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Oral history interview with Herbert Ferber, 1981 June 2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Herbert Ferber on June 2, 1981. The interview was conducted by Phyllis Tuchman as part of the Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project, with funding provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Do you remember where and how you met Mark Rothko?

HERBERT FERBER: Yes. I met him through the Betty Parsons Gallery which I joined in 1947, and I met the other artists who were there---Still, Lipton, Hedda Sterne, Steinberg, Barney Newman. And Rothko was one of them. But for some reason which was hard to explain, we became friendly within a year.

MS. TUCHMAN: Had you been aware of Rothko, for example, either his pictures or the statement that he and Gottlieb published for the New York Times?

MR. FERBER: No, I was not aware of Rothko or Gottlieb or any of those people until I joined the gallery because I was leading a very kind of withdrawn life in my ignorance. I was showing at another gallery, a midtown gallery. I used to go around to the galleries as usual, as many people did on Saturday. But somehow I never went to Betty Parsons' gallery. I went to many others, but not that one. So I didn't know these people. But when I did join the gallery, we all became a closely knit group in a short time. And Rothko was one of them.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was he doing his semi-surrealistic paintings at that point?

MR. FERBER: He was doing his surrealistic pictures in '46 and 47, I guess. And then very shortly thereafter he began to do the transitional ones. But he was doing surrealistic paintings, and several other people at the gallery were still involved in surrealism, although not most of them.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did people talk about surrealism? Or did one just look at new works of art and think, oh, there's a bit of surrealism but someone is trying to get something else going?

MR. FERBER: There was no conscious move in the direction of what later became known as Ab-Ex [abstract expressionism] at that time in '47. There was a good deal of appreciation for the surrealists who were living in the country at that time. Baziotes and Motherwell were not showing at that gallery. They were showing at Sidney Janis. They were very closely associated with the surrealists. And Motherwell had studied with one of them. Baziotes became sort of adopted by the surrealists as a surrealist himself. Then when they began... several of them-Rothko and Still and Baziotes and Motherwell-showed at Art of This Century, Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, which was really originally a surrealist group, they were very conscious of their surrealist direction. When they left that gallery and moved to Betty Parsons, they began to explore other directions. And very soon thereafter Rothko began to make his transitional paintings which were not his typical oblong on top of oblong.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you trade art with Rothko at that time?

MR. FERBER: I traded art with him on and off from 1948 or '49 until…for ten years, I guess. So I still have some of his…two of his surrealist paintings, one transitional painting, and then I had another one, a typical 1949 painting which I sold.

MS. TUCHMAN: When you traded art, did he give you free choice of what to pick or would he choose something for you to take himself?

MR. FERBER: No. There was a pretty free choice on both sides. He was not terribly interested in sculpture and, in my case, I point out that I was doing sculpture then primarily-I suggested some sculpture. Those early pieces had a surrealist flavor. And his offering to me was fairly wide. I mean I made a choice, along with my wife, at that time.

MS. TUCHMAN: What do you feel originally cemented your friendship with Rothko? Did you enjoy spending the evening the same way? I mean, did you go to movies or concerts? Was it conversations you had about art?

MR. FERBER: Well, I think what cemented our friendship was our common ethnic background, Jewish ethnic background, the fact that we had both come out of very poor families, that we thought in very liberal terms about politics and social problems. We had read similar things and similar literature. In other words, there was a

spark of mutual interest which grew into a very strong flame of friendship. We went to some concerts together. He was a mad devotee of Mozart. He considered every other composer inferior. I didn't go along with that, but it wasn't a basis for disagreement. We were both interested by 1949 in the development of the New York School-what later became known as the New York School. And, along with Baziotes and Gottlieb and Clyfford Still and Barney Newman and Motherwell, all of whom used to meet very frequently in each other's homes, we had a very vital and active and conversational interest in talking about art and the possibilities of breaking away from the European influence, and of the influence of American art which just preceded our generation. With the exception of Gottlieb and Rothko, both of whom were very fervent admirers of Avery.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you ever spend any time with Rothko and Avery, the three of you?

MR. FERBER: No. I never go to know Avery except casually.

MS TUCHMAN: I just wondered how it appeared that they related, whether Avery treated Rothko like a little brother or not?

MR. FERBER: I'm not aware of that. Actually I became aware of what kind of character Avery had later on. And he was a very humble and generous man, and he would never have thought of a younger painter, a talented younger painter, in a derogatory manner.

MS. TUCHMAN: Herbert, you knew at the end of the '40's and in the '50's a lot of people outside the art world, people who I guess one could call New York intellectuals, like William Phillips of Partisan Review. Do you think Rothko was comfortable in company outside the art world?

MR. FERBER: No. In fact, he was in a sense an anti-intellectual, of the kind of intellectuality that Clement Greenberg and William Phillips represented, particularly because Partisan Review, with which both those men were associated, didn't give much coverage to the contemporary art scene and certainly not to what was becoming the New York School. In fact, I remember on one occasion when I was having lunch with William Phillips. Rothko knew where I usually had lunch when I was in my office, that is, when I was practicing dentistry. I always ate in a certain French restaurant. One day Rothko came to look for me and that was when I introduced him to William Phillips. And William was awkward enough to say that he didn't think American art would have any future compared to what was then known about French art in New York, namely, Braque, Matisse, Miro, and so on. Phillips is not a…I mean he's cognizant of what goes on in art, but he's not "a looker." He doesn't examine works of art really carefully, but he knows what's going on. But he was prejudiced in favor of European art. This inflamed Rothko and there was a terrifically unpleasant scene at that lunch and Rothko could never stand Phillips after that. But Rothko had an intellectual kind of mind, and he was unusual in that he saw aspects of life from different angles and points of view that most people didn't, weren't aware of. In other words, he had a mind which was exploratory and speculative but not along the Marxist and Trotskyite political-sociological position which Partisan Review and other people around Partisan Review were attached to.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think it made a difference that Rothko went to Yale?

MR. FERBER: No. He was proud of the fact that he had gone to Yale on a scholarship from Oregon, but he certainly never referred to it as a bed of learning for him. He had nothing to do with art at that time. In fact, he was aspiring to be an actor. And he once...I don't know how true this is. He always claimed that he was once an understudy for…who is it now? "Gone with the Wind?"

MS. TUCHMAN: Clark Gable?

MR. FERBER: Clark Gable in some off-Broadway…there was no off-Broadway, but in some amateur theatrical. And later on, when Clark Gable became so famous, Rothko used to refer to the fact that he was once his understudy. He really wanted to be an actor at one time, and he remained an actor all his life. I mean all of his acting in relation to other people was a kind of dramatization of himself.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, do you think he was writing the lines, or did he act the way he thought an artist would act? Do you mean in terms of psychology?

MR. FERBER: I wouldn't say that he was acting a part which he didn't believe in. But he was very conscious of the fact that an artist is different from other people. He consciously tried to create an image of himself which he thought would fit the picture of an artist. His conversation, his dress, his opinions were to some people outrageous; so that he thought of himself as presenting ideas which would jolt people. And he really did work at creating an image, because he would start painting very early in the morning, at 7:00 or 8:00, and by 1:00 he was finished for the day. And then he would begin to go around to the galleries, to museums to what were called…they weren't coffee houses but places where you could get a cup of coffee and where he'd bump into people. He was extremely well known in the art world. Everybody knew Rothko because he spent afternoons wandering around New York meeting people.

MS. TUCHMAN: I've never heard you say this about him. I'm struck at how your description kind of resembles those that are made about Gorky.

MR. FERBER: Yeah. I didn't know Gorky extremely well, but quite superficially, as a matter of fact. And I always had the feeling that he was a similar actor in that respect. That he…first of all, Gorky did something that Rothko never did. Gorky lived off people for a while. That is, he had strong supporters, especially amongst women-devoted upper-middle-class women, one of whom wrote a biography, another one who was an artist. And the respect and worship that they paid to Gorky was something that never happened to Rothko until much, much later.

MS. TUCHMAN: You were talking about Rothko in terms of his thinking. Was he interested in philosophy? Did he philosophize the way, say, artists to day get around and they talk about psychology?

MR. FERBER: As a matter of fact, he claimed to be interested in philosophy, and he always claimed to have read the church fathers, as we called them, the early Christian writers. But I don't really believe that because he never quoted from them. He just said, "I've read them." And I also never was aware that he read any philosophy as some of the other artists tried to do or did. Motherwell, for example, was a philosophy major in college. Rothko bluffed a lot. He did. And, in the time I knew him, which was, I'd say, about '47 until he died, his principal reading was detective stories.

MS. TUCHMAN: You're kidding!

MR. FERBER: He really was so neurotic, so impatient. He listened to music a great deal, particularly Mozart; went to the opera, to the City Opera; listened to records. But his reading was very trivial, very superficial.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did he read the newspaper?

MR. FERBER: Not more or less than everybody else. Everybody read the newspapers, but he was not really interested in politics. He had a liberal point of view, but he was not interested in politics. He was very strongly interested in his ethnic background, his Russian background. And he invented stories about his Russian childhood-being carried in the arms of his mother or a nurse at one time when a Cossack rode by and slashed at them with a whip. And he had a scar on his nose which he claimed had been caused by the whip of a Cossack. But, you know, those stores were apocryphal. It was hard to believe them. He repeated them often enough so that some people, perhaps, believed them or wanted to believe them, but I didn't really believe them because he told many stories which didn't really make sense, or might have happened but most likely didn't in my mind.

MS. TUCHMAN: There was a profile in The New Yorker a couple of months ago about a man who started and still runs the Village Gate, who had been a newspaper boy with Rothko in Portland. Max Gordon?

MR. FERBER: Gordon. He was a relative. Gordon was related to him.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh.

MR. FERBER: Gordon was a kind of distant cousin. Not the Village Gate. Is it the Village Vanguard on 7th Avenue?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yeah, I think that's what it was. But Rothko didn't go to jazz things or stuff like that?

MR. FERBER: Yes. Max Gordon used to be my neighbor here on MacDougal Street. He was a finder of jazz talent, singers, people like that. And they were friendly. They liked each other because of their childhood in Oregon and because of their sort of distant relationship, blood relationship.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you know if Rothko painted while music was playing?

MR. FERBER: While he was where?

MS. TUCHMAN: Did he paint with music on the record player?

MR. FERBER: No. He had no record player. He listened to the radio, and he tried to listen to classical music. But, as often happens on the radio, he got disgusted after a half hour because they didn't play what he wanted to hear.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think over the years his studios changed in style?

MR. FERBER: They change in affluence. As he became richer, he got larger spaces in which to work. When I first met him, he was working in a studio that had been given to him in an empty building on 50…where is Radio City?

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, that's 50th.

MR. FERBER: I think it was on 58th Street, which had been given to him by a man who's now a dealer, an art dealer. And in return, Rothko gave him a painting which he later in a fury...he had an uncontrollable temper, even in the early '50's. He went into that man's home and slashed the painting to bits because he had heard that the man had put it up for sale after Rothko had given it to him in exchange for the studio. Later on Clyfford Still followed that example by slashing a painting that he had given to somebody in exchange for a studio.

MS. TUCHMAN: Too much. Did the studios...I understand how they changed in terms of his affluence, but do you think, did he change the means of illumination? Did he use fancier...?

MR. FERBER: I don't know what his early illumination was, but later on he became enamored of a kind of stage light, that is, a photographer's light which is a very strong bulb reflecting light from the ceiling, a soft light. And, as you most likely know, one of the things he couldn't stand when his works were being shown was to have a strong light on them because they were painted in a very low-keyed light. And he always felt that bright lights washed them out. I remember he had a terrific fight with Peter Selz who gave him his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art because Selz tried to light them strongly. And Rothko went around fighting with him about lowering the wattage on the lamps.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think the ceiling heights changed in his studios as the pictures got larger?

MR. FERBER: Oh, no doubt. When he first began, he was working in what were residence buildings. Then he got a studio (again around 58th Street) which had been some industrial stained glass studio, and he had a fairly high ceiling there. And I think the next place he moved to was up on 68th Street where he had a very high ceiling-a huge skylight which he covered with a cloth to keep out the bright light.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think that the photographs that show his attempt to create the ambiance, like the Rothko chapel in the studio on East 68th Street.... Do you think he succeeded, given how the chapel looks today?

MR. FERBER: Well, you know, what happened was that Philip Johnson designed the chapel originally and Philip Johnson supplied Rothko with some books on Renaissance architecture-the typical 15th , 14-15th century North Italian architecture in which oblong windows are evenly spaced on each side, and Rothko was very, very interested in that. When he was working on the chapel he had these books open to illustrations of that kind. And I think that the Rothko chapel paintings were very strongly influenced by those architectural photographs where the window comes out dark against a light surrounding stone. And also the regularity of the size and placement of the paintings in the Rothko chapel resembles in a certain way those early Renaissance buildings.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you know if this included Piedmont churches?

MR. FERBER: I don't know. I don't think they were churches. I mean I'm sure they weren't. The churches were... as far as I know church architecture had an entirely different character. These were fortress residence of the merchant class in Florence and North Italy, where the windows first began high above the ground to prevent people from entering and were really embrasures in the stone.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, this is sort of getting ahead of the questions, but on the topic of the Rothko chapel in Houston, did he ever talk to you about why he chose black? Was he always intending to paint black pictures?

MR. FERBER: No. As you know, his most famous or best known paintings are not black at all. I think his tendency to paint black pictures later in life.... As a matter of fact, I'm wrong about the move from studio to studio. You know, he was on the Bowery at one time. I'd forgotten about that. He moved from 58th Street down to the Bowery where he had a big, big studio, where I actually stored some pieces of sculpture at one time. Then from there he moved to another studio on upper Third Avenue in the '70's. And that must have been...that was before he began to paint the chapel, just before he began to paint the chapel, because I think it was with some of the money that he had gotten as an advance on the chapel and also some of the...I think this is true, and also some of the money which he had gotten from selling paintings, he moved to the 68th Street studio. So he moved around quite a bit. His tendency to paint black paintings.... There's no doubt in my mind that he was feeling competitive with Reinhardt.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, that's what I was going to ask you.

MR. FERBER: Reinhardt had begun to paint the dark picture, and there's no doubt in my mind because of what Rothko said to me on several occasions. When I went to visit him in his studio on Third Avenue in the '70's--think it was 76th Street or something like that, 75th Street-he showed me his first black paintings. And he said, "You see? They're better than Reinhardt, aren't they?" And I didn't commit myself to say they were better or not. In retrospect, they were close to Reinhardt; but in retrospect many works by different artists look close to each other. But he did speak of Reinhardt as not being quite up to his own quality in the dark painting. When he

began to do the chapel, he was already in a depressed mood, more than he had been during the years I knew him. Depression was a common occurrence with him, and one of the reasons he drank so much was to overcome that. Now I visited him frequently while he was painting the chapel pictures, but Rothko was not the kind of person to whom you directed criticism of his work. He couldn't take criticism. He wanted and needed approbation. He needed praise almost all during his lifetime, all during the time I knew him, which was from '47 until the time he died. He would show you a picture with the understanding that it was a work of genius, and there was no saying you didn't like it. You could say something in a general way about its being difficult to see or that you liked the purple against the darker purple or against the black. A least that was my feeling, and I never adversely criticized his work to him. He never did to me, either. He never said to me he didn't like something. He would say, I prefer something to another work of mine, which I might have done, too, with him. But it was always on the level that these works of his were works of genius and he didn't brook any serious criticism…I mean adverse criticism. Now when he was working on the chapel, I think from his conversation, from the general feeling that I had, because I knew him so well by that time, was that he felt, although he was not a religious man…he was really a… well, to say the least, an agnostic, but I think he was really an atheist. In spite of his interest in his Jewish background, he felt about the paintings that there should be an atmosphere of reverence created…let's put it that way. Certainly the history of religious painting is not [interruption] He was trying to create a sense of reverence and of awe, perhaps awe more than reverence. Oh, yes, I was talking about the history of religious painting. Obviously, the history of religious painting doesn't depend on the brightness or the darkness or the somberness of color. Some of the most intensely religious paintings are very bright in color. But he was also at that time somber, drinking very heavily. He had left his wife and was living in the studio. He was lonely. He was pretty miserable. The paintings…I hate to say that the paintings reflect that in any unconscious way. I think they reflect it consciously. He thought that dark paintings would reflect the loneliness and the somberness of his own life and that it would also create an atmosphere of reference, of awe, when they got into the chapel.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, you just said that he had moments of depression during his life. Do you think the changed much during his last years or was it just he got older?

MR. FERBER: No, he changed. He got more irrational and lost some of his friends. Motherwell, for example, couldn't stand it any longer. And he once said to me, "I don't know how you can stand keeping your friendship with Rothko because Rothko never wants anybody to say no to him. It's always yes." And I didn't think of myself as being a "yes" man. I just...knowing his irrationality and the fact that he simply couldn't take criticism, we talked about things of mutual interest and not about his work particularly. He would talk about his work. I would not talk very much about it.

MS. TUCHMAN: When he talked about his work, did he talk about subject matter, content, form?

MR. FERBER: He talked about form. He avoided, definitely avoided subject matter. And from the time he began to leave the surrealist phase, he did what he once described to me as avoiding subject matter to the extent that if he saw something in one of his paintings that resembled an object, he would change the shape. In other words, if it resembled a teapot or a tree, he would wipe it out. Interestingly enough, he always insisted that he was not a colorist. I think his paintings exist, his best paintings in my opinion exist, largely because of the color, not that that's the subject matter, but it is a way…it's the way in which he conveyed the quality, the kind of ambiguity, of his work. As you know, he painted in such a way that his painting was layered, color on top of color, so that you had a sense of light coming through. He talked about that kind of thing. He did not believe in deep painting but he did want to have paintings which were not flat entirely. He avoided what artists called "holes" in his painting-too bright a spot or too dark a spot-which would make it appear that there was too much depth. But the very nature of his work always gave a kind of limited depth to his paintings, and he was aware of that. He always insisted he was not a colorist. I think the reason is that he felt that some of the Europeans like Matisse or the American Avery were colorists and he didn't want to be included in that category.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did he ever talk about the invention of acrylics?

MR. FERBER: He avoided acrylics until very late because he was fearful of losing his touch, as he called it. He always painted, by the way, on canvas which was already stretched. And I used to talk to him about the way in which other people painted, including myself, which was to paint against…I tried painting on stretched canvas but I always got annoyed by the cross-bars. And he took the cross-bars out while he was painting and put them back when the painting was finished because the cross-bars would show up as lines. And I gave it up, and many other people gave it up, by putting the paintings on the floor as Pollock and Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler did. And I always painted by tacking the canvas to a wall. But he was afraid of the solidity of the wall. He liked what he called the tautness or the vibration of the canvas as he worked with his brushes and rags.

MS. TUCHMAN: There I think was a very famous New Yorker cartoon that he had in his studio showing a couple out by the beach watching the sunset. And the sunset was a Mark Rothko image. Do you think he enjoyed that association or he just liked the humor of it?

MR. FERBER: Well, I think he liked the humor of it. He avoided the idea that any of his work looked like sunsets or looked like landscapes or anything of that kind. It's interesting that in his later work the black and gray paintings did look like landscapes.

MS. TUCHMAN: You know, the last small ones that they showed at Marlborough in the back room, I always thought looked like Edward Corbett paintings that had been made in Provincetown.

MR. FERBER: I always thought of them as paintings with a horizon and a sky, which he denied. But hose paintings were definitely an expression of his depression. You know, his favorite opera was "Don Giovanni" which was really in a way a black opera in that Don Giovanni disappears in a cloud of steam and goes to hell and Don Giovanni is dressed in black in some productions. He didn't use black as Motherwell and Kline and de Kooning did as a color. He used it as a means of expressing what he thought of as…I'm convinced that he thought of it as a psychological device, not as an aesthetic one.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, do you think if Rothko had had a choice that he would have preferred to have lived among the old masters, or that he liked being in New York post-1945?

MR. FERBER: Well, he certainly liked living in New York. And when he went to Europe in 1949 for the first time, he came back disappointed in the old masters and often talked about Italian primitive paintings as being comic strips because, as you know, some of them had different scenes in one painting. He never went so far as to say Leonardo or Michelangelo or Rubens weren't great artists, but he really exuded a kind of contempt for early… that is, the great tradition of Italian and Flemish painting. And yet, as you know, there is one painting of his which is dedicated, Homage to Matisse. He didn't like Picasso. Well, Picasso was too much of a draftsman and Rothko was not a draftsman.

MS. TUCHMAN: That's for sure.

MR. FERBER: He liked Matisse because of the color, but he didn't want to be thought of as a colorist.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, do you think he liked being a pioneer?

MR. FERBER: Oh, yes, of course. That's why the letter that he and Gottlieb wrote about subject matter and content to the New York Times, that was a favorite expression, not only of his but of other people at the time. The subject matter was not the important thing but the content was. And whatever that means, it was an avant-garde idea, and he certainly thought of himself as an avant-garde artist. He always referred to the fact that he had written a book about his work and about art. But that book, which he often referred to as having been in manuscript form and complete, was never found. They searched like hell for it when he died and never found it. So it's a figment. I think it was a complete figment of his acting, as I call it.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, that sounds fair.

MR. FERBER: A way of impressing people.

MS. TUCHMAN: George Segal, the sculptor, has talked about being very impressed by the way Rothko's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was hung, its environmental quality, and how much it affected his [Segal's] sculpture. Do you know how Rothko felt about Pop art and Minimalism and the things that followed?

MR. FERBER: He not only hated it, he was disgusted with it. But he was also disgusted with all of the post-abstract expressionists, the second generation, and the later work of people who came after the first and second generation of abstract expressionists. He simply discarded them. He was totally uninterested…I shouldn't say totally uninterested. He was vituperative about younger artists. He hated their work. He felt it to be a threat. I don't know how he felt about George Segal. And you mentioned the environmental idea. Don't forget the sculpture I did, "To create and Environment," was done before Rothko's show at the Museum of Modern Art. And it was while his show at the Museum of Modern Art was on that my sculpture "To Create an environment" was shown at the Whitney. And I would go to look at my sculpture and we'd meet in the Museum lunchroom and talk. And the idea of the environment…the environmental idea was not current. Now, every exhibition…I think that's nonsense on Segal's part…every exhibition of one man's work, especially if it's limited as the Museum of Modern Art show was to a certain period (not like the Guggenheim show which covered his early subway paintings and so on). It was limited to a certain period. It gives one a sense of wholeness, of an environment created by the artist. That's perfectly natural. Retrospective exhibitions which cover the gambit don't look environmental because the style has changed from period to period. But in the Museum of Modern Art show, it was mainly these, as Peter Selz labeled them, Wagnerian kind of paintings

MS. TUCHMAN: Just before Rothko died, I had a conversation with Robert Goldwater in which Goldwater was talking about Rothko's teaching, very short teaching experience, at Hunter, that Rothko had felt that the students wanted everything from him and they would give him nothing in return. Do you think this was an

attitude prevalent in Rothko's life, that people were always taking things from him?

MR. FERBER: Yes, You know, I'm sorry to say that, although we were extremely close friends and like brothers, felt like brothers, that I was very aware of all these unpleasant characteristics. That doesn't mean that we didn't have a real fondness for each other in other grounds, but don't forget, he also taught at Brooklyn College for a short time and lost his job there because he was so contemptuous of the kind of thing they were doing. Don't forget, Brooklyn College was then under the influence of the Abstract Artists of America group. Reinhardt was one of them and other people under the influence of Mondrian and the de Stijl artists. Rothko was the only AB-EX painter there, and his outspoken criticism of the way in which they taught by means of two-dimensional, three-dimensional design, he felt was antagonistic, as I do too, to the spirit of art. When he got to Hunter, he was really then in a very unhappy and depressed mood. And it was Tony Smith who was responsible for getting him to teach there. Tony worshiped Rothko's work and him, and Tony felt that anything that Rothko said would be of value to the students. I was never present when he spoke to them so, I don't know. It just was not something he wanted to do. In his early life when he was trying to make ends meet, he taught in a parochial school in Brooklyn, I think, where he taught kids how to paint. But that was a boring thing for anybody to do. I don't think his experience of teaching was a happy one.

MS. TUCHMAN: The one short visit I made to his studio, the phone never stopped ringing and dealers were constantly calling. Do you think he was just then, above all of that?

MR. FERBER: Above it?

MS. TUCHMAN: That he got bothered too much?

MR. FERBER: I don't know. I don't know how those calls originated, whether Marlborough fostered them or whether…why do I forget that man's name? I know why. There's a real block!

MS. TUCHMAN: Lloyd?

MR. FERBER: No, not Lloyd. I always remember Lloyd's name because Lloyd was not a vicious man. He was dishonest, but he wasn't vicious. No, I'm thinking of Bernard Reis who was the friend of all of us, who helped…I must say that Bernard Reis did a great service to many of us with his sort of financial advice. But Bernard Reis also made a career of Rothko's painting and he may have suggested that people call. He was always trying to further Rothko's career. I don't know how those calls originated, I'm speculating.

MS. TUCHMAN: Rothko was the father of a young daughter and a rather young boy when he died. And one wouldn't normally, I don't think expect someone to prepare for a friend's being a guardian. Were you asked? Were you surprised when you were asked? Was it…?

MR. FERBER: Don't forget, his daughter was 18 or 19 years old when he died. His son was 6. When Mark and Mel went to Europe in the '50's-they went to Italy in the middle '50's I suppose-as sort of guests of the Marlborough Gallery in Rome, he asked my then-wife and me to be prospective…whether we would accept guardianship, which we did. So we had understood that we would. Then, I don't know whether you know it or not, but when… as Mark got older and I got older (since we were about the same age), he began to feel that he wanted a younger persons to be the guardian of his son. And he designated Levine, what was his name? Mort Levine, to be the guardian of his son. He never, for some reason, suggested that his daughter have a new guardian. So the original will in which Mel and Mark designated me and my former wife to be the guardian of his daughter remained in effect. That's how I became the guardian of his daughter, which lasted for two years. But she also, his wife, made me the executor of her estate. That's why [how?] I started the suit against Marlborough as the executor.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were you surprised when all of that…can I use the expression…history hit that fan, that all of those legal proceedings had to happen? I mean, given Rothko's life, was it surprising that he created so many difficulties after he died?

MR. FERBER: Well, don't forget that when he died, I was still a close friend of Bernard Reis and of Stamos and of Levine. I had known Stamos ever since 1947 when I first began to show at Betty Parsons and later on got to know Levine. When Mark died, I was in Vermont. And I got a phone call from Bernard Reis saying that he had died…no, I'm sorry. I was in New York when Mark died, when Mark committed suicide. It was when Mel died six months later that I was in Vermont. I got a phone call from Bernard Reis saying she had died and that I was, according to the will, the executor of her estate and the guardian of her daughter. He told me that I had these jobs in my future, so I offered to come to New York. He said, "No, no. Don't come. I'm taking care of everything." When I came to New York a few weeks later, he came to see me and told me that he had sold a hundred paintings for a certain price. And this raised my feelings or suspicions that the price was not right. And since I was an executor and a guardian and it was a new position for me, I went to see a lawyer; and then it began from there. I was terribly surprised. I was outraged and surprised and could hardly believe that these three executors

had done what they had done with Marlborough.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, given everything that happened with the court case-I don't know how that affected you-when you hear the name Mark Rothko today or do you see a painting by Mark Rothko, what's one of the first images that comes to your mind?

MR. FERBER: Well, I suppose that one of the first images that comes to my mind is Mark visiting me in Vermont and our long talks and evenings together when we sat outside on the grass and talked about art and about life and about things in general.

MS. TUCHMAN: Thank you.

MR. FERBER: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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