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Oral history interview with Stanley Kunitz, 1983 Dec. 8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Stanley Kunitz on December 8, 1983 and March 22, 1984. The interview was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is 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

AVIS BERMAN: I guess we should start with when and how you met Mark Rothko.

STANLEY KUNITZ: As I recall my first meeting, and this was a single event and then there was a big lapse afterward, was early in the fifties. This was directly after Mark had made his first trip abroad, and it may have been '52. I'm not sure; I don't recall. Or maybe '51. I'm not sure. But a friend of mine who had met Mark at Yaddo the summer before suggested that it would probably mean something to both of us to meet, and called him up and took me to his apartment which was then midtown off Sixth Avenue, a rather shabby, rundown place with a studio in the rear - not a studio, just a room that he was painting in. What I recall aside from the first visual impressions of Mark was his vehemence about the European scene, about the whole tradition of European painting beginning with the Renaissance, and his flat rejection of it - his saying, "We have wiped the slate clean. We start new. A new land. We've got to forget what the Old Masters did," - which rather shocked me because I wasn't ready to reject [laughter] wholesale the entire past. Now the paintings - of course, he had stacks of them in the room. Some of them were in his early surrealist style which I didn't care for particularly and never have. Then there were, as I recall, a few that were more like the Mark that we know, but I don't think as yet he had really found his style, his signature. I wasn't really overwhelmed by any means by the painting. I liked Mark himself. He was very friendly, gracious and articulate. So that was really my first meeting, but I didn't become a friend of Mark, and I don't think I even saw him - one reason being that I wasn't living in New York at that time - until '57 when Elise and I got together. She was already a friend of Mark's, and at that point I became very much a part of that whole New York School. I'd been to MacDowell Colony in '56 and I'd met there Jim Brooks and Paul Burlin and Giorgio Cavallon and Linda Lindeberg. It was through them that I met Elise actually afterwards when I came back to New York. We became very fast friends, but it wasn't just alone. It was also a friendship with Philip Guston and Jim Brooks as I mentioned, and Giorgio and Linda, and Bill de Kooning and Franz Kline - I think those were the ones we were closest to all during that period.

MS. BERMAN: Which ones were Rothko close to, of the circle that you mentioned just now?

MR. KUNITZ: It's hard to say. He was so wary of friendship among his peers. You always felt that he preferred another kind of social life that wasn't involved with the competition of the art world. It isn't that he was unfriendly, but he was closest to Stamos and Dan Rice. I don't know whether you know about him who became his assistant actually, younger people who were acolytes in a way. Then, of course, he was devoted to the Reises and Gynn Davies. He was much closer to them than he was to any of his real peers. For a while he was very close to Barney Newman but then, as with many other artists who were his contemporaries, they quarreled and didn't speak to each other for years.

MS. BERMAN: Do you happen to know why he and Newman quarreled?

MR. KUNITZ: Who took from whom was really what it amounted to. [Laughter.]

MS. BERMAN: The usual. [Laughter.] I just want to return to that first meeting. The reason I'm interested that you say that Rothko's first trip to Europe was in the early fifties is that in the Guggenheim Catalog and other records it said he took his first trip to Europe in 1958, but evidently from what you remember that's incorrect?

MR. KUNITZ: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think he possibly went in say, '52 or '53?

MR. KUNITZ: I would think so. I remember distinctly his referring to it. He had been to Italy as I remember, and we talked and talked about it. We talked about Italy. That's very strange that there is disagreement there.

MS. BERMAN: There are a lot of errors in there, and this is one of the reasons we're doing the interviews to bring these things up to date that weren't checked that well. He went to Italy. He refused to be seduced by Europe is that what you're saying?

MR. KUNITZ: Basically, that's what he was saying. The painters whom he generally would say he felt closest to among the Americans were Gottlieb - he was very close to Gottlieb at one period - and Milton Avery. He always spoke of them with quite special tenderness and affection. Talking about friendship in the arts, his closest friend for a long time during the period when we were together was Herbert Ferber. And then, of course, they quarreled. So that became a very bitter business in the end.

MS. BERMAN: Did you question Rothko at all about his ideas about European art of I guess the decadence of the tradition? Or did you feel you didn't know him well enough? Or did you probe him about that at all?

MR. KUNITZ: I think our conversation at that time was, after all we were strangers, fairly vehement and cogent, but it was at a conversational level. I don't think it was a profound conversation in any way.

MS. BERMAN: Were you aware of him very much as a painter? Had you heard of him before?

MR. KUNITZ: Oh, yes. I knew of Mark.

MS. BERMAN: And was he familiar with your work as a poet?

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, he knew of my work.

MS. BERMAN: Besides the vehemence what other impressions did you note?

MR. KUNITZ: I told you his warmth, that sense of social embrace that in his good days and his good time was characteristic of Mark until he changed towards the end.

MS. BERMAN: What was he working on at the time? Can you remember?

MR. KUNITZ: That I don't remember explicitly enough. I think he was - but this may be a superimposition from a later period - beginning to work with those blocks of color. That's my recollection, but I wouldn't swear by it. It's so easy to correct your memory, postdating it.

MS. BERMAN: Who was the person who introduced you? You mentioned a friend.

MR. KUNITZ: That was the poet Jean Garrigue.

MS. BERMAN: Who were some of the other people that you may have met through Rothko?

MR. KUNITZ: It's hard to say. I don't know whether it was directly through Mark. That whole circle was so close. There was always a dinner party or a gathering of some sort. It seems to me that at least once or twice a week we saw everybody in that world. At that time we started giving an annual New Year's Eve party to which everybody in that world came. You couldn't say that anybody ever introduced anybody. You simply knew you were together, part of the same ambiance.

MS. BERMAN: As time went on what things do you feel cemented your friendship?

MR. KUNITZ: That's hard to say. I think it was mutual respect. Mark was not a great reader; he wasn't familiar really with most of the poetry being written in that period, but he had a feeling for poetry. He certainly thought of Shakespeare and Mozart, as he always said, as being the two artists in the world he most admired. He would come to my readings at the Y and elsewhere. At one point he wanted to do a book with me, and we talked about it very seriously. He wanted to do art as the French did, that connection, because he felt close and tender and somehow wanted to be affiliated. It turned out he couldn't do it at all. He tried, I know, but as he said, and I felt very honestly and pathetically, "The truth is, I don't know how to draw."

MS. BERMAN: In other words -

MR. KUNITZ: He didn't have the craft.

MS. BERMAN: He wanted to do something that would be either illustration or drawings that would connote the -

MR. KUNITZ: That would somehow work with the poems.

MS. BERMAN: What collection of yours did this turn out to be? Or was it to be something special?

MR. KUNITZ: This would be out of the poems that I was writing then. We would put together, he thought, a collection and then he would do the illustrations.

MS. BERMAN: When was this?

MR. KUNITZ: This must have been around '60 or maybe a little earlier, '59.

MS. BERMAN: It's interesting. In other words he didn't propose, say, having small prints of some of his paintings. He wanted to make distinct -

MR. KUNITZ: No. He wasn't interested in graphic art anyhow. This was not in his ken at all. He wanted to do something very special. He talked about it first with great enthusiasm until he came to the actual problem of what to do. And then he felt inadequate really.

MS. BERMAN: That must have been quite a depressing moment for him.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: No, he couldn't draw. I think you can also see that by a lot of his early paintings. Did that make a great deal of difference to him, the inability to draw?

MR. KUNITZ: I think like many artists he came to recognize his limitations, and then to work outside them, to create a style that didn't require that particular skill and leaned on what he was a master of. This is true in all the arts. Poets do that all the time. Fiction writers do it. A classic example is Conrad, for example, who couldn't handle straight narrative, and then invented the persona of Marlowe who would speak the narration so that he wouldn't have to do it in the third person. Or a Joyce with his limited eyesight who then concentrated on the sound of language. This is, I think, what every artist does. And I think it was lucky for Mark that at a certain point he realized this was not his skill, but that he had virtues that he could actually transform in the making of his paintings.

MS. BERMAN: The reason I ask you about the drawing is when I talked to Mrs. Kunitz the other day she mentioned that, and she felt that one of the reasons that he began to feel trapped and blocked was that he couldn't draw. She felt it was a frustration.

MR. KUNITZ: I don't agree with her on that, because once he invented his signature, style, his icon - once he found his icon, I don't think he felt limited really at all. He felt he was pulling something out of the depths that was stronger than our surface deftness with draftsmanship.

MS. BERMAN: Let's go back to literature for a minute or two. Another thing - Mrs. Kunitz says that Rothko would talk about the Russians, about Dostoevsky or Tolstoy.

MR. KUNITZ: *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* was a favorite of his, Tolstoy's story. He liked to think of himself as having a Russian soul. And he was proud of it.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if the subject of the Russian writers came up because of your translation of the Russians or was it just -

MR. KUNITZ: He didn't know the modern Russian poets. He knew Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. I think he knew Chekhov, too, but I think that was pretty much the extent of it.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think he knew them well?

MR. KUNITZ: I doubt that he had studied them with any deep probing of them, but he felt that they were close to him in spirit.

MS. BERMAN: This is a very farfetched association, but I happened to make it when I was just going over some information, and I know that by the end when he was calling you about this overcoat all the time -

MR. KUNITZ: *The Overcoat* by Gogol!

MS. BERMAN: Yes, and I was wondering if he -

MR. KUNITZ: I thought of that, too, but I don't think he was aware of it. I'm not sure. I don't recall we ever discussed Gogol. But that was one of the strangest things - every day. It was an excuse to talk on the phone, because he was so desperate.

MS. BERMAN: And he would call you and ask you about, I guess, where to find an overcoat?

MR. KUNITZ: It wasn't so much that. I'd been to Russia in '67, and I had bought this big winter coat at Barney's as a matter of fact. It had a fur collar. I still have it as a matter of fact. He admired that coat extravagantly. In the last days he began calling up and saying, "Now where did you say you got that coat, Stanley?" And I would tell him. The next day he would say, "I don't quite remember. Where exactly is Barney's?" But it was only an

excuse. It wasn't the coat that was important. He really wanted me to come up and have lunch with him. Then he'd say, "How about coming up. I need to show you something and we can have lunch together." It was clear from the tone of his voice that there was so much anxiety, that he was in deep trouble.

MS. BERMAN: I want to go back to the Rothko of earlier days, the articulate, warm person. Besides literature, I was wondering if he talked about some of the ideas that motivated him that were either philosophical or aesthetic?

MR. KUNITZ: I don't recall conversations where he expounded a philosophy. He would get most articulate, vehement when he read a comment on his work that he felt misrepresented what he was doing. He hated it when anybody said he was really a painter of abstract landscapes. That bothered him very much.

MS. BERMAN: Why was that?

MR. KUNITZ: He didn't want to be associated with nature. In fact, one of his statements that shocked me most was saying that he really hated nature, and that he felt uncomfortable in the natural world. When they bought the house up on Ninety-Fourth Street -

MS. BERMAN: Ninety-Fifth, I think.

MR. KUNITZ: I'm a gardener. They took such terrible care of the garden that it became a scandal. [Laughter.] One day he asked my advice. He said that he thought it was time maybe to do something. I suggested a few plants that I thought would brighten up that dreary garden which was in any case ruined because their dog had the run of it and didn't do much good to it. But he said, "Oh, no, I can't stand flowers. No flowers. No flowers. I just want anything that will grow tall and maybe provide some shade, but I don't really want it to be like a jungle of any kind." He was a little frightened of that.

MS. BERMAN: That's absolutely fascinating. I've never heard of anyone saying they didn't like nature. Do you have any idea why? Was he just such a city rat?

MR. KUNITZ: I think that was partly it, but maybe this is all part of his lack of any kind of manual skill. He was clumsy. His hands were not an artist's hands. He didn't know how to work any tools. He didn't even hammer anything. Certainly he couldn't do any gardening. That was completely outside. So he felt somewhat at a disadvantage. He also didn't know the names of any plants. So it made him feel ignorant.

MS. BERMAN: How unusual.

MR. KUNITZ: When he bought his house up in Provincetown, and largely because we were there and he wanted to be a neighbor, and we went around to look at various houses, he didn't want any house that had a formidable garden. He wanted a place he wouldn't have to take care of.

MS. BERMAN: Did he want a place with a view?

MR. KUNITZ: Not particularly. The place they bought finally didn't have any view at all. It had quite a bit of land [laughter] as I remember which he did nothing with, though the man next door was a very good gardener and tried to encourage him to do something. But he never did. As a matter of fact he was quite miserable during his Provincetown years, of course he was already deteriorating. So that was part of it, but he was also very angry. This is going out of chronology, but you have -

MS. BERMAN: That's quite alright.

MR. KUNITZ: But as long as I'm thinking of it. One memory is that he asked me whether I knew any young painters in Provincetown. And of course, I did, and in fact, had been one of the founders of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown which invites young painters to Provincetown. I got him in touch with a few young painters, and he invited them to come to his studio once a week. He thought of it as somehow establishing some contact with the young. But that ended in disaster because he felt that they didn't respect his work enough and they were really adversaries. And, of course, by this time he was quite paranoid, and he threw them out. One night he got into a rage once and he threw them all out and told them never to come back.

MS. BERMAN: He didn't remember what it was like to be young and questioning.

MR. KUNITZ: That's right. But he wanted adoration and not familiarity. He thought they were much too familiar and not respectful enough.

MS. BERMAN: Sad. I just can't get over these remarks about nature. [Laughter.] It's amazing, because art, of course, is a part of nature and all that everyone else wants to unite with nature.

MR. KUNITZ: There have been other artists. Berthold Brecht said, "It's obscene to talk about trees when the world is in such a state."

MS. BERMAN: I think Rothko would have said something. He seemed so self-absorbed and concentrated in his own world. Did he talk about politics very much?

MR. KUNITZ: There was a good deal of the usual kind of talk about the political scene, about Fascism, Nazism, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War. Yes, he was essentially on the left side, the liberal side. We had no disagreements.

MS. BERMAN: Were there any other comments about his work that you remember that he would become incensed about?

MR. KUNITZ: Of course, one of his paramount rages was against the museum world and the commodity world of the galleries. That was always calculated to send him off into a fit of anger. He felt that the museum world and particularly the Museum of Modern Art had treated him shabbily, had not recognized him when he needed recognition, had not shown him when he should have been shown. He had nothing good to say about that whole world, and kept saying he would have nothing to do with it. Of course, when they came to him, he was perfectly ready to be agreeable. [Laughter.] He was different from Philip who had some of the same negative responses to that same world, was absolutely inexorable in his feelings and did not compromise ever.

MS. BERMAN: Rothko was bought and shown by the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1950s.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, I know.

MS. BERMAN: And before that the Whitney bought some of his things in the forties when his work wasn't even resolved.

MR. KUNITZ: It's true, but he never felt that they gave him enough. He wanted to be kingpin.

MS. BERMAN: By the way, just talking before about *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* - do you remember why he liked that so much?

MR. KUNITZ: I don't know. It happens to be a great tale. It's the product of a tragic vision, but a vision that also has an exultation beyond the tragic. And that's very close to the feeling that Mark himself wanted to communicate in his own work.

MS. BERMAN: You said he wasn't a great reader, but I was just wondering if you felt that he read things like say, D.H. Lawrence or Thomas Mann or Joyce?

MR. KUNITZ: I don't think he knew them very well. He knew certain things. We could talk about Eliot. We did talk about Eliot at one time. We talked about Joyce, also. He admired him, but I don't think it was a deep knowing that he had of them. They were part of the cultural climate.

MS. BERMAN: That's what I was trying to explore with you, Rothko as a man of culture.

MR. KUNITZ: He had very few contemporary books around, practically no library to speak of in his household.

MS. BERMAN: You also called him "the last rabbi of Western art." I was wondering what you meant by that?

MR. KUNITZ: I meant several things. When I said that to him once, he enjoyed it; it made him feel very good. I meant that there was in him a rather magisterial authority, a sense of transcendence as well, a feeling in him that he belonged to the line of the prophets rather than to the line of the great craftsmen. It partly had to do with his appearance and his mannerism. You could imagine him being a grand rabbi.

MS. BERMAN: What were his mannerisms like?

MR. KUNITZ: Of course they changed; so you have to speak of them in different periods. In the beginning of our friendship when he was well and beginning to enjoy his success, there was a kind of affluence about his being. He exuded a warmth, an energy of friendship, of connection with others. There was a sense of a very strong persona which had great pleasure in itself, but that began to change very soon. Then you felt the joy leaked out of him, and the dread of the anxiety supplanted it. His whole character seemed to change. Part of it, I think, was due to illness. Certainly that bypass operation was traumatic for him, and then his domestic problems, drinking - to which he became addicted during the period of this stress - all this affected his nature. So that I think of him almost as two different persons, although the former was never completely eliminated. There were always flashes of it. Certainly between the bouts of paranoia the old intimacy and the friendship were always manifest.

MS. BERMAN: Going back to the rabbi, I was wondering what were his feelings about religion?

MR. KUNITZ: He certainly had very little orthodox religion, but I think he felt strongly that he belonged to a great Judaic tradition, and that this was central to his art and to his life. It had nothing to do with the practice of religion but it had to do with the sense of being.

MS. BERMAN: He certainly was motivated by a spiritual element. He certainly wanted to include that in his art -

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, but it was something that he could not articulate in language. When he tried to do so - there were times when he would talk about what he was trying to do in his work - it always seemed to me to be an inadequate statement, although he did at times put down in writing, I think, some statements that have a quite noble ring to them. But these he worked on very, very carefully. I know in the period when he was working on the Chapel paintings we discussed what he was trying to do, and it was clear that he wanted to create not so much a panel of paint as to enclose the viewer in the emanations of his own spirit. That was essentially what he was trying to do. And he associated that with the play of diminished light on the surfaces. That's what he was working at, was a painting that would take on slightly different aspects with the changing of the light. He didn't want any full light on it; he wanted a religious twilight basically, but he was very concerned with the way the light fell on his paintings. And in his studio he had arranged a canvas over the skylight so that he could control the light. It was always suffused light that he wanted.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that that ideal was resolved? Do you think that having very low light on the paintings worked? Do you think it did convey what Rothko was after?

MR. KUNITZ: For those particular paintings, yes, it was appropriate. I don't think those last paintings ...

[END OF SIDE ONE]

MR. KUNITZ: Certainly those eggplant, aubergine paintings and the great gold and yellows earlier can stand full light and glory in it. So I think it's a question of difference in mood.

MS. BERMAN: Well, actually he changed it, because at first he liked this. He had the high key color and he had the light on. Do you have any idea why he changed his mind and his outlook about light on the paintings?

MR. KUNITZ: I have a poem about that. Do you know my poem called, "*The Artist*?"

MS. BERMAN: No. I'm afraid I don't.

MR. KUNITZ: That's what it's about.

MS. BERMAN: Which collection is it so I can look it up?

MR. KUNITZ: It's in the Collected Poems. It's called, "*The Artist*."

MS. BERMAN: All right. I'll look it up.

MR. KUNITZ: "His paintings grew darker every year," is the first line. There is, I think, a psychological interpretation for what was going on.

MS. BERMAN: Before you mentioned Gottlieb and Avery. Were there any other artists that he admired that he mentioned?

MR. KUNITZ: Those were the ones he spoke of with greatest admiration. Of course, he liked Stamos but that was more friendship. I think he liked Stamos because Stamos derived to a degree from him at a certain point, also. I can't think of anyone else whom he praised particularly. He was not quick with praise. [Laughter.]

MS. BERMAN: No, no. The ones you mentioned are the only ones he does, but I'm always looking. Did he ever talk about his ideas about color?

MR. KUNITZ: Not as theory. I never heard him. I don't think he was much interested in theory. He was a pragmatist in his paintings. He hit upon a certain palette; he hit upon a certain technique of the fringed edges of the blocks of color. They always worked for him, and he felt they did for him what he wanted to do. But I don't think he had any strict theory of either color or composition.

MS. BERMAN: Why did he go to the edges, to the absolute edges? There's nothing left on the canvas.

MR. KUNITZ: Because I think he essentially did not want the effect of being contained within a frame. He wanted the world of the painting to move out from the canvas just as in the Chapel paintings. He wanted to create an

environment. A painting that did not go to the edge would be an enclosure, and he wanted more a disclosure rather than enclosure.

MS. BERMAN: He didn't want to be framed in any way.

MR. KUNITZ: That's right.

MS. BERMAN: Did he talk about a theme at all besides the emanation of his own spirit which is obviously the theme of every painting?

MR. KUNITZ: But in his case it was a closer connection than I think it usually is. For one thing he did not, like most artists, go out from the self into a world of particulars to gather nourishment just as he resisted nature. That intercourse as Wallace Stevens calls it, between imagination and reality was not for him. He did not carry on a dialogue with the world. His immersion was in selfhood essentially.

MS. BERMAN: Do you feel he was ever satisfied with his work?

MR. KUNITZ: He thought it was great. [Laughter.] Certainly at the peak of his work. He became anxious at the end when he was doing his black paintings. Somebody he did admire at the last I should have mentioned, but this was toward the end, was Ad Rinehardt. One of the last conversations I had with him about painting was in his last months. He said he wondered whether his paintings were as good as Ad Rinehardt's. He thought maybe they weren't, but that was a rare admission on his part.

MS. BERMAN: I ask that because, for example, some of the murals he would go back and work and rework, and felt as if maybe he thought something was missing or he could get more in. But I felt that the sense of anxiety about the pictures grew over the years.

MR. KUNITZ: Oh, yes. Of course, he always needed confirmation. It was to be expected that any day of the week if Mark was working on a painting he would call up and say, "I want to show you something." Then he would show you; he would stage it very carefully. The light had to be just right; everything had to be right. And he would watch your face while you looked at it. If your face didn't show exultation [laughter] or if you didn't say anything, he would get very worried. He would get very worried. Sometimes he would get a little angry even saying, "I guess you don't like it."

MS. BERMAN: Did he actually unveil it or did he have I on the trolley and bring it out?

MR. KUNITZ: He had it on ropes and mounted. He had a very ingenious system of pulleys working in his studio.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever watch him paint?

MR. KUNITZ: Only touching up something. I never saw him painting in full stride. He didn't want people to see him do that because he thought - I'm just interpreting it - he'd be giving away his technical secrets.

MS. BERMAN: That's true, but he had nothing to fear as far as you would be concerned.

MR. KUNITZ: I know, but I knew a lot of painters and was married to a painter. He didn't really want you to know quite what he was doing. He didn't want you to know at a certain time the way he prepared his ground. In the end, of course, an assistant did it for him. He didn't do the ground at all himself. It was done for him. Do you know, by the way, the piece that Dan Rice wrote right after Mark died? It appeared in *New American Writing*. Dan did all the technical preparation of all the paintings. And in this piece he discusses exactly - Now I think it's one of those things that may have escaped the attention of the art world. It didn't appear in an art publication.

MS. BERMAN: Exactly. I'm going to look into it, because it certainly circumvents a lot of these questions which I am going to ask.

MR. KUNITZ: I've never known any artist who saw that piece, but it will tell you everything you really want to know because it goes into great detail. The critical piece that Mark was proudest of was written by Robert Goldwater. That's the only one I ever heard him speak of with satisfaction. He felt that that was close to what he would like to have said about his work.

MS. BERMAN: Of course, Goldwater was to write the definitive monograph about him. On the occasion when you saw Rothko touching up the painting can you remember anything about what he was doing? Was he using a sponge, a brush or a cloth?

MR. KUNITZ: As I recall it was a brush that he was working with, and a rather broad [one]. He wanted an even flow of paint. He, again, was just the opposite of Philip who liked to work with a smaller brush and who wanted the brushwork to be very much a part of the painting. It was quite different technique.

MS. BERMAN: What about the little painting that he made you? Can you tell me about the circumstances of that?

MR. KUNITZ: It was an anniversary gift of our marriage, and it was small, but it was in the great period of the intense palette. It couldn't have been much more than fifteen inches, something like that. But it had big scale. It glowed and had a sense of the small monumental. [Laughter.] And he inscribed it on the back.

MS. BERMAN: Did you know he was making you something?

MR. KUNITZ: No. He brought two down and he offered us a choice. The other one was in a darker palette, more towards the plum or eggplant color. We both preferred the sunlit one.

MS. BERMAN: Was it more orange or yellow or gold?

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, it was that. And then a red.

MS. BERMAN: Do you know who got the other one?

MR. KUNITZ: I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: What did Rothko himself have in mind for the Foundation? What were his intentions as far as you know?

MR. KUNITZ: As far as I knew it was very clear. Whenever he talked about the future, his will and what he would like to do, he would begin by saying, "The young have everything done for them. All the awards, the prizes, the honors go to the young." He was bitter about that, and he had a real feeling of sympathy for older artists around who were in bad straits, and we knew several of them. I won't name them, but they were clearly in need both of recognition and of money. And Mark would always say, "Well, I would like to leave money to help older artists." He must have said that a dozen times, and that was my understanding and so remains to this day.

MS. BERMAN: How did he get the idea of establishing a Foundation?

MR. KUNITZ: When he was working on his will with Bernie Reis, this was obviously one way, in fact the only way in which it could be done. And the idea was that some of the income from the estate would be fed perpetually into the Foundation and would therefore keep it going so that it could flourish in later years.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if the idea possibly had been sparked by maybe he had run into people he had known when he was younger; specific cases of need had -

MR. KUNITZ: Oh, yes, they were specific cases. The first few cases that came to our attention were actually persons whom Mark befriended and had helped previously.

MS. BERMAN: So actually while he was alive he had been generous to several artists.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes. Mark was very generous in spirit especially to artists whom he felt loyal to and who were on their uppers.

MS. BERMAN: Of course - this is not a kind construction to put on this - these were people he wasn't in competition with?

MR. KUNITZ: It's true. And as I told you earlier, he really distrusted the young and didn't get along with them, and he felt they were worshipping false gods, namely Barney Newman and others. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: Also, I think he didn't like pomp and he didn't like minimalism and he didn't seem to like anything that was -

MR. KUNITZ: He wasn't really much interested in other people's work. It wasn't terribly important to him, I think.

MS. BERMAN: Do you feel when Rothko talked about older artists and his interest in helping them besides a real charitable impulse, perhaps he was in a sense going back and wanting to align himself with the tradition in art either in Europe or America with the Masters? Do you think he suddenly wanted to fit himself into history? Suddenly might be a wrong word.

MR. KUNITZ: I don't think so. I think it was a genuine charitable impulse. It grew out of real sympathy. I don't think it was a put-on in any way, nor for self-aggrandizement.

MS. BERMAN: I didn't mean as a put-on. For someone who was casting off this and that it seemed to me -

MR. KUNITZ: But there are numbers of cases in which while he was alive he helped persons and always

anonymously. He never wanted it known, nor did he ever talk about it.

MS. BERMAN: How did he accomplish it, say, anonymously?

MR. KUNITZ: He actually gave them a painting that they could sell or actually helped them with dollars, but usually it was through the gift of a painting.

MS. BERMAN: That was really a wonderful gesture, also to give a painting away, something that took a while to do. Do you know if Rothko painted quickly or slowly? Or do you have any idea about that?

MR. KUNITZ: The preparation took a lot of time, and he was a perfectionist. The actual painting, judging from the time when he would tell me he was working on something and then when he completed it, once he got the canvas prepared and everything in order he worked quite fast. But then he would really keep it and study it and try to get that peculiar glowing suffusion of tone that he wanted.

MS. BERMAN: We talked about the light that he wanted. Did he ever talk to you about how he wanted his paintings hung and shown?

MR. KUNITZ: You know about the big hassle with the paintings at Harvard -

MS. BERMAN: The *Four Seasons*. Seagrams.

MR. KUNITZ: He was fit to be tied during that whole period. In the beginning of course, he felt complimented because they wanted the work, but when he saw what they were doing with the hanging, he was furious. I've never seen him so angry about anything. He couldn't talk about anything else for weeks.

MS. BERMAN: What infuriated him the most about it?

MR. KUNITZ: He felt his paintings were being treated like decorations, and that all the labor, all the love and all the art that had gone into them was wasted. It was just a little ornamental show.

MS. BERMAN: Was that because people were eating in front of them? Or was it how they were being hung?

MR. KUNITZ: He knew beforehand. I think it was largely the hanging. Somehow they looked insignificant and tawdry where they were. He felt it was all wrong. I'll give you another example how hanging was important to him. He never wanted to be shown with another painter. He wanted that room, that atmosphere, that environment, all to be his own. Somebody had suggested a show with Francis.

MS. BERMAN: Sam Francis.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes. He exploded, wouldn't be shown in the same room with him, over his dead body.

MS. BERMAN: Was that because he felt that Francis was an inferior painter?

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, that was partly it, but I think that was not the sole reason. He wouldn't have wanted it with anybody.

MS. BERMAN: That was a feeling that many of them in the New York School had. I was wondering if you knew how that came about or why that became such an issue to them?

MR. KUNITZ: I couldn't explain that. In his case I understand it, because I think that the effectiveness of his paintings is dependent really on the creation of that atmosphere. If you have a different set of vibrations challenging his own, something has gone awry with the work that's all.

MS. BERMAN: He seemed to have got his way. I don't remember any show with Sam Francis.

MR. KUNITZ: No. He would not permit it. That's all.

MS. BERMAN: Now of course, compared to the paintings that are being done Rothko's paintings don't look large, but for the time they were very large. Did he ever talk to you about the scale and the size?

MR. KUNITZ: Mark was not interested in easel painting. Therefore he wanted this monumental scale in order to achieve as much of the atmosphere of his soul as he could project. The bigger, therefore, the more of it would emanate in the painting. I think it was as simple as that.

MS. BERMAN: You had said before when he showed you a painting obviously he wanted praise. Did he ever ask you or was he ever interested in any kind of actual constructive criticism?

MR. KUNITZ: No. I don't think that Mark would tolerate criticism from anybody. That wasn't the way he worked. His aesthetic was so clearly defined to him that I don't think he felt anybody was qualified to correct it for him.

MS. BERMAN: I wanted to talk about the Museum of Modern Art Retrospective in 1961. It seemed to me, and you can correct me, that his behavior began to change either during or after that show or that somehow he became very obsessed about the whole thing.

MR. KUNITZ: Of course, this was the biggest event in his life up to then. That show was to him like being invited to dwell in Parnassus. Though he didn't want to show it, I think he was angry with himself for caring so much about it. He did behave like an obsessed man during that whole period. He also felt - I'm interpreting now; so this is subject to modification - that this was to a degree an act of self-betrayal, because his caring so much about this show negated all that he'd been saying about the museum world.

MS. BERMAN: Also that set felt that personal publicity was odious. Whether it was thrust upon you or you sought it, it amounted to the same thing for many [of them]. It made you less pure, I guess.

MR. KUNITZ: That makes me think of an artist I did forget to mention -

MS. BERMAN: Clyfford Still?

MR. KUNITZ: Still. Mark spoke of him with great admiration at one period, early. And again they quarreled and he couldn't stand the thought of him, but Still was among his admirations. Certainly there are certain correspondences.

MS. BERMAN: I guess in a certain respect Still acted as a rebuke to him because Still had moved to Maryland and Still wasn't showing interest.

MR. KUNITZ: Clyfford really acted out what Mark only talked about, and I think that was part of the explanation of his rage against him.

MS. BERMAN: "He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly." [Laughter.] Sill brought up the terrible contrast, I guess. I'm not saying that Still had a beauty in his life, but to Rothko he still had the ideals and hadn't succumbed. In the Museum of Modern Art show did you get any idea from Rothko what it felt like to see all of these works brought together?

MR. KUNITZ: He was riding high. That's all I can say. To him there was a kind of euphoria about that whole experience. I don't think anything that ever happened to him meant as much to him except the Chapel paintings. The idea of becoming a chapel - that excited him no end. He couldn't stop talking about it.

MS. BERMAN: What about the room at the Tate?

MR. KUNITZ: That was important, too. Oh, yes, he was very proud of that. It's a glorious room by the way. Have you seen it?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. KUNITZ: That was enormous pride. That, the Chapel, and the Museum Show, I guess, were the highlights of his whole career.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever notice the brand of art materials he used, what kind of paints or anything?

MR. KUNITZ: No. I have a feeling that he did talk to me about it once, but I don't remember. Elise might remember that. Dan Rice talks about that in his piece. I have a feeling that he didn't use the highest grade paint at all, certainly not in the preparation of the ground. It was all mixed in a big tub as I remember it, like a pail. And he had this big sort of like a plasterer's brush.

MS. BERMAN: I forgot to ask you before when we were talking about any kind of philosophy that motivated Rothko if he talked about psychoanalysis or any kind of -

MR. KUNITZ: I don't recall offhand. Of course it was clear that he needed help desperately at the last, but I don't recall his ever talking about it.

MS. BERMAN: I don't mean in terms of medical help for himself, but the way intellectuals talk about Freud and Jung and the schools and any kind of influence on his thought in general?

MR. KUNITZ: I don't recall any such conversations. It doesn't mean we didn't have them, but it didn't register. I suspect we did, but I can't recall it at the moment. It would seem unlikely that it wouldn't have been talked of

since I was very much concerned with Jung maybe more than Freud. But still it is very likely that we did talk. But I don't recall the conversations.

MS. BERMAN: Did you see him more frequently in New York or Provincetown?

MR. KUNITZ: Most of the time in New York. He was not in Provincetown for more than a few years, three or four years. And he was in bad shape at that time.

MS. BERMAN: Who did he socialize up there with? With you and Katharine Kuh and -

MR. KUNITZ: That was pretty much it. He occasionally saw Jack Tworkov but they didn't really get along too well. They were not companionable. Tony Vevers, a younger painter. Fritz Baltman. That's about it. He and Motherwell didn't associate to any degree. I remember, recalling Provincetown, once he came by up the street past my house while I was working in the garden. He called to me from the street, and I responded, but I kept on working. And I didn't ask him in. And he was bitterly offended. Weeks, months, years after, he said, "That time I came by you didn't ask me into your garden, Stanley, I couldn't forgive you. That was a terrible thing to do."

MS. BERMAN: Morbid. Just morbid sensitivity.

MR. KUNITZ: He didn't realize that that's my meditation time, my work period. I didn't entertain in the garden. That's all.

MS. BERMAN: Did you explain that to him eventually?

MR. KUNITZ: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: What did he think of that? It didn't matter?

MR. KUNITZ: It didn't matter. [Laughter.]

MS. BERMAN: Did he have a meditation time or kind of method, a mulling over period?

MR. KUNITZ: He was so impatient. He was the most impatient man I think I ever saw. He couldn't sit. He always had to be moving. And he was so restless in spirit. He was never quite satisfied. Things were never quite right. His meditation I think was largely when he was working, when he would put on his Mozart and play it [as] background music. That was it. And that would go on for hours and hours. That was his substitute, I think, for meditation.

MS. BERMAN: Did he spend all day in the studio?

MR. KUNITZ: Of course, he entertained and he received people to look at the painting, go out to lunch. But he spent a good day in the studio.

MS. BERMAN: There are, of course, many other artists and older artists up at Provincetown, and wealth. I was wondering if he knew people like Edwin Dickinson or Myron Stout?

MR. KUNITZ: He knew Myron, but as far as Dickinson goes, I never saw him with Dickinson. We saw Dickinson now and then, but I don't recall ever seeing Mark with him. I don't think they would have been at all compatible.

MS. BERMAN: That's true. Or even someone like Chaim Gross who's been up there for many years.

MR. KUNITZ: No. They were not close. I don't think he had that much respect for Gross.

MS. BERMAN: Would he have been up there in time to say, meet someone like Hopper? Of course, Hopper was very old then.

MR. KUNITZ: I don't think that Mark would have wanted to meet Hopper. It would be my guess. Again I'm only speculating, but I can't think of those two together. [Laughter.]

MS. BERMAN: Neither can I, but I thought it would have -

MR. KUNITZ: It would seem inevitable.

MS. BERMAN: In case they had, I thought I would ask. To go into some of the other people, did he know Mary McCarthy well?

MR. KUNITZ: I don't think so, nor Edmond Wilson.

MS. BERMAN: I don't know how Rothko felt toward women, but would she have been too smart for him?

MR. KUNITZ: Mark was a very sensuous and sensual being. He loved women. I think he had a strong libido, very strong. And he liked to have beautiful women around, but not necessarily intellects.

[End of Interview]

March 22, 1984

MS. BERMAN: The first questions I'm going to ask you are based on our previous interview. You mentioned that Rothko asked you if you knew some younger painters, and that you would send them over to his studio.

MR. KUNITZ: This was in Provincetown.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And it wasn't too successful ultimately. I was wondering if you could remember whom you suggested and which ones went to his studio at least for a while.

MR. KUNITZ: That's hard. Offhand I can't recall. They were young painters in the town. Perhaps Tony Vevers would recall. Have you ever spoken to him?

MS. BERMAN: No. Who is Tony Vevers?

MR. KUNITZ: Tony Vevers is a painter still. He's in the Art Department at Purdue University now, but he still has a home in Provincetown, a summer home. I don't think he was one of the group because he was too mature for that, but he may have suggested or may have known the young painters who went there. He's head of the Art Department at Purdue.

MS. BERMAN: Was he connected with Rothko at all?

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, I think he was quite close to Mark. Tony's an interesting painter actually. He was closer to Franz than I think to Mark, but he knew Mark quite well.

MS. BERMAN: How old would he have been say in 1968?

MR. KUNITZ: Let's see. What year did we agree on?

MS. BERMAN: 1968.

MR. KUNITZ: He's now I suppose around fifty.

MS. BERMAN: You also mentioned that once Rothko wondered to you if his paintings were as good as Ad Rinehardt's. I was wondering if you knew what the relationship between the two men was.

MR. KUNITZ: Of course, the provocation was Ad's widow being so close to Mark at this period. And her feeling about Ad and I think her comparison of the two is what led him to say that. I don't think they were great buddies, but they certainly knew each other. Whether it was an intimate relation or not I couldn't really say. I doubt that it was. Of course, Ad was a sort of gadfly in the whole art world and had a wicked tongue and wrote some pretty biting pieces about the art world.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that Rothko felt that his work was similar to his?

MR. KUNITZ: Of course, at the last when he was painting those dark pictures inevitably I think the comparison rose to mind. So that I think that was the provocation. I don't think up to then he had been, but it was that he was coming into his black period.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think he welcomed that comparison or was he uncomfortable about it? [Laughter.]

MR. KUNITZ: I don't think it made him happy, no.

MS. BERMAN: You mentioned that Mozart was one of Rothko's favorite artists; in your poem you mentioned it. Weren't there any other composers either classical or modern or jazz that you know that he responded to?

MR. KUNITZ: Mozart was his god, and whenever I was in the studio with him it was Mozart he was playing. [Laughs.] So as far as I know that was it.

MS. BERMAN: We also talked about the book of poems you considered collaborating on. Did you actually see any of the drawings Rothko attempted?

MR. KUNITZ: No.

MS. BERMAN: Was there any hint of what they were like from him?

MR. KUNITZ: I don't believe there was. I don't recall his ever defining what he had in mind.

MS. BERMAN: Did he talk maybe even what media they were to be in?

MR. KUNITZ: That was left to him. It was not anything that we discussed in any detail. It was one of those projects that you're sitting around and you talk about and have a drink and you talk about some more, but it came to nothing. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: I was checking with The Mark Rothko Foundation and they had some line drawings from about 1961, and I was wondering if they could be -

MR. KUNITZ: It's conceivable, yes.

MS. BERMAN: We also talked about misconceptions, things that Mark disliked that the critics said. One was being an abstract landscapist. I was wondering if he had ever discussed critics' emphasis on color relationships. Color was his main statement. I was wondering if he had ever discussed how he felt about being labeled as a colorist.

MR. KUNITZ: My feeling, again it's very tenuous, is that he would not have resented that. He did to a degree think of himself as a colorist, but color to him was more than pigment. It had for him emotive correspondences that were essential to an understanding of his work.

MS. BERMAN: The reason I asked you that was I always got the feeling that he wanted his work discussed in terms of content and not formalistic forms.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, that is generally true, and that's why he so much liked Goldwater's piece on him because that was the thrust of what he was saying.

MS. BERMAN: Were there any other things that you can think of that Rothko particularly railed against in terms of discussion of his art?

MR. KUNITZ: Well, he was always railing [laughter] so that it's pretty hard to separate one rail from another, but his general attitude was that the whole art, gallery, museum and critical world stank. [Laughter.]

MS. BERMAN: We also talked a little bit about Rothko wanting his Foundation to aid older artists. What I forgot to ask was were there any other purposes or activities of the Foundation that Rothko had in mind, to your knowledge?

MR. KUNITZ: That was the only program that he ever discussed with me. You see, that's one of the bones of contention about the whole endowment of the Foundation, was whether he had another intention which the court finally decided in favor of. But if that was in his mind it was certainly not expressed to his closest friends.

MS. BERMAN: We talked about the *Four Seasons* murals. And in our last interview you talked about them and gave me the sense that they were actually installed in the restaurant. Other sources seemed to be confused. One other source I have [says] the pictures were never actually delivered to the restaurant. Can you recall if you either saw them -

MR. KUNITZ: I never saw them installed, but my recollection is that that was what made him so angry was - whether it was a proposed installation or whether it was an actual installation I don't know - he felt they were being treated as a commercial adjunct and would disappear, be used as a tool, and would not be visible as paintings.

MS. BERMAN: In your recollection you had the feeling that Rothko actually did see them on the walls of the restaurant?

MR. KUNITZ: That's what I had always supposed from the tenor of his rage. Otherwise I don't know why he would have been so angry. But it seems to me that's a historical fact that could easily be verified. Johnny Meyers would know about that aspect of it.

MS. BERMAN: That's interesting you say that, because I've read his book. He made so many mistakes in the fact part.

MR. KUNITZ: I know, because he was working from memory. It's just so easy to. And then he had a program in

mind. [Laughs] I noticed there were many errors.

MS. BERMAN: I want to talk about your poem, "*The Artist*." Of course, the first line is: "His paintings grew darker every year." It seems to me that you imply an autobiographical interpretation in there or an equivalent maybe.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, I certainly do.

MS. BERMAN: I think that Rothko, according to his writings, would have disagreed with you. He seemed to say that his painting wasn't personal.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, I know. The same way T.S. Eliot claimed that poetry was not personal, but now that we know the facts of his life we know that there was direct association between let us say what was happening to him and the time he was writing "*The Wasteland*" and the way the poem evolved itself. It is inconceivable there could be a complete separation between the man that suffers and the mind that creates. It was so obvious that he was in a depressed state at the time of that [turning].

MS. BERMAN: Did you and Rothko ever discuss to what degree art is personal?

MR. KUNITZ: Not in the abstract. I commented on what the painting said to me, and he didn't dispute it.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, you actually said directly to him - I don't want to put words in your mouth.

MR. KUNITZ: I said that these paintings seem to me - I forget my exact words, but in effect - bleak and despondent, as compared to the glowing canvases of the earlier period. And he did not refute it.

MS. BERMAN: That's really interesting. I think that Rothko had a problem with the word "personal" because he seemed to think that it might maybe contradict the word "universal," which is probably what he wanted.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes. Of course, he did, as I recall, propose at one point when we were talking a theory of the black embracing all colors and being capable of all sorts of nuances so that it wasn't a monolithic color.

MS. BERMAN: But his paintings weren't really black. I mean they were closely valued paintings, colors laid over each other so that would also fit his theory, because it was the black embracing everything.

MR. KUNITZ: He was right, of course, in that. I always had the feeling that even in the blackest of them his aubergine was creeping through or trying to creep through.

MS. BERMAN: Yes, I think we definitely get the feeling of that. You talked about his "monumental void." It puzzles me about Rothko. Why do you think he lacked inner resources the way he seemed to?

MR. KUNITZ: [Laughter.] I'm not a psychoanalyst so I don't know, but I do think there was a great vacuum at the center of his being. I've noticed this in other artists by the way, great ones, too. Poets included. And this may be a reflection of what Keats called negative capability - the absence of (again, I'm using Keats' words) irritable striving for knowledge or wisdom, the other aspect of it. As he said, the poetical character has no character of his own; he flows into his environment. In one of his letters he (this is Keats) comments on a sparrow pecking on his windowsill and he becomes that sparrow. He goes into a room and he becomes all the people in the room. I think there is that quality to a degree in most artists, and in this case I think it was evasive.

MS. BERMAN: That's interesting, because I think of Rothko flowing into his paintings and wanting them all around and displayed and emerging with that environment.

MR. KUNITZ: He wanted to become his paintings.

MS. BERMAN: And he wanted the viewer to become his paintings, too.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, that's right. Of course, that was the great effort involved. So that if you look at it very closely, what that implies is a destruction of personality and a diffusion of it. And essentially I would say that is what happened - the whole body of the work.

MS. BERMAN: It also makes a neat, maybe too neat a connection, but you know that when Rothko was younger he wanted to be an actor.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes, I know that. He was very proud of that whole period. When he wanted to reminisce about his past, that was the only aspect of it he ever wanted to talk about.

MS. BERMAN: Shall we just digress for a minute and talk about what he told you when he reminisced about his [youth]?

MR. KUNITZ: I think he fantasized to a degree, but he thought of himself as having been quite a success as an actor. I don't recall all the details, but he claimed that Clark Gable was in the stock company that he was acting in. And he told me that he was just as good as Clark. [Laughter.]

MS. BERMAN: I would love to know if those two ever met again! [Laughter.]

MR. KUNITZ: Or if they ever did.

MS. BERMAN: True.

MR. KUNITZ: Summer stock. I think it was on the West Coast, Pacific Northwest.

MS. BERMAN: The actor, of course, the desire is to lose one's self in the character, in the creation, too. Actors almost always seem to me as not having inner resources, but that's almost a plus for some of them because it's so easy for them to -

MR. KUNITZ: And this, of course, ties in with his endless playing of Mozart. He wanted that music to saturate the room, to diffuse it in the same way that his paintings were diffused through a room.

MS. BERMAN: Almost played in an addictive way.

MR. KUNITZ: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: I wanted to ask you a question, and this is from "*A Kind of Order, A Kind of Folly*." You mentioned that Rothko was very near-sighted. Do you think that had any bearing on his work?

MR. KUNITZ: It's true that he wore very thick glasses, and was very unobservant of detail. Certainly in nature as I think I pointed out to you, he saw nothing that interested him except large forms. So it is conceivable that it did. It would be hard to imagine any such disability, let us say, not having some consequence. You could say, for example, with Joyce that his near blindness was to a degree instrumental in leading him to create an art that did not depend on the delineation of small particulars.

MS. BERMAN: But just think of something like "*Ulysses*" which has the many, many details - of course, that was from memory not from eyesight.

MR. KUNITZ: No, that was from memory, and they were all immersed in this lyric flow. And eventually as he grew blinder, in the end the particulars disappeared from "*Finnegan's Wake*" and it became a linguistic epic rather than a heroic, sensory one.

MS. BERMAN: Also, you reported a conversation that you had with Rothko in which you refer to Joyce and Picasso as monsters. You said that this troubled Rothko, and you said that genius and monster were often interchangeable. And Rothko said, "You don't mean me, do you?"

MR. KUNITZ: [Laughs.] Yes. I remember that so well.

MS. BERMAN: I wanted to ask you two questions about that. The first is, what do you think he feared here?

MR. KUNITZ: He feared that he had become or was becoming monstrous in many ways. I think this had to do with his personal life in relation to Mel, but more than that it had to do with that terrible drive for fame, for power and for success which the competitiveness of the art world - all of it which he recognized and yet at the same time though he raged against the art world, he must have known inside that he had become a victim of it. I think all that must have crossed his mind. Naturally I didn't explore it.

MS. BERMAN: Another ramification is that if you said he was a monster, that meant that you also thought that he was a genius.

MR. KUNITZ: Of course; it was flattery to a degree. And of course, the association of my remark was with the concept of the sacred monster which would have pleased him even more.

MS. BERMAN: I also got the feeling, and this is just from reading the writing, it sounded as if he had never even heard or thought of that idea before. It sounded as if it was a new idea to think of Picasso as a holy or sacred monster. Was that a fresh idea to him?

MR. KUNITZ: I believe so, because I don't think he had thought of it in those terms, because I was saying that or talking about it not in order to put the blame on any individual artist. I was talking about the role of the artist in the age and why that separation between art and society leads to the breeding of the sacred monsters.

MS. BERMAN: I want to go to the summer of 1968 when Rothko was in Provincetown. What were his routines there, if you could tell? How did he live while he was there?

MR. KUNITZ: They had a house on the bay and he had a little studio that he was working in. It was in one of the side streets. He wasn't working very well that summer. It was clear. He was in very bad shape. He was drinking a great deal. He was terribly sloppy personally in his habits, and got fat and confused. And then he had these terrible quarrels with Mel that were ugly in every way. I just had the feeling that he was going completely to seed. Then eventually he bought this little house. I think I commented on that. Tony Vevers by the way bought it from him.

MS. BERMAN: Oh. So he lives in -

MR. KUNITZ: He lives in their house.

MS. BERMAN: In the Rothko house now.

MR. KUNITZ: It's a nice little house, set back from the street with land. As I pointed out Mark had no feeling for the land and did not want to do anything with. Tony has done it; it's very attractive. He was out a good deal. He walked around. He used to walk up to the west end of town. I was in the opposite end of town. He would come by the garden. Occasionally he would visit Jack Tworkov, who lived next door. But you felt that he was lost. He exuded no satisfaction in a certain way, no joy. So I welcomed it when he did say to me that he'd like to see some of the younger artists. I'm just trying to recall, to see if I could think of one person, but I'm not even sure that I knew them very well. I might have talked to Tony and Tony might have given him names. There was one of them though that I did know because I remember, but I don't see his face so I'm not sure who it was - who told me the story, the big scene when he threw them out, and so I heard it both from him and -

MS. BERMAN: Can you recount this big scene?

MR. KUNITZ: As far as I could gather a few of them had come to the studio, and Mark had shown them some of the work he was doing, and he began to talk about painting and he thought they were bored and weren't paying any attention. Whether somebody said anything - I don't think - but Mark could get very angry in a moment. He felt he was being ignored or slighted and he stood up and he said, "Get out of here. I don't want to see any of you any more."

MS. BERMAN: That's a scene. Did you see much what he was working on that summer?

MR. KUNITZ: He was doing small things. These were the first black paintings, I think, if memory serves me right, that I'd seen. They were not as I recall them, colorful in any way. They were moving towards that whole black period.

MS. BERMAN: What about works on paper? Did you see any?

MR. KUNITZ: That was what he was doing largely there. It was mostly work on paper as I recall. In fact I don't recall if I saw any canvas. I must have seen something, but it's the drawings that I recall.

MS. BERMAN: They were in dark colors. Did you see him working in any way with acrylics?

MR. KUNITZ: No. Not in that period, no. He wasn't working very intensively. Whenever I came over to see him, he wasn't working. So I don't have an image in my mind of ever seeing him actually working in Provincetown.

MS. BERMAN: So you never got the sense that you were disturbing him when he was doing something?

MR. KUNITZ: Oh, no. Mark never gave you that impression because Mark loved an audience. And though he did not actually paint while you were in his studio, he wanted you to be part of the scenery, [laughter] and to admire what he was doing. He would watch you like a hawk to be sure that you weren't concealing any emotions about what you saw.

MS. BERMAN: I think it would be very difficult to have gone there at times. The house we talked about - he didn't care about the land or the view or anything. Goldwater said that the ocean inspired Rothko's later work. I was wondering if you would agree in light of your -

MR. KUNITZ: I don't think so. I think he was immune to the blandishments of nature.

MS. BERMAN: Do you have any notion of how he got his ideas or ideas came to him, for want of a cruder word, inspiration?

MR. KUNITZ: No. I have no idea at all how he approached a painting, how conceptual it was or his tactic.

Whatever I know about that is from reading his own statements or Dan Rice's piece. No, I don't think so.

MS. BERMAN: Did you see these works on paper, these small things? I was wondering how he treated them, what his attitude was, how he kept them.

MR. KUNITZ: It was a mess, the whole studio, papers lying all around. They were simply on tables, just obviously there for reference. I don't think he thought of them as finished work.

MS. BERMAN: I'm trying to find out - he must have been doing something, but how much we don't know.

MR. KUNITZ: I don't really know. My sense was that he was floundering and no longer felt that the color phase of his work was responsive to his own emotional needs. So he had to go elsewhere, and this was the solution he was working out.

MS. BERMAN: I guess I've seen some of the ones that were brown and gray. To me they look very rich. I liked some of them as a matter of fact.

MR. KUNITZ: These are dated?

MS. BERMAN: These are these works on paper.

MR. KUNITZ: Around '68?

MS. BERMAN: Right. To me some of them look quite rich. I've only seen a few of them.

MR. KUNITZ: there are some I know that were in a very rich ocher. I recall some of those, but gradually the ocher got dark.

MS. BERMAN: I want to ask you about 1969 which was about the last summer or so of his life. I would like to know if you know where he was the summer of 1969 after he split up with his wife?

MR. KUNITZ: He spent most of his time in the studio with - what's her name?

MS. BERMAN: Rita?

MR. KUNITZ: Rita, yes. Rita was there all the time, at least whenever I was there Rita was around, but he called Mel every day.

MS. BERMAN: She was up there in Provincetown?

MR. KUNITZ: No. Back in New York. This is the split up here, the final split up I'm talking about. He both needed to be apart and at the same time, the two of them, Mel and Mark, had this terrible bond. They had to be talking to each other every day. He was tormented and in such a state of agitation as I've rarely seen.

MS. BERMAN: I guess what I'm trying to do since there is no documentation for his whereabouts the summer of '69, I was wondering if you knew if he was there.

MR. KUNITZ: Let me clarify. This was after they had left the house in Provincetown?

MS. BERMAN: The summer of '68 he was up there, and it seems to me that he wasn't up there in '69.

MR. KUNITZ: Didn't he go to Italy?

MS. BERMAN: No. That was the summer before.

MR. KUNITZ: I know that there was an Italian adventure, too. That whole last period closed together for me. It's very hard to separate the summers from the winters because it was a steady decline. What year did he sell the house in Provincetown? Do you have a record of that?

MS. BERMAN: No. That would, of course, be easy to find out, because what were you thinking about to date from there?

MR. KUNITZ: Yes. You could date it from that. Tony would have all that information.

MS. BERMAN: Of course! He would be the one to know that. So you think once he sold the house he didn't go anywhere.

MR. KUNITZ: I'm just trying to remember. I can't recall. Sorry.

MS. BERMAN: When was the last time you saw Rothko?

MR. KUNITZ: It must have been three or four days before the end, but he was on the phone every day until the last day. Of course, he frightened me. I felt something terrible was going to happen to him. And yet you don't really believe it when it does. But I'd gone up there to the studio and had stayed maybe an hour or so. Once he got to show the paintings and talk, he was quite rational, but he was also very disturbed about Mel and about Rita. It was really what he was talking about, the unspeakable mess he was in.

MS. BERMAN: Any closing thoughts or observations about Rothko that we haven't touched on?

MR. KUNITZ: I think it's very difficult to pinpoint Mark, to sum up either the worth of a man or even to figure for one's self what the source of his power was since there was so great a flaw at the center of his being. And yet, of course, it's clear he triumphed in that bitter way. That's why art still and always will remain a mystery.

MS. BERMAN: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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