painting on a fairly regular basis that you hadn't done before very much?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, I had painted some in Paris. In fact, I had a small show in Paris of sort of silly work. You see, then I was very ingrained with what nowadays would be called French intimate painting. I liked very much Matisse, Bonnard, Vuillard, Utrillo, Braque, certain aspects of Picasso. Which was a very powerful influence in the world. Everything changes, but one has no idea how dominant in terms of international communications that particular—and Matisse above all—that particular aspect of modern art was. I mean to many people it seemed to be modern art with Surrealism and abstract art and German Expressionism as sort of maverick fringes of this central core. So I began to work that way. I mean very much in my own way, very beautifully. None of the work exists, unfortunately. You know, I'd leave it at home and when the family would move they'd give it away or burn it, or whatever. I spent a year learning, let's say, French intimate painting very well. I did some of it from postcards of France. I did some of it from nature in Oregon. But it was hard to do in Oregon because Oregon is very foresty and Scandinavian, and all that French thing is based on everything being parks and mannered and manicured and transformed by man. To this day, I prefer that. I mean it's not accidental that I chose a place like this that has a park, instead of a farm where everything is just sort of at random.

PAUL CUMMINGS: While you were painting and teaching you kept on reading? You said you read a book a day for so long. What did you read? I mean anything, everything? Or did you have particular areas of interest that you followed?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. I've always been very thorough. For example, if I decided to read Greek tragedy I would read all the 37, or whatever it is, known Greek tragedies. Or if I decided to read André Gide I would read his complete works. Or Freud. Or Elizabethan drama. I don't know—at one time or another, I think I've read everything. I don't mean that vainly. It really was a kind of madness. But very thoroughly. I was a very good scholar. You know, I knew how to make bibliographies and footnote everything. It was very funny—what are we talking about?—at least 30 years ago, 35 years ago, there wasn't so much to read in one sense. Well, for example, at Harvard I took a yearlong seminar in the "Idea of Romanticism" with Lovejoy. My particular topic was Delacroix's Journal, somebody else had the Schlegel brothers, somebody else had Schiller, somebody else had Wordsworth, somebody else had Berlioz, and so on. The topic of the seminar was: "What is Romanticism?" So I read every book there was on the subject of "What is Romanticism?". And if you read them all it's amazing how few ideas there are, and how everybody is stealing from everybody else. So that if you really go about it thoroughly—which people very rarely do—in those days most humanistic subjects you could really master in several months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think just because of the proliferation of books there's a proliferation of ideas now? I mean do you think there are that many more new books with content on, say, that particular topic?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, yes. For example, I've been reading about Romanticism again this year in relation to an article I'm writing about Picasso, and there are several books written since then that are so infinitely superior in intelligence, research, everything, that it makes what I was able to read then, what existed, absolutely primitive—I mean rudimentary, childish almost. And I think in most fields—when AiKen and studied the theory of tragedy, say in the winter of '35-'36 or whenever it was, there were maybe 12 books. There may be 200 books now and, again, some of them are more brilliant than anything we could read except the classisc like Hegel and Aristotle and A.C. Bradley and so on. No, there's a definite qualitative difference. In the same way that in those days there were maybe five good painters in America and there are probably 200 good painters in America now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I want to talk about Matisse for a second because he keeps popping up over and over and over. What were the qualities in his work that appealed to you?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh God, I don't know any more than anybody else. You see, being an intellectual everybody would assume that I look at everything analytically. And it's really the exact opposite. I look at it—there is a total impression, there remains a kind of warm afterimage in my mind. Gorky, for example, used to very carefully analyze how a Kandinsky or Miró or Matta would technically do something. I never looked at that. I always looked at just the total overall effect. There's something about the—apart from the obvious sensuality and color and all of that—there's something in Matisse that is as remorselessly, relentlessly adjusted in terms of internal relations as somebody like Piero della Francesca. Most people don't that in him. But it's just as much there. That's why all painters really love him—well, not the only reason, but a reason. He's as strong as Piero. And it was that double aspect that I liked—the sensuality, and the color and the so-and-so plus this thing that is almost—well, Georges Duthuit wrote sometime—though I've never seen them—that "Matisse is as strong as the mosaics of Ravenna." And whatever he's trying to say by that, in my own way I also saw. And if that is a kind of classicism, that structural sense, then I have a classical side as well as a sort of modern immediacy and so on. Though I guess in relation to 1971 I'm purely classical. I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To go back to the University of Oregon, how did you like the teaching experience? This was your first—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I did. But you see, I'd been a student since I was 15 and to this day in many ways the student situation is the most normal social situation to me. I mean I'm living with a couple students now. I give lectures four or five times a year. I'm a Distinguished Professor at Hunter. I get along with students like a house afire because we're all open-ended. I have no difficulty with them because I do my own thing so that, you know, I'm not giving them a lot of information. I'm, like them, analyzing what life and art are all about, not from an authoritarian position but open-ended. What is it all about? And that's what they're interested in too. And I was always that way as a teacher and as a student.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you like the idea of teaching?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. But I don't do it very much because it takes the same energy as painting. In fact, I only did it this year because for the first time in 30 years I'm living in the country, and for the first time in 30 years I'm a bachelor and I thought, given those two big changes in my life, it might be very good for me to have a regular contact with New York that took me in all the time. It turns out that although I enjoy it I don't need it at all. If I'm suffering from anything it's from too full a life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For example, you came back after a summer in Aberdeen to New York, you sailed around through the Panama Canal. Was there a reason for that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. Everything at home was so awful that I had to get away and Columbia wasn't open yet so it was really a way of spending some time. I mean it got me out of California two weeks earlier. That was all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You only have one sister, right?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did she ever have any art interest at all?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. None.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, you came to New York and that fall you started at Columbia with Meyer Schapiro?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do with him? What did you study? And what was that like?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I took a course in the history of modern art with him, which was mainly about Picasso, and a course in Romanesque manuscripts at the Morgan Library. But I lived near him by chance, not on purpose. And being so innocent about how busy people are

in New York, I used to paint all the time and I'd go around to his house around ten o'clock at night once a week and show him my pictures. He was very nice to me. But finally in a very exasperated way—really as I would now if somebody were doing the same thing—he said to me, "Look, what you want to know, painters could tell much more quickly, and all you're dying to do is hang around painters, so I'm going to introduce you to some." And he introduced me to the Parisian Surrealists and set up for me to study with Kurt Seligmann whom he chose because he spoke English well, and was a highly cultivated man, and was willing to do it, and led a regular life. And so he set up that ostensibly I was studying with Seligmann. I did study engraving with him. I think I paid him $15 an afternoon or something. But actually the Surrealists were real comrades, a real gang, the only real gang of artists I've ever know. And so if you knew one, pretty soon, you'd know them all. Two or three times a week, they'd all have lunch together, they wandered the streets together and edited magazines together. So that within four months I knew them all. And was especially friendly with Matta, who was the only other young artist around, who was as enthusiastic as I was, and who also spoke English very well, and was more or less my age. Then that spring Matta and I and Bernard Reis's daughter and Matta's wife went to Mexico together for the summer. And it was there that I really seriously started painting. And wrote my father that I was going to quit school and paint. And by that time he was beginning to feel that everything might turn out all right, though he would die in the next year. So he said, "Fine, if that's what you want to do, do it and I'll give you your $50 a week."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there anybody in Meyer Schapiro's classes that you got interested in or involved with?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: There were several students that we talked a lot: Milton Gunde who has written the Italian letter for *Art News* all these years, and a couple of scholars. But you see they were all training to be art historians. And it's impossible to realize now how remote from most people lives, including art historians, modern art was then. It was as remote as say, the drug culture was ten years ago from most peoples' lives. I mean you knew it existed but you didn't know anybody involved in it. It was a remote thing. So I was very alone really. And the first two years in New York were hell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you live when you first came here, what part of New York?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: The first year in a thing called the Rhinelander Gardens which were old iron-balconied buildings on Eleventh Street—beautiful. I had a big room and a balcony and a garden in front. And in Mexico I fell in love with a Mexican actress and she came back with me. We took a little apartment on Perry Street for a year, and then moved to an apartment on Eighth Street facing MacDougal Alley and lived there for several years. Then I moved to East Hampton and built a house with a French architect out of a tiny inheritance my father had left me. I lived in East Hampton for four or five years. Then she and I were divorced and I moved back to New York. I became a professor at Hunter College so then I moved to the Upper East Side and lived there until just a couple of months ago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's one thing you said about the Surrealists being a gang, the only real gang of artists you've ever know. How do you think that's never happened with American artists, I mean even with The Club or the Cedar Bar on Tenth Street and any kind of vague group like that was never really closely knit—I don't think—as the Surrealists. Was it because they were all Europeans in New York?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think it was that and lots of other obvious things. But I think the main thing was that they had a collective ideology and that it was primarily a literary movement. So that there was an ideology to hold everybody together the way the young Communists might be a gang, or young Freudian analysts, or people who had a common field of interest that would have overcome all the individual differences. The Americans never had that because Abstract Expressionism as an ideology was only in my mind and in everybody else was their various ways of painting, so that it was much less clear that there was something in common. I imagine the Cubists had it for a moment, and it was wrecked by the First World War. I imagine the De Stijl people had it for a bit, and maybe the Russian Constructivists. I do think the war, and the displacement from Europe, probably made the Surrealist thing last longer. Because usually these movements or these gangs exist when you're young and trying to find yourself and need moral and physical support from other people, and then as you become married and settled and find your way they tend to split apart. But the Surrealists were so displaced that it went on well into middle age. And plus the personality of Breton. I mean it's the only movement I've ever heard of where everybody

acknowledged that there was a leader. And Breton was the leader. You know, it's inconceivable that Rothko, let's say, would—as Max Ernst, for example would—say, "yes, there is an intellectual leader that I believe in."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think because Americans have always been more independent? Or just never culturally had the possibility of thinking that way?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know—no, I think it's because Surrealism was a very complex intellectual ideology having to do with politics, psychology, poetry, painting, chance, magic, cards, that it was a whole vision of life. Where the other movements are much more technical and just painting technique is not enough to hold people together very long. That's what I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you ever think someone could develop as a theoretician like that in this country?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think English-speaking artists are basically anti-intellectual. So I don't see it. I think they're wrong to be anti-intellectual.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think they are though?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: The English tradition in general is anti-intellectual. You know, English philosophy has always been very empirical and matter-of-fact. The English tradition is to bumble through and to be very distrustful of somebody who is exceptionally brilliant or exceptionally fanatical or exceptionally ideological. And there's a certain wisdom in that, too. I don't know—I know I've suffered from it all my life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Don't you find there's also that kind of quality—particularly in American life—where even if one is intelligent you kind of find the hard way to do things? Because you don't do things easily, you don't do things simply. There's got to be an obvious or imposed or a real struggle. Maybe it has to do with frontier thinking.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It could be. And also there's a certain American impatience. The American reaction is: don't give me all that bullshit—I like orange, that's enough.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. I want it now.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I do wonder though about the whole development because, you know, there are younger painters who seem to be interested in different kinds of writing today.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, I do think it has changed a lot. I mean a guy like Robert Morris is a real intellectual. Probably Oldenburg is. I'm sure there are a dozen of them that are. And in my day that was inconceivable. And, of course, I was a freak on account of my peculiar background. And if I hadn't been gifted for painting, it wouldn't have happened for another 20 years probably.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about coming to New York? Because you were not involved with the WPA or any of those government things but many of the people that you met had been involved with them. Also that whole kind of American "scene" painting that was going on.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, I was not involved with the WPA. Well, for example, I used to go and look at the Whitney Annuals. Which were representative, as they still are, of what's going on, for better or worse. And I used to look at them appalled. You know, looked at Curry, Paul Cadmus, Guy Péne du Bois, John Carroll, all the people who were the reigning—Fletcher Martin—all the people who were the reigning stars of American art. And they used to look to me so parochial, so corny, so ugly, so nothing, that I couldn't believe it. I mean I really looked at it as: "The Emperor has no clothes." And there the Scot comes out in me. In the end there's something puritanically implacable about my mind if I really see something. And nobody could have convinced me that I was wrong. And actually I think I was right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think the problem was in those days? Was it the fact that there was so little awareness of European art, or intellectualization, or intellectual life?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know. Why don't Americans drink wine? Why don't they have bidets? Why don't they have three of the basic things that civilizations have discovered

make life a very comfortable, agreeable, and so on? They're foreign, so they won't take them. I mean, again, that's changed a lot since the jet airplane and people began to see it all. Or maybe—oh, I don't know—a couple of weeks ago I gave a lecture in Omaha and was arguing for internationalism. Two days ago I got a letter from a professor who was in the audience very angry saying that concreteness and so on, and mentioning Dostoevsky and God knows what all. I understood very well what he meant: that there's something beautiful in local things, in Greek customs, or Irish customs or Irish literature, or Spanish literature. Which I wouldn't deny for a moment. But let's say, the Americanism struck me as phony. You know, in the end if you attack Norman Rockwell—it's not that he's a bad painter. He's a very good painter, in his particular way. But the subject matter is a goddamned lie. I mean America is not like that. Reality is not like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he's painting a fantasy.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. And in that sense, the Soyers, painting their ballet dancers seem to me a goddamned lie. If what they meant was the Degas tradition, which is all that they could have meant, then it was clumsy, corny, colorless, ridiculous. But if they were great American painters, then there was something cockeyed with American painting that it was using such standards. And so on right down the line.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So much of it seems to harken back rather than looking at today or even looking forward.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sure. I mean I think there are two universals that one has to deal with. One is nature, I mean, just the universe. And the other is the culture of art. And any work made anywhere has to be able to stand against both, the way Cézanne would put one of his landscapes out in the field and see if it was as good as the field. And the other thing he probably wanted to do was put it next to a Poussin and see if it was as good as a Poussin. Those are primitive examples but, say, that's a way of setting up standards. What seemed to me appalling were the standards of American art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it was because of the artists? Or the criticism? Or the society? Or the kind of newness of painting in this country?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know. It's also true—I mean we're talking about the 1940s—it was equally true of Spain, of Italy, of everything in Eastern Europe, of Germany, England. There wasn't anything anywhere except in Paris, really. But that didn't mean that one couldn't use high standards the way Paris did. And actually, exactly what's happened in the last 30 years is that Americans have enormously raised their standards and Europe has enormously lowered its standards.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about studying engraving with Seligmann? How did you like that, and him, and the experience?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I enjoyed it very much but we both knew that he was taking me in, so to speak, for a few months until I somehow got a bit oriented. The real thing started when Matta who had an oedipal relation with the Surrealists—he both loved them and hated them—and was younger, he was my age—which is to say we were in our 20s—and they were in their 40s. He wanted to start a revolution within Surrealism, a movement. And he asked me to find some other American artists that would help start a new movement. It was then that Baziotes and I went to see Pollock and de Kooning and Hofmann and Kamrowski and Busa and several other people. And if we could come with something. Peggy Guggenheim, who liked us, said that she would put on a show of this new business. And so I went around explaining the theory of automatism to everybody because the only way that you could have a movement was that it had some common principle. It sort of all began that way. I realize now—and I don't mean this cynically—but that I was naive. I realize now that most of the interest of the other artists was not in the principle of automatism so much as in the fact that I had a connection with Peggy Guggenheim.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it was very practical.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. Their interest was practical, but I was talking theoretically all the time. Somewhere there's an interview with Matta in the last several years where he says "Bob was always talking about aesthetics." And what people don't understand is that he means that quite literally, that I was trying to lay the basis of a new aesthetic based on free association.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that the theory of automatism.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was that developed?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It was a Surrealist technique but it had all kinds of possibilities that had really never been developed. In those days of the sort of interest to us—Klee used that kind of technique, although he was not really a Surrealist; Masson and Miró and Arp were all doing it. It was doodling in one way or another but still with European classical composition and so on. You see, what I realized was that Americans potentially could paint like angels but that there was no creative principle around, so that everybody who liked modern art was copying it. Gorky was copying Picasso. Pollock was copying Picasso. De Kooning was copying Picasso. I mean I say this too unqualifiedly. I was painting French intimate pictures or whatever. And that all we needed was a creative principle, I mean something that would mobilize this capacity to paint in a creative way, and that that's what Europe had that we hadn't had. We had always followed in their wake. And I thought of all the possibilities, free association—because I also had a psychoanalytic background and I understood the implications—might be the best chance to really make something entirely new, which everybody agreed was the thing to do. You know, like Baudelaire says at the end of *The Voyage*: "Looking for the new." And it's all so obvious and yet nobody got it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sometimes the obvious is very difficult to see.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. I mean so obvious if you know modern culture. And I think in a way we all intended just to carry on the European thing. In fact, when the big American show was on at the Metropolitan, I remember Kramer writing in the New York Times Magazine that we were the true heirs to the École de Paris. Which is exactly how we started.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Talking again about the Surrealist group, which ones were you closest to or most involved with besides Matta?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Max Ernst, Duchamp—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Breton? He was here for a while, wasn't he?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. I knew them all well but probably the three I saw the most and knew the best were Duchamp and—you see, all three of them spoke English very well. All three of them then liked America—both Matta and Ernst changed later—and Ernst for a year was married to Peggy Guggenheim, who always rather liked me and my Mexican wife who was fantastically beautiful. Peggy always thought that we made a nice decoration at her parties and was very nice to us. Masson I liked very much but he lived in Connecticut and I rarely saw him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what about Duchamp? He was older than the rest of the people that you knew at that point, wasn't he? Or did that not make very much difference?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, nobody ever thought of ages really. Also simultaneously going around with Surrealists, I knew Baziotes very well. We were very close. And then during the '40s I slowly got to know Rothko, Gottlieb, Tomlin, Newman, Tony Smith, Herbert Ferber, David Smith. In fact it's hard to describe now but Matta from the European side, and I from the American side, were sort of liaison officers between these two camps that really didn't intermingle at all. Ultimately Gorky got drawn into the Surrealist camp, also David Hare, and Noguchi—who was in love with Matta's wife at that time. People nowadays have very little sense of how little intermingling there was. I mean everybody now knows that the European artists in exile were here during the war and they all assume that they were everywhere and that everybody saw them. It wasn't that at all. The Europeans mainly saw the Museum of Modern Art people and society people—not especially because they wanted to but they were sort of taken in hand that way. They were very alienated and very frightened. During the first three years of the war it looked as though the Nazis might very well win and that all of European civilization would collapse. And the Americans, on the other hand, had been on the WPA. Nobody would buy one of our pictures for $75 when a Dufy would sell for several thousand dollars. So on the American side there was a lot of bitterness and discontent, and so on. I suppose that the only person who throughout this period has moved equally well in both camps has been Calder, who also is the only one who has continually lived in France as well as in America. But there was very little connection. In fact I think it was a golden

opportunity that was largely missed. And then there was also Mondrian. He had half a dozen fanatical disciples. And there was Léger, ditto. There was Ozenfant running a school; Zadkine running a school. Who else was there? Lipchitz who was always mean to everybody. You know that famous photograph of the European artists in exile?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, at the Matisse Gallery.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. If it hadn't been for the war you never could have gotten those 15 men in the same room, but being exiled was even more important at that moment than the aesthetic differences. Everybody forgets everything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The thing that I find interesting is that Léger really spent a lot of time in the country and he didn't really take to New York from what I've been able to piece together.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, he had a studio there. I remember going to it. Actually, for one thing, all the Europeans worked very hard. They were much harder workers than the Americans. Secondly, they had no resources. They had to work in order to make a living. And where they were very lucky was that the best galleries—Curt Valentin, Pierre Matisse, Julien Levy and so on—were all for them, so that if they had the work they could immediately have shows at the galleries, make a living and so on. But they were in dead earnest because they were really up against it. And the main meeting place was the so-called Free French Canteen. Which was a sort of storefront that Pierre Chareau redesigned and where sort of high society Francophile Americans would provide wine and coffee. And on the Fourteenth of July there's be dancing and so on. But it was a kind of wartime Europeans-in-exile canteen and people would meet there in a very friendly way. You see, Paris—still at that moment in '40, '41, '42—was the queen of European culture. And so France became the symbol of the whole shooting match. Because Russia was Stalinist. Germany and Central Europe were Nazi. The English hadn't been very involved in the modern art scene. So it was everybody who was connected with Paris and therefore with the Free French Canteen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about your association with Duchamp? What brought you together? What was the mutual interest that developed the friendship, would you say?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, that's not the right way to put it. It was more that the Surrealists had constant enterprises: a big show, or publishing a magazine, or writing a manifesto, or publishing a portfolio to raise money for the poets. And so there'd be these gatherings of all of them. But I would more naturally find myself talking to Duchamp, for example, who was detached. After all, I was a scholar as well as an artist and also had a certain detachment. I'm not an ideologist at heart. Or I would talk to Max Ernst, who probably was the first painter before me to have a degree in philosophy and who was perfectly willing to talk about intellectual things—liked to—and who thought I had a lot of possibilities. He used to say to me, "You have a tremendous capacity to grow because you're always learning." Or I would talk to Matta because we were already beginning to figure out our "revolution" and so on. But also language. You see, I'm tone-deaf, so I speak so poorly anything but English. But also it was a matter of temperament. Tanguy would just get drunk and bash his head against the wall. Masson, who was very bright, didn't know one word of English and was all sort of self-contained and rarely there. Calas was there a lot but I never liked him and he didn't like me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was also sort of needling people.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No matter what he said, if he said "hello" you'd feel there something there.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, exactly. There was something very pretentious. And Breton was a very difficult person, whom I admired him but found very difficult. Seligmann was always very pleasant, but a little bit frightened in those situations. He was much less secure—rightly so—as an artist than the others were. There were group meetings. Matta then had a very beautiful American wife. And I remember once in somebody's studio, we were talking about bringing out the magazine. And there suddenly there was a terrible fight between Breton and Max Ernst. They were both standing screaming at each other. My beautiful wife, and Matta's beautiful wife, and somebody else had gone to Chinatown and had dinner and bought little wooden pipes, you know, that you play tunes on. At the height of this thing, these two beautiful girls came in piping little tunes on these pipes in front of everybody's

faces. Everybody broke into uproarious laughter except Breton and Ernst who, as I say, were still equally furious, but suddenly in a position where being furious was absurd. The girls had no idea of what was going on. It was all very much like that, I mean it was very human, very real, all of it, in a way that I understand humanism. Where when I would be with the American artists, it would be a lot of bitterness toward Europe, toward The Museum of Modern Art—which of course neglected us all then—talk about money all the time. It always struck me that the European artists never mentioned money, and the American artists talked about money 90 percent of the time. The Americans didn't want to talk about aesthetics. The European artists would always talk about ideas. I remember that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder why that is. I find that many artists that I know find it very difficult to talk about art in general or specifically, or their work, or other peoples' work.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Like you were saying earlier, the American artists want to talk about practical things. The European artists regard it the way an aristocrat does: it's vulgar to talk about practical things. Somehow you take care of them and it's your own business and your own way. At the same time, I think they're probably shrewder than Americans are about money but they never mention it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating. There seems to be this terrible problem. They do talk about money here all the time.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It also has to do with, I'm sure, American civilization. In that somehow in America to achieve something has to be confirmed by money whether you believe in it or not, because American civilization is so oriented that way it's unreal. And Europe is not that way. I mean a poor poet can be held in as great respect for what he is as a cardinal. And there's not that kind of support here. I mean I'm treated very well in Greenwich not because I'm a well-known artist but because I drive a Mercedes-Benz down the street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think people will every change their spiritual values here?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, I think it's one of the things the younger generation are trying to do. And I hope they succeed. And I think they might.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it will enrich the life a great deal.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, sure. And put everybody under much less abstract pressure. You know, certain people are designed to become rich. Most people are not. They would be much better off if their aspiration were something much more natural to them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They might end up accomplishing more.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Absolutely, and much more happily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start teaching at Hunter?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: In 1950.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you teaching anywhere in the '40s?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. Rothko and Baziotes and I had a one-year school but it was just in a loft with a dozen students.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about *VVV*, the magazine, and all those publications that seem to be appearing? You started writing reviews and all kinds of things somewhere in the '40s, started being published. Was that something you planned to do? Or was it something that happened?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It happened. I've never written anything in my life that I wasn't asked to write. It would never occur to me to just sit down and write something for the hell of it. But in those days everybody needed explanations. And so because I was the most highly-educated of the American artists, I became the guy who inevitably wrote whatever had to be written. And also probably I believed more in words than the others. I mean I'm aware of how terrible they are and also often attack them, but they're a real social weapon and anybody

ignores them at his peril.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, because people are trained to respond.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Exactly. And I think it's wrong that they are. But I think also it's wrong to ignore that they are.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the exhibition in the catalogue "The First Papers of Surrealism"? Because that was one of the great manifestations of that period. Did it mean something to be included in an exhibition like that? Or was it just something that one was in because of the circle? Because so often now you hear painters say, "Oh, So-and-So is doing X kind of exhibition and I've got to be in that"—for one political reason or another.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, no. It was the Surrealist family. As I remember, the only Americans in it were Calder, who was part of the international business; Man Ray who had been a Surrealist; Baziotes, and myself who were going around with the Surrealists; Bernard Reis's daughter, Barbara, who was also studying with Kurt Seligmann; and maybe one or two other young Americans—maybe David Hare was in it—I don't remember. But it was definitely just people who had daily contact with them who could be regarded as part of this family. Maybe Cornell was in it, and if Cornell was in it then it would have not been personal contact but that everybody recognized immediately that he was involved in a kind of magical poetry that Surrealism was interested in. Matta and I were both very strong advocates of him in those days when most people didn't pay any attention to him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did it take so long for people to think of Cornell?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, there were all those little indications of his presence here and there but nothing—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I really don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it because he made boxes and objects that weren't paintings or drawings?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I really don't know. He's a very difficult man. And he wasn't around that much. He's a kind of Captain Ahab. Misfortune really. It is so obvious that—you know, I used to say in those days, "He's the one American artist who could be set down in Paris and the next day everybody would get it." But nobody ever did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Baziotes? When did you get really involved with him, and how did that come about?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Matta introduced us. Baziotes was the only American artist that Matta knew except for me at a certain moment. One day, Matta and I went to Columbia to look at the models of mathematical objects which we regarded in those days as more beautiful than most modern sculpture. And there was a very nice young girl. Matta talked to her for a minute and then came back to where I was standing. I asked, "Who is that?" He said, "She's the wife of an American artist named Baziotes. Do you know him?" I said, "No." He said, "You should. I think you two would like each other." And he introduced us. And we couldn't be more opposite. Baziotes was from a Greek immigrant family from the ghettos of Reading, paranoid, trained at the National Academy, looked like George Raft, was interested in gangsters. We couldn't have been more different but we got along like a house afire. I mean, for one thing, I think I'm one of the few people that he was not paranoid about. It was perfectly evident that I had no angles at all.

[END OF TRACK]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side 3—February 21, 1972. Paul Cummings talking to Robert Motherwell in his house in Connecticut. Well, shall we just start by developing your involvement with the Surrealist group and the other artists as you met them in New York in the early '40s?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: What I meant to say is I don't remember anything of what I said before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that chronology sort of spells it out, in the modern art catalogue. But that was the beginning?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. But yes, 1941—and not all—but—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Most. That was the beginning. Who was the key person there as far as, say, introductions went?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Matta, who was very close to me in age, and had been in New York for several years, and had an American wife, and spoke English quite well. And at the same time as a South American had a parallel problem with North Americans, which is the whole problem of not being a colonial artist without becoming an expatriate like, say Henry James, and being totally absorbed by European culture. Also, I don't know whether I said it before: the Surrealists were the most closely-knit group of artists, I think that has probably ever been. If you knew one—as I did working in Seligmann's studio—presently everyone would pass through. And there would be many group dinners, group lunches, group enterprises, magazines, exhibitions, political issues, God knows what. But they were always continually consulting each other, so that to know one, if you were acceptable, it meant you were very quickly incorporated in the ambiance of not just one person but in the whole circle.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That never really happened with the American artists, did it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Certainly not to that extent. I think it's also unusual with Europeans—I think the reason it was possible with the Surrealists was they had an elaborate ideology and an elaborate series of methods, of methodology, so that there was something beyond personal affection or personal relations to relate to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also they had Breton as their guiding spirit.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes absolutely. But as Max Ernst always used to say—it was not that Breton was a dictator, though sometimes he seemed to be so—but, as Ernst said, he was Surrealism. So that to the degree that it was an ideological question, or whether or not somebody had a "Surrealist sense," he was the ultimate arbiter. And it must have been something peculiar to his own personality. I certainly don't know of any other group of European artists, or certainly any group of American artists, who would have accepted a poet as the arbiter of who was on the track, so to speak, and who was off.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But a poet more than, say a critic or historian?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, certainly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find people like Breton and Matta, and I think Duchamp comes in there at some period, does he not?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean was it possible to communicate? Or was it rather distant or difficult? Was it social?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, it was probably social but that wasn't the point. You know, maybe the most important Surrealist publication was a magazine called *Surrealism at the Service of The Revolution*, and if one searched for the lowest common denominator in all these relations I would think it would have to be that everyone in some sense, on some level—and the senses would differ and the levels would differ—that we were all involved in a revolutionary enterprise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? Because Surrealism had very political overtones at a certain point?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: In the generic sense of revolution, of changing, transforming, bringing about real historical effects, that that was the task for all of us. And different people conceived of it in different ways. That's what all the discussions were about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find the American artists at that time as aware of a sense of history as the Surrealists seemed to be?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. Not at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they—what—more involved with themselves? With their own work?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And with being beaten. I mean the American establishment then was Social Realism, and regionalism, mostly socially conscious things. Because this was the tail end of the Depression, so that they were an underground Modernist ghetto in relation to the prevailing American thing. And conversely, American collectors, museum directors, et cetera, in general could not conceive of an American being a first-rate modern—or abstract or however you want to put it—artist, so that the Americans were a closed enclave being shot at from both directions or rejected in both directions. I mean, imagine the feelings of a Pollock or a Rothko or whoever going to a Park Avenue apartment on the few occasions when one might be invited and seeing not only great European masterpieces by Picasso, Léger, and Matisse, and so on, but also seeing Dufys, and Vlamincks, and van Dongens, and God knows what all, as being held in a kind of a scene that none of use would be. So that it was a closed in, in many ways, paranoid-making situation, which meant that most of the Americans—there were a few exceptions—later on Gorky; David Hare; Noguchi, who was half-Japanese; myself, and—I don't know—a few others. But generally, the Americans were in a very standoff relation with the Europeans. The Europeans, on the other hand, were very much taken up by the American art establishment. They had the best dealers, they were entertained by the Museum of Modern Art, but had their own private drama, which was that in the early '40s, I guess until the end of '43, or maybe the beginning of '44, the Nazis were conquering everything and it looked as though Europe and a certain kind of humanism might really disappear. They were exiles in a foreign country. Many of them could scarcely speak English. Their main contacts with America were with first-class dealers or Park Avenue parties and so on. So they must have felt very strange. I mean I would feel very strange if I were in exile from America and my only contact with another country would be its upper crust, so to speak, instead of my own colleagues.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did they show much interest in American artists as they met them? Because some of them did, and some of them seemed to be rather aloof, from what one hears.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It differed with different people. For example, Ozenfant and Zadkine had schools here as they had had in Europe and in a certain way met American students and all the rest of it all the time. In those days, the most known form of abstraction is what we would nowadays call "hard-edged" abstraction. Both Mondrian and Léger were heroes to those people interested in that direction so that they had a little coterie of their own.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the American Abstract Artists group, wasn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. [Inaudible.] Lipchitz alone treated American artists with real contempt and indifference. There was a peculiar circumstance in that the Surrealists had as part of their aesthetic a real belief in young talent. I mean their heroes were Rimbaud who finished his work at 18, Lautréamont who committed suicide at 22 or 23, the early de Chirico who made his masterpieces in his 20s; and so on. So that a circumstance that was lucky for a few Americans at least was that the Surrealists were on the prowl for young talent. And Peggy Guggenheim was very influenced by them—at a certain moment she was married to Max Ernst—and listened very carefully. It was the Surrealist search for the new and the young that made the real contact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It sounds like such an American activity.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, very much. But I imagine a unique European activity. I can't imagine any other group of Europeans doing that. so in the end Peggy showed Pollock and Baziotes and myself and Gottlieb and Rothko, and Hofmann who was an old man but who had his first show when he was 60, and who in that sense was a young man, or a new artist. And she also, conversely, showed things from Europe for the first time: Giacometti's sculpture; I think she had the first show of European collages in America to which she asked Pollock and Baziotes and me to contribute and we did. Naturally, as youngsters, relatively speaking, we were delighted to be in a show where there was Max Ernst and Arp and Picasso and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get involved with Peggy Guggenheim? Was she just around, or did you meet her rather formally through someone?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: To tell the truth, I don't remember. But she often invited me—I think

partly because not having grown up in the New York art world but coming out of the university world, I didn't have any particular antagonism toward Europeans. I think partly because I was young. I was rather handsome and had a beautiful South American wife, an actress who was a Brigitte Bardot of her day. I think probably Peggy liked us as decoration, or whatever. And I didn't care what the terms were so long as I could talk and see and be with people that I was avid to learn things from. There were also ironic things. I remember one time at her place Tchelitchew, whose work I never particularly liked or esteemed, saying to me, "Are you a young painter? You look like one." And I said, "Yes." We were standing in front of a Tanguy—certainly a not very abstract Surrealist work—and his telling me that everything was in composition, and explaining to me the composition of the particular work, and my thinking: you're all wrong, composition takes care of itself. But I being a beginning painter could not say so. Or another time George Grosz telling me at length, impassionedly, that art is really illusion and describing seeing German theatrical shows of the kind that I had also seen in America when there was vaudeville when I was young. Somebody coming on a stage and smoking a white piece of porcelain and drawing in it the earthquake of Tokyo, and I've forgotten exactly what Grosz described but a certain moment—it must have been a snow scene—and then artificial snowflakes fell on the stage. And he said, "That's what art really is, that kind of magic." I remember my thinking to myself: you're absolutely wrong; that's a kind of magic but that's not the magic of painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Don't you think some of these were ploys on their part to kind of see what one was into, or interested in, or to fend you off of their own activity?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, I think it's more the opposite. It was probably that the social gatherings at Peggy's and at the Reis's and a few other people—it was one of the few moments that they felt expansive, taken care of, secure, respected, well-fed, well-dined. After all, they were political exiles and I imagine in many ways were quite frightened. And then, so to speak, in an expansive mood. Grosz with a cigar and having had a cognac and so on, as an act of generosity on his part would tell me what art really was. I don't mean that I was so talented or whatever, but I knew damned well the history of Cubism, the character of Matisse's art, the principles on which Modrian operated and so on, and from that standpoint what he was telling me about the snow falling on the stage in a provincial town in Germany was pure corn. But I was polite enough not to say so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, who of those people became the closest to you, as far as an artist you would talk to about those things?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Matta, Seligmann. I think Mondrian would have if he hadn't died. Which is to say among other things—with the exception of Duchamp who is unique—artists who were not French, not with that European sense of America being strange or vulgar or whatever, but artists who spoke English well, who took America for what it was, who were by nature extremely open and friendly and so on. Chagall lived in a world of his own. Berman went around with ballet people and that sort as Tchelitchew did. Léger simply went about his business painting his pictures and surviving. Zadkine ran his school. Masson in the three or four years he was here never learned one word of English and just passionately worked away in Connecticut. I mean it had nothing to do with me. I think it had to do with the difference between the ones who were very open and the ones who were very closed. And the ones I speak of I became friendly with because they were very open.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They were accessible and interested.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about *VVV* magazine? Weren't you involved with that at some point?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about? Because there weren't a lot of issues of that, were there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. I'll tell you what I remember—and there's a lot I don't remember. In France before the war, I think Skira—but I'm not sure—published an extremely elaborate deluxe art magazine called *Minotaure* that increasingly became a vehicle for the Surrealists. The Surrealists were proselyters [ph]. Which the other artists weren't at all. They very badly

wanted a vehicle here. Through hook and crook, slowly some money was raised. The actual editor was André Breton who always was the chief of everything Surrealist. I think Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst if I remember were associate editors. But the Surrealists had a feeling—not really realizing that artists in America are not taken very seriously—that they were politically radical, et cetera; they were aliens, exiles, et cetera; and that there should be, ostensibly, an American editor. There was also some effort to get some Americans to contribute. William Carlos Williams, and so on. And so for a time I accepted the role simply to help them out. Then one day it became clear to me in an angry discussion in French—which I only partly understood—that they had also assumed that I had American connections and could raise some money. Which I didn't have, and couldn't. Then I got furious and resigned. And then the compromise was that Lionel Abel and I co-edited. And then what transpired is Abel, who had no job, no money, no anything, asked for the colossal sum of $25 a week simply in order to exist while he was gathering the manuscripts and all the rest of it. And again, they got furious at that and fired him. Then I said, "I resign." Then David Hare who had, I think, an independent income, agreed to be the nominal editor. Something very interesting to me that always amuses me is, the name came from the fact that they wanted to invent a 27th letter in the alphabet. And in French, W is double V (VV). And so they hit on the idea of having triple V (VVV) as the 27th letter. And Breton also didn't know a word of English. And as sort of their American adviser, lieutenant, liaison officer, I pointed out to him that for reasons I didn't understand, double V in English is pronounced double U, so that it would not translate; in English you would have to call it triple U when nevertheless the sign was three V's and it really wouldn't work. He would not accept that it wouldn't work. And it used to confuse everybody. People didn't know whether to say V-V-V or triple V or triple U or whatever. But if it were literally transcribed into English the proper title would have been triple U. And the fact that they chose V—with the way that English-speaking people say V—made it not translate. Which is to say, if you said triple U as the name of the magazine, immediately Americans would have got the point. But it was always called triple V and nobody got the point. It seemed senseless.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's like the classic V-U-V combination.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's incredible. Did you get know David Hare through this? Or did you know him before or does he fit in here at all even?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I never knew him well. Only in connection with things like this. At Peggy Guggenheim's, I think he had the show just before mine or just after—no, it must have ben just before because Baziotes had the one just after. And we were the same age, you know, a man to talk to, but we were never comrades at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it was the end of 1941 or thereabouts that you painted *The Little Spanish Prison*, which seems to be a key picture of that period. What is there about that painting that you feel is so important at that point, say, as it changed or remained subsequently?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Actually, it was the first year I began to paint seriously. Before that I was a student who painted on the side. And I would imagine that that was the first picture in which I hit something that is deep in my character, as two years later when I made my first collages, I hit something else that is deep in my character, and as seven years later in making the first *Spanish Elegy*, I hit a third thing that's very deep in my character. But what it is I don't know. What it stands for I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is part of everything. After the collage show with Peggy Guggenheim, there was a nearly total black—or totally black painting. How did it derive that it was getting more and more colored over that way?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, the black paintings were much later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: '43?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, no. 20 years later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's something in there about that. It's out of order then. In '44, I think it was, you started the *Documents of Modern Art* with Wittenborn. How did that develop? Was that an interest of yours? Or did it develop through Wittenborn?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, all my life next to paintings, I've liked books the best and have always or for many years, decades, haunted bookshops, secondhand bookshops, any kind of bookshop, looking for things that interested me. I always ran up staggering bills at bookshops. During college because I knew the stock so well would be hired during the busy Christmas season to be an employee. I would pay off the bills that way. And when I have attacks of anxiety, which I do all the time—as all artists do—one of the ways I alleviate it is to go to a bookshop and browse. In the '40s, the most pleasurable place to browse if you were interested in art was Wittenborn's and Schultz's Bookshop which was on the floor above Curt Valentin's gallery, which was also the best gallery then. And I used to go in and look at things by the hour and talk to the people who came in. I'd talk to Wittenborn and Schultz and so on. Like most painters, I'm a very poor linguist and I often used to be upset that there would be something in French or German or Italian that I couldn't read. One day we were talking about it and somehow out of the air came the idea that we should put all these things, or as many as we could, into English. And we just shook hands on it. And Schultz, who was later killed in a transatlantic plane accident and who was the deepest book lover of all, insisted—and I had no reason to disagree—that Apollinaire's *The Cubist Painters* would be the first volume. We all agreed that all the books should be by artists themselves. Wittenborn had the feeling that they should be only in paperback. He thinks books are too expensive, which I agree. But it was too premature. And they weren't publishers; they were a small art bookstore publishing some books and it was too big a problem for them to take on by themselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you did quite a number of books over the years.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, we did 12 or 13. Then when Schultz was killed in the plane, I think Wittenborn and Schultz were partners and I think Wittenborn was in the economic position that he had to pay off Schultz's estate and there was no capital left. Also Wittenborn literally and deeply believed in astrology—this was in 1950, I think—and had my chart read by a very famous astrologer—to my diffidence—and the astrologer predicted seven terrible years for me. And I think that also affected Wittenborn's decision not to continue. And ironically the astrologer was absolutely right. That year I entered into a disastrous marriage, which presently nearly paralyzed me as a painter. But during those years I was a professor at Hunter College and did very well there. And I think I would have done very well editing. But, anyway, through Schultz's unfortunate death, the wrongness of the stars, and so on, the thing came to an end. Several years ago, Wittenborn came back to me and wanted me to begin again. But I didn't want to be subject to astrology again so I went with Viking instead.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've liked doing the series, though?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, sure. It's been a marvelous hobby for me. I like to think about what art is. I think one has to in modern times.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? Do you mean generally?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I mean: what is it? I mean the whole problem of modern artists. Which is to say the whole problem of artists when art is not a tribal expression, which modern art is not. What is it? And I would rather think about what artists I respect think than what anybody else thinks, and so in making their work available to myself, I also as a by-product, if you want to put it that way, published them for everybody else, too. There are many Americans in the same position.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the teaching? Did you start that at Hunter?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, there was the school that Rothko, Baziotes, and David Hare and I had together for a year. Then I had a school of my own for a year. But in both cases we didn't make enough except to pay the rent and the heat and so on. And then I was offered a job and simultaneously had married a woman with a child and presently was to have a couple of my own, and for the first time was in a situation where I was responsible for four people and it was really necessary to take the job. And I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that the two previous schools were useful experiences? Or were they just looking for something that really didn't develop properly?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: They didn't develop at all in the way one hoped. But there was an extraordinary by-product of the group school. Which was that originally Clyfford Still was also to be one of the teachers. We had arranged it that each of us would teach one day so that,

say, Baziotes would teach on Monday; Rothko Tuesday; David Hare Wednesday; myself Thursday; and Still Friday. At the last moment, for reasons I've never known, Still dropped out and went back to California. So there was a blank day, and to fill that blank day we began to invite other artists—de Kooning, Reinhardt, Harry Holtzman, I don't know who all—to come and instead of teaching to give a lecture in the evening. We were very anxious that the school not be doctrinaire, that those of us who were teaching be regarded as individuals, and that the students be regarded as individuals. Those Friday evenings, as they came to be called, became the magnet, the center, for everybody in New York who was interested in the avant-garde to come to. Originally it was just for the school. Then people would call up and say, "Can we come, too?" And pretty soon we were renting a couple of hundred chairs and so on. We were so poor then that the pay for whoever gave the lecture was to be taken to dinner and given a bottle of his favorite liquor. In those days we all drank 75-cent sherry. But if he wanted a bottle of Scotch or whatever it was we got it for him, and seven dollars was like $700 for a lecture now. Then that whole tradition went on and became the famous Club and so on. But that was pure chance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you active in The Club once it turned into The Club?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. The Club really began just about the time I became a professor at Hunter and was married with a child and had more children and had to live a regular life. The essential nature of The Club was for bachelors, for guys to get together—although that's not a fair way to put it. But if you're carrying on a complete life and having to keep regular hours, which I used to have to, then to go out in the evening for six hours and drink and talk was less reasonable than it was before. I think The Club must have started in about 1950. And it was that year that I married.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were at Black Mountain one summer?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Two.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Two summers. Was that through Albers? Or someone else?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember anything about Black Mountain that might be pertinent or illuminating about that place? Did you like it as a summer experience?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. I mean in those days I couldn't afford to go anywhere for the summer. They paid $100 a month to distinguished visitors and they themselves had an income of $25 a month. But it was in the mountains and it was sunny and there were marvelous guys there. And it was a way of getting a break from New York and at the same time going to a place that one would not feel alienated from. Black Mountain more than any place was the avant-garde college that Americans had. Reed College in Oregon wasn't then. Bennington wasn't then. But Black Mountain really was. And since my whole commitment was to the avant-garde, nothing could have been more natural, given all the circumstances, than to go there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any particular people there that interested you, as far as the students that you remember?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Among my students were Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Francine du Plessix Gray, and others. Apart from my classes—it was a very small community—the thing I remember with the greatest pleasure and realest contact was the baseball games we played on Sundays. I remember—what's his name who had the press in North Carolina—a poet—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Jonathan Williams?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes, Jonathan Williams. He was a superb centerfielder. I remember Joel Oppenheim pitching. I remember Charles Olson playing first base with a tremendous beat. I remember Dan Reis, a marvelous catcher. I remember Fielding Dawson egging us all on with Southern whoops, and so on. And there, it's odd, in a funny way the baseball games, all the various areas, camps, blue jeans, Brooks Brothers, whatever it was, it all suddenly was flattened out and we were all just playing a marvelous game together and having a ball. We did that every Saturday and Sunday.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you found the summers interesting there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. Oh, yes. I loved the place. The second summer I was there the place was falling apart economically, spiritually, and every way. They supported themselves by having a big farm and had their own milk and corn and so on. I remember passionately arguing to them that the essential nature of the place was an avant-garde college, that the natural place to draw on would be New York, and that they should sell this place in North Carolina—everybody in North Carolina hated them—and get a big farm on Long Island and that they'd have no difficulties at all. Which I'm sure is true. Then they would be a celebrated place now. But it had reached the standpoint of internal friction, argument, decadence, that nobody could listen to anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the local community? Did you get involved with it and meet any those people?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, Black Mountain was really a farm on—I don't know whether it was a mountain or a hill or whatever. But I remember very clearly the first time I was there was either during the war or right after the war when rationing was on. The closest town was Asheville, which is, I gather, a rather aristocratic Southern town, in a way like Greenwich here. You couldn't get cigarettes. And I remember going into a drugstore to buy something and seeing cartons of English Players cigarettes, which I like. I like practically all cigarettes. And saying, "Could I have a pack of those?" And the guy saying, "You can have as many as you want." This was at a time when you had to bribe somebody to get one package. I think I had enough money with me to buy three cartons with me—which I bought them. When my stretch was over there, on the train going back to New York, which was filled with soldiers, and many of the cars non-smoking. It was the old-fashioned kind of train where there was a sort of bathroom with a little foyer with a bench where you also could sit and smoke and shave and so on. And I remember going back there and smoking. And there was a big fat Southerner maybe shaving there. He saw me take out the Players package, which is a cardboard one where you shove the cigarettes out, unlike an American package. He asked, "What are those?" I said, "English cigarettes. Would you like one?" He said, "Yes." He took one and we started talking, and he asked me what I was doing, or whatever. I told him I had been teaching at Black Mountain and I was on my way back to New York. He immediately flew into a rage that it was a bunch of what now we would call hippies, homosexuals, New York Jews—I don't know what all. I got up and left. And from things I've heard afterward, I would have the feeling that the whole community around felt that way. That this was a hippie camp or whatever, that they wished to hell everybody would pick up and get out. From that standpoint, Long Island would have been much more reasonable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had one show with Peggy Guggenheim, right?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And after she closed you went to Sam Kootz?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did she arrange that? Or he or you? Or how did you get involved with that gallery?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: He arranged it. I don't know the exact details. I have the impression that he had been in advertising, in public relations, all kinds of things. Anyway, at that particular moment, which must have been at the end of '44 or early in '45, he decided that he wanted to start a gallery and that since he had no financial backing, they would have to be young artists, they would have to be modern artists. I think his favorite artist in Europe was Léger. He liked strong, masculine, semi-abstract artists. The only inducement he could have would be to pay the artists. So he offered us 200 bucks a month for our complete works which had to be a minimum of 75 works a year—drawings, watercolors, paintings, et cetera. It also was the end of the WPA. It was the one chance to be supported—difficult as the terms were—entirely by one's own work. I insisted I wouldn't go unless he took Baziotes, too, who was desperate. He was reluctant to, but finally did. He also took Gottlieb, Hofmann, David Hare, Carl Holty, somebody else, I forget who. And he started the gallery. Peggy, as a corollary, had always made it very clear that she really wanted to live in Europe and that the day the war was over, she was going to move the whole damn thing back to Europe. Her gallery was originally meant to be in London, and she didn't know whether she was going to take it back to London or where. As it turned out, she took it back to Venice. She always very clearly said to us, "I will help you as long as I'm here in whatever way I can, but the day I go

you're on your own." And I think it was only Pollock that she made some kind of arrangement to take care of. The rest of us were really on our own. Nearly everybody who had showed with her went either to Kootz or to Betty Parsons.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find the experience in that gallery over the years, or for a while?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, God, that's complicated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, was it difficult? Was he demanding, or not?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know—I imagine the experience differed with different people. One thing was, because he had so few artists, you had to have a show every year. I'd only been painting two-and-a-half years when he got me and wasn't that experienced. I think in my first two shows I really tried too hard to meet his demands. From that standpoint it was bad. It was in fact really awful for an inexperienced artist to tie himself up, that willy-nilly he was going to produce so much work. But one has to balance that with the fact that he was the only person in the world who would have paid us anything at all to go about painting and the fact that from his point of view the more we painted the better. I also think in a certain way that he was something of a hero—he also had bad faults—but he was something of a hero in that he was really the first person who took it upon himself to convince the American art establishment that modern American artists were also worthy of recognition. And he fought like a tiger for that. He was also totally unfinanced, had to borrow money from Chinatown at fantastic rates of interest, maybe 12 percent a month. He was always desperate. And in that sense there was much, much, too much pressure on us, on him, et cetera. On the other hand, it gave him a drive that Betty Parsons, for example, who is a great lady, who had connections—on the modest scale that she operated I think probably always could have got sufficient capital—was not hungry enough. There was a certain moment maybe,I don't know, '49 or '50 ,when Kootz had closed, that Betty Parsons really had, of that generation and that milieu, all of the greatest artists in America. And she lost them all because she couldn't provide enough for anybody to pay the rent. She also had dozens of other artists that she knew socially or God knows how all. Everybody loved her but one would have to be in the position of being able to afford her. Which none of us could.

[END OF TRACK]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Side 4. It's very interesting that Betty Parsons did have all those people in her gallery and they eventually all drifted away, and really it was for financial reasons I guess ultimately.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Or survival reasons. I mean, nobody has any conception of how poor we all were then. I remember as late as, maybe '55, you know, after the so-called triumph of Abstract Expressionism Rothko saying to me, "If somebody would pay me $500 a month for all my past work"—which constituted hundreds of pictures—"plus everything I'll make in the future, I would gladly accept it in order to survive." I remember looking him in silence because we knew—and this is in 1955—that nobody in the world would pay him $6,000 a year for his total output; and he was married with a child in the most expensive city in the world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think the problem was as far as patronage and collectors were concerned?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: The position in the '30s and '40s was that if you were a modern artist and any good you were by definition a European.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that un-American or anti-American?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, it was like wine. If wine is any good it's French. Or if cooking is any good it's French. It's inconceivable that an American can make a masterpiece. And, okay, certainly people like Matisse and Picasso and Miró and so on are gigantic figures. But for us on the few occasions when we were invited to a collector's house to see not only those but the most chichi Dufys and the most dis-integrated Vlamincks, or whatever, also held up as way beyond our capacities would fill us with a depression and an anger—which are the same thing—that one can't imagine. At the same time, the American scene was equally hostile to us because if, as we thought, to make an authentic gesture without any a priori idea of how it would turn out, was the real gambit, then everything—"hard-edge" abstraction

with its ideology, Social Realism with its ideology, regionalism with its ideology, landscape painting with its sentimentality, portrait painting with its class background, anything you could imagine—was equally threatened by our premise. So that if the Europeans didn't know we existed, and the collectors who collected Europeans didn't know we existed, all other American artists hated us as one man—as probably the only coalition there's ever been from left to right among American artists—was against Abstract Expressionists. Alfred Barr told me this with astonishment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did he say that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, years ago. Maybe 1950 something—'52, 20 years ago, let's say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, the thing that was so difficult is that the personalities and the imagery and things are so different. There was no one uniting force like Breton, or no one particular critic.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, but there was a united ideal, and that was that American painting no longer be colonial. And everybody attacked the problem in his own way. And by God, that we succeeded in. Partly because, unexpectedly, simultaneously, the great School of Paris collapsed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you had no idea that you were going to be the alternative?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It never occurred to us. I think Clement Greenberg had an inkling in '44 that it could be that. I don't think it occurred to any of us. What occurred to us was that if there were an international exhibition, we would like to have work that on international terms would stand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, in other words, it wasn't necessarily a national—it was more an international—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, absolutely. I remember talking to Pollock about it once. In effect he said, "One's nationality takes care of itself." And he was right. But certainly all the ideals were—Oh, hell, and there's nothing unique about it. Paris was great before the Second World War because it was the international meeting place. Munich was great before the First World War because it was an international meeting place. I mean the German Expressionists, the French Cubists, the Dutch De Stijl group, all the rest of it, couldn't have cared less about nationality. It was to try to find some universal, modern principles. And we were engaged in the same enterprise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there wasn't a direct awareness? Or was it after the fact? Or was it just undefined?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It was undefined but always there. Always there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about Greenberg? He was one of the few people who was writing about—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Because he was the only critic with an eye. I mean I disagreed with him about many things but he had a painter's eye. And none of the other critics did; not one. So as a direct intuition he got it right off the bat, and being a critic, not being filled with our kind of anxiety, traveling around, probably saw it in much better perspective than we did. And it occurred to him from the beginning that this was going to be of international consequence. As it turned out to be. The BBC guys who were here today—the other day when I talked to them they told me that in England if you talk to the man in the street about Cubism or Fauvism or Surrealism or Futurism they look sort of dim, but you say "Action Painting" and immediately whatever the image is, there is an image and they know who you're talking about. You see, I think we had no conception of the impact it made outside. To put it another way, the danger of modern art is to become decoration. And in France after the war it did. And if there's anything that is abstract and anti-decoration, it's Abstract Expressionism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about that term, though? There are so many stories about that.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It's so logical it's unbelievable. Which is to say, let's say in 1944 or '45, whenever it came into use, generally abstract art in America meant what we call "hard-edge" abstraction now. Expressionism meant highly emotional art. So obviously, confronted with Abstract Expressionism, that kind of painting, which was both abstract and highly emotional, it would be an absolutely logical two terms in that particular context simply to describe what one is referring to. I mean ultimately at the end of 1949 and the beginning of '50 I invented the term "School of New York." Because I was asked to write the preface to the first showing of it on the West Coast and in trying to find common denominators among the various people, including some people that we now would not regard as Abstract Expressionist, I realized that one couldn't make aesthetically a common denominator, but that what everybody did have in common in the sense that there was a School of Paris or in those days a Boston School of Jewish Expressionist painters, there was a New York School. But the word "New York" was meant in another sense. To say there is no such thing as Abstract Expressionism. They're a collection of individuals working with certain aspirations or whatever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were in the Fourteen Americans show at The Museum of Modern Art in 1946?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was one of the Dorothy Miller "number" exhibitions.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find that that exhibition which also had some Newmans, I think, and Rothkos, and some others—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, no, they were years later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they later? Yes. But did you find that that exhibition did anything useful for you as far as people being able to look at what you were doing? The fact that it was in a museum and the whole museum edifice was there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I really don't know. I have no way of judging. You see, an artist's relation to the exhibition of his work extremely indirect, remote. I imagine I've had as many museum shows as any American artist, 30 or 40 or something. Maybe twenty times in my life has anybody every said anything to me about one of them. It's that remote.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? That's extraordinary.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about your own feelings, though, seeing these exhibitions?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Most of them I never went to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about the Museum of Modern Art retrospective one? That Frank O'Hara wrote about. Was that a more meaningful exhibition? It certainly was a large survey.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, God—I think it was the first time I ever confronted the practicalities of human existence and I was 50. Which is to say I was no child. And it was awful. Well, for example, the last show I had at Marlborough in '69, three years ago—well, less than three years ago—was of huge paintings. So large as Marlborough is, we could show only 15 or 16 or 17. I sent 40 pictures over and was quite sure that I would show, say, 13 of them and that it would be a question of what the 14th, 15th, 16th one would be. As it turned out, out of my original selection only three were shown when we tried to set up the ensemble. The ones I thought in my mind would work well together didn't at all. Well, in the same way when O'Hara and I were working on the Museum of Modern Art show, we'd go through all the photographs and say, yes, that one is important. And I also made an agreement with him, which he violated. The Modern Museum asked me who I would like to have as the curator in charge of my show. O'Hara had never put on a show but he was a poet. And what I didn't want was a historical show but a show of what I thought, within the boundaries of my work, were the most radiant works. And I thought I'd have a much better chance with a poet than with an art historian to bring it about that way. In fact, O'Hara, maybe because it was his first show, fell right back into the art historian thing. So that we

chose—I don't know—120 pictures or something, many of which for historical reasons. When they were all together and we were trying to assemble it in a terrible gallery—I had the first show in that Philip Johnson wing with no windows, no anything—it's like being in the middle of a pyramid. I realized that 30 percent of the pictures, or 20 percent, or whatever, shouldn't be there. And then I confronted reality. I said, "Let's just put those out. We made a mistake. We were guessing. We guessed wrong there." And it was pointed out to me that we couldn't put any of them out; that the pictures had been borrowed from lenders and the lenders, in their vanity, would be mortally wounded, would say to the Museum: You asked me to lend my picture, now when you get it there you discover it's not good enough. And so we had to put the whole goddamned thing on. Which very badly hurt it; which is to say with any show or with a picture itself you edit it. And I was put in a position where I could not edit anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean "edit" the picture itself? In what way?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, you can have a beautiful passage in a picture and want to retain it at any cost and ultimately realize that, beautiful as the passage is, it's hurting the picture as a whole, and then you paint it out. Or you paint a lousy picture and you burn it. Or whatever. Photographers do the same thing. They crop, they tear up, they throw away. Writers revise, change, get the galleys back, cut certain parts off. I mean, it's part of the creative process. I was put in a position with the most important show of my life, perhaps probably the most important show I will ever have, and not being allowed to edit at all. So that though it was marvelous that it happened at that institution that I love above all other institutions, it was not the show I wanted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I get the feeling that you were more interested in an aesthetic or an art experience exhibition than one that would document the whole—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Absolutely. Because that's the point of art. The point of art is to have an aesthetic experience. I mean not to look at somebody's biography. Unless the subject matter is history or something, which my art certainly is not. I mean my art is about feeling organized in a certain way, and there's no point in showing anything that doesn't do that at its maximum intensity. And that's all I wanted the show to be. Then the exhibition went to London. And I wrote Robertson who was putting it on, and whom I know; I said: "For God's sake, take out 30 percent of the pictures." He wrote back, "Thank God, you know what you're doing." Then it went to Continental Europe. Later I met one of the people who put it on in Europe—I don't remember whether it was Milan or Amsterdam or Brussels, wherever—and he said, "My God, you're a peculiar artist. You wrote us not to show some of your pictures." He couldn't believe it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did they have to take the whole group of them from the Modern?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they could select out of that then?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, theoretically they were supposed to show it as it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the late 1940's you began the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series. Was that title an afterthought on looking back at things?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you develop that? What is it based on?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sometime in the 1940s—I forget when—say, about 1947, when I was still editing books with Wittenborn and Schultz, they told me that they'd like to put out an annual about the current scene and would I edit it. I said sure; but I think it should be broader than just painting and sculpture, and that it was too great a responsibility and too great a demand on my time to do it single-handed. I said that I would be glad to do it if I could have some co-editors. They said, "Fine. Who do you want?" I suggested a French architect-in-exile Pierre Chareau—with whom I had worked several years building a studio in East Hampton—as the architectural editor. John Cage to deal with music and dance. And Harold Rosenberg to deal with literature. And I would do the painting part. They found that agreeable. We brought out an issue.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was "Possibilities"?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It was called "Possibilities." Then we were working on the second issue. And Harold who in those days regarded himself as really a poet—he was doing these other things incidentally the way I've always regarded myself as really a painter and doing these other things incidentally—he wrote a very powerful, brutal, I would think Rimbaud-inspired, poem. We agreed that I would handwrite the poem in my calligraphy and make a drawing or drawings to go with it and it was to be in black and white. So I began to think not only about getting the brutality and aggression of his poem in some kind of abstract terms but also that this was going to be reproduced in black and white. I worked for weeks getting the amounts. Really, in painting the whole issue of quality is quantities, is the amounts of black and white or thinness or thickness, fluidity, and whatever. I really conceived something that worked beautifully in black and white. It must have been at that time that Schultz was killed in the airplane and the whole project was dropped. I stuck the thing in a drawer in East Hampton. A year or two later I moved to New York to a little studio on Fourteenth Street. One day while unpacking I came across it and was able to look at it with detachment. And thought: God, that's a beautiful idea; I should make some paintings on the basis of that kind of structure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This was on your black and white structure?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. And began to. And then one day I realized there was something really obsessional about it, that I would probably make many; that it had taken on a life of its own; and that it would not any longer be legitimate to refer it merely to Harold's poem which indeed was the original impulse; that it might indeed turn out to be possibly the main statement I would make in painting and therefore I would like to connect it with something that, through associations, reverberated in my mind as completely and as widely as the concept itself. And belonging to the Spanish Civil War generation, I thought of that. I think maybe there was a transitional moment where I thought if it's going to refer to poetry it should be to Lorca. In fact, the first *Elegy* was originally called "At Five in the Afternoon" from the refrain to Lorca's poem, "The Death of the Bullfighter" [Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter]. Then one of the few times in my life that a lot of people talked to me about a picture was that picture, and they would say, "I saw the most beautiful picture by you. I can't remember exactly the title. It has something to do with the cocktail hour or something." And suddenly I realized that five in the afternoon in New York means not the death of a bullfighter but a martini. And then I began to grope for a more generalized expression. The original ones were subtitles, I mean *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* and then in parenthesis, Grenada, or whatever. And then that began to raise questions: does it really look like Grenada, and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's relationship to the main title.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. So I finally dropped that. And I don't regret it. I mean to me subjectively in the sense that for us, though the Spanish War was an issue of black and white, of life and death, an overture to the Second World War which we all knew was coming, and all the other things that are obviously involved, no, I don't regret doing it. I also suffered a lot. I've always been politically independent. I've never belonged to a political party. And for years it was taken for granted that I was a Communist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, because of the series.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. I mean it was just assumed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had other series of paintings?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, sure. The *Je t'aime* series, the *Beside the Sea* series, *Lyric Suite*. I think what happens is that when you hit something that seems a true expression of one's self, it's mysterious to one's self why that particular configuration rather than another one is, and one begins to investigate, mucking around, trying it in different ways, trying to find what one's own essence is and worry it and worry it and worry it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that implies then that you feel these are major streams of activity, right?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, sure. I mean I happen to be an anxiety-ridden person. I think if for 10 days in a row I awakened feeling radiant, I would begin to try to find out what is it that makes me feel radiant and hang on to it. And in that sense, the original thing in the series is a sense of one's real potence. And that's a real preoccupation of any human being: what is it

that's really making me so potent?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was the *Je t'aime* series the first one where you used words in the paintings?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. There's an early collage with "Viva" in it. No, I'm sure there were many before. You see, I never was really a Surrealist but I did go around with them for two or three years and picked up a lot. And certainly one of the things, generally speaking, was a belief that there's something marvelous about painters and poets together, that they're involved in different media but in a very parallel enterprise. And secondly, the Surrealists all the time used words interchangeably with blocks of color, or certain shapes, and so on, and it was I guess in a literal sense a lingua franca. And I took that for granted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it was very uncommon for American painters to use words in a painting?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL; Yes. But if I may say so, in that sense I'm a very uncommon American painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the reaction like from other painters when they saw the words appearing in the canvases?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I only know of one, which is devastating. Last year I was waiting in Bill Rubin's office to see him about something. He was late so I looked on the table and there was this catalogue to Frank Stella's show, which I had never read. I began to look at it. Suddenly I came across my name and *Je t'aime* and a footnote. I looked in the rear of the book at the footnote and it turns out that Stella had made a series of pictures with some really Pop title like "Purple Lips I Love You" or something and Stella had told Rubin that this was a parody of my *Je t'aime* series and that was how it occurred to him to do it. I don't know the exact words we could look it up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But in the collages there are a lot of words because there are printed pages and things. Do you use words, or are they just considered shapes or colors? Do the words mean something when they're visible and apparent?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, at times in my life when I painted I would play certain pieces of music again and again. I remember painting a whole show in which I continually played Mozart's *Requiem Mass*. I remember another show when I made the *Homely Protestant*. I was very friendly with Joseph Cornell then who had an equal interest with me in French culture. One day he sent me a postcard that he had found a recording by Berlioz—who was really unknown here then—called *Harold in Italy,* and that I should get it. And I got it, the recording, where William Primrose plays the viola. I played that like mad all winter. Every time I turned it on something would move in me. It was in the same way that Delacroix, who I used to be an expert on, used to have people read Dante to him, or whatever, when he was painting. Another thing I often do is obsessionally read a book of poetry during a period. There was a period where I had a book of Paul Eluard's poems. It was in a moment when I was very unhappily married, teaching at Hunter, feeling very lonely, very uptight. In one of the poems there was a line "Jour la maison nuit la rue," meaning "In daytime at home, at night in the streets." And that was exactly my miserable life at that time. I would stay home in the daytime and paint and by nighttime I couldn't stand it anymore. I'd wander the streets, go to the Cedar Bar, drop in on Rothko, go to Times Square, or go to a movie, or I don't know whatever. So that no, the phrase was not a decoration but a declaration. The *Je t'aime* series was done about the same time when I was equally miserable. People used to think I must have fallen in love and that's why I was painting them. It was the exact opposite. It was really a cry that I would like to love, and probably an incorrect thing. I also wrote it in such a way that certain French people thought it said, "I'm hungry," j'ai faim. Then everybody said: okay, you don't know French very well really; you like lot of French things; why don't you write it in English? But there's such a thing as artistic distance, and if I had written, "I love you," it would have had what nowadays what we would call a "Pop quality" that I didn't want. Whereas in a foreign language it was exactly what I meant, and yet it was one step removed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What would it be to a Frenchman, though?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Probably Pop art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting how the same thing can mean different things.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I remember when in the last few years I made a series of aquatints with the Gauloises blue cigarette package—because I love that blue—as part of the image, Helen Frankenthaler looking at me with stupefaction and saying, "I can't imagine you being a Pop artist." And certainly from the French point of view it must look like Pop art. To me it looked as exotic as Tahiti must have looked to French travelers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, it's interesting mentioning the blue and then looking at the painting there which is mainly—or it's all black and white, isn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL; No, there's a little bit of the Gauloises blue in the upper right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're very specific in the way you use colors over and over and over and over. Is that conscious, or is that just the way it happens? And it's not a large range of colors.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You know, when I came to New York to study with Meyer Schapiro—I lived near him—and I used to drag around my latest picture at eleven o'clock at night. I realize now to his great annoyance. I would ask him, "What do you think of it?" He told me a couple of good things—I don't mean about the painting but about what it is to be an artist. There was one picture he rather liked. He said, "Go home and make a lot of them. What it is to be an artist is to get to know your own forms." And I would say that in that sense there are certain colors that have become my colors; they're yellow ochre, black and white, a certain ultramarine blue—in fact some people in New York call it "Motherwell blue"—and so on. Colors are no different than shapes. Anybody recognizes a Tanguy shape, or a Magritte shape, or a Miró shape. Well, one has to use color as personally and exactly as one does shapes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it becomes a refining process of identification.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sure. And part of your vocabulary.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the teaching experience at Hunter? You've referred to that a number of times. Was that practical? Enjoyable?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, yes. I had a marvelous rapport with the students. But what it turns out is that if you take teaching seriously—which I did, as I do everything practically—it takes exactly the same kind of energy as painting does. At the end of a few years there I realized that because I was giving so much to the students, I myself was producing less and less. When it came time for my sabbatical, I took it and discovered that I painted four times as much and also began to make a little money because there were more pictures to choose from. And so the next year I took a sabbatical without pay and painted five times as much. [Inaudible.] Well, the truth is I'm a professor at Hunter this year but in a very special circumstance where I'm a so-called distinguished professor where I don't have any regular courses or anything like that. And that I like.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you found that the teaching really cut into your own work.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, it's exhausting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a heavy schedule? Or was it just the activity of it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: What basically happens is you become the kids' father in every dimension. Maybe if you were teaching mathematics you could just teach mathematics. But art is so broad that in the end you're involved in their family problems, their economic problems, their sex problems, their everything problems. And when defenseless youngsters are looking at you imploring you to help orient them, unless you're a supreme egotist—which I think I'm not, I'm certainly egotistical as all artists are—you can't turn your back. To use a highly exaggerated example: Socrates didn't write any books, he didn't have any time to; Plato wrote the books. And in the same way if you're treating the students seriously there was not time enough and energy enough to paint as much as one should. At the same time I had married a woman who had a child, had two more, as I said, and I had to take the responsibility for them. If I knew more I would have done something differently I guess. Also I was young enough to think that the future was endless, and that I had the energy to do everything. Now I know otherwise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I find it interesting that you've always gravitated in and out of the university life. It always sort of weaves around.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. That's very astute. Most people have never noticed that. I'm trying to explain it accurately. It has to do with getting away from political pressure and distortion. You see, when I enter a university I come, in a way, as a visiting lord. Which is to say that my credentials are not academic but from the creative world. So that I'm a sort of special guest. I have nothing to do with the routine. I'm not involved in promotions. I'm not a rival in terms of academic accomplishment, scholarly articles, or whatever. I come in as my own man, and because I'm in no way a threat to them I'm treated as my own man. And there are times, though, I have to be partisan and in certain ways am partisan. The politics and the pressures and the historical distortions and rewriting of history, for whatever ends, really shock me in the art world. And also the illiteracy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think the art world has produced such writers and doesn't really attract literate people? Is it because it's new?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Because it's one of the quickest ways to get power there is. We live in a non-visual world essentially, where most people can't tell the difference between a real picture and a pseudo picture. An artist cannot control very much his own fate. At the same time his fate in the external world depends on his reputation. So artists are very easily terrorized. There's a wide, open field for somebody who talks or writes to walk in, look at the artist and tell the rest of the world who's who and both cow the artist and cow the rest of the world for entirely different reasons. The artist is helpless, the victim. The rest of the world doesn't know the difference. So-and-so is writing for the *Times* or *Art News* or whatever it is. In the world's naiveté, he must know what he'd talking about or he wouldn't be there. I happen to have been beautifully trained as a scholar before I ever became a painter, happen to believe in the free discourse of ideas. And the narrowness, the partisanship, the distortion, the heedlessness, the irresponsibility, the venality of it all used to shock me. I also have many friends who have spent their life as professors and they say that if I had spent my whole life in the university world I would have found it equally the same thing. So I move back and forth. In the same way as much as I can, I go from Europe to America on occasion. To get a perspective, to get a relief from the immediacy of the struggle or whatever. I was talking to somebody the other day who was very shocked that I like to go to Switzerland, because from one point of view Switzerland is so dull. I pointed out that I wasn't in search of excitement but of the opposite, for a magic month to reflect and sit and think. In that sense the universities were partially a magic month—also very receptive. If in a scholarly way you could authenticate the enterprise, no matter how strange the enterprise was, in a funny way they were much more open than the real world to it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The real world being what?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Say, 57th Street, New York, Paris, all that business.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sort of the "art scene." Yes.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sure. And you also have to realize that I was for eight years in universities, four years in prep school before that, so that until I was 40, I had spent more of my life in schools than I had outside. It was a very natural environment to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there was always somewhere to go and look and search and then come out and do and then come back.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that there's been any influence in your work apropos the academic university experience? Or has it been fairly separate?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Completely separate. Actually at Hunter in a couple of weeks for the first time in more than 30 years, I'm going to give a couple of lectures in the philosophy department. I'm also going to give one in the cooking department. When I was writing the professor of philosophy who asked me I said, "Yes, I was trained as a philosopher but I haven't read at all in 30 years and now I need to address a course in aesthetics, I really think philosophical aesthetics has nothing to do with what professional artists are involved in, so that I feel dubious about accepting your invitation." He wrote back, "It's exactly because you feel that way that we would like you to talk. We're using such and such an anthology of

Santayana and Dewey, et cetera. Would you come and explain to us why they have nothing to do with what you're doing." And I said, "Sure." On the other hand, philosophy is a marvelous training in words.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: From that standpoint I don't regret it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the teaching at Hunter you had what graduate courses? Or undergraduate courses?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: With the exception of one hour, only graduate courses. In fact, when I first went there I was the only full time graduate professor. I mean essentially I taught everything the studio, the seminars, read the theses, the whole shooting match.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much do you think one can teach though in a studio course in a university situation?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know now. Then, I think one had to do it in conjunction with a seminar. In fact at the end of my tenure at Hunter, Yale wanted me to become, when Albers retired, the head of the department there. It so happens that at Yale, the art school and the art history department are entirely separate. I mean even organizationally they're set up differently. I said that if I taught, I would only teach if I could teach art history in conjunction with studio. They refused to make that coalition. So I refused to accept the job. Which is to say any art is part of general culture, and ultimately I think it's a cultural problem. Most artists like to think not. It's a question of individual genius and genius is a sine qua non but it's not enough. As I was saying the other day, I think that if Rothko had really believed in culture he wouldn't be dead. But believing only in his own ego, I can see why he's dead. And when I say "culture" I don't mean with a capital K, but I mean the fabric or the interchange of human beings at a given historical moment in a given place with given preoccupations. I think everybody completely underestimates what a third ear artists have, how aware they are—even if they're living in a hamlet in Vermont—of everything that's going on in the world in terms of their medium. So what I was able to teach at Hunter was to teach culture. You know, I taught them about Stravinsky, about Picasso, about Joyce, about Mondrian, about the Surrealists, about the Dadaists, about Whistler, about John Marin, about Eakins, about I don't know what. To give them the sense that they were living in the midst of one of the most absorbing moments in the history of human culture and it would be fascinating to be aware of it and participate in it and follow it all one's life. And that they got. And most of them weren't painters. They were schoolteachers getting an M.A. so they could get a raise. They enjoyed, in a way, the classes. I said, "Look, there's a beautiful story, a beautiful enterprise. Let's follow it and talk about it." And they liked that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much do you think, though, that one can teach somebody who wants to be not a teacher but a professional painter in a university situation? Do you think there's much? Or not really that much?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I used to tell them all the time then and, you see, I haven't taught since then—and we're talking about the 1950s—except sporadically, but not seriously and sustainedly—I used to tell them, "The moment for you to become an artist is the day you go and get yourself a studio and move out of here, out of this university and start thinking what you're going to show when you can show it. Then you become serious." I used to tell them Degas' remark, "You plan a picture the way you plan a bank robbery and if you succeed you'll be shot or imprisoned." And in an academic situation, there's rarely that sense of risk that it has to come off, it's much more a spoon-fed thing: if I please the professor I'm going to get through the course. And of course that has nothing to do with anything.

[END OF TRACK.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's March 30, 1972. Paul Cummings talking to Robert Motherwell, side 5. We open by discussing the photograph, *The Irascibles.*

[Audio break.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible] discussing the photograph of *The Irascibles*, Motherwell.

[Audio break.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. Where, where was it taken? Do you remember the—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. I think maybe in the photographer's studio who was a very grim German woman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And it was very difficult to get everyone together. Incredibly difficult. And uh, there were a lot of tensions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Because there are all sorts of—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Personalities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs]—personalities and—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And she kept taking the photo again, and again, and again. I would think it went on maybe two hours. And people—I remember when it came out—people saying how grim we all looked, and naturally concluded that we were grim about the merit. But the grimness in everybody's expression is really at the breaking point of exasperation, irritation uh, at the photographer. And as I remember, somebody, probably Newman, had the idea of protesting the Met, who I think—I think it had been discovered that the Met had the Hearn fund to buy modern American pictures, and hadn't really used it. And I think also the Met was going to put on some big shows and buy from them. And it, when the jury was announced it was, from my point of view, very timid and power happy on the whole. And anyway, we made the protest and it was on the—the protest was on the front page of the *New York Times*. That's how *Life* got interested. And Barney managed that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he write the letter or was it a group effort? Do you remember?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I can't remember it all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, and I asked Newman how he was able to get it on the front page. I mean, what connections he had. And he laughed and said that uh, many years before he had run for mayor of New York—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —as the head of some obscure political party and had learned how to get to the uh, front page desk. And at any rate, it ran. And I have a feeling it had some effect on the Met, but my God, after 22 years I really don't remember. And the only other thing I remember was Rothko was in Europe, and being as touchy as he was, I think after a long discussion—and we couldn't get in touch with him—we signed his name to the letter also and said that he would appear in the photo, and didn't know at all whether he would appear. But now, but when I see him and Still, and Pollock, and Newman, and de Kooning together, it's really sort of incredible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Well, they were really not all the best of friends, were they?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, well, whether they were friends or not, they were all highly temperamental, suspicious, irritable, as they called it, irascible guys. And uh, it's a miracle that it exists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right. Um, you know, one thing that you mentioned in one of the tapes before—it was about Bernard Rice in the '40s and his activities around—did he do much or was he just around? You know, because he was a friend of the Surrealists and various people, and also you know, worked with the galleries as an accountant, I gather. Did he, was he, you know, from your point of view, involved very much with the American artists then or—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Not really. He had a, he and his wife had, what in France would be called a salon. And his real interest was in the Europeans. In fact, to this day, if you look at his collection, it's predominantly European. The best pictures are European. The only money

was spent on Europeans. To the degree that he has any American pictures, I'm sure we gave them to him. Uh, he was very conservative and very snobbish that way, really without knowing it. I think it was he who persuaded Peggy Guggenheim to give that huge Pollock to the Iowa Art Museum, Iowa University. And I imagine for I don't know what, a $3,000 tax deduction or something. And it must be worth a third of a million dollars now. When you say he had no—he never evidenced any real faith in the Americans. At the same time, he's a very possessive man and from his point of view, the possessiveness is also benign. None of the Americans knew anything about business, or taxes, or dealers. And he often helped assorted artists with those things. However, I disagree with a lot of the things he did, like how he presumed that from his point of view he was doing what he thought was the right thing. But if you don't have a particular belief in the artists, and then your judgment of what the right thing is, is different from if you do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm just curious about him because he's been around for so many years.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Weaves in and out of many—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, when I first went there, which was very early, I came to New York in 1940. And I must have started going there within a few months, partly because both his daughter and I were studying with Kurt Seligmann. So that I got to know her and I imagine she invited me to the house, and so on. Um, I had the impression that in the '30s the salon had been around the group theater. Uh, it's a very strange thing about Rice. He's one of the tightest, most conservative men I've ever known in all his personal style of only buying pictures, or established masterpieces, of being very taken by celebrity. At the same time, he has an almost irrational, straight Marxist view of reality, which must have come from the um, his close association with the group theater in the '30s. I don't know. It's, it always seemed to me a complete contradiction with his personal lifestyle, and his interest in gourmet food, and all the rest of it. And, and not liberal. Very, very literal. In fact, I remember not so many years ago, maybe three or four at a dinner party, I'd been reading a book about the number of Russians that Stalin was estimated to have killed by a man who spent years researching it, which was over 20 million. And um, Rice's horrified reaction that anybody would assert such a thing. I mean, when you say it struck me that—and in the late 1960s, his political views probably hadn't shifted one iota from what they must have been in the late '30s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's extraordinary. Um, let me shift to something else. You were a member of the American Abstract Artists at one point.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Weren't you?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because they have you listed in one of their books as—or do you just exhibit with them?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I might have or they might have asked me to join and I said sure or something like that, because I've always been sympathetic to hard-edge abstraction as well as to Abstract Expressionism. And in fact, throughout my career, periodically made my own version of a hard-edge abstraction. But certainly I was not active really. I don't ever even remember having gone to a meeting. Uh, I was off and on very close with both Ad Reinhardt and Harry Holtzman and heard a lot about the meetings, and the activity, and so on. But I have no first-hand memories of it at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that they served a good purpose in those years, say the '40s or the '50s, with their exhibitions, little catalogues and all that kind of thing? Do you—and from your point of view, do you think it did anything for you as far as—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It had no influence on me. I always had a certain sympathy for them because Mondrian was one of my early heroes and in a way they represented that kind of a tendency at a time when it was very unacceptable. And I always felt a certain sympathy for them. In another way, it struck me as an almost quixotic, uh, doomed enterprise, but with a

certain, from the outside, purity and innocence. Though, from the things I've heard, I imagine there was a hell of a lot of savage infighting actually if you were in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But I never was. It's perfectly possible that I was technically a member, maybe even that I showed with them. I don't remember. But it certainly would have been a gratuitous connection on my part.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, um—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I mean, I suppose I felt in a way like art, that who could join both the—

[Side conversation.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um. A Surrealist and an abstract movement equally [inaudible] since my own feelings overlap both.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there's also some mention of Picasso a number of times. How, what, what did you think of him? What was your attitude towards him and—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, my own belief is that he was the strongest influence of anybody to the degree that anybody was influenced by Europe. It's very visible in de Kooning, in Gorky, in Pollock, in certain aspects of my work. I've heard in Rothko's files, there are Picassoid, um, drawings. Um, in Tomlin's quasi-Cubism. I mean, certainly in 1950, if there was any single European who was the most influential, I would say it was Picasso. I, in the same way that now I would think that it's Matisse.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think has caused the shift?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um. Well, with the growth of field painting, I think a wider interest in color than there's ever been before. Um, an interest in painterly painting. Um, Matisse represents the things as a 20th-century ancestor more, more profoundly than anybody else. I would think that Matisse and Miró on the one side, and on the other side, Duchamp.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But Duchamp in the philosophical rather than the visual.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah, well, Duchamp's been the influence on the anti-artists, which is also very strong, though. And then among, on the painterly side, I think one would now have to put Picasso third. But I think in 1950, one would have to have put him first.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I've always had the feeling from looking at things that, that the artists were quite interested in Miró for a long time. He's in the background, but people were aware of him more so than, say, the public or the museums.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know. Uh, Vasionis is the only one I ever remember mentioning and I brought Vasionis to him. It's hard to say, but I don't see how Still would have been, or Rothko, or de Kooning, or Pollock, or Newman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Newman not, but I think it's—I don't think directly very much. I think there are certain little qualities that appear there.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, among the Abstract Expressionists in general, as I think among the American artists in general, there was always a very strong antipathy towards Surrealism. And Miró was so connected with this Surrealist group in those days that I think probably lots of people didn't look at him uh, for what he really is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because I know you can't, you couldn't think of somebody like Max Ernst necessarily being an influence on—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. No, no, no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —on anybody.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But and, and also Miró's rise to fame really, though he's older, really occupies the same time as Abstract Expressionism where you say he really only became

very well-known after the Second World War.

[Side conversation.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh, well, you know, it's marvelous. It's such a temptation sitting here with this entire wall of photographs and work from what, 19—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Forty-one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Forty-one. Um, for you to kind of talk about all of those things. But I think, to still, you know, trying to stick to the '50s. Um. You know, we've talked really not that much about your work except round, and round, and round. Um. Where do you think things were going for you at that point in the sense of, you know, you'd been painting what? Ten years roughly.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Um, well, actually in '49, I made the first *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*. And I would say that that was the third breakthrough I made for myself. I think the first one was that white picture that you were remarking on earlier, and *The Little Spanish Prison*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The white one in the Museum of Modern Art.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. And I think the second one was the first collages. And the third one was the *Spanish Elegies*. And I suppose, so that by the end of the '40s, in those first eight years, I really found the basic vocabulary that I've used with different emphases ever since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the art—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, are you—probably I should add the fourth category, *The Homely Protestant*, which was the, uh, a figure painting and also the first field painting as they say now in some—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not [inaudible]. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Yeah. In some ways, though also that early white one I guess, from one point of view, is a field painting. Uh, what I hadn't done, and what I began to in the '50s, was paint large pictures. Before, the—in the '40s, the largest ones were still what now would be regarded as easel painting size. I suppose the biggest picture I painted before 1950 was six feet long.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the *Elegies* began with really large canvases, didn't they?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. The first ones were—the first completed one, that one there, *At Five in the Afternoon*, is 15 by 20 inches.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I thought—I was thinking it would have been larger.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. And that one next to it, *Grenada*, I guess is maybe six feet long. And in those days, it seemed huge when it was exhibited.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And now, as you know, a six-foot picture is nothing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. No. Well, that's interesting that that is that size. Somehow I always think of it as larger. Um, yeah. One of the other things that's interested me is, is the palette seems to have very spec—well, there seems to be very specific kind of palettes for the different images or ideas. Uh, just how they're clearly expressed, but, you know, like the one behind you, which is black, white, with a little blue, and um. The colors haven't gone round, and round, and round into all sorts of—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think my colors are as specific as my forms in the same way that I

have a repertoire of certain shapes and ways of placing. Um, I basically use very few colors. Predominantly black and white, and yellow ochre, and the other earth colors, and various blues, and scarlet, and pink, which leaves out—and occasionally yellow, but it uh, pale yellow. But it leaves out—oh, and orange, too. Yes. But, you know, there are about 70 colors that artists can choose from. And I've basically stuck to maybe eight, which to me are as familiar as any of the other elements that I use.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did they, you know, was that kind of an intellectual decision or was it a decision that evolved as the work progressed? You know, the choice of those colors?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I actually, the first year I started painting seriously was in 1941. And I spent the summer in Mexico. And one day, I bought some papier-mâché masks. Uh, you know, the popular artworks for the kind that in those days, in this country, one might have got for Halloween. Um, and they were in a basic palette of white and yellow ochre, and a little bit of scarlet, and a little bit of blue. And I made a picture that had nothing to do with the mask in terms of forms, but using those colors because they deeply appealed to me. And um, I spent about two years figuring out the amounts. I discovered that you couldn't just use those four colors arbitrarily, but that white and yellow ochre had to be in much larger amounts than the blue and the red. And that went on for some years until I made the first Spanish elegy in black and white, because I had a technical problem, that it was to be an illustration in a, to be reproduced in black and white. So I didn't think of—uh, I thought it was going to be in black and white. I might as well conceive of it in black and white. But I would say for those first 15 years, probably the basic elements were the original white, yellow ochre, blue and scarlet, and then later um, dropping the colors or only using a touch of the colors, and also working in black and white. And it's really only in the '60s, and especially the late '60s and '70s that I'd begun to use a lot of colors. But it's the first time I'd concentrated on um, in certain pictures, on the color being the dominant element instead of a democratic element [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Important element. Sweeney [ph] used to think that I was so attached to yellow ochre because I grew up in California, which is very orange and yellow ochre uh, half the year. I used to—and I've always used colors in a rather matte way. I've always detested glossy pictures. And he thinks that has something to do with California, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, and also the texture frequently seems to be played down.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. I, all my life, I mean, would you say, in the past 30 years of my painting life, there have been continually abstract artists and Expressionist artists experimenting with impasto and texture and so on. And in America, it seemed to me they almost always did in a very gross way. Uh, I mean, I think Miró does it beautifully, but he does it in a very sensitive way. But on the whole, I would rather have my pictures visual than tactile.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean in the sense of uh, the image being active rather than the surface?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, or that the surface be um—oh, I don't know. Words are so inadequate about these things. Um. That the variations in the surface be relatively subtle, considering how bold and simplified my images are. I mean, surface is very important to me, but I like a much finer range of differences in the surface than many artists, such as Hofmann, for example, who made really quite violent textural contrasts, or Still, who made a very massive surface. Or Rothko, who made a very thin, almost egg tempera surface.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or Reinhardt for that very controlled—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. But Reinhardt, but Reinhardt is also very different from me in that he wanted to get rid of any feeling of the brush. And I, on the contrary, think the brush is part of painting as I understand it. In fact, the other day I went to the Met to see the Chinese calligraphy show, and I was stupefied by the title of the treatise written in the 3rd century A.D., the title being, "The Battle Formation of the Brush." And I thought that guy had it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Marvelous.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —seventeen centuries ago was talking about a lot of what is the heart of Abstract Expressionism. I mean, he simply, simply described all of us. And the different ways we use the brush. It would get much closer to the essence of each person's work than many of the categories that are used.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Because, well, you know, the painting behind you, which dates from what roughly?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Forty-nine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Forty-nine. Uh, you know, it's massively black and white, and the white brushstrokes are quite visible. Less so in the black until you look at them for a while. And um, although the black is always busier on the edges.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Always.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, the brush leaves tracks and makes quite different kinds of marks than, than uh, you know, in the images. Uh. Do you have any idea how the images have developed, I mean, from the sense of, oh, you know, sources or logical progression? Um. There are, there are, you know, the verticality is apparent in a lot of these, and the oval forms, and the black, vertical, narrow panels I guess that—there seems to be a, a kind of um, not—an underlying structure, which is not geometric, but—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Hmm. I don't know. It's hard to talk about it. Uh, I remember Picasso saying somewhat of the—painting is a kind of rhyming and a kind of punning. And certainly one of my preoccupations off and on has been rhyming, so to speak. Straight lines with—or straight shapes with curved shapes. And yet they're not mechanically geometrical.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: They're freehand straights and ovals and circles. And there's also been a rhyming of darkness with lightness. And then in many pictures, a middle tone, too. Uh, some people think that my pictures naturally read from left to right, the way Chinese pictures read from right to left. But if so, that's unconscious. I mean, it was never done on purpose. I also invented, I think, in *The Voyage* and the *Elegies* something that has influenced a lot of artists whose work otherwise doesn't particularly resemble mine, of that sort of squeezing adjacent shapes as though they were pressing against one another. Very sculptative, taking it over various paintings. Um. I mean, really many, I would say a dozen first-rate artists have consciously or unconsciously been influenced by it. But I haven't the remotest idea of where it came from in me, because I don't remember ever being aware of it in a predecessor of mine. That I looked at a picture and thought, "Oh. He's pressing the shapes together." But if you look at that wall, it's fantastic with all the different imagery and different periods, how the shapes tend to press against each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, one thing that struck me frequently, I guess really about the *Elegies* and some of the other ones, is that the shapes, if you draw a horizontal line, almost kind of mirror the top and the bottom in a curious way. There's a kind of balance.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I never thought of it that way, but I guess it's true. And the main activity sort of takes place in the center, moving horizontally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But this is—you've made collages, to go back to that, almost all the way through until you stopped.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In fact, in the early years, when I did it in the '40s, very few people did. I think now it's probably, in one form or another, it's basic principles of gluing together in one way or another disparate elements, is probably the widest spread technique there is in contemporary art now. But when I did it, I was almost alone in regarding it as a major means in this country.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that in making collages, it is done as a separate activity or you know, is it your own kind of vocabulary? Or is it done as, you know, the development towards what might appear in the paintings at a later point?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um. Well, they overlap in certain ways, but I think my collages tend to be um, just because I can incorporate writing and letterpress, and things like that, I think

they tend to be more autobiographical. I mean, after all, the main body of my work is—it's involved in ultimate concerns so to speak, my ultimate view of the nature of living, where the collages are much more—though they're still relatively abstract—they have much more to do with my everyday personal life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Scraps of paper from—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sure. And I don't look for the elements in the collages. Hardly any of them uh, have elements that weren't things that came into the studio. Packages, letters, wine labels, tickets. Where you say, I don't go around and look at something and think, "God, that would make a good collage." But when I feel like making a collage, I look around the studio for what just happens to be there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's all material that comes to you.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Exactly. And um, I also think there's an underlying theme that a lot of the elements have to do with pleasure. Cigarettes, wine, chocolate things, and, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Labels, package labels and things.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You know. And a lot of the elements have to do with my professional life, with art catalogues, books arriving in the mail, invoices, labels from packages of canvas, um, and so on. And then I suppose in that sense, my daily life is mainly either my professional life, going about its business, or those rudimentary human pleasures of eating, and drinking, and smoking, and reading.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm just curious about the series um, over there, which are later, with the horizontal—I've forgotten what that series is called.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You mean the *Beside the Sea*?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's right. Right. With the very free strokes above the horizontal dark bars. How did they start, because that's, there's a quite consistent—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, those are in the early '60s. Um, the—actually, they're the only ones that have a quite a literal origin. Uh, in the summer, I had a house in Provincetown. And in the summer of '62, I tried to buy a lot with a shack on it across the street, which was directly on the water. And the house was, the shack was empty. And so after painting in the late afternoons, I used to go over there and sit on the deck looking at the sea, and contemplating what I would do if I couldn't get the place. The people who owned the place didn't use it, and at the same time, it'd been in the family for years I think. Fifty years or something. And they couldn't make up their minds whether to sell it or not. It took all summer for them to make up their minds.

And um, in Provincetown there's a tremendous tide, an 800-foot tide between high and low water. And at high tide, when the wind blows from the southwest, which is the prevailing wind in the summer, the waves burst against the concrete bulkhead. And I would be sitting a few feet from it watching the tide slowly rise and beginning to hit the bulkhead harder and harder. And the spray would begin to fly. And I watched it so much, I began to realize that this spray constituted a kind of automatic calligraphy. And one day, for the hell of it, I thought I'd, um, see if I could make some spray, if you want to put it that way. And did it on some paper. And I discovered if you're just trying to draw it, it looked weak compared to the original. So more and more I began to use my whole arm and hit the paper. And then the paper would break. So finally I got some five-ply paper. I mean, paper, five layers of paper glued together like plywood that you can't break. And by using my full force, then could make a spray that was like the actual spray. And then I realized, um, that instead of imitating the effect of nature, one usually should bring about this—use the same process to bring about the same visual result, so to speak.

And I got intrigued with it because very few of my pictures have motion in them. Most of them are static and silent. And I got intrigued with putting motion in them and worked on the problem for several years. Now I work on it in a different way. But I think it's—someday I must make a photograph, because I finally did get the shack and over it built my summer studio. And the spray's still there. And some day I should photograph it, because it's so—the pictures are really, with all their abstraction, so much more realistic in one sense than people realize.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's the only group in the body of work that is, is so directly related to the natural phenomenon.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think so. I really, I really think so. I also, I think I would not have been interested if at that particular moment I weren't also interested in loosening my work up, and in problems of automatism. My work tends to swing from being relatively formal and rigid to being very spontaneous. And would you say, I think it's always self-correcting. It's always self-correcting. If it begins to get too disorganized I begin to formalize it and it begins to get too formal, and I begin to try to make it more spontaneous. So that it also coincided making them beside the series with definite artistic problems. I, would you say, I never—well, no.

There's another one. Um. There's a picture over there about a preg—called *The Pregnant Woman Holding Child*. Yeah. And I drew that when my wife was pregnant. One day I saw her moving in bed holding a child when she was about eight months pregnant. And I was suddenly struck with the curves, and the masses, and the bulbous, soft quality of it all and made that. But it's—and there's some birds there. And in East Hampton, where I had a studio, there used to be lots of birds around. And I made a—I don't know how many now. I did make a series of abstract birds because I used to watch them a lot out the window, had a feeder. But in general, I don't begin that way. And even in most cases, would not begin that way if it didn't also correspond with certain technical problems that I was interested in at the time. You see, I would like my shapes to have a living quality, like living bodies. And it's then that I can be attracted to an external source.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think these correcting activities that you mentioned a moment ago are conscious? Or do they start happening and then you become aware of it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. They start happening.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And then you just, you see what—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm about as little conscious as one can be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You know what I paint.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Oh.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: In fact, I usually just start with something, a blob of color or drawing a line, and uh, if you get two or three elements, regardless of what they are, down, and get over the hump of the block at the beginning, then the elements begin to suggest further steps. And then in a certain moment you have a half-realized structure on your hands. And then you can consciously decide, more or less, how far you want to take it, what part of the structure you want to emphasize, et cetera. But I very rarely begin a picture with an idea that I'm going to do such and such. I mean, I really begin the picture with the idea I'm going to begin a picture and then let it, at a certain moment take a—and in the beginning it takes over. And then somewhere along the line, I take over. But I like painting that is self-originating, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean you take over at a certain point? What—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, I begin to direct it toward being more spontaneous or less spontaneous, or deeper space, or shallower space, or simplifying the shapes, or leaving them pretty much as they originated or whatever. See, I had my work, despite its obvious debts to modern culture, in another way is quite original. And I think its originality comes from my allowing it to begin itself, so to speak. I mean, I think there are many things in it that if I had a more clear-cut idea of what I'd begun, what the picture was going to be like, then I never would have discovered.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So that really, the images grow as you work.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Exactly that. Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They interweave, rather than having uh—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —a particular idea, and then making the painting, too, as an extension or the confirmation of the idea.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One piece that's just always intrigued me is the one up there with the three and two shapes that are very, very kind of cut out. What do—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible] title of that one.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. It's called *La Danse*. It's in the Met. It has been there a long time, ever since I painted it. And in black and white it's very deceptive because it's, in the center is a large scarlet rectangle. And then the border is yellow ochre. So especially for its period, it's quite a brilliant picture in color. But it so happens that the scarlet and the yellow ochre must be exactly the same tone. So it photographs as though they're just those figures on a plain tone instead of actually on a bright red square that has a yellow ochre border.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's always intrigued me because it's the only one I can even here see where the forms don't reach the top and bottom, don't go from edge to edge, and seem almost to be cut out, like a, you know, like a Matisse leaf or something.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, it's one of the few pictures that I didn't make in the way that we've been discussing. I drew those outlines and filled it in. And it has a certain nice finish, but on the other hand, I don't think it's as profound as many of the others.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. It's just it's always been such an odd, you know—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. It is an oddball in my work. And it always annoys me that the Met has it, but the only reason they would buy it was that it seemed more highly finished and less ragged—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —than my regular work. And they liked that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How extraordinary.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think one of the—it's quite a big picture. I think six feet. And they bought it for the magnificent sum of $900 or something. But as late as 10 years later, they were refusing to take a Rothko or whatever. I mean, they were, until very recently, the trustees were ultraconservative. And for that matter, so was Robert—what's his name when he was the curator of modern art there?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Beverly Hale. Robert Hale. Yeah. Yeah. Um.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I mean, the Met completely missed the Abstract Expressionist period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I've always felt they've never really wanted to be that involved with current art anyway. They wanted a certain space in history to operate within or behind.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, I think they're beginning to change now. I mean, I have a show there in the fall. And they just had the big Albers show and there's going to be a big Lipchitz show this spring.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who's putting on your show there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, John McHenry because it's of my uh, the Alberti book that I've—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —and all the preliminary sketches, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —trial proofs and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When—there's another uh, there's the group of what I call the triangle, which has appeared in prints and uh, comes up in some [inaudible]—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Usually it's called *Summertime in Italy*. And there, your guess is as good as mine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I can't, I have no idea where, how they began.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, sometimes they relate to the, you know, *Beside the Sea*, which is very pre-linear kind of.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It must be. In a way, they make into uh, larger volumes, that kind of thrown shape. And I've always a tendency to put fours, the number four in the pictures. It occurs in one of the very earliest ones. I haven't got it here. And the triangle in a way also maybe came originally from that, because I make a four like a triangle, not with the four open, but—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Closed.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. A closed four. But I really don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You started teaching at Hunter in '51, '50, '51?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, and that was also when the Dada painters and poets came up. Was that, how did that particular book come about? Was that your idea to collect all of the—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Um, see, I went around with the Surrealists a lot in the early '40s. And they often would refer to Dada phenomena. And there was nothing in English about it, and I realized I would understand Surrealism better if I understood Dada better. So I slowly began to put it together. Uh, Karpel, really, his research made it possible, because once I had the idea and we started, and we'd get a section done and then he'd suddenly come with excitement and say, "I've found something more." So the book grew for about six years. And actually we're bringing out a new edition in my series for Viking. And I'm going to have him as a co-author on the title page because he really was in the sense that—though it was my idea and I developed it, and I chose—it was he who like a bloodhound who found—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Tracked down.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —the thing after thing after thing, many of which had been completely forgot. Uh, Bill Rubin tells me he thinks it's the most important art book that ever appeared in the sense that it's only one that resurrected a movement, and also partially created a new movement, the Pop movement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, as I remember, there's an insert with a piece by Richard Halbeck [ph] or something. Isn't that in there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What, how did that come to be that way rather than—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: All right. I tell about it in the preface. Uh, uh, Halbeck [ph], Huelsenbeck, and uh, Tristan Tzara hated each other at the time I was making the book. Both of their contributions were essential. Um, I foolishly probably asked them to write new things to bring it up to date, so to speak. And when each discovered the other was in the book, they both refused to be in the book. And if I printed either one, so and I—Duchamp tried to help me to get them to give in, that they were being childish. But they wouldn't. And so finally, as a practical solution, I printed each of their current contributions as separate pamphlets, and inserted them in the book. But they were not part of the book technically in the sense that they weren't bound into it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Et cetera. So it was purely a practical expedient to deal with an

impossible situation.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And to still keep the material together.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Because they both wanted to even withdraw their early, original Dada work. And that would have wrecked the book because Huelsenbeck was the most eloquent of the Germans. And Tzara was a key figure in the Paris development. And I couldn't have a book without them in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Okay. Well, let's—

[END OF TRACK.]

[REEL NUMBER THREE, SIDE B.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. This is side six. 1951 was the year of the great, famous Ninth Street exhibition. Remember that with—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With all those people?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's been constantly brought up as a kind of specific uh, moment to a lot of people. Did it have any particular interest or meaning to you at that point, that, you know, being involved with that particular exhibition?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, not really. Off the top of my head, it occurs to me, you know, what it really symbolized was the second generation, and also the fringe artists, of getting on the Abstract Expressionist bandwagon that um—and symbolized an effort to make that direction the sole representative of the American avant-garde. But for me, it, I don't know what—it was, was 10 years too late instead of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I mean, in another way, I would say it's the beginning of the Stalinization of the old Bolsheviks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that was also uh, the time when you were in the São Paulo Biennale. Um.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wasn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, no. That was 10 years later. It was '61.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was '61?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What does it say there in—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sixty-one. I was in—really I was one of many artists in the São Paulo exhibit that year. But in '61, I was the only painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that was—right, right. But that was really in '51. That was your first international exhibition, wasn't it, of that type? Was there any before that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, I think there was um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It might have been in a gallery, but I think it was one of those big international—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yes. I think so. And I was also one of many artists in the Venice Biennale, but I guess that was later. I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, and then Tokyo. And they just, you know, *documenta* came even a few years later, but—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, did that have any particular meaning at that point, being um—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No.

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You really, really didn't know anything about it, you know. Somebody from the Modern Museum or whoever arranged it said, "Can I have such and such a picture?" or two pictures of whatever it was for São Paulo. It was a very important international show they said. And you said fine and that was the end of it, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it went away for six months or something, and they came back.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You know, and they came back and you never read anything, never heard anything, and no anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, did those exhibitions, you know, you'd say the ones at the large American museums have any meaning or effect on, on your activities as far as you—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: What do you mean?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did they have any meaning for you? Did they do anything about the market for you? Get more people interested? Uh, or were they just kind of activities that happened and there's nothing particularly ascertainable on your part, about the being included in these shows—in these exhibitions?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, they certainly didn't have any effect on my market. I mean, the money I made in the '40s and '50s from painting was so negligible that I think most of those years I didn't even file an income tax uh, thing. I mean, I don't think there was enough to file. Um, I guess the first time I started was when I got a job at Hunter and got a regular modest income, but—

PAUL CUMMINGS: From the paintings. So there was still no great—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. No. I didn't make any money from paintings till—it was the very late '50s when Janis took me on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you'd been with Kootz before that, right?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. And then, yeah. Maybe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right. Um, how did Janis, how did you get involved with the Janis Gallery?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, most of the other Abstract Expressionists were there, including ones that appeared on the scene a long time after me, such as Kline and Guston. And I thought that I should be there, too. And for the only time in my life asked him—all the other galleries I've ever been with or expect to be with have asked me. And he agreed. Though I don't think he ever had any particular feeling for my work. But he, for several years he did quite well. And when I say quite well, I mean I made as much in a year as I might get for a single large picture now, which let's say was, the amounts of monies all of us made, all the Abstract Expressionists made in the '50s were nothing compared to the amounts of money you know, that the so-called second generation made in the '60s. In fact, in a funny way, the second generation took the money in the '60s when Abstract Expressionism went into a temporary eclipse that logically should have gone to the Abstract Expressionists themselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that's because of the dealers' activities or—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. See, Janis abandoned Abstract Expressionism for Pop in the early '60s. Probably the most active of all the galleries was Castelli, uh, whose heroes were

Johns, and Rauschenberg, who were the second generation. And the other really active gallery was Emmerich who had Noland and Helen Frankenthaler, and so on. Also, they themselves had a much more realistic, tough attitude, the second generation, because with the first generation, there was never any reason to suppose there was any money. And the guys were used to being hit over the head, managing and so on, where the second generation realized that there were great possibilities in art as a career, and very intelligently. And matter of factly went about making it a real career. I think now, maybe in the '70s, it will swing back again. I just read a—I glanced at an anthology of Abstract Expressionism that's just appeared where the man who edited it asserts that Abstract Expressionism is the movement against which other American artists will ultimately have to be judged.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which publication is this?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It's called the *New York School* by Maurice Tuchman. And uh, he says that. And if that's true, then maybe in the '70s the Abstract Expressionists will realize what would have been more normal to have realized in the '60s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, to go back to Janis for a few minutes. Um, how did you find him as a dealer? You know, did he do things for you? You know, work on the market and place pictures in collections, or was it haphazard?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't—I really don't know because I don't know what goes on in a gallery. My impression was that he had a group of people who were more or less regular clients, because most of the things he sold were—I'm talking now about the '50s—were of very high quality. And also appreciated greatly. You know, the art market, like the stock market, rose continually from '45 to '69. And I would guess especially in the late '50s and early '60s, with the exception of '62. And so people who dealt with Janis did very well because he had very good taste among European artists—Picasso, Léger, or Giacommetti, et cetera. And at one moment in the late '50s, had all of the abs—or most of the Abstract Expressionists. So the people who dealt with him really got things of great aesthetic quality and of great historical importance. But as far as I can make out, he essentially used American artists, as many dealers do—or let's say essentially used living artists or artists on the rise as many dealers do who have a large collection of classical masterpieces, as bait for those masterpieces. And he wanted the prices of the active artists to remain relatively low so that he would have a double market, a quick turnover of low-priced things, and also his bait to bring in people to see the classical things.

I think he also had a theory that an art movement only lasts 10 years or something. And the way really to make money, which is his essential interest, is to get a movement on the rise when it's relatively cheap, before people realize how important it is. And um, in the early '60s, he decided Abstract Expressionism had got expensive enough. Though it wasn't very expensive. I would imagine the average important picture of an Abstract Expressionist then would be, say, $12,000. I mean, the kind of pictures now that would be anywhere from $30, [000] to more than a $100,000. And decided to drop it all for a new movement, Pop, that was on the rise. Uh, personally, I was basically satisfied with him, in that he made the only money for me that I'd ever got from art to speak of, with the exception that I wanted to show in Europe. I've always felt, and I think with some reason, the Europeans are interested in what I do. And Janis would always sabotage it by not answering the letters, or by demanding such a cut that a show wasn't economically viable, being rude to the European dealers. That was the source of my dissatisfaction. I think most of the Abstract Expressionists felt um, that he really didn't have sufficient commitment. He didn't buy any of our work. Though, as you know, he had a great European collection. In a way, he's like Bernard Rice. Seemingly the friend and interested, but not to the degree to buy. And there it wasn't a question of money, because I think he sold everybody reasonably well and what difference from the standpoint of money when if he bought it or a client bought it, but from the standpoint of feeling that this man is, you know, really your knight errant, your real protector and so on. But that it was a marriage of convenience.

And most of the Abstract Expressionists were too deeply emotional, had suffered too much, and if I may say so in a certain way, were too profound to be satisfied with such a shallow commercial relationship. So that when Janis showed signs of starting another cycle, everybody wanted to leave, which as I said before, I was not in favor of basically, except for the European question. But at the same time, I didn't want to remain isolated among a group of pop artists. I felt more comfortable being with my own colleagues. In fact, I remember at

that time another dealer told me that he thought I could make much more money and was a much more important artist than I was treated, and would like to undertake that task. But his gallery was essentially a Surrealist, European Surrealist gallery. And ultimately I refused because I felt uncomfortable by being isolated from my colleagues. And I remember his fury at my refusal and he was saying, "I thought you were the cosmopolitan one and would not stick with your colleagues like that." And it's possible that I made a mistake. I don't know. I mean, it was also during the '60s that the potential rivalries among any group of artists, among the Abstract Expressionists began to develop, so that there was relatively little comradeship left at the end of the '60s. So from that standpoint, if I'd already isolated myself from my colleagues, I don't think it would have made a lot of difference. I don't know. But certainly, I would say that I've had the three toughest dealers over the past 25 years that there've ever been in America, would you say, first Kootz, then Janis, and then Frank Lloyd of Marlborough. And um, if I'd ever had the experience of a more humane dealer, I might have chosen differently or behaved differently, but that was my experience of what dealers were like, recently.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it's possible to be a good dealer and be humane? [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, recently, I've had a few minor contacts with humane people so far. And I think it is possible. But I really don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about Janis. Would he come to the studio frequently or—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What, how would he look at your work? I mean, would he say things about it and—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think he had a pretty good eye. Uh, I think he knew when the work was in the gallery, which were the more important ones. Uh, but he never expressed any real enthusiasm, except politeness. I must say, Lloyd doesn't even politely express enthusiasm. Kootz did, because I think Kootz, with all his faults, and he was as tough as either of the others, um, I think really loved a certain kind of painting. I think Kootz's favorite painters were Léger and the really tough, hard-to-take Picassos. And consequently, Abstract Expressionism is not so different in that sense. I mean, it's also tough, masculine, sensual and in its day, far out. And I think Kootz really went for it, where I think Janis's basic taste, or most personal taste, was naive painters. And from that standpoint, I can understand his going for Op, which has a sort of also popular, cynical, naive quality to it. Where I think Lloyd's taste is conservative London taste. He probably really likes, if he likes any pictures, probably likes Kokoschka best or something. Or Francis Bacon maybe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well, how do you find Lloyd to deal with then, juxtaposed against Janis? It's more, more—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: He—I found them all bullies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And other dealers, I must say, who've heard some of the details of my relationships with him, are so shocked that they can't believe that those were the terms. For example, with Kootz, for five years, my contract was 75 works a year, which he owned in the first two years for $200 a month, the third and fourth year for $250, and the fifth year for $300 a month. And the work I made for him in that time was certainly worth more than a million dollars. I mean, he was paying the average of, let's see, $2,400 a year, 75 pictures. I don't what that averages out to. Thirty-five bucks or something a picture. And a couple of weeks ago, a typical picture of those days sold for $16,000. Well, you say that one picture is more than he paid me during the five years. And Janis was equally tough. And Marlborough even worse.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. But you know, if—I had the feeling that maybe Marlborough was a better merchandising organization, has more galleries. It got things into uh, galleries in other countries. Or doesn't that really make that much difference?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know. I think Marlborough's an effort to be a monopoly, like Standard Oil in the early days, or General Motors. And I don't think that they're so marvelous at selling things. I think that they have lots of things that people want, but you see,

essentially—and essentially really should only handle dead artists. It works like a small museum. You have no sense, as one of their artists, what your real relations with the public are. I would think that most of the clientele in relation to modern art are on the conservative end of modern art, that they really want a Picasso etching, or a Soutine, or a Francis Bacon, or so on. Because certainly there's never been a gallery of that caliber with so many mediocre artists. I don't know how many artists it had. Something like 60. And 40 of them don't uh—shouldn't be in a third-rate gallery. But I, would you say, I think Marlborough's position comes from the absence of a really powerful and intelligent gallery such as Beyeler in Switzerland.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you think Beyeler's become such a unique international dealer? Because of—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I would never—I've never met him, so I don't know anything personally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's extraordinary what he does and how he does it.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, uh, I would suspect from his catalogues that he has a very good eye and a very high sense of quality. And I've heard that when he began he went to the largest Swiss bank and, wanting to borrow money to buy pictures. And they said, "all right," at a very high interest rate. And then he went back and proposed to them in essence that they become partners and go 50/50 if he were given unlimited capital. And they agreed. And um, let's say this was in the early '50s or whenever it was. I don't know when he began. Um, anybody who went in partnership with unlimited capital, to somebody who had a very good sense of quality, would have made a fortune. In the early '50s, everything was undervalued. Miró was. Léger was. Matisse collages were. All the American artists were. Um, Tàpies was. Arp was. Giacometti was. And if Beyeler bought those kinds of things in those years with millions of dollars, he would have made tens of millions for them, which is a very rational and intelligent way to go about it.

I think it'd be more difficult now because I think there are relatively few things that are undervalued. On the other hand, maybe from the standpoint of 1950, it seemed that things were very high. Who knows if pictures that then went for $5,000 went, go for $50,000 now. Maybe they'll go for half a million 20 years from now. I don't know. It's uh—and that's a kind of dreamland that no artist has very much experience with. I mean, the other day, I read that a Henry Moore wooden sculpture went for a quarter of a million dollars. So it was bought in those days for $6,000. And if that's possible, then God knows what's possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Janis said that a museum recently bought a small Mondrian, about 20 inches, for a quarter of a million dollars. And he said Mondrian's a most costly 20th-century artist.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, in a way he deserves to be because it's—I suppose he and Brâncuși deserve to be in that they're the two of first-rate quality who have a tiny output. I mean, I was amazed at the Brâncuși show at the Guggenheim, which doesn't hold that many pictures. I mean, I think I can make that many pictures in a year. And it essentially was containing Brâncuși, who lived—who died in his 80s—his complete life's work. And Mondrian wasn't all that prolific, either. I would guess he made 10 paintings a year or something. Uh, so that his whole oeuvre, including drawings I imagine, is—I don't know what—500 items or um, very small. I mean, certainly Picasso would make that many in one year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. It's interesting though how, you know, Picasso's prolificness [ph] has not somehow affected his market it seems. And so many people seem worried about producing too much for their market.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, the—I imagine only a tiny fraction of Picasso's work has ever arrived on the market. I have no idea, but my impression—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there's volumes.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —is that maybe 50 pictures a year or less are released. But Miró has certainly released much more and his market continually grows. But marketing is something I know nothing about. See, an artist really has no way of even knowing what his pictures are worth in that American artists usually are dealing with somebody who has exclusive rights and says a picture should be such-and-such a price. And you really don't

know. And when you're beginning, your works don't appear at auction or anything. Uh, so you don't know. Now that I've been—I'm painting for 30 years and sold thousands of works. Some begin to appear at auctions and I realize that at auctions and in private dealers they sell for much more than I sold them for. But I um—one of the problems of an artist is to find somebody disinterested who's really knowing with the whole art thing, as a very intricate, private world with rules of its own, to give you really straight advice or even straight facts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the facts all look different from different points of view.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Exactly. Uh, would you say, it's very difficult to find somebody who would identify with your interests, but what's very easy is to find somebody who wants to use you in one way or another.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I think that, that's pretty much true of people who do anything which is done for the public. You know, certain writers, and performers, and people who do public things, there's always somebody there for their cut of the action, you know. Anyway, let's, let's go back to some other things here. Uh, in 1953, you moved to 94th Street, which is the house you lived in until recently. Um, but it was also the year uh—I don't know if I've gotten out of chronological order here. Uh, where, where had you been prior to 94th Street? Were you, were you living up town then or—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. On 82nd Street. For a couple of years, I'd been teaching at Hunter and I think then was given tenure. And I lived in an apartment on 82nd Street and painted in the dining room. But in '52, my wife, who was a very bourgeois woman, who had a child, became pregnant—and it was obvious that the apartment, which was already inadequate for my both painting and living there, and I liked to work at home—would be hopelessly inadequate with the birth of another child. And one day, by chance, I picked up the *New York Times* and there was an old brownstone for sale on 94th Street, very cheaply. And an old aunt that I'd had, who I'd only ever seen once, had died intestate. And so all of her nieces and nephews became partial heirs, and I inherited a few thousand dollars. I forget what. Eight thousand or something. Uh, but it was enough for the down payment. And I'd always lived, till I came to New York, in houses, block houses. This was on a block of all houses with gardens. And I realized that if just painted the place white, which is all I could afford to do, that there was plenty of space, that I could work at home perfectly peacefully. And um, took it and lived there until just a few months ago when Helen Frankenthaler and I got divorced and as part of the property settlement she took it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, well, were there any other particular activities that happened that year? That must have taken a lot of time moving into, to the house, and setting up.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I had a show at Kootz, which I don't even remember. But it did take a while. And also the birth of the child uh, was my first child of my own. And that takes a lot of time and excitement, and revising of your life, and so on, because a baby requires a lot of care and concern, and so on. It was also the early '50s or the mid-'50s. They were a rather low point in my career. I was actually very unhappy and painted the least I ever have. And was also being—having moved uptown teaching. Would you say—having moved out of the center of Greenwich Village, and the Artists' Club and all of that, because I couldn't keep those hours any more. And the tremendous push behind especially de Kooning, and Kline, and Guston and so on, all of whom were latecomers, really around '49 or '50. Um, part of the strategy behind them was obviously to push the older ones off the center of the stage. So it was a very low time economically, artistically, and for that matter, uh, domestically. And which, I suppose my main energy went into teaching those, say, four or five years. Though, occasionally I painted very well. I painted the—at that time, somewhere along—I painted the Albright Elegy, *The Spanish Republic*, which some people think is the best picture I ever painted. And did some other things. But it was—um, the mid-'50s were I think the lowest moment in my professional and personal career.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how about 1954, which was that trip to Germany? Did that mean anything particularly to you at that time? Or was it just one of those activities that came along?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It came along and I had been always quite strongly anti-German. And at the same time, an internationalist and against prejudice. And when I was offered the opportunity to go, I thought that in the interest of fair play, I should go. And if my fantasy about Germany was mistaken, admit it to myself. I really didn't enjoy the trip at all, but I

think that had mostly to do with my own state of mind. And Richard Lippold, who was also on the trip—it was artist, architects, and landscape designers. I think there were 12 or 14 of us. He was a very warm and friendly guy, whom I hardly knew. Um, it was a month trip. We roomed together and became extremely friendly because he was extremely sympathetic and supportive to my alienation and misery on the trip, which really didn't have to do with Germany, but with my own state of mind. And I also learned some things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it accomplished anything, either the objective set out or for you personally?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, you—I think the idea behind it was to overcome in the rest of the world the prejudice against Germany. Apparently every month they had a group from entirely different fields. One month, say, it'd be international lawyers. Another month, chemists. And another month, businessmen. And another month, I don't know what—car manufacturers and so on. And the month I went, it was artists and architects. Uh, and certainly we were treated throughout with the greatest courtesy, generosity, pleasantness. Um, and if I'd been in a different state of mind, I might have enjoyed it a lot. But I basically found it sad. I was sad. Germany was still being reconstructed. Like all official things, it was done in a rather silly way. You know, we'd be taken to see Beethoven's "Fidelio" instead of some avant-garde thing that would interest us much more. Or taken to see Ernst Barlach or Karl Hofer, or the old-time pre-war artists instead of our own contemporaries.

The most fun was, they gave us a first-class railroad ticket, good anywhere, anytime. And on weekends, we didn't have official duties, so Lippold and I would get on the first express train from wherever we were in Germany and go to the Austrian border, and then take a little train, which only took an hour, to Salzburg, and spend the weekend listening to Mozart, eating more delectable food, and feeling much more at home. Though Lippold's of German descent and not at all antagonistic toward Germany.

But it was the wrong moment. It, um, I was too uptight to be receptive. I wish I could do it all over again because now my feelings about Germany are quite different, and if I had the time and the—were treated with that hospitality, I think I would enjoy it very much, doing the same thing all over again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, uh, you know, the following year, you were in the Tokyo Biennale. Did you go for that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The pictures went off again and came back. Or was that a different—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, I've had, I don't know, something like—I've been in dozens of European and Oriental shows, including at least eight that were just me, myself. I've never gone to any of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a reason for that? Or didn't it interest you or—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't know. I think maybe it frightened me. I don't know. Again, I feel entirely differently. Uh, last year I had a show in Switzerland and I did go for the first time. I think now I would go. And I also remember now, in those days, I hated flying. In fact, on that trip to Germany, the plane caught on fire over Nova Scotia. And it was a dreadful trip. It took us something like 36 hours to get from New York to Frankfurt. And we were all wrecks when we got there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, somewhere along the line I discovered you were quite the poker player. Do you still play?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Every, every summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It, what, well—what is it? A summer activity?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. I used to do it some in New York, too. Uh, but in New York, it's much more difficult to find an evening where you know, I played with professional men, artists, professors, psychiatrists and so on. In New York it's much more difficult to find an evening where you can get everybody together. But in Provincetown, I played with the same seven men for 20 years now I guess.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Who are they?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, mostly old um, socialist painters of the '30s. Uh. Jules Kaplan, Florsheim [ph], and a Joyce expert named Halpern [ph], Henry Rothman, and one, the first one to die, who died recently, Harry Engel. And, but it's—I don't know. It's the classic male poker game where you get away from the house and the family one evening a week and talk with the guys, so to speak, and have this amiable game for very low stakes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What interests you about poker as a game?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It's a real revelation of character. Um. People play poker exactly the way they are, going to the exact degree of timidity, or nerve, or cautiousness, or bluff, or tightness, or extravagance, or concentration, or vagueness, or conservativeness, or narcissism, or whatever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Oh.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Uh-huh. I mean, it's one of the clearest indications of character I know if you play with somebody for a long time. You have to play with them at least a dozen times to really get it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really find out. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. But it, it's also a warm, male—the way we play. Because we play for such small stakes, that the money's unimportant. Um, I've played in poker games for thousands of dollars and then it's an entirely different thing. It's—

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It's like war.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever play with Paul Magriel in those games that he used to have?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah, occasionally. But he was an infantile madman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You know, if he lost three hands then he really—suddenly throw all the cards on the floor, things that one just doesn't do playing poker.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Really.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I remember betting Ken Noland $2,000 on a hand, and in a moment where I had—I would have had great difficulty paying if I'd lost. And it was the first time I'd ever played for such stakes. I remember it flashed through my mind, you have to play rationally and figure it as though you're playing for $20 instead of $2,000 and do exactly what you would do if you were playing for $20. Don't get rattled by the money. And I thought the chances are 10 to one that I have a better hand than he does. And, and he had a very strong hand, but I had a superb hand. And so I bet the $2,000 and won, somewhat to his surprise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Because statistically uh, he had a very good chance to win.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you find that the statistics work out in playing?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, yes. Um, well, no. Let's put it this way. The statistics are absolutely accurate about the percentages for hands, but you're not playing with machines.

You're playing with people, so that you often ignore the statistics. If you're playing with somebody who's very timid, for example, even though the statistics are against you, you can try to bluff him out and often succeed. Or if you're playing with somebody who never bets a lot unless they have a powerhouse of a hand, even though the statistics are very good for your particular hand, the chances are that that person has an even better hand, and then you abandon the statistics and so on. What you say—

PAUL CUMMINGS: So psychology, as well.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. It's, it's not only the percentages. It's also that you're playing with opponents and part of the equation is reading the opponents. And that's where the character revelation comes out because you're constantly looking at the other person thinking, "What has he got?" And looking at his behavior and slowly learning his patterns of play and so on. And after a while, you realize X is a relatively timid player. J is an absolutely reckless player. And reckless players always lose over the long run. And Y is a generally conservative player who one time out of 10 will really bluff you and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it really is a great game.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, yeah. It's a fascinating game. But I won't play with strangers, so that I would say, beyond the game, my main interest is being with a group of men whom I really like as human beings once a week, and also exchanging a little gossip before and afterwards. And as I say, getting—I've always lived with women all my life. I mean, lots of women. Housekeepers, wives, daughters, stepdaughters, all their friends. And once in a while it's very pleasant to be in a wholly masculine atmosphere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Well, how did you like Provincetown? Because—do you still go there, because you know—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, yeah. I like it better than any place in America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But hasn't—it's changed a great deal, hasn't it, over the years?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, I don't think so relatively. I mean, it was always the most Bohemian place in America, I think. I mean, to the precise degree that, say, in the '20s and '30s, and early '40s, Greenwich Village was. And it remains that way. Now, Bohemia itself has changed a lot. And in that sense, Provincetown has changed along with it, but still remains the most Bohemian, open, most tolerant, most sophisticated in a Bohemian sense—though it's in America—with an incomparable sight, a beautiful harbor at the end of Cape Cod. And with fantastically beautiful light. You know, Matisse—most people don't know it. Matisse thought of all the places he'd ever been, and he went around the world, that New York had the most beautiful light. And Provincetown, in the sense Matisse meant it about New York, Provincetown has the same kind of light even more beautifully. The only place I've ever been that has this beautiful light, or the only two places, are Venice and the Greek Islands. Because you see, Provincetown is a very narrow spit of land surrounded by the sea. And I'm there in the summer when it's mostly sunny. And I think the reflection of the sunlight on the sea, and the fact that like the Greek Islands, all the buildings are painted white. The light dances in a golden warmth. And I love that kind of light.

For example, people—there's a thing called Motherwell Blue, which actually, there is no such thing. That is, I use lots of blues. So no matter which one it is, everybody calls it a Motherwell Blue. But what they really mean is, I use blue warmly. And I don't know how. I mean, most people use it coldly or neutrally. But it certainly has to do with the golden light of Provincetown because I almost always use it there alone. I'm sure because I see it so much in the sea and in the sky. And I have a white boat that I go out to the sea in, and so on. But you see, in my house there is done with yacht's hardware, and it's all mahogany and white. It's like a boathouse directly in the water. And there's a big marine aspect to my work that nobody has ever noticed. But I mean, the kind of colors I use, the kind of light in the pictures, the matteness of them. Everything about them is very much related to a seaport environment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you find that the—I think you've mentioned once when we were just talking that you frequently will start things in Provincetown and then finish them when you come back—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL CUMMINGS: —in the winter.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: That's true. And as the winter progresses, the changes would be more radical. And not necessarily for the better, but in the sense as the winter progresses, my eye gets much more grays and earth colors, and so on, because that's what I see in the winter, in a northern climate. It would really be logical for me to live in Morocco in the winter, or um, how would you say? In a sunlit climate, or the Caribbean. And then my work would not alternate between sunlit pictures and somber pictures, but would be all sunlight.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting the close relationship to nature.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. But it's a generalized relationship. It's uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: To the seasons and time.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And in fact, all of my painting is generalized in one sense in that I'm trying to deal with more or less universal elements. Yet in another way it's highly personal in the particular configurations that I conclude out of those generalized things. You see, in that sense, that's where I feel empathy with Mondrian. Uh, though Mondrian was also after universals. But he wanted nothing personal. And that's where I disagree with him. To the degree that he wanted universal essences, I do too, but I want more um, more humanistic ones. In the end, the center of my work is human beings. And the center of Mondrian's work is a universe that is so structuralized, the human beings are sucked in just as much as sky, and earth, and buildings, and everything else. They have no prior value, or no greater value. And for me they do. I mean, for me, would you say, I'm interested in the human drama, but in its ultimate terms as I see them. He's interested in almost in the sense of physics. The physical nature of the universe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what do you mean in the human terms and ultimate terms?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: All this, and my pictures are filled with death and life, and sexuality, and personal mementos, and poetic illusions, and irony, and travel, and fantasy, all kinds of things that Mondrian would rigorously exclude. And at the same time, I think I'm no more—and there I would agree with him—I think I'm no more sentimental than he is, even though—and he's certainly not a sentimental artist. I don't think I am, either, at all. But uh, I mean, he wouldn't paint a pregnant nude or a French poem, or a synagogue mural, or an elegy to the Spanish Republic, or a Gauloises bleu cigarette label. And all of those have both plastic—well, you see, I want to be as plastic and as structural as he is, but to allow a much greater range of subject matter. Would you say, ultimately to be less abstract than he is. And that is a very conscious choice on my part, because I have as good a philosophical mind as he does, a better-trained one. And I could have been as abstract as any artist who ever lived if that's what I chose to do. But I don't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, has this been a continuing choice, a recent development, or was it—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No, no. That, that was always the choice. I mean, see, I was trained professionally as a philosopher. I understood perfectly the nature of abstraction philosophically. So any degree of abstraction I use, I know exactly how and why, where I think most artists stumble on it in a hit-and-miss, rough-and-ready, empirical way, and ultimately choose their stand.

Picasso's equally clear about it. He deliberately wants not to pass the degree of abstraction that you cannot get back to what the picture originates in. I would agree with that, but I put more extreme limits to the degree of abstraction that it's possible to get back to the original from than he does. I mean, he's more old-fashioned that way.

[END OF TRACK.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's May 1, 1974. This is side seven, Paul Cummings talking to Robert Motherwell in his house in Greenwich. Okay.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, we haven't reached the '60s yet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Now, when, when did you meet her? You met her somewhere towards the end of the '50s or something, wasn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. I met her in December of '57 at a mutual friend's house at a dinner party. And I was, at the time, in the process of getting divorced. And was already legally separated from my former wife. And then we started going out together and we were married the following April.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, in—but you know, one thing that always fascinates me are the relationships between two artists, or two writers, or two people who do the same thing. And how did you, you know, find that in the beginning? Was it exciting, complicated, difficult?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It um, it certainly was exciting in the—

[Side conversation.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —beginning of—in fact, for the previous couple of years, before we were married in '58, I had considerable difficulty painting, painted very little, which had a lot to do with being miserable. And the break-up of the family. I was very devoted to my children, whom I was losing, and so on. And um, I was also teaching, so that Helen and I couldn't have a proper honeymoon when we got married in April. But as soon as school was out, we went to Europe for the summer and rented a huge old villa in the Basque country that was going to be turned into condominiums that fall. So it was quite empty and fortunately painted white inside. Had about 18 rooms. And I painted something like 78 pictures that summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: My goodness.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: After having painted maybe eight the whole previous year, or something like that. So suddenly it was a fantastic explosion of energy, and release, and so on. And Helen painted—I don't know if she painted as many pictures, but probably in square feet since she paints mainly huge pictures. She probably painted as many square feet as I did. And that continued. Uh, that kind of activity continued really until, I guess, my Museum of Modern Art show, which was when, uh, 1965, I think. And that's only for about a year. And, you see, Helen and I were not a characteristic example of two artists being married in that, one, we were of two different generations. And secondly, we were both fully formed in our styles, both had had dozens of exhibitions, both were very well known. So there wasn't all of the problems of rivalry or, if say, two young artists start out together and one turns out to be much more recognized than the other. And we weren't, we were not in one sense in direct competition, belonging to different generations, too. I mean, Helen was very highly esteemed among the artists of the '50s. And I was among the artists of the '40s. And of course, there were, I know there were lots of rumors about us, and all of that, but I think the—it had very little influence on our work. I think I would have painted very much the same pictures during the period of the 14 years we were married that I did, and she would have primarily. We each might have influenced the other five percent or something like that. But in fact, the real difficulties were not at all in our being artists, but in our both being celebrated. And it wouldn't have mattered what field. It meant that the um—I mean, I can hardly manage to keep on top of my own life of, you know, all the shows and interviews, and lectures, and students coming, and people writing, and autographs, and [inaudible], and all the rest of it. And when you double that—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You could make it four times as much almost.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Exactly. It makes it four times as bad. And in the end, it was just too much, so that in the last several years, we hardly saw each other because, you know, she would be meeting with her dealer at such and such an hour. I'd be meeting with mine or whatever the—Lebrun [ph] would be coming to collect some of her pictures or some of my pictures to go somewhere. And it was almost like a, um—well, down here a mile away there's a supermarket, an independent supermarket owned by a man and his wife. And I often shop there. And I can see the same thing with them. But they really hardly have a chance to talk to each other. She's at the cashier all the time. He's making the inventories and all the rest of it. And from 8:00 o'clock in the morning till 8:00 at night something is going on. And then they're so exhausted, I imagine they can only sort of smile at each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And it was something like that I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But now, did you paint at home? Did she paint at home or did you have

separate studios then?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, she always painted outside. And I always did both. I always had a small studio at home, which I did some of my biggest pictures in, and a big outside studio. But I'm basically a very domestic man whose life centers around a house. In fact, the main thing I've done in my life outside of painting is to build five houses or remodel them. House-studios, I should say. And Helen's the exact opposite. She's a native New Yorker, very active, and knew literally hundreds of New Yorkers well. In fact, when I first knew her I used to be stunned as we'd walk down Madison Avenue, that we couldn't walk 20 feet without somebody saying, "Hi, Helen." And so on. And she, in some ways, it was the way you think of an executive woman that's—to her it's very natural to go over to her studio and start right up. And she had a kitchen, kitchenette in her outside studio, would entertain there a lot, too, as well as work there. But I always worked very privately. Very few people ever went to my studios. I didn't like it. And also, I work a lot at night, which she very rarely did. And then is when the home studio was very useful, which was on a separate floor. We lived in a four-story house. And my studio was the garden floor with its own entrance so that I could work there absolutely undisturbed by all the activity in the house above. So that I, but I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about situations? You know, did you talk about things? I mean, you spent the summers in Provincetown together and that must have been some different, different kind of life than New York.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, which she never liked. Uh, she never liked Provincetown. She regarded it as second-rate and—what Provincetown was in those days was essentially Greenwich Village moved to the seaside for the summer, in the way that you can say the Hamptons are Madison Avenue.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Moved there for the summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To the beach.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And since my professional life has always been on 57th Street and Madison Avenue, for me it was a great relief to go to something simpler. And I really always preferred Greenwich Village anyway. I'm talking about the days before it went to pieces as it did in the '60s. Where Helen, I think, um, had no feeling for Greenwich Village or a Bohemian kind of life. I don't know. Uh, she also—like a few New Yorkers I've known, likes New York very much in the summer, likes the fact that it's a much less busy—apparently doesn't mind the heat, which used to bother me very much. Uh, I would say New York City is her domain and I find it interesting that before I knew her, there was never any summer place she went to regularly, nor, so far as I know, in the four years since we've been divorced has there been any place that she settled in. Where I still go to Provincetown and probably will as long as I live. So—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you like that shift into nature, too, don't you? I mean, the light—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, I love the s—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —and the water, and—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I have a passion for the water. An absolute passion. In fact, this place here in Greenwich, which is in the back country, in the real country, I finally got after ransacking the Connecticut coast for an adequate place and simply couldn't find one because I really would have liked to have had a sea place, but much nearer New York than Provincetown. And I couldn't find it. So this is a compromise. And I've lived all my life by the sea. I was born in a seaport. I grew up in uh, basically in San Francisco. Then I went to Cambridge and Boston, and—which is a harbor. And I went to Paris, which is on the sea. And then I went to New York, which is a great seaport.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: So I've spent all my life around water. And to this day, I like boats, and marine hardware, and fisherman, and fishing boats, and seagulls, and the whole shooting match, which in a way that other people have a passion for the mountains.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And Helen, in some ways, has a deeper feeling for landscape than I do in that she likes all kinds of landscapes. You know, whether it's in Aix-en-Provence, or it's a seaport, or it's the Matterhorn, or Central Park, she likes it all. Where it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's just to see rather than to revisit, though, isn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. And uh, yeah. She has a much more—she's basically a traveler. And I'm basically a person who needs a home base. And um, so that it was a real compromise for her to go to Provincetown for every summer. And a couple of times we did go to Europe for the summer. But it never worked out well because it's almost impossible, except for that one lucky chance the first year to find the kind of space that two American artists working on the scale both of us do, do. And I, even that first summer, at the end of the summer, we were painting on peasant sheets because we exhausted all the—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —all the canvas in the whole province. I mean, we just couldn't find any. And we began to have paint sent by airmail from New York because we used up all the paint in the whole Basque province.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, my.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And when we finished all that work, we had to get the local coffin maker to make the crates for us to send it all back to New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] They must have wondered what in the world you were doing with all of the—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Probably they thought that we were crazy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Terrific, though. But you know, one thing that I suppose is very obvious is did you talk about art? Did you discuss it? Did you discuss your work with each other? You know, what was going on, or look at it? Or did you maintain a certain independence?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um. I would say much more independence than people would suspect. And Helen is very strict in her judgment. Where I think I'm more tolerant in that I spent a lot of my life teaching and judging, and being on the Guggenheim jury and so on. And if you use the standard that something is a masterpiece or it's nothing, it's impossible to function on the level that students, or even on the Guggenheim awards for a year or so on. What you have to do is use relative standards and in relation to what's the best possible in a situation, judge that way. And that kind of thing really didn't interest her. And she hasn't taught very much. And so that then, um, yes. We used to talk a lot about masterpieces, you know. Either great contemporary shows, say a Miró show, or a Rothko show, or something like that. Or Old Masters. But very little really about—surprisingly little about the contemporary scene in general. She also is an inveterate gallery and museum-goer. And I'm the opposite. I go very rarely, a few times a year, so that um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true. I remember seeing her frequently in galleries, but not you so often. It's a rare sight to see you out.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, somehow I always get cornered into conversations and so on. And when I go to look I just want to look and not talk. And so I guess in the end I gave up looking or would go to offbeat things that I was less apt to run into everybody I know. And so I don't know what it is. I'm also basically a much less gregarious person than Helen is, I think. Well, that's hard to say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you think that, you know, going back to the career influences in one's life. Do you think that really is so important in affecting your, the personal relationships that way? I mean, is there a way to get around that or does it just encroach subtly, subtly, subtly? And pretty soon you find that um, created a real division in the demands of the—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I, it's hard to say. I really don't know, or I should say, I know of maybe 30 or 40 artist couples. And out of those, the only ones that seem to have worked

very well over a lifetime that I can think of offhand, was Sunny and Robert Dolener [ph], and Arp and his first wife, uh, Sophie. And in the case of the Arps, I think there's a considerable disparity in talent, that the man was definitely more talented. But the, otherwise what their life was like, I don't know. But I do know quite a bit about Dolener, and there's no question that, in that case, the wife stood absolutely in the background, though I think equally talented, as long as he was alive. It's true that she outlived him for decades and came into her own afterward. But I can't think of um—you know, if I think of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. Ultimately it broke. Or Grace Hartigan and Al Leslie. Or, I don't know about Joan Mitchell, if she's still with Riopelle or not—but certainly two artists living together is, for a lifetime, is very rare. And I think must be built in the situation, as I think it's difficult for anybody to live with an artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, because there's so much temperament involved, and self-absorption, and vagueness, and impulsiveness, and egotism, and—it's because the—see, normal life is led under a certain amount of pressure and a certain amount of grace as things go, but in a way, it's mainly external, you know. If a man's worried, he's worried about his income tax or whatever it is and so on. And in art, one's haunted always by knowing that one's never fully realized the work the way one would like to be able to exactly, and is always pondering it, and repainting it one's mind, and so on. So that a lot of what's going on is not at all visible. And I think my experience is that—well, let's take wives of artists or mates of artists who are not artists themselves. I would say in nearly all the cases that I know where it worked over a lifetime, the mate who was not the artist was a very traditional, restrained, unobtrusive, but very strong person in dealing with the outside world. It's much more like a father-daughter relationship, or a mother-son relationship in many ways. And that's, and I think that's built in, in the situation.

I think it would also be true of poets, or composers, or maybe mathematicians, or people who are dealing with problems that are in one sense purely theoretical all the time. That it's not tangible like building a house, or running a business, or running a farm, or whatever. But where, in a sense, it's all in one's head. I imagine, you know, I imagine it's very difficult to live with a man like Einstein, or very difficult—in the same that it'd be very difficult to live with a man like Picasso, or with a man like Stravinsky. And uh—though Stravinsky made out very well, but his mate was exactly the kind of person I'm trying to describe, at once unobtrusive, but very strong in dealing with the outside world and making the artist partner very comfortable, physically and psychologically. And when I say this, it's just what I've noticed in my life. I can't prove it. And in that sense, for two artists to be married, they're really missing that third unobtrusive person who takes care of them. And in fact, one of the first things Helen and I did after we'd been married a year or two, was to get a housekeeper, which I still have. Whom I still have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's an important adjunct you find, somebody who can kind of run the house that way.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. I would say. You see, the big traditional thing was that one person was a professional and the other stayed home and ran the house. Now the person who's a professional comes home, theoretically, exhausted, worn out by the world, and wants peace and quiet, and a nice supper, and so on. If they both come home in that mood, who has the energy to do it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And so what you really need is a third person who stayed home all day to have done that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who can do all that?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Um, well, you know, your teaching career, which was mentioned many times here. Uh, was it in '59 I think you resigned from Hunter as a full-time instructor? Uh, was that because life was better or you were fed up with it, or was it? Because you'd been there for years by that time.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, several things have been—I first taught regularly at Hunter—

well, I, in the very early '50s, maybe 1950 itself, or '51. I don't remember. And taught there for six or seven years. And that was a time of great personal unhappiness. And I enjoyed the teaching very much and was very good at it. And it so happened that after I married Helen, uh, a couple months afterward, then I was due for a sabbatical at half pay. So the first year we were married I took the sabbatical and discovered that—and certainly this partly had to do with my new happiness with Helen, but it also had to do, I think, with not teaching. Uh, that I painted extraordinarily more than I had in the last several years. So the next year, I took a leave of absence without pay and discovered the same thing happened, and also discovered that with a greater body of work available, I also could make approximately the same amount of money or maybe a little more even, than I was teaching. And I had started teaching in the first place to support my children, and the whole family ménage. And once I realized that I could do just as well painting, naturally I preferred to because, though I loved teaching, I think it's really an either/or thing, that teaching and painting—if one teaches well and responsibly—take exactly the same kind of energy. I mean, the problem of what to do with the canvas, and the problem of what to do with a given student, required the same energy, the same knowledge, the same psychic resources, the same sensitivity, the same everything. And I think there are very few artists who have managed to teach a lifetime successfully and have been very productive. I mean, it's very interesting to me, for example, that Hofmann, who's generally regarded as the paragon of modern art teachers in this country, actually had his first one-man show—or at least his first show of mature work of the kind that we all associate with him now—when he was 60. And certainly all those years of teaching must have held him back 20 years. And he had the great fortune to live another 25 years beyond, or 20 years beyond normal life expectancy. But in, so that if he hadn't, his career would have been very adumbrated. And I think that happens to most artist/teachers unfortunately. And it's a pity because certainly the best artists would be the best teachers if they weren't too confined by an academic institutional situation. But there you have to choose. So now I teach indirectly. By that, I mean that I visit several universities several times a year and spend hours or a couple of days with students. And I have young artist helpers and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you had assistants like that very, very long? Or is that a recent development?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Uh, I did in the past, but since I work—would you say, when I lived in New York, I had some, but it didn't work very well because I so often worked at home at night. And very often when I would go to the outside studio, I wouldn't feel like working or there'd be nothing particularly to do. And I'm not a very good organizer. And the whole situation sort of embarrassed me. But since I moved to the country, yes, I've had assistants steadily because if, in the moment I want to be alone in the studio, or hours I want to be alone, there are plenty of other things to do around the country place. There's always a leaking roof, or a piece of fence, or a car to be taken in for a check-up, or so on. So that I don't uh, so that it becomes a real job in a way that there's not that much for an assistant to do for an artist. Um, or at least the kind I am because I don't have—I've never had assistants paint my pictures, you know. I mean, paint parts of them. They do really just the stretching, framing, moving things around, ordering things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They don't work on the canvases or anything.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. Occasionally I have one, if I don't want to work on a white canvas, but say on a beige canvas, I'll have the assistant paint the background beige. But that's the same as you know, painting a wall. It's—but in terms of the actual work—or, for example, this winter I made a fantastic number of collages. And for the first time I had an assistant, that I'd never done before, who glues them together. And I discovered that saves me—well, save is not the right word—it conserves my energy enormously. I can make another collage while he is going through all the purely tedious work of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Gluing it down.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —gluing layer by layer, and putting weights on so it'll stay down, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you make them? Pinning pieces in place or kind of laying them out?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. I just place them and then he does exactly what I did, is just put

little pencil marks, points at various corners where they all fit together. And then you, if it's in, say, six layers, you pull them all off in order and paste down the first layer, and then the second layer, and then the third layer. In a way, it's a lot like making a multi-plate print. They, they're done in layers. And now for the first time I also have a—speaking of prints—I also have a printer working for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? That's new, isn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. And in fact, I have a whole print workshop now, I guess since you've been here. I hadn't—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, my goodness. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I hadn't realized it was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. I mean, this is a whole new—you were just putting that addition of the back on.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, that's [inaudible], but this, I have a print shop in the stable over there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: A young teacher from Bennington who prints for me, and actually this weekend I have an English printer coming, who's a great technician. And we're going to spend the whole weekend working on monotypes, which I've never done before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of printing is it? The etching or lithography?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Etching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Etching. Terrific.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I don't have to get involved in lithography because um, the master printer, Gemini, has just moved—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Ken Tyler. Yeah. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And uh, he has tremendous presses. Oh, that's only lithography. I'm, I'm sure I'll be doing [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Great. It makes it nice.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But it—you see, my work depends on my wrists and hands. And there are many artists nowadays who have, whose works are completely executed by somebody else, which is perfectly possible if the hand doesn't count, if it's purely Conceptual art. Then you can do it, as Moholy-Nagy used to dream of, by telephoning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And, and I see nothing wrong with it because the conception is the work, but it so happens that part of my conception is my hand. And nobody else's hand works the same way mine does, that's impossible to teach.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right. No. It's fascinating, though, how many people do use assistants these days and the number of them in some cases.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, um, but it also is true in the Renaissance. Where it's always been true of mural painters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And contemporary art is really reaching those proportions. Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I've always felt it was funny. I was reading about Tiepolo the other day and there's always to me something, after looking at those for years, they become somewhat anonymous because you start discerning so many different hands. You know, there's not that cohesive one-line statement, I guess, is what it is. It's um—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But on the other hand, um, if he hadn't worked with assistants, there would be much less work in existence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: True. True.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Much less variety and then he might have developed much less. You see, I think in a way in every artist, they are built in so many pictures, potential pictures. Say 10,000. And according to how the artist works and every kind of circumstance. When he dies, maybe 10 came out. Maybe a 100 came out. Maybe 5,000 came out or whatever. And I like the idea of assistants from the standpoint that maybe more—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Can happen.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —of the man's whole potential was revealed, because there's no artist who doesn't make some things altogether by himself and those examples are, if you want simply only by him, they exist to show what he does all by himself. But I think there's more involved than that. I also think working with assistants changes one's concepts—

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —somewhat.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, do you make use of the assistants?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah, that one's energy can be focused more critically simply on aesthetic judgments. You know, I remember sitting one afternoon with Rothko, who was spending the whole afternoon making very clumsy stretchers for his canvases. They were clumsy because he was doing it in a way that was very economical, using the wrong side of the wood because it was cheaper for them to do it properly. And as we sat there, I thought to myself in these four hours that he's made these several stretchers very poorly, he could have painted a whole picture. And somebody else should have been paid, you know, $30 dollars to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: To do it.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —to do it. And it was just a waste of his time. On the other hand, there are certain sculptors who, you know, like Brâncuși, that I think, part of the quality of the work comes from polishing, and polishing, and fussing over the work all the time. But with Abstract Expressionism, which is in a certain way so spontaneous and impulsive, there's nothing to fuss over really. I mean, it's much more like Oriental calligraphy. You do it and either you hit it or you don't. But to spend a whole day getting the paper stretched out is—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, my God. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: But now, do you have, do you have that same attitude towards you know, the paintings in your *Open* series, that same tack and spontaneity?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, sure. See, all of the *Open* series are done, um, as though they were calligraphy. I mean, they're drawn just as quickly. They're not measured or anything like that. I mean, you know, they're just drawn like that. And if they're placed wrongly, then drawn spontaneously, then I just paint out the lines and do it again or throw it away, according to whether I think I can paint it out without wrecking the surface. Sometimes the painting out enriches the surface. Sometimes it spoils its freshness, and then I throw it away. In fact, I, last night I was doing that to several pictures. Old ones.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, I'm curious about um, because I made some notes from listening to the other tape yesterday. Um, do you go back and review paintings in say, six months old, a year old, and look through things every so often? Or—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: On occasion. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or do you kind of keep work that's in process visible?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In fact, a lot of the work I have here—I mean, there are hundreds of works here. And the reason I have them here instead of putting

them in a warehouse is most of the ones I have here, at least half, are ones that I intend to revise at some time or another, or black out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I mean, half the pictures here are ones, are here because I'm not satisfied with them. And every once in a while I do do that. Not as often as I'd like to because I have a very poor storage system, and it's hard to get at it physically. It's hard to get at one of the pictures and I forget about them. And actually what my building project is, that the architect is coming for in an hour, is to build this summer a really systematic system of sliding walls on which I can hang pictures and so on. And be able to get at them, and also be able to show them, and, but in being—seeing them more often, be more sure of what I want to do and don't want to do. See, when you paint on the scale I do, several hundred pictures a year, you really forget about a lot of the pictures. And especially if they're, as it is now, I have sort of hidden storage bins. They go in there like bottles of wine into a wine cellar.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But are they—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And then you forget, you forget what you have even.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And to spread them all out would require—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Enormous space, too.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Impossible space. But if I get—and actually Ken Tyler, who's an expert at schematic designing—the racks for me so that I can pull them out, like sliding screens and see 10 pictures on a screen, that's going to, I think, enormously help me because I definitely, any pictures that are still in my possession that I don't think are of the first order, I either want to bring into that realm or want to destroy before I die.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there are some paintings then that you might have worked on two or three times over four or five years.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Of course. Yeah. Last night I was working on one that I painted four years ago, and painted it, four years ago, painted it in maybe at the most an hour. It's a large picture. Six feet high. And looking at it last night, uh, it was one of those pictures that—it was an *Open*. And looking at it last night, I saw the lines were, did not hold up in quality or in spacing. So I just painted them out. And painting them out, I wrecked the background. So next time I feel like it, I'll try to prepare a decent ground. If I succeed in that, then I'll try to put the lines back in again in a way that I think is especially more accurate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happens when you work on a painting like that? Do, did the concept sort of come back again to you, or does it change? Or shift because of the work that's intervened? Do you think you see it differently? Or it's been clarified by the work that's gone, you know, in, in between?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: That's hard to answer. Um, you know, last year I had a retrospective of collages covering 30 years that traveled to various museums. And in one museum, they had hung it chronologically and by groups so that, say, 1953 was slightly separated from 1954, and so on. And as you know, my collages are relatively abstract. I mean, they're not figurative. And I was stupefied at how looking, say, at 1957, all kinds of things from these abstract works about 1957 would come back to me—where they were painted, what the light was like, what I felt like then. And I had no conception of how autobiographical my work is in that sense. I don't think it would be to somebody who didn't know my life intimately. But to me it is. But conversely, all through those years, there are certain concepts or certain possibilities that I still could do or still do do, or many of them I could still correct, even if they were 30 years old because they're so vivid to me, in terms of something that's also permanent in my character. So it's impossible for me to answer you yes or no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: One thing that remains absolutely steady in me, and there's another thing that's absolutely fortuitous year by year. And I think there are certain works that I could not touch. The more fortuitous, the less I could touch them. But say in the *Open*

series, which is a concept I've worked on for five years now and is essentially such a simple-minded concept in its essence, that I have quite a steady view of, which I think doesn't fluctuate as much with my moods.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you realized before the autobiographical content or—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Not nearly—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —before that, seeing that collage exhibition?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Not nearly to that degree. And autobiographical content is misleading.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible] I guess—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: A mood.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —key.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: A mood is the word, or tone. I mean, the tone or the mood of the year would come back to me. And, but really set up memories and associations that I really had completely forgot. I'm sure looking at that show I thought of a thousand things that I hadn't thought of for 10 years, or in some cases, for 20 years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Yeah. Do you think some of those things would be apparent to, to other people who would see that? Or is it just because of your own life and your work that you're the only one who would have that kind of experience?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, I think it would be very difficult for another person because, in the end, it's a question of light, and color, and, in some cases, the objects themselves. Say a boat ticket or a ticket to the entrance to a museum. Then that part is quite concrete and somebody could see, yeah, in 1958, he was at the Prado. But what's more basic, the uh—

Well, to give a clear example, I, looking at them, I can tell for the most part which ones were painted in the summer and which were in the winter. Though it's only recently that I've begun to date pictures except by the year. But by looking at the quality of the light and color in them, I can tell, yeah, that must have been done in July or August. And others must have been done in December and January and February, and so on. And I don't know whether somebody else could tell that or not.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the *Fragments*? You know, because I've always been intrigued by the, you know, the NRF mailing papers and the cigarette packages, and the [laughs], you know.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: [Inaudible.] Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, all of this material which, which to me has always been kind of like a diary that somebody could put together and see a certain—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But it's a—I can truthfully say that it's all stuff that came out of the studio that I never collected for that purpose. But in the case of NRF, which you mentioned, and in the case of the Gauloises packets, which are made of [inaudible], both of those were given to me by the same friend—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —a neighbor who I only see in the summer. He's been a summer neighbor for 10 years now, who has some funny empathy for what I like that way. Though in the case of the Gauloises, it so happens that he smokes them. And one day we were having a drink on the terrace late in the afternoon talking about something and he said, "Do you want one?" And I said, "Sure," and took one. I don't normally smoke them. And remarked, "God, that's such a beautiful blue," in the Gauloises pack, because most blues are greenish blues. And the Gauloises pack is reddish blue or ultramarine blue, really. And a week later I looked in my mailbox and it was filled with empty Gauloises packs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And immediately I realized what it was all about. He's, he has that kind of thoughtfulness. And put them up in the studio. And it might have been—I don't remember at all. But it might have been two years later, say, before one day, in working on a collage and I thought, "It really needs some blue there." And I looked around the studio and saw all those packets and tried one, and suddenly realized it worked beautifully. And then made another and started.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there really is, is time between the actual piece of paper and the time it might be used.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: See, you see, I think my mind—now I'm not telling you about quality, but about character—I think in many ways it's probably a very Proustian kind of mind where the past and the present in many ways can join, and that it's all interlaced back and forth in a way that is very meaningful to me. And I think it's meaningful to other people, only to the degree that if something is meaningful to oneself, people can recognize it's meaningful without necessarily seeing what the meaning is. You know, in the same way that when Proust ate the famous cake, whoever was sitting with him might very well have noticed that something was happening to him without any idea of what it was that was happening to him. And in that sense, I think, my work is taken by people in general as, "Yeah, it means something to him, and therefore has some meaning, even if it's not quite clear to me what it is."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, do you think the—you know, one of the things that always intrigues me, I guess from an art historical point or a critic's point of view is the kind of meanings that can be read into non-representational shapes and images. Do you feel that the kind of criticism you've had over the years has been valid in that kind of instance? Or has it been, you know, has—or is that difficult?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think there's very little—I think there's been less intelligent criticism about my work than any artist I know who's exhibited that much and been that much written about. But I also can partly understand why, is that—I mean, to put it simply and arrogantly, most of the people who write about me are much less literate than I am. And that varies in degree from a high school student, to a graduate student, to a young critic, to critics who are too young to have witnessed a certain intimate scene in New York in the '40s, which is the most distorted uh, decade I know. Partly because most, most of the people who wrote about it weren't present. And some of the people who were present deliberately distorted it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think they did that? Their own ends or?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. For lots of reasons.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Um.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: You know, for example, I spent my whole life—I was trained as a professional philosopher. I spent my whole life reading. Probably read more than I've painted. And it's very rarely that I would confront a critic, let's say, who knows not only the art scene of the '40s, where my origins are, but also knows Mallarme, knows Spinoza, knows Freud, knows Zen, knows a dozen other things that I know in an almost professional way. I've spent so much time on them. And my work is full of allusions, sometimes ironic, sometimes titillating, sometimes quite blunt. So all kinds of things of that order, that nobody has ever even tried to tackle, and which ultimately may not be important in painting terms, but I know is all there. It's as though I'd written operas all my life and people had listened to the music, but never listened to the words. And all the, all the words have been ignored.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Do I make myself clear?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Matter of fact, there's a young art historian who wants to write a book about me, and I was making this point to him. And then he looked at me and said, "But you see, the point is I haven't read all the things you have, anything close to it. And in that

sense, I can't do that." And he said, "I don't know who could, who would."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but you know, I think you have to do that. I think that's one of the problems the art historians have to face at some point. You can't be all things to all people.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he's got to select. But you continue reading, don't you? I mean, more and more, you know.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I always have. I've given away two 10-volume, 10,000-volume libraries. And now, this summer, I'm going to build a kitchen out here. I'm going to use all that kitchen area for a new library. I must read at least three hours a day and I'm a very rapid reader. So that would mean a couple of hundred pages a day. Periodicals, books, everything you could imagine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have any system of reading or do you just read what your interests are? Or do you follow, you know—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, some of the reading I do because I have to, you know. I'm editing a book or, for example, at this moment, I'm rereading Frank O'Hara's art criticism because the publisher wants me to write a preface to it, which I really don't want to do and don't think I should. I mean, I think somebody of his own generation and group should do it, but his sister, who's, has control of things for whatever reason wants me to do it. And so—and it's a lot of reading to do. And as you know, I'm the editor of a series of books and naturally I have to read all of them. And from several points of view, most of the books I edit are translations. And I have to read them partly in terms of simply how well translated they are, and partly in terms of what notes they might need, or explanations for an American or an English reader, and other things. But then, there are other things that I uh—well, last week I spent—I read three volumes of Paul Valéry. And when I was young, I read him a lot because he was a big help to me in trying to formulate some of the defense of abstract art that I was making in the '40s and '50s. And his works were not easy to come by. As you know, in the last—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very hard then.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. In the last 10 years, Princeton has published, is publishing them all. And about a month ago, I got a catalogue from Princeton Press that they were um—two professional people, professors—they were selling lots of books at half price or less. And among them were several volumes of Valéry that I didn't have and had never read. And so I ordered them and they came in the mail last week. And I picked one up and began to get as absorbed as I ever was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But from an entirely different point of view. I mean, much more critical now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How has it changed in those intervening years?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: He seems to me much more shallow than I thought then. And I also can see um, how should I say? See, now I'm a busy man, too, as he must have been. He must have been asked all the time to lecture on this, or that he was the appropriate person for such and such. And I can see now certain ones are written hastily. Or certain ones have nothing to do with their ostensible subject, but he's performing a duty when he gives the eulogy, let's say, to Marshal Pétain, or whatever. And I can also see that they're much more pretentious than I realized, that he knows much less about science and mathematics than he pretended, or indeed would be necessary to project, to realize the kind of ultimate structural abstract mind that was his ideal, as opposed to a romantic, free associated, irrational mind.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: He wanted a mind of total, logical, mathematical clarity. Uh, actually, his logic and mathematics are very weak. And I say that as a person whose own logic in mathematics is greatly pathetic and so.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: [Laughs.]

[END OF TRACK.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Side eight.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —wrote in my opinion, was, at my request an introduction to a marvelous book that I edited in my original series of documents at Wittenborn, called *From Beaudelaire to Surrealism*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And um, Howard remarks in his preface that one of the problems of a French poet is that they're so engrained with French rhetoric uh, how not to speak poetically.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I mean, it's, their problem's the other—if an American's problem is to become a poet, their problem is to become an unpoet. And I think Valéry particularly is a victim of that built-in rhetoric. And from that standpoint, Celine, whom in many ways I detest, is a breath of fresh air after Valéry's rhetoric. And one can understand Beckett or Ionesco and their brevity, and their moving toward almost incoherence as a reaction against the color of French academic eloquence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's almost like the academic American poets, too.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Everything is really kind of, to me, prose with a ragged right edge.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But I still think there's also a problem here to be a poet, so that—I mean, I don't think we're overwhelmed by um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: By good poets.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And, or by classical rhetoric. In fact, the, about a year ago, Max Frisch, the Swiss novelist was here to dinner, and I was very struck at one moment during the dinner. He suddenly exclaimed—he's a very quiet uh, man—and he suddenly exclaimed, "Gee, I wish I wrote in American instead of German." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because American is constantly in a state of flux, of recreating itself, and the least hidebound of any language there is." And he said, "And I envy anybody who has that lack of constrictions as his principle language."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, you know, going back here a bit. In 1961, you had an exhibition in Paris, right?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. At Berggruen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Um, that was your first Paris show, right? I think.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or one of the earliest.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It was the first important one. The very first show I ever had was in Paris, but that was kids' stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, how'd you like showing there? What was—that was, because that was the beginning of you know, kind of being seen abroad, wasn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Because that show thenwent to Italy and to Germany. And what was very unusual for me, I've had maybe a 100 shows and I've gone to maybe 10 outside New York in all that time. And I was there. I can't remember why. But I certainly wouldn't have gone just for it. Um, and it must have been at the beginning or the end of one of the summers Helen and I spent in Europe. And um, Berggruen, as you know, is a first-line gallery. And in those days, more strongly devoted to works on paper than to paintings. And it

was an all-paper show with a superlative catalogue in terms of the quality of reproductions. By far the best catalogue I've ever had. In fact, was in one of a series that I think are the best catalogues that have ever been produced by any gallery. Uh, by a printer, genius.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that those vertical ones that he did?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And so I was there. And some of his friends came to the show. Parisian artists seemed to pay very little attention to it. I don't even remember any reviews. I'm sure there were some, but certainly nothing that sticks in my memory. And the same with it going on so that, in a way, if it weren't for that beautiful catalogue, it would be almost as though the show had never taken place. Um, I do know of two of the works in Germany now. One is owned, oddly enough, by the friends of the parents of my present wife or I wouldn't even know it existed. A doctor who has a very small, almost hobby collection, and why he at some time bought that picture I don't know, in a little town called Münster. And just the other day, my wife encountered an old friend and discovered for the first time that the friend's father also has one from that show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How extraordinary.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But, you know, it was at the height of de Gaullism. Or to use something I know much more about, oddly enough, is I talked to him at great length about it a couple of years later, whenever it was, when Rothko had a big show of big paintings in Paris in one of the museums. Was it—I don't think it was the Museum of Modern Art. Or maybe it was. But at any rate, apparently this huge show was put in subterranean galleries and unheated, and ignored pretty much by the French press. I think either closed or taken down early on some kind of pretext and so on, so that my show was a small show of recent collages. I don't think made the slightest ripple, but even as great an artist as Rothko with a huge show of major work, so far as I know, made a very slight ripple. I think—though I do think in his case one very important article came out that he was very pleased with, a very lengthy, considered one. But I think, in those days, unless one lived in modern France, like Calder, or, who, Sam Francis, or Joan Mitchell, or—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Tobey, who'd been—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And Tobey.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —in and out of there for years. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And that invaders or foreigners were really basically disregarded. And I think not only Americans, but also English artists, German artists, Italian artists. They all were.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I think by the late '60s that they got quite interested in, you know, Bill Rubin's brother, uh—what's his—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Larry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Larry had his gallery and Ileana opened her gallery.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: They all had a show at Larry's and we went to that, too. In fact, she had—so much was there. We went to one of them and there was the same feeling about it as with my shows that, say the American expatriates came, a few French artists who felt friendly toward the American artists came. But in general, it made very little impression. Certainly nothing of the impression that such a show would have made in London, or, I think Zurich, or certainly in America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, it went—it was somewhere in the early '60s that you left Janis and moved to Marlborough.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, why was that? Was that because Janis was moving into new areas?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It was for two reasons. One was all the Abstract Expressionists decided to leave him. Um, and I had theories about—because of Janis's marked growing interest in Pop art, and I had theories about Janis in relation to that, but they're just speculations. And in a sense, I didn't want to be left there alone, because I don't think I was one of Janis's favorite artists when it was all an Abstract Expressionist gallery. Though in many ways, I liked the gallery and instinctively disliked Frank Lloyd from the beginning, which is the gallery that most of my colleagues were considering. But the um—and if it had been only that, I might have stayed. Uh, and in many ways, I regret that I didn't because the worst years professionally in my life were the years with Marlborough. But the thing that really determined me personally, that I think had nothing to do with anybody else—I mean, no one else had this same reason—was that Janis—I was always very anxious to show in Europe and thought that my work would in some ways would be understood there. Um, certain dimensions of it would be understood there maybe even better than in America, though I don't know now. And Janis would always sabotage those efforts. And it was only after being with him for quite a few years that I would find out by chance that such and such a gallery in Paris, or Milan or so on had broached the matter to him and he sometimes never told me about it. Or if the person simultaneously wrote me, he would say, "Well, let me handle it." And then ultimately I would discover that he had made it so impossible, physically and technically, that the other person at certain moments said, "Oh, to hell with it. It's too much trouble."

PAUL CUMMINGS: And sometimes financially, too.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. So that—and my main motive for leaving him was the hopes to be able to show in Europe much more. And of course, that was part of Marlborough's bait, pointing out that they already had a gallery in London, already had a gallery in Rome, and were very seriously thinking of a gallery in Switzerland, which ultimately they did get, and possibly even one in Paris. So from the outside, it looked like this would be marvelous to have an international dealer, because that's exactly what I wanted. As it turned out, Marlborough did exactly the same thing as Janis did, including other American galleries, would make it impossible. Well, I can give you a clear example. Um, I was with Marlborough nine years, only had one exhibition there in nine years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wow.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I think maybe in those nine years, at the most, one small exhibition at some other gallery in America. In the two years since I've left Marlborough—it'll be two years next month, I've had something like 39 shows in 24 months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: My goodness.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And this was all people, that I now learned, that were turned off by Marlborough. You know, Marlborough, for example, would say, "Sure, you can have a show of his for a 10 percent margin."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Now, it's impossible to ship and insure the work to Detroit for 10 percent, let alone even make a profit. And then next, people would say, "I'm sorry. We just can't do it." Marlborough would say, "Sorry, but those are our terms." And never talked to me. So I never knew there was this interest in my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: In fact, for the first time in my life, these past two years since I left Marlborough, I've had to have a full-time secretary. And what I realized is I could have for the past 15 years at Janis and Marlborough if I'd known what was going on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Isn't that incredible?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: But on the contrary, I was put in a subjective position of thinking, especially watching the artists handled by Castelli so efficiently all over the place, of thinking that I was much less interesting to other people than they were. But it was, I think now entirely a question of the difference in how the dealers treated the situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It really is. I mean, in that sense, I threw away 15 years of opportunities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a tremendous amount of time.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. I mean, it's—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think Marlborough ended up being like that or doing that? Or do you think that was his idea anyway, just to get people in there and—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, I think his, uh, Lloyd's ultimate fantasy would be to own every artist in the world—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —and tell them exactly what he can do and not do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] And play Hitler or something.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And those things are character traits. I also have no idea of why Janis wouldn't cooperate, unless he felt that he himself could sell all the good works I was producing and he didn't want me to spread myself thin or whatever. But I was never consulted about a decision that was obviously crucial to my artistic exposure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But did Marlborough sell for you through those years? I mean, even though there were no exhibitions?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, yes. Uh, adequately. But again, the first year I left him I made more money than I made in nine years with him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding. That's fantastic.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the same thing's happening this year, which is a, from that standpoint, they mathematically do, presumably a 10 percent job because you know, my reputation, my work, my personality—none of that has changed that much over the years. I was I would say as well known 15 years ago as I am now. And working as well—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's astounding.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —15 years ago as I am now and actually physically in much better condition. I mean, more energetic and quite a, you know, going to these places and helped out, and um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's absolutely incredible. But it's fascinating how many people seem to have gotten so disillusioned with Mr. Lloyd and his international business after being a part of it for a few years.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, there are lots of fantasies about Marlborough from the outside world. Uh, you know, for example, people thought that the artists who went there were given a lot of money and that's why they went there. I know in my case, and I know in the case of David Smith, because I'm executor of his estate and know all the details of his relations, that his agreement was the identical with mine, which was basically that we were allowed to borrow a certain amount of money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And [inaudible] in return for their having world rights. And just before—which meant in effect that if they didn't do anything for you, there's nothing you could do for yourself. And if I were to ever give any artist any economic advice, it would be never to give anybody exclusive rights.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It's, it would be, is—though my capital with this house—and I had an agreement with somebody that only he could buy it. And if he decides not to buy it, and it's the only capital I've got and [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you do? Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. In fact, when I was building this house, a foreign dealer—it was during the '70 depression, which was the worst year in sales I've had in a long time. And I desperately needed money because this place was not habitable. A foreign dealer said that he would buy an enormous amount of my work to help me out of my immediate difficulties. Lloyd refused to help me, though he had hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of my work as collateral. I just wanted a loan. He refused to give me a loan. And so the dealer did at a third discount, which is normal. Then Lloyd took another third. So out of this huge sale that was directly between the foreign dealer and me, I only got one-third. And which meant that, um—and Lloyd made a fortune on a deal—

PAUL CUMMINGS: He had nothing to do with.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —where he had nothing to do with. I mean, all he had to do was sign a paper, this is okay. And I told him it was blatantly unfair. And he said, "That's the contract. I get a third of your sales."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Fantastic.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I said, "Well, obviously your contract was never designed for a situation like that." Where now, there's another man who maybe wants to buy a lot of pictures of mine. And talking to Larry Rubin at Knoedler, I said, "Of course if we make a big deal like this, you wouldn't take the normal discount on the whole thing." And he said, "Of course not. I would never dream of it."

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. Wow. It's one of the ways Mr. Lloyd's gotten rich, I guess. [Laughs.] Um. In '64, you had that large exhibition at the Tate, which I guess traveled, didn't it?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: No. I didn't have an exhibition at the Tate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh, that was, now wait. I'm thinking of a group show. What was the show? Was that that international exhibition they had that you were in?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I don't remember. Um, '66, my Whitechapel show, uh—I mean my Museum of Modern Art show went to Whitechapel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right. But '60—the Modern show was in '65 in New York.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Right. The end of it. I think it was October or November, if I remember rightly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, how did that come about? I mean, was that a long time being put together or did it take years and years like some of their projects seem to or—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um. Yeah. It was a longterm project but um—and I don't remember the exact details, but quite a complicated one. Um, several European museum directors got together in the, either the late '50s or early '60s. I know the fellow who was at Sandburg [ph] was one. And Brian Robertson from Whitechapel was one. And there must have been a German and an Italian, I think. I remember meeting them one day in somebody's office. Maybe, maybe Bernard Rice's. And with somebody from the Museum of Modern Art. And they had made a list of five or six artists. To the best of my recollection it was de Kooning, Pollock, Kline, myself, and I think Adolph Gottlieb, quite sure Gottlieb, and maybe one more. But anyway, let's say, maybe Clyfford Still. I don't know. But anyway, they had agreed among themselves, and I think in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art, that in turn they would like to show each of these artists in depth. And possibly—do you know what year the Rothko big show was at the Modern Museum? Was that '60 or—?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't remember offhand.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I think possibly his was the first of the series. And then what happened was around '64—it must have been early in '64—the Guggenheim Museum made

it very clear to me that they would like to do the same thing for me. And that put me in a dilemma because it was a concrete offer and I was—and then the offer came from Harvey Arneson, whom I knew and respected as an absolutely straight man. At the same time, the Museum of Modern Art, I had a lot of affection for. They'd shown me constantly through the years. I was in, you know, the second of that series of shows they had of young artists and they collected me from the beginning. And I was friendly with many of the people there. And so I went to see Darncourt [ph] and explained that this had come up and I wasn't trying to bring any pressure to bear on the Modern Museum, but that obviously if the museum, Modern Museum, had the intention of following through this original program, I had to choose one way or the other. And it seems to me he said their schedule was full until '67. Or let's say, three years from then, and that I should choose whether to show at the Guggenheim or to wait for them. And there absolutely wasn't a time slot. And I was also afraid of the Guggenheim Museum building, because at that time it had a reputation for not being good to show paintings. Uh, I've since changed my mind. I think—or at least it shows large bold paintings very well, but there really hadn't been enough experience with it. And I talked to them technically and it turned out that their light system, artificial light, could not be modified. I found it too bright for my pictures. And there were, to my astonishment, there are no rheostats, no anything they could do to modify the light. They couldn't even take some of the tubes out because they were designed in a way that if one tube went out, the whole thing went out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything went out. Oh, God.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: So I was faced with that. And then it turned out, a few months later, that, I mean, Modern Museum show of Turner, which they ultimately did have, was held up on account of technical reasons, internal reasons of the British government. As you know the Turner estate, um, there's still argument about it as to who owns it and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —and so on and so on. And I guess they had a hell of a time getting permissions, or even who had the authority to give permissions. So suddenly they realized that they couldn't have the show in time. And then they said, "Since there's this unexpected spot, do you want it?" And then I hesitated a long time. And in certain ways to my regret now, I accepted the Museum of Modern Art offer to the great disappointment and hurt I think of the Guggenheim Museum, who of course had no conception of this Modern Museum project. In fact, it had been so long since it was first discussed that I had half forgot about it. And it really only came vividly to mind when the Guggenheim made its offer. So that's how it came about. I also think—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what was your, you know, sort of feeling and attitude about having a large major show at a major museum like this, given you know, your age, and career, and point in time and everything?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, you know, when that happened I was 50 and had been working and exhibiting steadily for 20 years. And it seemed very nice. And in those days, I think the highest honor that a modern artist could have—I mean, I should say during the days of my career. I think it's no longer true—was to have a one-man show at the Modern Museum. It was sort of like being knighted almost.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think's happened to that value of having an exhibition there? Do you think because Barr is not there, the museum has changed?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And because um, I think they granted—began to grant that kind of show too quickly. I think mine was the last one on such a scale, let's say of a middle-aged man that they then switched and began to do you know, Oldenburg, say, when he was 33, or Stella when he was in his late 20s or however old he was. Plus a lot of Conceptual art and, would you say, they switched from a kind of summation show into much more the kind of shows that an avant-garde gallery would put on anyway, but simply slightly larger.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting because a lot of people felt they started competing with the dealers at that point. You know, wanting to show somebody really before—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. Well, that's what I mean. And I must say that I profoundly believe that a museum should not do that. I mean, at least, um, a museum of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That stature?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: That stature. That its influence is too profound. And I mean, would you say, I think the durability of the work should be reasonably beyond question before they even contemplate giving an artist such a show. And in fact, the older I grow, the more I'm in favor of museums maybe not having anything to do with anybody alive or, if so, with nobody under 60. And I also say that I'm aware that I've had more museum support than I've ever had gallery support. I know my survival has depended on the fantastic number of museum shows I've had. I had 30 or 40. I don't know how many.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of response did you have to the effects produced by the exhibition at the museum? You know, the installation, the critical response?

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I saw it as, I thought the installation was terrible, and did what I could to rectify it, but thought it very badly needed an editing, that at least 20 percent of the pictures should be taken out. And then I ran into a fact that had never occurred to me, which the museum was adamant about. And that is most of the pictures were borrowed from collectors, from collections, public and private, and that they had to put anything they had borrowed into the show, which was the whole damn show in effect. Um, because the people would otherwise feel insulted that in the end their work wasn't good enough or so on. And it very often had nothing to do with the quality of the work, but that there were too many things there for purely historical reasons, or um—and that the room was too crowded. Also, I think my show was the first show ever in that room. It was a new room. And I didn't realize how oppressive it was. There are no windows. Um, it's like being in the middle of an Egyptian pyramid. And at first I thought it was simply the reaction to my own show, but ultimately they did have the Turner show there and some other very great artists. I think Matisse and I don't know who else. And I had the same feeling of gloom in that room. And so I realized it wasn't just me, but the room itself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have any influence in the selections at all? Or did you give them lists or suggestions or—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Oh, I worked on—they also gave me my choice of curators. And again I made a big mistake. Uh, I chose Frank O'Hara, who had never done a show there, because he was a poet rather than an art historian. And I was very anxious to have not a historical show, but simply a selection, according to the size of the room, of my best work. Well, what it turned out is because O'Hara had never done a show like that, he was determined unconsciously, but he agreed with my principle—he was determined unconsciously to show that he could do as [laughs] historical a show as any historian. In fact, maybe was more adamant than a historian who had already demonstrated that would have been. Several years later, at Frank's next show after me, and I think after Nakian, was to be the Pollock show. And then he died and Bill Lieberman did the Pollock show. And it was much more brilliantly hung, and edited, and selected than my show was. And I suppose it was the 20 or 30th show Lieberman had done so that he didn't have to prove anything, and did, as much as I guess was physically possible and socially possible, simply choose works that he thought were first-rate, and show them beautifully, which is what I'd wanted all along.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Has there been any effect on your career because of that exhibition that you've able to see there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, another funny thing happened, and that was that John Canaday gave it the most savage review that I think any artist has ever had in the history of American criticism, in the Sunday *Times*. And that came out mid-way during the show because the *New York Times* had been on strike. Uh, in fact, it ended with something like, "New York should put out flags on November 30th," or whatever it is, "The day the Motherwell show comes down." And the whole thing was in a tone like that, so that for a couple of years afterwards, people would ask me what I'd ever done to Canaday to have such a vicious, malicious review, and would scarcely believe me when I said truthfully that I'd never met him. But it was—and that certainly, you know, people, how many people are capable of independent judgment. At the opening, it seemed like it was going to be a glorious success artistically and that review of Canaday's, plus the fact that the other reviews were basically stupid. Um, there was one by, oh, I know. Another good writer who's a very corny painter. Teaches at Bennington. I forget his name for the moment. And uh,

would you say, the whole thing was, came out unfortunately as a mish-mash, critically.

In London, I was able to get Robertson to edit it, and it was much more beautiful there, but already a bit late for London. Because in certain ways, one of the most classical of the Abstract Expressionists, and I think London at that moment was looking for one that would be much more far out. Say, like Clyfford Still or whoever. But it was very well-received there. In Italy, it was—I saw some of the reviews and there it was very peculiarly received—would you say, the press seems to be split between Marxists and Catholics. And both of them implied that this show was really something, but the one side had to rationalize it in one series of terms. I mean, the Catholics in effect were arguing that even though it's a secular show, there's a great deal of spirituality in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the Communists were arguing that even though it's an abstract show, it was an homage to the Spanish Republic and so on, and I clearly had a social conscious [laughs] and so on. So those were very funny reviews. Uh, I never saw any reviews from Esson [ph]. Um, in Brussels, it won the critic's prize as the best show of the season, whatever it was. In Amsterdam, I don't know. And I didn't go to any of them, except the one in London because actually, the whole year's preparation for it, and the disappointment at its not looking the way I wanted it to put me in a depression that lasted most of 1966. And my painting also went to pieces in 1966. So I was in no mood to travel. Uh, now if such a thing happened again, I would definitely go because now I'm much more a veteran of the wars, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I don't think anything would throw me that much again. Though, even with my recent show, last month in New York, where again I thought the reviews were sort of peculiar. It depressed me for a couple of days. But then I just started painting again and have completely forgot about it already. And, but then I wasn't able to take it in stride. And maybe from that standpoint, I should have waited another 10 years, would you say, till this year, or next year. But it's a shock. And there's a lot more involved than just a show. Um, you know, for the catalogue, I never kept photographs, correspondence. Many of the pictures weren't dated. We had to spend a whole year, you know, trying to get some order out of the chaos that I'd always lived in. And that took a lot out of me. I think the best thing that came out of the show was the catalogue, which has bad color reproductions and, but which has—is on the whole very well done. And the museum made a huge edition out of it. And um, it's had a lot of influence. The only thing bad about it is it's the only widely-distributed book about me that exists. And being 10 years old, everybody still thinks that that's the way I paint.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —to believe. Otherwise, I wouldn't do it at all. I wouldn't even consider it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But now, you know, what—it's interesting. You said that that now is about 10 years old. Um, there've been some other publications on you, haven't there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, well—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Recent, that you can think of?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: There are only three of any consequence. One, a very nice little catalogue done by a small Swiss gallery, which nobody knows about in America and which is mostly in German. Uh, and then a very good catalogue published by the Houston Museum by Carmine [ph] , a collage retrospective. But again, it is not in bookstores. So that unless you happen to be in that museum in Texas, you don't know about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the third, which just arrived this week is, you know, unless you count a huge show at the Princeton Museum, in fact the biggest show I've had since the Museum of Modern Art show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the catalogue for that just came this week. But again, I don't know whether it's going to be distributed in bookstores because in a sense, it's a catalogue, but it has four essays in it, lots of pictures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Because I had wondered. I knew about the exhibition, but I'd never seen a catalogue or anything.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah, well, it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: There is one now.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It just came. Yeah. There it is on the uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —table over there. I'll show it to you in a minute. In fact, I've only got two, but I've ordered a lot. When I get one I'll give it to you. And also give you, when you leave, the uh, Carmine [ph] catalogue, which must have come out since I've seen you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, well, I don't remember that one.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And it's the—it's a very scholarly, well-done thing. And Arneson is now hoping to finish the book on me, the big Abrams book that he's been working on off and on for years. He's hoping to finish a month from today, which means that would come out about a year from now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And you see, actually, the past 10 years that this book, the O'Hara book, does not cover—have been by far the most prolific of my three decades of painting. And I think the whole image of me will shift considerably because of um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean? In terms of, of uh—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, for example, many people don't even know the *Open* series exists. Um, I've done a collage on an ever-increasing scale in the past 10 years. I've been involved in much more intense color than I ever was before. Uh, the pictures in general are much bigger than—everybody thinks that there are lots of huge *Elegies*. Actually, in the first 20 years, there were only five that were huge. And I've made maybe nine since then that are huge, as many small ones. And lots of huge *Opens* and so on. Also um, it's in the past 10 years that I've done all my print work, graphics, which has become increasingly as important to me, say, as collages are. It's another whole dimension.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the prints start? Because I know there was one or two here and there and it took, seemed to take a long time to get them going.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, the—basically it started with Tanya Grosman inviting me out. And for a long time, I did lithographs with her. And lithography, for some reason, is very difficult for me. And I would spend a lot of time and energy getting one that satisfied me. I mean, as much time and energy as I could paint a mural-sized painting. And though, in one way, I enjoyed the printing and the papers and so on. In another way, I think I enjoyed even more painting a huge picture if I had the choice to do one or the other. Certainly if somebody said, "Look. You've got this month. And here's a huge canvas." Or, "Here's this stone. Which would you rather spend the month on?" And I would have said the canvas. Um, and then to make a long story short—I'm getting tired and I feel I'm getting diffuse. Uh, finally I, with *A la pintura*, I began to work with etching and realized, as Hader had predicted 30 years before or 25 years before, whenever it was, that etching is much more congenial to me. I mean, the way—obviously collage is very congenial to me in the same way etching is. I can make good lithographs in fact. I have several downstairs that I did with Tanya that I think are as good as anybody has done in America.

But etching I really took to like a duck to water. And then is when my interest grew. And we did *A la pintura*, which has almost been universally esteemed and shown in dozens of museums. Here, in Europe, and South America, everywhere. And then last year, last spring, Gemini invited me out. And I was terribly ill. In fact, if I'd gone on much longer I would have

died. And had been misdiagnosed. And I was so ill that I couldn't live normally. And so I spent all my time that I was able, all the energy that I could in the studio, and then just went home and slept. And in the 21 days I was out there, I made 36 editions, which is probably the most intense working moment I've ever had in my life. And I learned an enormous amount there. And then as *A la pintura* was finished and I saw how remarkable it was, I wanted to go on with, again, with larger etchings and so on in that style. And Tanya gets involved in long projects. And it became very clear that, so to speak, I'd had my turn. And that I would have to wait around, as often happens, two or three years before she'd be ready again. And so one day on impulse, I bought the same etching press she has, which is made in New York City. And began to do it on my own. And now that the art part of Gemini has moved here, you know, just down the road, I think probably a good quarter of my time will be spent in graphics, if not more. Also Brooke Alexander wants to become the publisher of my own prints. And he's the first dealer I've had whom I can collaborate with. I mean, what I mean is that his eye in graphics is so good that he can often make suggestions that are artistically helpful. And I've never had that in a dealer before in any medium. I mean, they've liked what they've liked, but it never occurred to them to be able to do that. So that's what's happening. And actually the first Alex—what Alexander is publishing now, are things I started on my own, with the exception that, of one series he'd found a kind of paper I'd never seen before, that is crucial. But this weekend, the first real collaboration with him is going to start via, vis-à-vis this English printer he's found who's a technical genius. And I think can help me with monotypes in a way that [inaudible] had helped me with *A la pintura.*

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Modern artists don't know a lot, especially the best-known artists, don't know a lot about those techniques. Uh, I was talking to a first-rate printer the other day about Picasso, who as you know is a very great graphics person. And he said Picasso's technical knowledge is really quite limited, but that what he does with the limited knowledge is miraculous. And I would think that would be typical of contemporary artists. Or to put it the other way around, the ones who know a hell of a lot technically are usually not very good artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. They become constricted by their knowledge.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did a few screen prints, didn't you? Silkscreen prints in—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. For, that was commissioned by Marlborough, and I did those in London under very difficult circumstances. I didn't have a studio and so I had to do a lot of the sketches in the bathroom of my hotel room.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the other sketches on the floor of a tiny office at the studio shop where people were walking in and out all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How terrible.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I also think silkscreen is the most obnoxious of all the graphic processes anyway. So uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: For what reason?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, well, it's a basically a very insensitive medium. Many artists, in fact, while I was at this shop, which is a famous one in London—several times artists came with little maquettes, little paintings let's say. And just gave it to the shop and said, "Do them." And silkscreen is so clumsy that if it's a painting or a gouache, it really comes out like a very poor translation. If you work directly, it's limited the way woodcuts are. What it can do is give you a very clear outline, but if you try to make any kind of nuance, it's fantastically coarse compared to a lithographic stone or a copper plate. There's just no comparison. And if it hadn't been a commission actually from Marlborough to work in that particular shop, I never would have done it. And in some ways I regret that I did do it, but that was my chance, that commission, to acquire this place, that I knew was the place I wanted to live in the rest of my life. And so I did everything I could in the two weeks I was there. We, again, we made 36 editions and maybe 250 proofs. Uh, I mean, a fantastic amount of work in two

weeks. And then Marlborough got upset at the cost of my staying in London. And the corrections were made by mail and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, goodness. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I, considering how difficult the whole circumstance was, it's a miracle that the prints are as good as they are. But I don't think they compare with what I did with Tanya Grosman or even with what I did at Gemini.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you did a couple with Irwin Hollander, too, didn't you? Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I did a lot with Irwin Hollander that year after the Museum of Modern Art show. I was so depressed and my painting was going haywire, that I found it very sympathetic to go to somebody else's studio and work with somebody else and not feel that terrible loneliness and depression that I was feeling alone. But I didn't know anything about printing really. And Hollander—and I made a stupid financial arrangement with Hollander where he could make a great deal of money because I felt sorry for him. And I think he exploited me a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I don't think he's ever made money as a printer or a publisher.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, he did on those. He did. See, normally you'd pay—in those days you would have paid a printer five or 10 dollars a print. You know, to do your prints. And instead, I gave him a third of the editions. And we made less of editions, 20 or 30. And let's say in those days, the prints were selling for $200 each. If he had, I don't know what, 2,600 or say 3,000 that belonged to him, that's $60,000 instead of my paying him a few thousand dollars just for printing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work on stones all the time? Or were there metal—aluminum plates, or transfer papers, or what—did you try all those different—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Tried them all. We did mostly on stones I think. It's hard for me to remember now. And there was some aluminum, but I never liked aluminum. And it uh, Tanya, it's always been stone or copper. Here it's always been copper. At Gemini, it was mainly stone, but with lots of collage elements. Gemini was the first place I—I mean, I made one tiny collage one with Tanya years ago. But at Gemini, I made—half of the editions I made were collage editions, where you know, I used wine labels often, and even copied by a label maker. Had a label maker make an exact duplicate of a wine label—

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you could reuse it.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: A Chateau Latour.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, marvelous.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: They, you know, and again, they were very efficient. Before I went they said, "What would you like?" And I said, "Well, what do you drink? What's a good, good bottle of wine? I wouldn't mind having a wine label around." So Ken Tyler, who's moved here now, went out and bought a bottle of Chateau Latour. Now everybody thinks I drink Chateau Latour.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] All the time.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I never, I never even saw the bottle of wine. I just got the label.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? You didn't drink the wine?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: [Laughs] No. They drank it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Terrible.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Then I got the label.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's wild.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And that, that's exactly how I mean, every art historian can make a

devastating case that I drank Latour and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Constantly.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —and smoked Gauloises. [Inaudible.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]