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Oral history interview with Richard Lindner,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Richard Lindner on October 11, 1962. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Richard Lindner on October 11, 1962. Mr. Lindner, we were just talking about the reaction of some American artists associated with the New York school who had gone to Europe and had a rather surprising reaction to some of the artists they had earlier rejected. Would you like to go back to that point?

RICHARD LINDNER: I would like to because now I find for me this is very natural that he is now discovering Europe because first he had to reject it. Now that the Americans have found their own ways and their own security and their own reasons by the movement of abstract expressionism, now they can really look at Europe without being, let us say, involved as much as they had been before. Before there was only Europe. Now they have found their own expression, since Pollock, and I wouldn't go much further. Now they can look at this thing and can find Cezanne is great and investigate it like Europeans investigate it. They could investigate their past.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But as equals now?

RICHARD LINDNER: As equals now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. That's the difference, isn't it? In our discussion the other day about European artists, their attitudes toward their work being sometimes hampered by a certain over-attachment to tradition, I was very much interested in what you said. I wondered if you'd like to give an example?

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes. My thoughts go to the painter, Helion, who is an excellent painter but because he is an excellent painter he doesn't know what to do. He is now painting in the most academic tradition one can imagine. He paints stupid, beautiful things because it's a kind of a cleaning process he has to do. He wasn't, of course, American. He was in America I don't know how long, a couple of years during the war and in that time he was a most interesting avant garde painter. Of course he could be an avant garde painter in America because he was prepared to see the things here which at that time were not seen by American artists at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you explain what you mean by what he was seeing that was not seen by Americans?

RICHARD LINDNER: Well, he was seeing abstract. He was not involved with the human figure at that time but, in the abstraction of the human figure. For instance, a man holding an umbrella he cut him apart in small little pieces and so forth, which he hadn't done in Europe. He could do it here because he was involved in the vitality and the movement in this city, the split seconds which one is much more aware of in New York. I only can talk about New York City of course. I saw very clearly what that man was doing at that time. It wasn't American, it was still a European conception, but like a tourist who comes to a country and sees it better or more strictly than maybe the people who live there do. But of course he was still a European painter. When he went back to Paris he was completely lost. I didn't talk to him about this at all, but his paintings told me everything. He is now an academic painter, he is still a very beautiful painter but the conception is a kind of a hideout to start all over again and be at a complete neutral point. This was on since about, oh, ten years at least he didn't come out of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Wasn't that a reaction on his part to the experience of being in a concentration camp during the war?

RICHARD LINDNER: I don't think so, no. Because he was not in a concentration camp in the sense what we understand a concentration camp. He was a prisoner of war and he was maybe not very well treated but not like, let's say, like the Jews or political prisoners. He was a soldier. This kind of concentration camp was a little bit different. I don't think it left much impression, I mean. I think it was the United States. I have seen a lot of Leger when he was here; I have seen Miro too. These people were very involved with New York City but they didn't know what to do with it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you be more specific about Leger and Miro - how they were affected by New York City?

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes. Leger, for instance. He couldn't speak the language, of course and he didn't like to live in America because he was a Frenchman. French people don't like to live in other countries, you know. But as a

painter he was very much influenced by Broadway, by the market on 9th Avenue, by the vulgarity, by the tempo, by the straight, open approach of the New Yorkers or the people here in this country, of doing things right now and doing it fast and tomorrow let's not talk about it, which is for a Frenchman like Leger a big thing. His painting didn't change because he was too established, too much already in the European tradition, but he painted a painting which they would buy in New York or something like that. I remember it and it was rather banal. It was one of the most banal paintings Leger ever did because he got involved in a kind of a sentimental split between Europe and the United States. What he wanted to do was something which he witnessed here but he could not express that. I think that painting is somewhere in the United States. Miro was very much impressed by New York. He had a studio in Harlem and he was watching the children drawing on the pavement, you know, he was just delighted with all these things. He is a man, too, who likes to collect toys, by the way. But he, too, was not involved. But the strange thing is when you look at the latest of Miro's work he goes back to abstract expressionism some way or the other, certainly in the last exhibition, in which he is rather clumsy and he doesn't get to it really. He doesn't express very well in this kind of movement. But there is again another thing: why such a master like Miro, why does he become so insecure that he has to be influenced by the abstract expressionists and then right way he leaves it in these two beautiful paintings you saw. That blue one, which is more Miro, is a masterpiece. You can see that these people are - there is a situation they don't know. The ones who were here long enough, even if they are masters, lost their balance more or less. At the time Miro was here there wasn't any Pollock yet, abstract expressionism had not appeared. Only later when he came back for a week or so. But he remembered, he knows New York, after all he can't understand what's all about it. Then we have another man who I don't like to mention because I don't have much respect for him except that I think he's very talented and that is Dali. Dali did this kind of thing - shooting in picture and trying to be again an abstract expressionist and all this kind of thing. Then in Europe it continues in a clumsy, civilized way. Of course in Europe they civilized those things because of their past. And that is not the point, that is not what abstract expressionism is.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a very interesting point. I wonder if you would like to give some examples of ways in which you noticed this process of civilizing.

RICHARD LINDNER: I just have to look at the paintings. I know exactly what's behind it because by "civilized" I don't mean civilized in the usual sense of being a civilized person, because all the American painters are civilized people, too. I mean the atmosphere which you cannot create in Europe so they have to civilize it because of the past. The past is there and they can't get out of it, so they mix the past with this vital form of expression from the inside. Now inside Europe a painting doesn't look that way. It just never looked that way. There's a big misunderstanding, for instance, this comparison with Monet. I found it rather ridiculous. Many of the artists said abstract expressionism is based on Monet's paintings of earlier time, his flowers - what is that...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Monet? The Water Lilies?

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes. I think it's ridiculous. It has nothing to do with it. But they did tell me that abstract expressionist painters told me that. I think it's ridiculous because it's not possible. It was a message of the eye, a more poetic approach to let the colors go nearer to, of course, impressionistic feelings. There is nothing which they can understand or do about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're speaking now of the Europeans?

RICHARD LINDNER: I speak about the Europeans. Now the Americans are through with Europe. They are through in a way which is not right either. There is a certain arrogance which has developed in America especially with the young painters, I'm not talking about the older generation. By the older generation I mean the leaders of the abstract expressionists which are absolutely right in their attitude, but the younger ones now have a little bit of a stupid attitude about this and so forth. Even those painters which have come up, these Pop painters, which are not really painters in my belief. It is good because they have to revolt against the whole thing. But you see the revolt was done already by the abstract expressionists, nothing to revolt against anymore. I mean in relation to Europe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mean the independence of the Americans was established by the abstract...?

RICHARD LINDNER: Was established, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Don't you think there's a possibility that the younger generation will at least articulate the revolt in a way that corresponds to their own experience? After all they developed about 15 years later and the world has been rather different in its climate in many ways.

RICHARD LINDNER: Oh, I think so, yes. I agree with you certainly, except that I don't feel it is a real revolt, the attitude toward Europe, it's more a kind of an arrogance which is a little stupid.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you give an example?

RICHARD LINDNER: It's very hard for me to give an example, because I really don't know these people, but I've seen their work, you know. Now I am very much for that new movement as you know by now, and there are a few I think are very important. Many of them who are very recognized and have success I think are really not interesting because they are just shock painters usually. But there are a few people I think are very important. I think that a man like Rosenquist, for instance, could take a new role like Pollock did at that particular time. There are others, there is a man, I don't know his name who -

DOROTHY SECKLER: Thiebaud?

RICHARD LINDNER: Thiebaud. I think this one, too, is one of them. I can feel already the leaders in this particular thing. But as for the rest I don't think they are painters, they are people who come from other sources. You still have to be a traditional painter never mind what you approach, I mean if you go out and look in an ashcan and say this is beauty you have to be a painter to know whether it is beauty or not. Otherwise you are just - there is no instinct involved. But I think there are two or three people who I can see are becoming leaders and they will create an absolutely important and new movement as it has been done before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You must have been rather close to some of the artists involved with the original Dada movement. These artists all pay some tribute to Jasper Johns and neo-Dada. To what extent do you feel that they are freeing themselves from their debt to the older Dada movement?

RICHARD LINDNER: Well, first of all I think the Dada movement was not a painter's movement, it was a ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Literary.

RICHARD LINDNER: ...literary movement, it was by writers and poets and then involved highly intellectual painters like Duchamp and Picabia. These were all very intellectual people. They could have been writers or painters, it doesn't make any difference. But really a painter was not very much involved in that. I don't know of any really. What I know were all people of high intellectual calibre. Schwitters too was an intellectual. These people are all related to literature more or less. But if I talk about painters I must always mention Leger and Duchamp.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

RICHARD LINDNER: Who else? Well, Picabia was, too. Picabia was not really a painter but he had possibility to behave like one, here and there, very magnificently, and I liked very much as a painter. There is a woman in this city I respect very highly, this is Mrs. Rose Fried.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The dealer?

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes. I think that she is one of very few people today who know about Dada. There are some other people here, Duchamp of course knows everything about it - he's a real Dadaist, he stopped painting, you know. Today he's an old man and he is still Dada. I think for me he is the only Dada because he never painted again.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What about someone like Jasper Johns?

RICHARD LINDNER: I don't think they have much to do with Dada. I think that Jasper Johns is a highly talented young man, but he is more based on folk art, comes from American folk art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's an interesting observation.

RICHARD LINDNER: Don't you think so?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I have thought it about some of the others, the younger group who followed him and it hadn't occurred to me so much in relationship to him. Of course his flags and all his insignia would seem to indicate that.

RICHARD LINDNER: I think the stimulator originally was folk art, Americana. But Americana has nothing to do with America when it comes to art, is my feeling.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, explain that.

RICHARD LINDNER: Because it has nothing to do with it, it's primitive art, it's peoples' art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, how about your toys? They're I mean not that you like them as toys but they are also...

RICHARD LINDNER: My toys? No, I don't use my toys in my painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not directly, but neither do they - well, they do use...

RICHARD LINDNER: They do use the things and I don't. I get stimulated by them and then out comes, I hope, something else. But I think he is a very, very talented young man and I think one day when he frees himself of the Americana he will be a very interesting painter, certainly one of the best we have right now. But I think he is not involved in Dada. Nor is Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg for my feeling is a...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is a romantic?

RICHARD LINDNER: ...is a romantic, and I think there is no Dada here, really. If there is Dada visible with American painters then they are mostly minor talent. I think any of the talented people don't really express Dada, but here and there you see a Dada thing especially today with this new kind of painting but then, of course, they are minor people.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What would you call Rosenquist?

RICHARD LINDNER: Rosenquist is not a Dada.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is not Dada in spirit?

RICHARD LINDNER: No. No. Rosenquist I feel is the first one who gets more or less the spirit of this country from another side, from the immediate side of daily living: Madison Avenue, television, the things we are all involved with more or less, and he gets it somehow. But it isn't Dada, it has nothing to do with Dada.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The only connection there is that he did admire Jasper Johns very much and Jasper Johns was called neo-Dada.

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes, but I think it's wrong to say it's an insult to him. I think more of him than that. I think it's an insult to call him a neo-Dada because he is not a Dada. He's a man who comes from the other side; you see, I think it is this way: Jasper Johns comes from the aesthetics and finds the Americana more or less. But in Rosenquist there is a stronger talent. He comes from a deep, inside kind of revolt of what it's really about in a creative sense. Not aesthetics and not visual so much, while the other comes from the aesthetics, you know. I would rather like to be around, I'd like Rosenquist to influence Jasper Johns, then I think it would be interesting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You probably will.

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes, but it may be that, you see, I don't know both of them, it may be that Rosenquist is much more of a real personality. I don't know where he comes from.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He comes from the Middle West.

RICHARD LINDNER: And the other one is sophisticated and sophistication is very bad for a new movement. You can't be a sophisticated person, you have to find it with your nose, smell it, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Exactly. I think I share that feeling about Rosenquist. But do you see any equivalent of this kind of thing when you go to Europe among any of the younger artists?

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes, there are some in London I saw. Of course they could find this too, because this kind of thing is all over the world, but of course the English have no tradition in painting, really. The rest of Europe has.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Except as this gets a little bit closer to literature, as it even does a bit with Rosenquist sometimes.

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It becomes a little more possible for the English...

RICHARD LINDNER: To participate, yes. But I have never seen anything which impressed me. It was all constructed and all intellectually put together. I have feeling I saw these things here. The guy who does the ties, what's his name?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Dine?

RICHARD LINDNER: Dine. It's a little bit junky and it's clumsy but he, too, goes directly to the thing. But he hasn't the talent, for my feeling, that these others have. There are two or three more but I don't know their names yet

because I live in this neighborhood and I'm surrounded by Motherwell, Rothko and these people who are not agreeing with this business.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I know there's quite a different feeling.

RICHARD LINDNER: But I always had that trouble. I remember when the abstract expressionists came here, painters I knew didn't agree with them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: One of the things that struck me is that whereas we have this younger group in this country that apparently you feel have a better chance of really freeing themselves because they are in touch with the urban environment and all of its stimulation, and yet when you think about the theatre it seems that there are vigorous upshoots of the international modern theatre in other places. too. For instance, we have Albee here but then he has really come from some of the Europeans.

RICHARD LINDNER: Yes, I think in the literary area, as far as I know, I'm not an expert on that, my feeling is that Europeans are still very strong, stronger than the painters and the sculptors are. But I'm not an expert on that. I mean, I go to the theatre and I read books and what I see in avant garde and experimental thing which impress me are mostly from Europe and nothing from here as yet. So maybe they are a little later. In poetry they are quite better, I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Does any of this work by the younger artists seem to you to be sort of catching up with something that you yourself have inaugurated in painting? Is it close to certain things that you have done?

RICHARD LINDNER: In a sense this new movement is very close to me - if you know my paintings, you know that it has something to do with it. But of course it comes, again, in the European way and I am still involved in the past. I can't do anything about it. I was too old when I came to this country. I wish I had come when I was five years old and I probably would have been an interesting painter. But I carry along like all the other Europeans the burden of the past. I went through European schools and academies, you know, and there's nothing you can do about it. And even if you don't get it in schools it's just around you. And of course this is what the Americans like in Europe, they come there to see these beauties. These beauties are monsters which kill art today.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you say what you mean by "these beauties"?

RICHARD LINDNER: Oh, I mean if you go to Florence and see the beautiful things around, magnificent architecture, all the stuff...it's poison for the creative mind today, you see. You can imagine - imagine a painter living in Florence. He does not - he knows nothing from the world, he doesn't know anything if he hasn't been...and in Paris is the same thing. When you walk through the streets you see Renoirs and Degas's and when you walk through Holland you see the Dutch painters wherever you go. But, you don't see any painters. You don't even see abstract expressionists when you walk through New York City. But now comes the thing: you will very soon see Rosenquist's.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I've already seen quite a few.

RICHARD LINDNER: There is another man who doesn't belong in this category as a European, and that is Saul Steinberg, who very, very early in the early '30s, '40s recognized these things and used them. But he, too, is a European and he civilized them, of course.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And made them witty.

RICHARD LINDNER: And make them witty and aesthetically beautiful. But I think these people if they are right will not use aesthetics because aesthetics has nothing to do with it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But they'll make a new aesthetic?

RICHARD LINDNER: The aesthetic will come new, yes; really a new aesthetic, an American aesthetic, an aesthetic maybe... and that's what I really think is the big thing they do. The rest of it is all just paintings. I mean, Rosenquist okay - big painting but he really does what I think is important and that is he does an American aesthetic that isn't found yet except in Pollock. But Pollock, too, was still not free, not as free as these people about things. They couldn't do this, of course, without Pollock. Never.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's true. No..

RICHARD LINDNER: And all the other painters: Philip Guston, Motherwell, Rothko, they all are still aesthetic painters. Pollock was a little different and was very much alone and I think he was really the one who is the creator of American painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Some of the younger group admit a debt to someone like Rothko or even Newman in terms

of scale, of seeing a new scale.

RICHARD LINDNER: That is true. I agree with them. I think the space Rothko created is something just magnificent and I haven't seen it in Europe either nowhere. I think Rothko, for instance, is a very unique painter. But I have my doubts if he's an American painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. Could you explain that.

RICHARD LINDNER: Well, relation to our conversation...

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's a refinement?

RICHARD LINDNER: There's a refinement. He's a Russian, he's a Jew, there are still things which...

DOROTHY SECKLER: But is there any American that isn't a part of a European, you know? I mean we are this mixture...

RICHARD LINDNER: Not yet, but they will. These people who are now on their way may not be the ones, but from then on it will work. There may be a completely new kind of expression according to the geographical, temperamental, economic situation that we live in here. It isn't touched yet. Of course a man like Hemingway did that. It's really true, I mean Hemingway in the '20s already could easily talk about what American is. I don't know if this is really the best of literature. I have my doubts about that. I think he had more a kind of journalistic talent. But his temperament was very much that way. And he lived a long time in Europe and he always was an American more or less. He got a little bit spoiled of course by being there and becoming a master of all kinds of things which came later. But I think as a young man he was quite real in this respect. I don't know what I'm talking about but I feel very strongly where we are going, that this is the second step after the abstract expressionism which is the important one. Of course this one was a definite, decisive - it was much more important than anything in America; anything, I would think. It clarifies much more what we are if anything politically, economically or whatever they talk about. I think abstract expressionism clarifies what American, what an American is.

END OF INTERVIEW

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