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Oral history interview with Joseph Solman, 1981 May 6-8

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Joseph Solman on May 6 and 8, 1981. The interview took place at his studio at 156 Second Avenue in New York, NY, and was conducted by Avis Berman as part of the Mark Rothko and His Times Oral History Project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

May 6, 1981

Avis Berman:...talking with Joseph Solman here in his house and studio at 156 Second Avenue. And I guess we want to start with the basics. I know you were born in Russia. Maybe you could start by talking about that.

Joseph Solman: Yes. I was born in Russia in 1909. Our family came here in 1912, so I remember nothing of Russia. And we came to Jamaica, Long Island because we had some relatives there, like all immigrants land somewhere where they know somebody. I'd say that I was already drawing and painting in my teens - drawing mainly. The last year of high school I remember getting my first portrait commission from a black student. We agreed on a fee of five dollars. And then I painted many portraits of my friends shortly after that period. But after high school I went straight to the National Academy of Design to study. I regret now that I didn't enter George Luks' class. He was still alive. But I saw a show of his students, and their work didn't appeal to me. But that was a poor reason for my not going there. I didn't like the painting going on in the Academy because it was a diluted version of Charles Hawthorne's work. And I really began to pick up people in the park, bums or something, for a quarter or a half a dollar to pose for me. My first love was portraiture so I did a lot of loose portraiture somewhat in the style of either Sargent or Luks. Duivenek became a big deal with me at one period. At one period I thought he was the best of the portrait painters around that period. And I studied the museums and got much more knowledge of art from galleries and museums. In 1929 when I was still at the Academy the great show, the first show at the Modern Museum opened with Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cezanne, of which I guess to myself would have been what the Armory show was to the generation before me. And thereafter I went to galleries far more than I had been and was sequentially influenced by Rouault or Soutine Modigliani or Derain. I'd paint a couple of pictures in their style and, of course, a few months later I'd paint over those canvases because I'd be in love with someone else. But I was drinking in things. And I would say about 1931 when I was still living in Jamaica, Long Island, I think I found my own road, or partially at least. I did a lot of the streets and back alleys of Jamaica, Long Island, a suburban little rickety town. And though I'm sure one can trace some influences there, I thought I fused some elements of cubism, some elements of Rouault, my own feeling for locale into something that I could honestly call my own. They were small gouaches, maybe six by nine inches in size; but they were easy to do outside because of the small size. I'd take my watercolors and gouache - I'd carry everything. And I was very prolific. I did the railroad yards, the bridges, the alleys, the streets, and so on. And I felt a great satisfaction in coming back with something I felt was in step with my own feeling, my own forms, my own colors, and so on. I then began to try to do oils based on these streets, but I found that when I did an oil from an elevated station or from a stoop or something, I'd have much better results than if I did them from a gouache which I wanted to enlarge. Realizing that the picture was much more alive that way, I ceased to try to enlarge any of the gouaches. I did but I kicked my foot through many of them later on. I had my first one-man show in April of 1934 in a gallery called Contemporary Arts which also gave first one-man shows to people who never had had a show - gave a first one-man show to people like Rothko, I believe to Schanker. I know it gave the first show to people like Mark Tobey, Kerkam, and many future well-known artists. The pictures were very, very dark in that first show of mine and I destroyed many of them later on because I could hardly see them myself. Although I got rather nice reviews in a few papers. But the next step in my development was, living in New York and being married, I'd go out on the East Side streets, park scenes, and so on, and make drawings and gouaches. When I was excited about a scene, I'd just make a pencil drawing and when I came back - since I had done so many gouaches on the scene, I was able to transform the pencil drawing into an oil much more successfully than when I tried to enlarge a gouache. Once I discovered that, that led to a new period (and that's a perfect example of it). If I showed you the pencil drawing, it might be on the back of an envelope, you know, three by four inches. But I came home directly with the scene still vividly in my mind and laid out the canvas. And that was, I would say, the second important phase in my development. I had a show in 1937 at a place called "Another Place" of those particular streets. By that time, I had already been exhibiting in many places, you know, in group shows; and it was already after the formation of our group called The Ten in 1935 in my studio on East 15th Street. I was also on the WPA project. I think I got on in 1935. So I was young, free, and full

of all kinds of energy so I produced quite a bit of the streets, both in gouache and in oil at that period. The selling for most artists, outside of big names, was a very rare thing and so the WPA was a great boon to many of us. After all, even names…people don't know that, but even names like Marsden Hartley and Walkowitz and Tamayo were names on the Project. We all lined up for our paycheck on Monday or Friday, whatever it was. So it wasn't only people like myself or Ben Zion or hundreds of others that I could list, thus and so forth and so on. Now did you want to know more about The Ten?

MS. BERMAN: Well, I do but I'm going to go….

MR. SOLMAN: My biography is what you want now?

MS. BERMAN: Well, that's what I'm going to do first of all. I'm going to go back to your family. What were your parents' names?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, Rose and Nathan.

MS. BERMAN: And what was Rose's maiden name?

MR. SOLMAN: Peskin [P-E-S-K-I-N].

MS. BERMAN: And what did they do? What were their occupations?

MR. SOLMAN: You mean my father's occupation?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. SOLMAN: He was a tailor.

MS. BERMAN: And did your mother ever teach or help out?

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. She free-lanced dress-making.

MS. BERMAN: And did you have brothers and sisters?

MR. SOLMAN: I have one brother and one sister, both older than myself. My brother is a retired electrician but he always fooled around with sculpture a little bit, as more or less a devout hobby. In his later work he worked abstractly and has shown some things. My sister, who for years was a dental hygienist and married, always like acting and acted in these little community theater groups. About ten years or so ago, she auditioned for the part of a servant or something in Elaine May's movie, "New Leaf" and got hired and she's done bits in dozens of pictures since then. She always kibitzes, "A funny thing happened on the way to the cemetery." So the children were always interested in the arts, in one or the other of the arts. My mother was a big reader and maybe we got a little of it from her.

MS. BERMAN: Did you know of any artistic talent in the family?

MR. SOLMAN: In the family? None that I can trace, no. But as I say, since we came to this country at such an early age, I wouldn't have the opportunity to trace my ancestors.

MS. BERMAN: So you don't know that much about your…

MR. SOLMAN: I met another relative who I have known in my very young years and met her about 30 or so years later, and she was a very fine portrait painter, as I say, getting commissions to do judges and college professors. And she did them extremely well. My stuff by that time she had seen. It was a little modern for her but she finally took it very well and was, of course, kind of excited about seeing what I had developed into. And she has retired down to Florida where she's still doing commissions. She's I would imagine now well in her 80s.

MS. BERMAN: What is her name?

MR. SOLMAN: Her last name was Epstein, Jane Epstein, but she changed her name to Jane Grey [G-R-E-Y].

MS. BERMAN: What was the Solman household like to grow up in?

MR. SOLMAN: We were rather popular because of our varied interests so the house was always full of friends in Jamaica - people who were interested in, let's say, literature, theater, or what-not. And the house was always full of people and we had a lot of fun. My father liked music, particularly [we had a phonograph] the singing of Cantor Rosenblatt. He was a nut for that. But he was kind of like a married bachelor. He lived his own life, and my mother liked to participate with all our friends. And that took place until our late teens when we all drifted to

the city, got married, you know, or lived apart from the house. But it was a nice environment in Jamaica, Long Island because there were an awful lot of friends and relatives, usually coming together in our house. Our house was rather popular.

MS. BERMAN: And was Jamaica a small town or a village?

MR. SOLMAN: Yes. It was a much smaller town than it is now. There was a lot of woods then. Now it's all built up with housing. There wasn't much cultural activity there, whatever. You know, there was just the usual movies and so on. But we had a good time. We'd go into the city for something special. Of course, when I was studying at the Academy and shortly thereafter, I would take any kind of job so I could paint. If I had a day job, I'd go to the Academy at night. If I had a job like running the elevators at night…and a group of my artist friends did just that and we'd tell each other about a job. You would run an elevator at night and go to sleep about 2:00 in the morning when all the tenants were in and go get some sleep and then you had most of the day to paint in. So I did that for a few years. Then I worked with my wife in a book store on Eighth Street, the International Book and Art shop. The man who ran it is dead now, Joseph Kling. He was a crotchety character, but he knew his literature, he knew his poetry. He taught us E.E. Cummings and T.S. Eliot and many of the good writers. And he also kept a lot of prints in his shop and etchings. In fact, he was the one before I ever worked in his shop when I showed in an outdoor show, I think, in '31 or '32 - that was the only time I showed in a Washington Square show with those little gouaches I told you about - because I used to buy prints from this fellow, I asked him to keep my bundles in the back of his shop so I didn't have to drag them back to Jamaica. And when the week was over, whatever it was, when the period was over, the Washington Square exhibit, he gruffly told me to unpack them and show him the pictures and told me to lay aside a few [in the roughest manner possible], and then he asked me how much I wanted for each of them. I think at that time I asked three, four, or five dollars for each of them. And he bought a bunch and he showed them and he sold them. And thereafter, I'd come in. He sold many of those little gouaches for me. Then finally, he got myself and my wife to work. Well, before we were married, we worked in his shop and that's how we got married - he encouraged us to. And that was important because I think he was the first man who, as gruff as he was, crotchety as he was, saw my work, asked me the price, decided to handle them. And he handled some originals even in those days by Byron Browne. I'm trying to remember a few other names. Not many. But behind his gruff exterior he was really a softie. He liked artists because he drew pretty well himself, although he tried to write. And little as it is, it was recognition. Even in the back of the store, he had some kind of gallery. He'd put on shows and he'd put me in group shows and so forth and so on. So far from knocking it, I would say that it was a step. I always remember the quotation of Walter Sickert who didn't believe in a lot of publicity and so on. He once said…now I'm trying to remember the quote… "The binding of man to man is the passing from hand to hand of cash." It's almost exact. He meant if you really like an artist's work, buy it. You know, all that other stuff is extraneous.

MS. BERMAN: It seemed like everyone around that Eighth Street area had a gallery. I mean there was the Jumble Shop and all sort of book…you know, they all…

MR. SOLMAN: The Jumble Shop, it's interesting you mentioned that because when I was in that outdoor show, they had monthly shows at the Jumble Shop. You submitted. And somebody told me about it. Besides selling those few gouaches to Kling, I submitted some around that period to the Jumble Shop and I was accepted. And they hung three or four of my gouaches in a large group show there. The jury was Guy Pene du Bon, Reginald Marsh, and a guy who used to do cartoons for the Daily News. He's a very good cartoonist. He had a whole page… low-down characters. I think his name was Hill [H-I-L-L]. This goes way back. And the woman reported to me that they were enthusiastic about gouaches, which certainly made me feel good, and I think one of them was bought by this very cartoonist, Hill, if I remember his name right. So these little things, you know, were meaningful to a young painter.

MS. BERMAN: When did you decide you were going to be an artist?

MR. SOLMAN: I think by the time I was 13 I was sure I was going to be an artist. Because I was drawing so much then, all the time. There was nothing else in my mind.

MS. BERMAN: And how was this greeted in your family?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, my father didn't care what we did. As I say, he was no disciplinarian. My mother only suggested that I go through college so I could teach art and then paint, which was a perfectly practical notion, but I didn't heed her. She didn't say anything about my going off the art school after high school because I supported myself. I couldn't wait to get out of high school. I found it so damn dull. I did some caricatures of teachers for the school magazine. I got even with them that way.

MS. BERMAN: What happened to those early portraits that you were doing in the '20s?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, fortunately, I kept about two. But most of them, when I painted my friends, I just gave it to them. Well, I know one friend of mine who lives in San Diego who has about four portraits of mine, three of them

early. In recent years he commissioned me to do a late one, namely Sid Greenstein. So I can always lend one of those early portraits. In fact, I reproduce in my first book in the written introduction, I use a small photo of that. But I have a couple of portraits well before…I have about three, the ones I did well before I was exhibiting.

MS. BERMAN: You also seem to be very literary. I mean I know you've written and from the way you talk. Were you ever interested in writing at all?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, no. I only wrote as a critic when I was on *Art Front* and a few other magazines. I like….no, I don't like writing because I find it absolutely a masochistic task. But I work hard at it and I think I've done a few decent critiques.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, I want to ask you about the National Academy of Design and what you were learning and about your instructors and the atmosphere.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, the atmosphere was a little stuffy but a few rebels like myself and Byron Browne and somebody else used to go out in the hall if we didn't like the model and we'd pose for each other for portrait heads. We'd fool around with some ideas we had. And don't forget, I learned more sketching in the subway cars going all the way up to 109th Street then…and back late at night when people were sleeping. They pose perfectly when they're asleep. I got more real training out of that than any of the figure drawing and sculpture drawing that I did in the Academy, which was a discipline that I'm not knocking. I wish more people would go through a little bit of it. You don't have to go through as long as they made up do with all the shading and so on. I remember I did a nude that we had in class once. I first fell in love with Gauguin of those four painters I saw. I loved that decorative line of his. And I drew her in a strong outline with two leaves behind her, you know decorative leaves behind her like Gauguin would make. And I remember Olinski, Ivan Olinski. He only died a few years ago in his 90s. He was a sweet man. When he came by and he saw that, he passed right by me without a word and didn't criticize me that time. He thought I was fooling around, but I wasn't. I was just trying out Gauguin's style.

MS. BERMAN: Was he your only instructor there?

MR. SOLMAN: He was the instructor there, yes. He was the only instructor. Many years later, I saw him at the League and I said, "You've had thousands of students. You wouldn't remember me." And he didn't look different to me because he was in his 40s and I was a kid. He looked like an old man. Then he was in his 80s, you know, I didn't see any difference in his face.

MS. BERMAN: Besides Byron Browne, who were some of the other people that you met there?

MR. SOLMAN: I knew Ilya Bolotowsky shortly thereafter. I didn't know him in the school. And then later on he came to be part of a member of The Ten. We used to meet on Saturday nights. And Byron Browne and his first wife and Ilya and his first wife [I still have the same one luckily], and I knew Herman Rose very well in the Academy. He was the first acquaintance I made amongst the painters then. I'm still a close friend of his. We've been in many galleries together. He was once in the ACA and we showed in many group shows together. Hirshhorn has bought a lot of Roses and he's bought some of mine. That's about the main ones that I remember from the Academy. There's a man named Bruback. I don't know what became of him. In fact, there's a few others, but they disappeared. But through the years it was Byron Brown and Bolotowsky and Herman Rose particularly that I knew from those days.

MS. BERMAN: And you said also during this time you were going to galleries. What places were you going and what were you seeing?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, most of the galleries on 57th Street; a great haven, of course, was Durand-Ruel because you'd see a new Renoir that is, new to us. Beautiful examples all through the '30s. And then you'd become acquainted with some of the French School like Utrillo and Soutine and Modigliani and even a couple of Klees. As a matter of fact, the first Klee I ever saw was in Gallatin's collection at NYU when I used to court my wife and wait for her out there. She graduated from NYU. There were two Klees. One was called "Landscape with Bluebirds," and it looked to me like a cross between an Egyptian Coptic painting and cubism. And yet it looked as though it had happened, not that it was done deliberately to fuse those influences. It looked as though it happened all by itself. I was so astonished at it and the deep colors [since I like a dark palette] of deep blues and those browns, as I said, like the Coptic art so amazed me that I think I almost fell for everything I saw of his after that. It was a good example, you know. But he has that masterful way of fusing a few traditions where it seems to be imprinted instead of painted. He has kind of a magical….which I feel also about Vermeer. Vermeer doesn't look as though it's painted. It looks as though the canvas became impregnated with light. And since you don't see marks of strokes, you feel this was a magical happening, a magical event. And in a strange way, I felt that about a good Klee. Especially if you see a remarkable watercolor of his, you don't know how it's put on. It is a lot of magic. I don't know how he controls watercolor like that.

MS. BERMAN: Well, besides Durand-Ruel, were you going to the Downtown Gallery, for example?

MR. SOLMAN: The Downtown Gallery where I'd see Webers and Karl Knaths whose work had quite an…well, it had a little influence on me. I liked it very much, and I met him thereafter and we became quite friendly. But also in the early to mid-30s, someone brought my wife and myself to meet the Avery's when they were living on 11th Street. I think they were living there then. Anyway, there I first met Rothko and Gottlieb and many other admirers of Avery. We all liked his work and we'd sometimes meet there socially or something, and he'd pull out 14 or 20 new canvases. He didn't speak much, but he had a kind of dry wit and Sally would serve the wine or tea or coffee or whatever. And if the critics had listened to us then, they would have uncovered it much more quickly than they did. I'm talking about '33, 4, 5. He left quite a mark on particularly early Gottlieb. His influence was very strong. And to some extent on Rothko and then to a little extent on me at one phase of my life.

MS. BERMAN: Did you go to the Whitney Studio Club?

MR. SOLMAN: No. No, I did not. You said you were going to pepper me with questions.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, I know. Well, I thought you were going to say something else after that.

MR. SOLMAN: No.

MS. BERMAN: Okay, all right. I thought you were going to…

MR. SOLMAN: It was a little earlier than my time. We had no connections there.

MS. BERMAN: You just probably went to museum shows.

MR. SOLMAN: I went to the museum shows. I thought the museum shows were as dull as dishwater. In fact, I took one of those shows apart in *Art Front* magazine where I think I was even tough on Hopper. They had one little room in the back there for a few moderns, like a Marin watercolor. Marin I loved very much and still do - he had a little influence on me. In a little back room you'd see a Marin, a Stuart Davis, a Karl Knaths and maybe a Gorky. We all felt Gorky was far too much influenced by Picasso then so we didn't take him seriously, even though he did it so well. We felt he should look in a mirror and face himself someday, which he did unfortunately near the end of his life, the last four or five years. And by the way, I feel that the show at the Guggenheim, it does him a disservice because it has far too many…too much of the space is devoted to his influences and the proportion is bad. I think it should have been just one floor of the influences like the three Cezannes, three Picasso, three Miros and then the last two floors where he did loosen up and become…develop his own sense of fantasy and his own sense of sensitive approach to color and paint, washing it in. That should have been the main emphasis.

[END OF SIDE 1]

Hartley….is obviously influenced as Gorky's early things are. So that's not unfair to Hartley when I saw that show a year or two ago at the Whitney. But you know, the last two rooms, you come into Hartley. You see the real Hartley. Well, it's like here. The last two floors, you see the real Gorky, but they certainly shouldn't have shoved that much of the influence on the public. See, the public gets confused, and I was irate as a painter. And I went around with a gallery dealer and a sculptor, and we all felt the same way.

MS. BERMAN: Some of that is quite painful to see so much of it.

MR. SOLMAN: I don't like to see six Cezannes. We all went through Cezanne influence. We didn't save…he didn't mean to save them. I don't know how…you know, they might have been in storage. An artist doesn't think to… first, the stretchers cost money, you know what I mean. He thinks he might convert them or paint over them or something or he doesn't think of it. They're in storage. That's why I say it was unfair to him. He wasn't around to edit the show. Okay, next question.

MS. BERMAN: Okay, the next question. How did you meet your wife and when were you married?

MR. SOLMAN: I met her around 1930 at another - not girlfriend's but girl acquaintance's house. A girl I was going to see; there was going to be some party, wasn't home. She was across the street with this gal and that was it. And I went around with her until we got married in October, '33.

MS. BERMAN: And her name?

MR. SOLMAN: Her name is Ruth. And she is more interested in literature than I am. She is an omnivorous reader. And since she came over from Russia at the age of 14, she knows Russian well and has tried her hand at translating some modern Russian. However, they generally…the magazine or book comes out of that translation. You know, you have to really meet the author and sign a contract; but she did it on her own. And it's kind of

frustrating after working on it to just have the book come out suddenly translated by some English writer. It's so close to hers, you know, it turned out to be a labor of love lost. She loves art very much. She's highly critical of art.

MS. BERMAN: And you have two children, is that correct?

MR. SOLMAN: We have two children. Paul is 36 and he works for WGBH, the public station in Boston. And my daughter is 34. They're both married. And she teaches very young school age children out in Los Angeles, a lot of Spanish and Mexican kids. And that's what she enjoys and he likes his work too. So we're very, very fortunate there.

MS. BERMAN: All right. I want to return to that book store that the two of you worked at on Eighth Street.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, it doesn't exist anymore.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Well, I was just wondering if other artists or other cultural figures used to come in and you would meet people. Was it such a place?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yes. E.E. Cummings used to come in. In fact, he gave E.E. Cummings a show of watercolors. E.E. Cummings did watercolors. I met him but I didn't get to know him. I liked his work. Yes, some artists came in. When Liam O'Flaherty came from Ireland he dropped in because he was the only one handling his books. Some Pulitzer writers came in whose names I can't recall now. But there was one….what the hell was his name? Hilton Kramer gave his last book quite a write-up, a page one thing. It escapes me now. An American writer, a fairly well-known American writer.

MS. BERMAN: Are you talking about Marianne Moore?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, no, this is a man. The name is on the tip of my tongue.

MS. BERMAN: He reviewed a book of her poems that came out.

MR. SOLMAN: I know he did. He always used to have a lot of these little poetry magazines around on the desk, you know, that people would leave, the publishers. They'd come and go. And I remember some poet casually said, "I'd like a quarter's worth of poetry please." [Laughter] There was the Little Review. They were all being published in those days.

MS. BERMAN: So you had also the sense of everyone in the village being tremendously interested in the arts.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yes. De Hirsch [Margulies] used to come in there. A lot of painters, writers, or people in general who like books remember that shop because his books…you know, went all the way from the classics. If he had Anatole France he had practically a whole row of him. Or if he had Shaw, he had not three examples, but you know he'd have a whole shelf. So if you came in for good books, not for best sellers, you could find it there. He was a very, very discriminating lover of literature. In fact, in the back of the store, he had books in French since he knew about three or four languages; and he sold, as I say, a lot of etchings and prints. If he got a Matisse litho at some auction sale in those days, I guarantee if he picked it up for $5, he'd sell it for $8, you know. Or a Whistler etching that he'd pick up for $10, he'd sell it for $14, stuff like that.

MS. BERMAN: You mentioned before that you were kind of enamored of di Chirico's work and you like Atget. When did you become aware of that work?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, through the…I think first through the Julien Levy Gallery who handled surrealism. Well, I guess I saw my first di Chirico's at Pierre Matisse's gallery. He had some great shows of di Chirico, the early stuff. Some that the Modern now owns. That's where they got them. Then Julien Levy was Eugene Berman's gallery, Ernst, and di Chirico. And he was the first gallery I think that handled photographs outside of Stieglitz. And I saw a row of Atgets. I became so enamored of him, I think because he was handling some of the subjects I did. I'd go all around New York doing either a street scene or park scene or a sign on a store front. And when I saw him doing it so beautifully in photography, I looked him up in [Weyhe's] bookstore and so on. And then I knew Bernice Abbott had them. And Elizabeth McCausland, her boyfriend or girlfriend, whatever you want to call it, was a writer on art and I knew her through the Artists Union. And I asked her could I see them, because I wanted her to do an article on Atget for *Art Front* magazine. When I got onto the editorial board, I even used an enlarged photograph for a cover once so I was a little bit ahead of my time. I was certainly ahead of some of the social critics. And I went up to her place and, boy, did she give us a piece of Atget photographs!

MS. BERMAN: You mean Berenice Abbott?

MR. SOLMAN: Berenice Abbott. I picked two to be reproduced in that article and I think she signed her name - I think McCausland used to do the writing. I'm not sure of that now. I don't think I have…well, if I look up the issue.

MS. BERMAN: I know that issue. It was a good article because I did an article on Berenice Abbott and I went…

MR. SOLMAN: Did you? Did you meet her?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. I met her.

MR. SOLMAN: She's still up there in Maine somewhere.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, yes, she is. I went up to Blanchard….

MR. SOLMAN: You should have taken all your life savings and bought some Atget photographs. They keep going up. You don't own any?

MS. BERMAN: No. I want to get one. Again, I don't know if it will ever be possible because they're enormously expensive. They're about $4,000.

MR. SOLMAN: Yeah, I remember when I was up there, she was selling an original. She'd from the negatives make one. Even then, it was beyond my power to buy them. Then she made them for $20. I can't remember - something like that. Since we were getting paid by the Project $23.86 a week, you can understand I couldn't purchase it. But, oh, I was…I still am. I have kind of a nice paperback on Atget with some good photographs…I have some magazines. I think he's great. I think photography is an art, unlike a lot of my colleagues who don't, when it reaches the height of an Atget. And I think he had some effect on me. That is, I was already doing the streets and the signs and so on. But I think he appealed maybe a little more to me. You know, he did series just on iron railings. You know that, don't you? He did a series on everything.

MS. BERMAN: On pedestals, on vegetables.

MR. SOLMAN: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It was very detailed.

MR. SOLMAN: Phenomenal, like a Balzac ranging the visual world of Paris. It's amazing.

MS. BERMAN: It was more than just the surrealist preoccupation. I mean they only liked a very narrow part of him. They didn't appreciate….

MR. SOLMAN: They first exhibited a storefront where the reflections would make it look surrealist or symbolic, but that's only one part of him. I agree with you. He is larger, far larger than that - immense. He is the visual biographer of Paris for that period. And thank God there was someone like that.

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely.

MR. SOLMAN: You have to give Julien Levy credit for that. Did you read the book called "Memoirs of a Gallery Owner?"

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. SOLMAN: I think it's a good book. Now he's honest. He tells how he went to Gorky's studio and said, "There's too much Picasso. See me in a few years." And we never had the nerve to tell Gorky that. But Levy told it to him straight. And then when he found himself, and he explained it very well,, when he realized that the surrealists really played around and doodled and let their imaginations roam, whatever came out of their minds, then he had the courage to do it out of his own resources instead of looking at somebody else's pictures. And I think Levy describes that very well in his book. They should have quoted him.

MS. BERMAN: I haven't seen the catalogue so….

MR. SOLMAN: I've seen the catalogue.

MS. BERMAN: So I don't know. How did you get to meet Gorky? How did he cross your path?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, Gorky was on the Project.

MS. BERMAN: That's right. That's right.

MR. SOLMAN: I know a few friends who….like I met John Graham. Simply I met him at some gallery, like the Artists Gallery where there would be openings or shows and he liked my work very much. So I went up to his studio and he showed me a lot of African sculpture which I couldn't buy and which I wanted to. And we talked a lot. Of course, he was a very close friend of Gorky. And there was another good friend of Gorky. What's his

name? Mischa Resnikoff who palled around with Gorky a lot. I think he went later to teach at Smith College and married some student there. She was a photographer. But he'd come by with Gorky sometimes. He was influenced by Ernst [Mischa Resnikoff]. But later his work deteriorated into something not good at all. I think he got influenced by Tachism and just made strokes and colors. We never heard from him again. Gorky, of course, was a show-off, you know, very solemn, saturnine, and he always had his collar up. We didn't mind him holding forth because he was amusing with his accents and his comments. And he would throw out these paradoxes like, "I admire Salvador Dali..." We were razzing Dali then because we thought he was a little.... "I admire Salvador Dali because he is a master of success." You know, he would say things like that. Or if he was talking about Uccello and I chimed in with Piero dell Franchesca, I'm sure he loved him as much as I did, but in order to put me down, he'd say, "Oh, he was an academician," simply so the whole flow of conversation would revolve back to himself. He was kind of cutesy theatrical that way. But we didn't mind that.

MS. BERMAN: I wanted to backtrack for a second. I forgot to ask you, you never considered going to the Art Students League?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, I'm sorry. I did go there for one term and I didn't find it too exciting. I had Homer Boss for a teacher in the life class of drawing. The main thing there was the atmosphere. Talking with people was nice - I mean I met some people there but no lasting friends. So I realized that an artist had to develop himself but mainly really through either imitating masters he liked amongst the contemporaries, which is the way I learned, and studying the museums and the galleries. They're far, far more fruitful than any teacher we had unless you get a very unusual teacher. I don't know who was. Picasso never taught. Matisse only taught for a little while. As far as I know, none of them were real teachers anyway. They didn't have time to. For instance, they all talk about Hans Hofmann. I was never tempted to go to Hans Hofmann because by that time I had my own road. I had already done all my street scenes. I was entering a period doing these studio scenes like these. They were done in the '40s after the war. And I didn't see any sense in running after...what could Hans Hofmann teach me about abstract art that I couldn't learn from Kandinsky, Miro, Klee, you know, the great men. Why should I go to a secondary figure like that? Besides, I wasn't interested in just learning free form abstraction. I had already learned it - that much of it that I wanted.

MS. BERMAN: Were you on the Public Works of Art project, the little one?

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. I was on the real WPA. But fortunately, I started off as one of 20 mural assistants. We shortly thereafter pumped for an easel division and the only ones who could get on that were people who had had a one man show. Well, I fortunately had my one man show in '34, so I got on that as did about 100 others, and we were very fortunate to be able to devote our whole work to easel painting, which was our prime concern, and deliver one a month, whatever the situation was for the Project.

MS. BERMAN: At the time, what were your political views?

MR. SOLMAN: My political views were civil rights, housing, you know, the usual roll call, and a sympathy with the Soviet Union since it looked like a socialist utopia on paper. You know, the first reports that we used to hear. And a general sympathy for them which unfortunately had to be curtailed a little later. But everyone was in those days. Why Bill de Kooning and Gorky made floats for May Day parades.

MS. BERMAN: Were you ever in the John Reed Club?

MR. SOLMAN: No. I exhibited. When I lived in Jamaica, Long Island, I heard of an exhibition and I did little bootblack pictures of those shoeshine guys around Union Square in the depression days. A la Daumier who was a big influence on me. And I submitted one for a show in I think '29 or something. But I never went to any meeting or joined the club. I was in Jamaica, Long Island. Maybe if I had been in New York I might have participated in it.

MS. BERMAN: Well, when did you actually...

MR. SOLMAN: I wasn't that political then anyway.

MS. BERMAN: When did you move here and where was your first studio?

MR. SOLMAN: Move in here?

MS. BERMAN: No, Manhattan. Sorry.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh. Well, we were married in October '33. The first apartment we had was on West 14th Street Close to 7th Avenue. I painted right in the living room, you know. I had a studio in there but I painted right in the living room. We didn't live there long. Then there was a place called Paradise Alley that had a skylight, but that wasn't steam heated. So we moved out of there. I don't know how many times we moved that first year or two.

Dragging all the paintings with me too.

MS. BERMAN: Now I guess I want to ask you now…I want to weave in and out, still asking you questions but since we're getting to about 1934 when I believe you met Rothko…is that correct?

MR. SOLMAN: Right. I think I met him, yes, around '33 or '34. I think I first met him at Avery's. But then we were both being shown first in the Uptown Gallery [a place called the Uptown Gallery]. I only barely met him then. But I really got acquainted with him at the gallery on 12th Street called the Secession Gallery run by a man named Robert Godsoe who used to put up each month a one man show, one of the members. And he had some women in his group who…like Helen Westheller and Ann Mantel. I haven't heard of her since - a good painter. And he had a lot of romantic and expressionists and a few abstract painters in that gallery. So he'd always have…let's say, the month would have a one man show in the front room; in the back room, one example each of the stable mates. And we chipped in a little for that. It was a little bit cooperative to help if I remember rightly. I don't remember now. I think we chipped in a little bit. But his idea was good, and he took the, you might say, the illegitimates - the painters who couldn't find a gallery who were either a little too dark or too bold or too…you know. How many galleries were there, 16 galleries in the whole town? Most of them handled old masters. So we got to drinking coffee, visiting each other's houses and so forth and so on. And then when Godsoe began to incorporate what we thought were silly surrealist painters - I mean painters that we thought weren't as devoted to art - we kind of got a little irritated, not because there were so many, although that was a partial reason. He couldn't emphasize or do justice to the dozen or two dozen painters he had there. Like Stieglitz - you have to give him credit - stuck to his little group with undiminished loyalty. We began to talk about it, growl about it, and finally we decided to have a meeting at my studio on 15th Street in late '35. I always thought it was '36 until some critic told me he had the data. Very many of the catalogues, as you unfortunately know, during that period never had the year. It would say May 1 to 16, or whatever. I think that shows you how little we thought of the history of art. You know, you just had a show. We never thought that it would go into a library. It was unthinkable, and that's why we were so careless. I just want to explain.

MS. BERMAN: Well, you were a pretty good saver. I must say your papers are quite rich. You saved all of the little catalogues and ticket stubs.

MR. SOLMAN: I saved the catalogues. But, you know, a lot of the catalogues haven't got the year on them. You know how I know? I saved the reviews and the date would be on the newspaper. That's really how I knew. Otherwise I'd be very mixed up on dates. Oh, we were talking about Secession. We had a meeting out at my studio. We did a funny thing. We'd send out each man singly into the back room, into the kitchen, and vote on him in the front. I don't know how the hell we could have voted against anybody there. It would have been disgraceful. But we did go through the procedure anyway as though we were going to be very bold and honest about it. As I remember, we all voted each other in. But Tchakbasov gave us a big pain in the neck and we froze him out after about a year. He always had big ideas that were very raucous and noisy and stupid, and we didn't like his grab for publicity - those suggestions for publicity. We just wanted to paint pictures and show together because we believed in each other's work. And it was a good way of giving each other courage which we certainly did for a five year period. So we froze him out. Then we took in John Graham and we took in Earl Kerkam. We had Ralph Rosenborg. We had quite an all-star cast except for Yankel Kufeld who still exists and he's come back to painting. And he doesn't do bad abstract surrealist paintings. He's on the West Side if you want to see him, and he might give you a few things on Rothko. I think at one period he was closer to him than I was. I'll give you his name - Yankel Kufeld. He's a little older than me. But he was in our first group, and he might tell you some interesting stories about Rothko.

MS. BERMAN: That would be interesting. I want to just go back to when you met him in Avery's studio.

MR. SOLMAN: Yeah. Well, then we were just mutual admirers of Avery. But when I met him at Godsoe's Gallery we were part of a team. You know, we were stable mates. He and his wife liked us and we liked them. We'd go over their house. He was a…he was…I won't use the word grumbler, but Rothko was a little bit on the bitter side. You know, he was six or seven years older. I think I was the baby of the group. By one year, I think I was the youngest and Bolotowsky next, and so on. But, you know, he would object to a lot of different things. And he hadn't got anywhere. And when we had group shows of The Ten, we sent out delegations. We'd appoint, let's say, Lou Harris and myself to go uptown and knock at doors and show photographs. And so, I don't know. Godsoe's Gallery wasn't doing much then. I think they took pity on us and gave us our first show there. We had two shows there. Georgette Passedoit was very nice. She was a French gal - came from France. She had very good paintings, and she liked us somehow or other - maybe because she had a woman's compassion. She gave us several shows, and so on and so forth. So somehow or other we got a show or two here. We were knocking around town showing our pictures and we were called…Edward Allen Jewell was most conservative…he wasn't as conservative as Cortissoz but almost…he used the word 'dirty expressionists' with us. I guess you would call them expressionists, whatever the term means, dirty expressionists. I have the reviews of some of those.

MS. BERMAN: I think he meant "dirty" because of the darkness.

MR. SOLMAN: Darkness, yes. Also he meant they were unkempt. They didn't have finished edges, so they were unkempt too. No, "dirty" was more inclusive than just darkness.

MS. BERMAN: Right. I wanted to ask you, we haven't been able to find any information about Lou Harris.

MR. SOLMAN: He's dead.

MS. BERMAN: When did…do you…

MR. SOLMAN: And I don't know where his…I thought that last woman of his was just a friend but apparently was a wife of his. She called up once and unfortunately I did not get her address. She was asking me about doing something with his work. I'm trying to figure who would know. You know who might know her address? I think there's a sister-in-law of his first wife's still around somewhere. Maybe Yankel Kufeld would know.

MS. BERMAN: But he died here in New York?

MR. SOLMAN: He died here in New York, yeah, with his second heart attack.

MS. BERMAN: Now were you and Rothko friendly when you were on the easel division when you worked for WPA?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yes, since we were also in the group, members of The Ten and we were on the easel division. He wasn't on for too long I don't think. Maybe his wife worked or something. I don't know what it was. Yeah, we met and went out for coffee and discussed the art scene, what shows are there to see and so on. We were all fans of Klee, Picasso, Matisse. You know, we all liked a lot of the moderns and went to those shows. We'd tip each other off - you must see this show; you must see that show. And J.B. Neumann who ran the Art Circle saw us…I had brought him my early gouaches when I lived in Jamaica and he was very encouraging. He said they were very beautiful. I think he asked me to leave them around for a while. I don't know. And I showed him some early portraits which he said could have been done by somebody in Rembrandt's studio, but you've got to find yourself. And he was always very nice. So one time I met him at a gallery. He said, "I saw a very good painting of yours, a harbor scene," in my street period, that was about '37 or so. He knew of our Ten group too because we invited him down to show him the work once. But when he told me that he liked this…he said, "I saw a wonderful picture of yours," I acted very…how shall I say it….not coy, but I said, "Oh, I've got much better ones." He said, "Well, I'd like to see them." So he came down when we had a loft on 28th Street - one big room where I painted and the other room which we fixed up into a modern bedroom, kitchen, and everything else, a la very modernistic planning, which we learned a little from de Kooning and a few others who had remodeled lofts in those days. So he came over and he made me take every painting down from my rack. No one ever did that - every painting. So he said, "Well, bring those three over this week." So I said, "But you have so many painters." He said he must always change his diet a little bit. Well, you can imagine how flattered I was. Because he sent me a circular of a show. On the back, he showed the artists he represented and I came between Roualt and Weber. So he had an arrow on it and said, "Look where you've landed." And they were two favorite painters of mine. And don't forget, then he'd hang me up along side of Klee and the rest of them. I couldn't have been more flattered. He was a bad salesman. He was a dealer who was more of a collector, and there are dealers like that. You know, Serge Sabarsky was a collector who became a dealer, but I think he's a good salesman.

[END OF SIDE 2]

Neumann sent a group of pictures of mine to Duncan Phillips. You know, he shipped them out and got them back. He was sure that Phillips would buy them. Strangely enough, years later when I was with another gallery, Bonestal Gallery, Phillips and his wife came in and bought two pictures out of that show. But then I was doing interiors and still life's. And they met Neumann on the street and they said, "We discovered a wonderful American painter, Joseph Solman." He said, "That's the very guy I sent you those street scene's by." He said, "I must have been sick then. I couldn't view them or…" you know. Thereafter, Duncan Phillips was one of my closest….they purchased…they have six paintings of mine. And he gave me a big show in 1949 covering about… Well, to get back to Rothko, even then I could see that he was once in a while having a little argument with his wife. All married couples do that. But there was friction. I could tell that. And though I liked both of them… particularly his first wife, Edith. I think that…..and we had an awful lot of friends, painters and other people and so on, so that we didn't deepen our relationship even though we liked each other quite a lot and liked each other's work. He told me that I influenced his subway and street scenes. I don't mean to take great credit because I think Rothko's late work is his great work.

MS. BERMAN: Certainly. Everyone…

MR. SOLMAN: Whereas…I don't know whether this should go on tape…I think Gottlieb's work when he was influenced by Avery is nicer than those circles. Gottlieb used to say to me when he'd look at my work, "Geez, how do you combine…" this sounds self-serving, but forgive me. "How do you combine the abstract and the realistic the way you do?" I'd say, "A lot of painters do. I'm certainly not the only one." He said, "You know, Joe, I

know you like Klee and Kandinsky..." Well, he liked Klee and Kandinsky. He said, "I don't understand abstract art. It doesn't do anything for me." And I don't think he understood abstract art when he did it. It's all on the surface. There's no sense of space, pushing back and forwards like you see in a great Mondrian or one of my favorite abstract artists is Kurt Schwitters. He gets such dynamism in that small space, you know, in a 6 by 8 collage where it goes back and forth and sort of moves you. There's a kinetic quality besides an impact. When you look at it, slowly you get an impression of one confrontation and impact which a good abstraction should do for you, which Motherwell couldn't do if he lived another hundred years. But you get that in that little Schwitters or a good Mondrian where the disposition of the rectangles is so taut, you know, and firm and has a nerve pulse to it. Well, though Gottlieb has a big retrospective at the Corcoran right now and unfortunately I see when we were there - my feeling is...do you know his early work? He did lovely, lovely early work.

MS. BERMAN: I don't know it that well.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, it's figurative. If you saw a whole bunch of it, it was witty. It had its own sense of distortion, not like Avery's. And, oh, the influence was quite obvious... I think - Rothko was a very good talker. He could talk for hours. And Rothko could have been to my mind a Bible salesman. I think he talked Adolph and a few people into this idea of the eternal myth; and before you knew it, Adolph was spouting Rothko's theories. I don't mean to say that Rothko didn't believe in them. He absolutely did. I just say that he was very persuasive. He never tried to talk me into it because he saw that I was pretty stubborn about my own road. But, of course, I reiterate that story when we all saw the Picasso show. "Boys," he said at the next meeting, "do you know why he's so great? Because he's three dimensional." I always remembered that because it's true about certain Picassos' but there are other Picassos' that are as flat as can be and they're still powerful, you know, where he used nothing but flat spaces. One of my favorite periods is the 1922-1926 in cubism where he recombines the objects into new shapes and every space is flat. The full effect is of great volume, but there's no shading there. So he's going to call it...he meant by that...well, you could call that three dimensional I guess. You could. He did use sense of shadows there. Even though he flattened out the shadow into a beautiful flat black plane, it interpenetrates with the other things and does send things back and make things appear three dimensional. Or the distortion of the shape itself with the shadow will make it feel very three dimensional, where when you look at it precisely and technically, it's a flat space. You know what I mean? That's a great period. I think that's the most generic and fruitful, for me, of all the modern periods. I think it is a great beautiful revolution in painting a canvas compared with the 18th century renaissance or anything else. It's a really new development. You can say Matisse has a little bit flattened out from his influence from Gauguin and so on. But with Picasso's synthetic cubism, he had cut up the thing into 40 different planes from different views and so on. But in that period, he rearranged them again. He brought them together again. It became totally new shape-making in the sense that the continuity in line or the shape itself governs the form, and the relationship of the colors and the shadows and whatever governs the space. And to my mind, it is a grand resolution of a lot of things the moderns were fooling around with. I thought the grandest resolution of a modern vision is that period. That doesn't play down many other great artists. I think Ernst is marvelous - you could go on and on. But this I would have to say is the greatest, not his greatest period but his greatest revelation and influence on modern art. You know, modern art was changed since then - no question of it. And anyone who thinks like Kramer that he isn't a giant - he thinks he isn't a giant of 20th Century art - I think is absurd. You know, I love early Matisse up to about 1920. In fact, I think he is a little too easy and decorative till the cut-outs which I like very much. But when you look at what Picasso did and how he drowned unfortunately a lot of people under his spell, which a great man will do...Beethoven drowned a lot of musicians, composers. And Picasso came close to drowning Arshile Gorky. He finally came out of it. And Delacroix quotes Michelangelo who is supposed to have said, "How many great fools my art is destined to produce." And certainly Picasso could say it; Beethoven could say it.

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely.

MR. SOLMAN: And I run on.

MS. BERMAN: No, no, it's quite...I want this. I want your thoughts in general anyway about artists. I mean you have to have artists talk about artists. No one else does it as well. I wanted to ask you if Rothko ever talked about the effect the WPA had on him.

MR. SOLMAN: I don't think he was at it long enough to say it had a big effect on him. Of course, the camaraderie of the WPA was great because, you know, all artists met by accident. If I met someone who wasn't one of my close friends, whether it be Guston or somebody else, "Let's have a cup of coffee," were the first words. You know what I mean? And that was such a natural organic part of it, we didn't think of it. Only now I think how the art world is kind of split up. If you've made it a la Warhol or Lichtenstein or so on, then you're absolutely in one group, in one society. If you made it... even the abstract expressionists stuck very loyally together. I don't blame them for it either. But then there was no such thing. So if you met someone whose work you were interested in, you kind of liked, you'd say, "Oh, let's have a cup of coffee" - Loren MacIver or someone like that - and you'd bull around for an hour or two, which doesn't exist today any more. All over there were cafeterias where in the evening you'd drop in and you'd see one table with five artists, another with four artists or sculptors or

whatever. And you'd go over. You'd drag a cup of coffee over to the table. It would be 2 in the morning sometimes when you were discussing art....that sense of camaraderie which the WPA engendered - I want to emphasize - doesn't exist any more and I'm sorry for it.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Well, the art world was also much smaller.

MR. SOLMAN: Exactly.

MS. BERMAN: You could know just about everyone.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yeah. If you wanted to, you could, yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did Rothko ever talk about Weber at all, you know, discuss his teaching?

MR. SOLMAN: Yes. He said he learned a lot from him. He didn't deify him. But don't I tell in that book that story of Weber and Rothko at that show?

MS. BERMAN: Uh-huh, yeah.

MR. SOLMAN: Where he smears his cigarette ash on the...Mark was absolutely just amused at it. There I was, you know. I had shown Mark my painting of a street or something. He pulled me over to show me this string quartet. Then he pulled Weber over because he had been a pupil of his. I'll never forget that scene. He was from here to here. He had this cigarette in his hand. The ash was growing so it was going to fall on the floor. "Why don't you shorten that?" He thought he was a teacher in a class. We almost burst out laughing. Of course, we had to respect him as a senior citizen.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk about his time that he spent at Yale or...

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. No, he never talked to me about Yale, no. Actually we discussed generally, as I told you before, Avis, the contemporary painters. We liked this one, or we didn't like this one, or this was a lousy show, or what the hell has this guy got, a reputation? You know, this kind of stuff. It was much more the contemporary scene. In fact, I don't even remember discussing...well, of course, we all liked Rembrandt...but I never remember discussing old masters with him. Nor did I ever go with him to the Frick Collection or the Metropolitan, which I have done with Herman Rose and Hans Mueller and people like that. No, it was strictly the contemporary scene.

MS. BERMAN: Did he discuss who his favorite artists were?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, he was a devotee of Rouault - the French School, the ones I mentioned before. And you know, he got to know J.B. Neumann at that time too. And J.B. Neumann didn't show him till 1940 when our group was disbanded. It had been disbanded already. Apparently, J.B. Neumann began to like him when he flattened out his forms, those figures standing in subway stations. I think J.B. Neumann felt he got something more of his own then. They were a little influenced by...but in a very different visual psychological sense.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I felt also around 1938 or so when he was getting an archaic quality into his work he seemed to be influenced by Hartley.

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. He never was a Hartley fan. I think Avery liked Hartley more. That archaic trend and those stiff stylizations, I don't know where he got it. My feeling is he got it on his own. He felt that his forms were...I think he felt his forms were too fussy and he wanted to clean them up and flatten them out. And it was his own stylization from a little Avery, from some German expressionists that we saw, Matisse, you know, but in his own form of drawing; it was his own form of stylization. And J.B. Neumann liked them and showed it, but by that time I think he was already...he was showing those things in 1940 but they were done, I think, in '38 or 9. And I didn't know them. Maybe there was a hint in one or two of them. So that I think at that period when we had that show, why we weren't friends any more was I think he was already beginning that move towards either the surrealist or Saud. I remember seeing his show...I don't know what year...with Peggy Guggenheim. It looked sort of Misoesque and a little Ernsty in the sense of vast spaces and flat. There was a sense of an island and a scene and so on, a touch of Avery, some Miro, and a little bit of Ernst in that, in whatever degree or combination. But he was experimenting around until he found, really found himself. And that's the way it was. I didn't have contact with him after that.

MS. BERMAN: Had he invited you to Peggy Guggenheim's to see that show?

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. I just went to see it. I don't know what year that was. I think it was in the early '40s. Yes, it had to be after the J.B. Neumann scene. So he had left J.B. Neumann. He was there for a short while only and then went to Peggy Guggenheim. He was already obviously much more influenced in surrealist and abstract art then. And I was only peripherally. I loved it, but it didn't affect my work or very little because, you know, I was

doing my thing.

MS. BERMAN: Did you resent the fact…I mean did you get the feeling that he had dumped you or snubbed you?

MR. SOLMAN: No. That would be…how would you call it? I would call that kind of mutual because I also was in…I had already embarked…I had gotten into Bonestall Gallery so I was with a rather new milieu. I was in Bonestall Gallery with Ben Zion, Hans Mueller, and Eric Esenberger, and even that stage designer - I've never seen paintings of his again. They weren't very good then. He does all those stage designs for the musicals.

MS. BERMAN: Boris Aronson?

MR. SOLMAN: No.

MS. BERMAN: Simonson?

MR. SOLMAN: No. They're serious ones. The ones for the musicals. Boris Aronson I knew because he showed at J.B. Neumann. I guess if I open up the paper I'll see it because he's done it for the last 30 years. It doesn't matter. Very popular. It doesn't matter really. But I was in a different circle. He was already moving into the circle of the surrealists. I didn't feel any kinship to surrealism. So it was…we just grew apart. It was no dumping.

MS. BERMAN: But you liked him. I mean besides being….

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yes. Sure, he was a brainy - Rothko was no fool. That man, as I say, could have been not only a Bible salesman…he could have been a lawyer too. No, he was very stimulating - very stimulating. I think by then either he was splitting up with his wife or having an affair. I don't know what it was. So that socially he was moving in other circles. I don't know. I don't know what it was. After all, the war came along. I had already quit the Project and was working at the race track six months a year. Then, of course, we had to do defense work or go in the Army. I became a draftsman for Pratt & Whitney. I did three dimensional projections from blueprints so the unskilled worker could know how to put parts together in an airplane. So by that time, don't forget, they sent met to Hartford and so on. So we had…and he was well into his new phase I suppose. So we didn't cross paths much; I mean except I'd see him at a show and say hello.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever talk about drawing or discuss draftsmanship? Was he that interested in drawing?

MR. SOLMAN: No. Come to think of it, that's a good question because he never showed me a sheaf of drawings or I never saw a notebook of drawings of his. Is there such a thing? There must be.

MS. BERMAN: There must be. I haven't seen any, but I thought I'd ask.

MR. SOLMAN: That's a very good question. I don't want to answer in the negative because I don't know. But you know, it's just possible that I never did see drawings of his. It's curious. You ought to look into that. You know, you might be able to find out. Maybe he didn't have to draw, you know. I mean, after all, his paintings of figures shows he could draw, unlike some names that I'm not going to mention any more.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering also…

MR. SOLMAN: I don't think he emphasized draftsmanship in itself although I remember him admiring some Picasso drawings. But I never did ask him whether he drew.

MS. BERMAN: Did you used to go to his studio frequently too?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, what we used to do is have meetings. They alternated at different studios. So naturally I was at Brooklyn in his studio. But he didn't do large canvases. None of us did. That in back of you, that would be a large canvas in those days. In fact, outside of that playground picture, there's a couple of large ones I started and didn't finish. That would be a large canvas.

MS. BERMAN: But you did this in the '50s, didn't you?

MR. SOLMAN: In the '40s, late '40s. The studio pictures belong to '45 to '51.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever watch him paint?

MR. SOLMAN: No. But then he never watched me paint either.

MS. BERMAN: Right now, I am going through a series -

MR. SOLMAN: Well, that's a good question. I could have watched him paint, but I didn't.

MS. BERMAN: I was just wondering if he ever discussed techniques, say, priming canvases or…

MR. SOLMAN: There was one period where a lot of us primed our own canvases. I think he joined that gang too. Yeah, it was a period in the…well, exactly that period of the middle and late '30s where a lot of us went in for reading that book of Derner's or something and priming our own canvases. We may have done it wrong, but it worked out well anyway.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever do…do you know anything about if he ground pigment or…

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. He used tube paint like I did, most of us did. Lou Schanker ground his pigments, and you see them there. Not casein but they're powdered pigments. They're like tempera.

MS. BERMAN: Do you know if he advocated or used a particular brand of art materials?

MR. SOLMAN: No, that I couldn't say. I guess whatever we could afford.

MS. BERMAN: At the time did he have any ideas about how he wanted his paintings exhibited?

MR. SOLMAN: As I told you before, when we had shows of The Ten, he was rarely mentioned. And Lou Harris quoted this to me when Mark became famous. He smiled, because Lou Harris too used to see him sometimes. He was a closer friend of his. And Lou Harris said, "Mark in those days said to me, 'If they only said Rothko stinks.'" You know, he was annoyed at not being mentioned. As I told you, he had a little bit of streak in him.

MS. BERMAN: Well, you and Schanker seemed to be the farthest along at the time and tended to get the best notices. Well, Ben Zion too.

MR. SOLMAN: Ben Zion got good notices. The most modern painters were Ilya Bolotowsky and Schanker. Bolotowsky had already become quite abstract, but he went through a development, you know. He was a good figurative man. And Lou Schanker already had those playful harlequins or puppets of his which you'll see nicely in that show, just lovely things. He has a little feeling of Karl Knaths, of black lines against colored surfaces but in a very different way. Two totally different artists using the same vocabulary, which of course is so nice about the individual personalities of artists, that they can use the same vocabulary and do so many different things with it. For instance, Knaths and Avery both stem to a certain extent from Matisse, right. But they stem from different periods of Matisse, and neither one thought anything. I knew them both very well. If I mentioned one to the other, they shrugged their shoulders. Knaths didn't think much of Avery and he didn't think much of Knaths, and I admired both of them very much.

MS. BERMAN: Were Knaths and Rothko friendly?

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. Knaths was in Provincetown all the time. I met him out there one time on a visit to Byron Browne's widow I think. I looked him up. We had corresponded and met a few times. So when Knaths would come into town, he'd always let Lou Harris know and Lou Harris would round up Earl Kerkam and myself and a couple other painters and we'd always meet in a cafeteria. On rare occasions he would come into town, and we'd talk about Picasso, Klee and shapes and who's good and who isn't. That was the general talk.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Did Rothko ever talk about Jung or analysis or Freud? Was he….

MR. SOLMAN: I'm trying to think now. He was quite an intellectual. I'm sure that we must have discussed Freud since I at that time hadn't read anything of Jung I certainly couldn't have entered into a discussion on it. But he was into some of that, sure.

MS. BERMAN: How about…I know this is before you broke through…but color theories or…

MR. SOLMAN: No, strangely enough. It's amazing…when I say amazing, I don't mean I didn't think he had it in him. I simply meant there was nothing to predict such a beautiful coloring. It is true, you know, that some of those wonderful large pictures of his, some of those that I like best, have blacks, deep browns, deep purples, and then a shot of red and then magenta and so on. Now he really found himself through the dark palette but flat layers of it and then one bright color or two bright colors shining through, almost like in a good sunset. So that you must remember that his palette to a certain extent was still indigenous of coming out of the dark palette, what we might call his muddier palette. But that expresses his personality - kind of deep and solemn and grim and bitter and so on and so forth. I'm not talking about two red planes, one against the other like in some of the things, but let's take this [catalogue of Guggenheim retrospective] now to give you examples of what I mean. I'm not talking about this. He's found himself then. I love more the dispositions here. There's one like this in the Modern Museum that I think is just marvelous - light yellow and subtle blues, just beautiful. That I would have never suspected of him, light yellow and subtle blues, never. But even this has dramatic quality about it here, you know. That's nice. They don't have any of those dark ones. Why don't they….well, this is his.

This you can relate to his earlier stuff in some ways. This is more poetic and sensitive, but you feel a lot of t his in his early work. There's no question for me who knew him that a thing like this…If he had gone abstract and done his first series like this, I'd have understood. I'd have said, well, he doesn't like subject any more. He gets more out of color. This I could understand because this has the deep murky probing feeling of his.

MS. BERMAN: Which one are you referring to there? Does it say?

MR. SOLMAN: This one.

MS. BERMAN: Let's see. That's number 117, 1961.

MR. SOLMAN: Now that's interesting, I think there, '61, because he had found himself in '49 or '50. Now that's interesting in '61 he's returning to my mind to the earlier color schemes except abstractly. Don't you think?

MS. BERMAN: Yes, you're right.

MR. SOLMAN: You see a lot of it in this. I recognize him in this.

MS. BERMAN: Right. If you look at some of these early self-portraits and subway scenes that are in color, you can find it. Do you have a copy of this?

MR. SOLMAN: Yeah, I have a copy. That's the least they could have given me. They were going to reproduce one of my works…in fact, they had me photograph four of my subway scenes that relate to this. Why she put one of Newman and not one of…not that I care. It's just a footnote. This is, of course, the kind of thing he exhibited with me at Neumann.

MS. BERMAN: That's number 16.

MR. SOLMAN: Yeah. That was one of the pictures in the show. I remember it distinctly. You see now, strange enough, if you look at this upside down, you've got some planes here. Look at it right here.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. SOLMAN: It's canvas. But even if you're forgetting the figures, you've got a lot of the rectilinear in there. Here a little bit. But I just saw it upside down, and it occurred to me that maybe one should leaf through a book upside down if you're going to look at influences.

MS. BERMAN: That color scheme is very vast.

MR. SOLMAN: That's the color scheme. That's what I mean. That's the kind of color scheme, yes. But he certainly clarified his vision. See, this subway scene. That's the one where I had an influence on him but he does it his own way. He dies it with a…as you say, the word archaic is nice and mine aren't. Mine are more expressionist. But I'll show you a few of these, of that period of mine. What date did they put on this?

MS. BERMAN: Let me see. That's 1938 they have there.

MR. SOLMAN: Yes. That would be exactly it, yes. I mean I was doing them from '36 on. I don't care so much for this intermediate period, although that's very nice. Well, here you get it. If you leave out all the objects, you've got four planes of color.

MS. BERMAN: You're right.

MR. SOLMAN: What year is that? '40?

MS. BERMAN: That's 1944.

MR. SOLMAN: That was about five years before he broke through. But that doesn't give you any intimation of the plangent right color schemes he was going to give. That's rather aesthetic for him. Now if we go back earlier, as you said, we've got that dark murky feeling, right? Here you've got almost too pristine a thing. That isn't him. This is more him and this is more him than this is. This isn't Rothko. So it took him quite a struggle to find himself. See, this is a lot of planes too. I find that interesting, holding this book upside down. I've discovered it. This phase [surrealist] I'm not so crazy about. They have them at Pace. I didn't see the show. You know, some of them have a charm but not too much. We wouldn't have known him if he'd stuck to this phase, that's for sure. I give him credit for experimenting a lot. What year is that now?

MS. BERMAN: That one is 1945.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, it's still four years before he finds himself.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. SOLMAN: Yeah, he's still going through a lot of this stuff. In my mind he liked Ernst, especially early Ernst. But it doesn't have that sharp, bitter, hard bite that Ernst had in those years, those early years. That's when he was his greatest. He doesn't get it. And I think Rothko is fooling around. He's dying to get into something but he can't quite attain it, you know what I mean?

MS. BERMAN: Uh-huh.

MR. SOLMAN: So he's trying it in light phase, almost like Avery here, like an Avery surrealism. And he still hasn't got it. Now he's beginning. What year is that?

MS. BERMAN: That's '48.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, that's the year before. Now he's beginning but it isn't clarified. He's just beginning to like almost demand…

[END OF SIDE 3]

…entered a new period. And he had this phase before which is very rich and nice, a lovely period - 1947-1948. They're lovely. And he would have made it to a certain extent with this period. But I give him credit for going further than that. This is all the planes of color except some of them are squiggled around, beautiful in color. Just imagine that. But then he begins to really find it. I thought when I was at that show several times, I thought it was '49 when he seems to have hit it.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. SOLMAN: What are the dates here?

MS. BERMAN: Those are '49.

MR. SOLMAN: Yeah, but they're not good enough.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. SOLMAN: Although he's got the idea. Now we're coming.

MS. BERMAN: That one I would say…now that's '49 but I think that's the end of '49.

MR. SOLMAN: It might be the end. So at the end of '49 he attains it, yes. Now he's really in it. I don't care for the ones where he has an absolute white, pure white line, because he became such a colorist he should have known enough not to use white except as maybe a background, you know or as a shape.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. SOLMAN: When he had that show at the Modern Museum, I was disappointed in the way he put a white line across there. But this show is a beautiful show. Gorgeous colors.

MS. BERMAN: Was he interested in Stuart Davis?

MR. SOLMAN: No, no. Stuart Davis was too cold for him. I remember because we both thought so. I got to like Davis much more. I knew him only slightly but I knew his wife pretty well. She was a secretary of something or other. And I've gotten to like Davis more and more. He's a biggie, I think. You know, he's a very important American artist. I think he's been underplayed lately. Oh, a good example will fetch a lot of money; but after all, not only because he was one of the pioneers of this country of the flat space and the ideograms and the diagrams and everything else but he had a forceful statement. I mean he was very forceful. You know what he said about this movement.

MS. BERMAN: When you say which, the…

MR. SOLMAN: What Stuart Davis said about the abstract expressionist movement.

MS. BERMAN: No, I don't.

MR. SOLMAN: He called it a belch from the unconscious. He was a very tough cynic. He talked out of the side of his mouth like an underworld character. And the quote is in the book, the exact quote. And he wrote it down

himself. It was a kind of diary he kept.

MS. BERMAN: Did you get to know him from your days on *Art Front*?

MR. SOLMAN: No. I think he got off *Art Front* when I was on it. He already became…they made him the president of the American Artists Congress. He talked like this - "How are you, guy?" - like that. He was not forbidding but he's not the type to casually say, "Let's have a cup of coffee," type of thing. And I felt his work was strong and fine but a little cold for my taste. Even J.B. Neumann used to say, "He lacks saliva." But I've come to think it's strong and monumental. In fact, I'd love to buy one of his drawings if I could afford it.

MS. BERMAN: Was Rothko involved in *Art Front* or interested in writing for it?

MR. SOLMAN: He certainly could have written I think. I think that Whitney Dissenters catalogue…my friend Bernard Braddon…I didn't know him then but years later I got to know him. He's one of my closest friends. I once asked him…I was out arranging exhibitions in an art center in Spokane, Washington then, and I said to him once, "Who wrote that forward? I think it's wonderful." He said, "I think Rothko wrote it." So obviously Rothko has some writing ability. I don't know that he ever wrote anything. That you'd have to find out. He made statements. He made statements that are quoted in this book. And some of the statements are a little bit vaunting. I remember reading-see he became friends with Motherwell, whose work I think is nil. And I'm just saying this as a guess on my part - Rothko kind of envied this WASP, and Rothko admired maybe…I can't believe, though he says so, that he admired Motherwell's work because there's nothing in it for Rothko to admire, I don't think. And then when they were…Rosenberg and Motherwell were putting out some damn thing - the *Tiger's Eye* or some publication - I was really shocked to read Mark's statement that a picture takes a risk when it goes out; that hostile eyes can harm it. I thought that that was almost a satire on Oscar Wilde, who by the way is one of my admirations. I love his work, and his wit particularly. But that almost seemed like a satire on Oscar Wilde. I mean, you know, that was just too much. And if I knew him at that time, I would have really crossed swords with him. I can't believe that he meant it, and yet he didn't say it tongue-in-cheek. Why he ever said that, I don't know. It bothers me.

MS. BERMAN: Well, if you remember, the people he was friendly with then besides Motherwell were Still and Newman and all of them were very high flown talkers.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, Barney Newman. We used to call him Bullshit Barney when he used to hang around the studios. We were once up at Avery's and we were sitting there and Avery was showing us some wonderful landscapes, mountains. Maybe Sally was pulling them out. And Barnet Newman, Barney says, "You know why they're so good, Joe?" My wife and I were sitting there. I said, "Why?" He said, "Because Milt hates nature." So I looked around at Milt and Milt went like this. [Winked] You know, he thought it was an epigram maybe or a parody, you know. Do you know that the first time Barnet Newman…he wrote a piece on Avery, not for a catalogue here. He used to write the prefaces for Still and Gottlieb's shows. And he invented the ideogram…well, it's a word. But he developed it. And he wrote an article for Avery and I forget how the show took place in Mexico or something. It was translated into Spanish, and it was the first piece of writing of his that I know of that was ever even printed, not in the original language. From then on…of course, artists aren't articulate. I am but you meet so many who aren't…So he would do that. Now in the '40s, since he wrote so many of these things for Betty Parson's catalogue, he brought in a picture in pastels. This is a square. It was cut exactly diagonally. One was black and one was yellow with pastel on it - flat black and flat yellow - and he called it Orpheus Descending or some hype like that. Now she couldn't tell him that she couldn't put it in the show because it was a large group show and he had done so much of this writing for her. So she put it in. She didn't know that a Frankenstein was in the process of getting born. And then began to get into the act. I swear to you that we all laughed ourselves sick when we heard that he was going to have an exhibition of paintings. You know, he had no years of training. He had no years of…he didn't change over like we were examining Rothko and the gamut of work. You know what I mean, or Gottlieb. Oh, if you mentioned his name to Adolph Gottlieb, Adolph Gottlieb would get red in the face. He would get apoplexy from it. The fact that he made himself into a name and a selling artist. Mark was so sure of himself that he laughed about it. But Adolph absolutely got livid about it.

MS. BERMAN: Because he thought he was opportunistic or just that…

MR. SOLMAN: No, no, that he was a complete fraud, which I agree with totally. He was absolutely fraudulent. How the critics and the museums ever fell for that I'll never know. Someday somebody will write…I should because there will be no one left to write it. But to get back to your questions.

MS. BERMAN: I wanted to ask you, by the way, you've known Alice Neel for a long time, right?

MR. SOLMAN: I knew her from about '32. It was '32 in the Washington Square show. She was about four artists away from me and I liked her things very much and we met. Then that guy Kling put us in a group show together. He liked her work too. But she could get nowhere. I liked her work; Herman Rose liked her work; Earl Kerkam liked her work; but some painters couldn't see a goddamn thing in her. As a matter of fact, when she

got into the…she's finally into the Academy now. Well, she's also into the Arts and Letters. And I remember admiring one of her…she had a picture in one of the Academy shows. It was one of the…talk about a comment on our times. She had a woman who I think was a transvestite next to a short man who whether he was a midget, gay, a homo, whatever; but it certainly was a seamy part of our social milieu. But she did such a strong painting of those two people…and you know she puts a lot of paint in it. She paints them directly. It was such a comment on that particular fringe of society that I think a museum should have had it. You know, it was like a statement that covers a lot of territory like a good picture does. But to get back, she couldn't get anywhere. This show she'd show her work; she tried this and tried that. But she had one good break. I got her two shows at the ACA in the '50s - '54 and I think '56. I even wrote anonymously a little mention of something about Munch just to give the critics a clue, which they picked up, but didn't sell. Then when Graham Gallery had her, didn't sell a thing. She's still with Graham. But she was once picked as a juror with John Baur in some city. And she rode on a plane with him. And on the way back, she begged him to come up to her studio and he did; and he saw that she had such a range of work that he became very sympathetic - he didn't realize what a range of work she had - and gave her that show at the Whitney. It was very lucky. Otherwise, she'd still be completely unknown.

MS. BERMAN: Yes, but when was that? '74. So she was, what, 70 years old when she had that.

MR. SOLMAN: She's 81 or something like that.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Extraordinary. Was she friendly with any of your group on The Ten or anything?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yeah. Well, I've know her for years. She'd come down to our loft. She was funny. She characterized people. "Doesn't she look like a rabbit, doesn't this one?" She'd have such sharp verbal images of people. And she had that cruel but funny way of describing people which you sometimes see in her work.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, talking to her is…

MR. SOLMAN: She'd turn you inside out, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Talking with her is like talking with a battering ram. I went to interview her once.

MR. SOLMAN: Did you?

MS. BERMAN: I was doing an article. And the first thing…I'd never met her. The first thing that she does is she looks over and she asked me to pull down my glasses. She told me, "Well, you'd have a much more interesting face if you didn't wear any makeup and if you didn't pluck your eyebrows."

MR. SOLMAN: That's typical of Alice. That's sort of Alice when you were introduced to her, yeah. She'd come into the restaurant and my friend, Jules Halpern had a mustache down like this, very amiable guy. "Jules," she said, "you look like a cuckolded French husband." He did. She was marvelous. She was very funny. But she had some life. She always asked my wife, who in those days was a very, very handsome brunette, "Come on down. I'll paint you." And Ruth never came down. I think Ruth, like a lot of people, was afraid she'd turn her inside out because she can do something. I had a class in '40 before the war broke out and I told them about Alice Neel. I would take them to the Modern Museum. I would take them around and I told them about Alice Neel. I think I took them up to Alice Neel's once. And she asked one of them…you might know her name, Dorothy Koppelman. She belongs to that aesthetic realist group.

MS. BERMAN: They're the Moonies of the art world.

MR. SOLMAN: I know. I agree with you. In fact, I….well, I'll tell you about it. Anyway, she painted Dorothy and she painted a marvelous portrait with her peasant blouse. I'm telling you that it's…I don't know how she could get so much of her character in one sitting. Dorothy Koppelman used to send me, since I was her former teacher, she used to send me literature on that, to go to meetings and all that. I never did. Finally I wrote her what I thought a polite letter but I put a zinger in. I said, your…what's their patron saint - Siegel?

MS. BERMAN: Elliot or Ely?

MR. SOLMAN: Eli Siegel. I said, "And not only have I no use for philosophy like this I'm telling you and he doesn't know how to write English." I quoted one of the sentences in her prospectus which was such a jumbled sentence it didn't make any sense. I never heard from her again. I think she was so angry at me, until I met recently at some show. She still looks very pretty I think and the years haven't done much to mark her. Her husband is a good artist, Hy Koppelman. He's in the Academy as a graphic man. He's a good etcher. She didn't forgive me that little crack. You know, their children believe in it too. They have a nice daughter, a grown daughter, who's a devout aesthetic realist. I told her in the letter that the theory of opposites is as old as the Greeks. The theory of opposites is quoted by the Chinese, by the Greeks. Everyone knows the theory of the opposites, the ying and the yang and all them. What, did Eli Siegel discover this? Well, let's not waste our time with that.

MS. BERMAN: The fanatics are fanatics. I wanted to ask you also if Rothko was involved with the Artists Union and the People League and those sorts of causes.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yes, of course he was part of that. But I'll tell you where the break happened politically. The American Artist Congress, which he belonged to also [we all did], apparently either when the Soviet-Nazi nonaggression pact took place or the invasion of Finland [I forget which], the American Artists Congress rationalized or backed the Soviet Union's position. And that's when Rothko and Gottlieb, Bolotowsky and quite a few others decided to form their own group called the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors that I belonged to and in fact I'm one of the executive board members - have been for a long time. But at that time, if they had made it...first, the idea was to make it nonpolitical because, you know, everyone was talking social art and this and that and the other. And I was fed up to my ears with it too. In fact, when I came on the *Art Front*, I was the first one to make them review the shows at the Museum of Modern Art. I sent Charmion Von Wiegand to review about Ernst first. She didn't know too much about him. But I might have even joined them if they were just having an art for art's sake organization. You know what I mean?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. SOLMAN: But actually, they were very political. They were so anti the American Artists Congress that it became a political thing in itself. Now the American Artists Congress, I was much more active in the Artists Union. But I was active on the cultural end of it - on the magazine, I arranged a series of lectures on expressionism, on social art, on abstract art, and so on. I'll never forget the time when Ad Reinhardt and Philip Evergood were doing battle. One was talking about social art and Ad Reinhardt was talking about abstract art. And Ad Reinhardt said to Evergood, "But...but subject matter is illustration." And Evergood got all fuming. He said, "Well, your stuff is wallpaper." [Laughter] So that's the kind of fights that were going on in the '30s and '40s.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Was Rothko interested in mural painting at all?

MR. SOLMAN: Not that I know of. Not that I know of. He was strictly an easel painter, enjoyed it very much. But he certainly did reach a mural style all his own. No, this is a growth. I think one of the most interesting things about Rothko is the development in his middle years. Don't forget how old he was. How old is he in '49?

MS. BERMAN: Forty-six.

MR. SOLMAN: He was born in 1903. That's right. He's 46 then. Now generally speaking, that's pretty late to find yourself. You could say that the greatest Degas and the greatest Cezannes were done when they were 46 [some of the greatest], but they already showed their road well before that. But in Rothko's case...Rothko's an interesting case of a man who had developed a certain kind of expressionist manner of painting, then felt not uneasy but a little...it didn't do enough for him and he began...and you have to give him a lot of credit...began searching at the age of 37...he was born in 1903. In 1940 is that show at J.B. Neumann. At the age of 37, close to 40, he's beginning to search out. It took a lot of deep soul searching and courage I think. And that's what I think should be brought out about Rothko. That at the age of a man approaching 40 and having gotten nowhere whatsoever with his art...a little encouragement with our group. We did encourage each other. We had a very happy group for five years. And J.B. Neumann's encouragement I know was important to him. He thought very highly of him...he was one of the few real dealers in town like...what's his name...Curt Valentin was. But Curt had all the Europeans already so we couldn't edge in, except Ben Zion edged into his gallery to some extent. For a man closing the age of 40, getting absolutely nowhere in his art, no recognition in his art, begins to try to look for a different dimension, different areas, trying to add something to his art, and he kind of flounders around. Some of it is rather ghostly you know. That doesn't do it. Then he goes surrealist. He goes through Miro. But he's searching. And not till 45 or 46 is he beginning to see the light of something that will make him feel awestruck. You know, when you do something, like if a poet does a poem that really hits him. Then two days later he looks at it. He doesn't know how he did it. You know what I mean. He's in awe of his creation. And I have to give Rothko credit for doing that because it took a great deal of self-examination, hard work against the tide of everything else to get where he did. That's also the reason I think he over-praised Clyfford Still. I think he's a lousy artist. Because he felt that they were doing something like he had. He worked so hard and searched. Clyfford Still didn't do any of that searching at all - I can tell you stories about him. And yet he was very sympathetic. Maybe he was sympathetic to Motherwell for that reason too. But it was Rothko you have to give the credit for the long road to Calvary. And I certainly esteemed not only his art but his struggle that way, which I couldn't say for Gottlieb. To my mind his is a facile art. You know, it's graceful and clever but it doesn't compare to Mark's. I'll say that for him. There's something else I wanted to say about Mark. I was talking to him once about...we would sometimes talk about the old masters. Besides Rembrandt, I'm sure I remember he liked Bellini, people like that. He liked Corot. I'm trying to think in terms of this struggle of his. Oh, I know what I wanted to say. Someone told me that he had a show at Betty Parson's, one of the first shows of this group, whether it was '49, '50, or '51. And he was very disappointed. It got no attention. It was long before he was at Sidney Janis'. And this person who told me [wasn't a painter], told me that Joan Miro came in and bought two

watercolors of his. They weren't hung up on a shelf. And this gave him a big, big lift. It has to be a true story because the person that told me was a close friend of Rothko. He was some kind of an archaeologist or something. And that's an interesting story.

MS. BERMAN: I think that would be in '48 because I believe Miro was here in '48.

MR. SOLMAN: Maybe it was '48.

MS. BERMAN: I seem to remember '48 as Miro being in this country.

MR. SOLMAN: Ask Betty Parsons.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. She's on the list for being talked to.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

May 8, 1981

MS. BERMAN: I just wanted to ask you - I do want to talk about The Ten a little bit more, but I wanted to ask you one question that again goes back to your youth and where you studied. You were never involved with the Education Alliance at all?

MR. SOLMAN: No. The Soyers and Chaim Gross were.

MS. BERMAN: Right. I thought that was unusual.

MR. SOLMAN: I guess I was still in Jamaica. After all, I'm about 11 years younger than they are.

MS. BERMAN: Yeah, but the school went on and goes on.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, all I heard about was the National Academy and I brought my drawings there, they passed me, and I got in and I was happy to join also. I must say that after about four months of drawing from the cast, it was so dull and I was so much more capable than that for my own work, I began to even have doubts whether I wanted to be an artist if this was being an artist. That only indicates how dull an awful lot of art schools are and can really discourage - it couldn't discourage a real artist of which I believe myself to be a member, but it could discourage some weaker artists possibly.

MS. BERMAN: I wanted to start around 1933 with the Contemporary Arts Gallery and with a man I guess named Pat Codyre.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yes. He was working at the Museum of Modern Art. Do I relate that story in one of the books somewhere?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah, well, you talked about how he was a receptionist there and then I guess he was -

MR. SOLMAN: He met all of the new rebels and the new artists around that were just drinking in the new art at the Museum of Modern Art and either showing him work or asking him to come to the studios and so on. I met him in a curious way. A friend of mine and I had picked up a painting at University Place that we thought to be a Corot. In fact, I've got it hanging on a hanger out here, and he thought it was and he asked me to see Barr who also thought it might be and here I thought my whole future was ascertained by that. But he [Codyre] asked me if I was a painter. I said yes and I think he came all the way out to Jamaica, or I brought some things in. He put me in some show called a no-name show, which was a very original idea. They ought to do that. But he just pasted out, put a cloth over the names. That's were I saw my first John Graham in that show. I had a thing called *Sill Street*. He loved my stuff at that time. I was doing my earlier streets before the ones I showed you, and he was - I only learned later who knew anything about gays then and he was quite obviously gay. But, by putting on shows like that he was dismissed from the Modern Museum and that was very rigid of them. It had no conflict with the Modern Museum. Put up a show at the Hotel Marguery of a lot of the new American painters. I thought he was doing a duty that they should have applauded, but back to the bureaucracy again, you know. They want everything cut and dried and the poor guy got fired and he was on the lam and so on. I was up his apartment I remember. He showed me John Kane and Eilshemius. That was a little ahead of his time. He had a whole group of them, and he was an enthusiast really an enthusiast. I remember him giving me a copy of *Ulysses* [Sylvia Beach; Paris: 1922] torn apart, had no covers at all. Of course, I used it as a still life it was such a marvelous object, but I also read it. He was quite a character. In an artist's youthful development, you know, meeting a character like that means something. He knew Don Forbes who now seems to have disappeared. He was a rather nice romantic painter. It's a shame that someone doesn't kind of try to dig him up. He was curiously - he was as good looking as Gary Cooper, a tall guy, but I realized later he was part of the group of the gays. He was a very gifted painter and I don't know what's happened to his work. He's dead. Codyre might be alive, for all I

know.

MS. BERMAN: Do you know what happened to Codyre after he was fired? Where did he go?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, he lived with one buddy or another. In fact he put up at my place at Jamaica, Long Island, for a few nights, at my mother's house. Years later, Alfred Werner told me he bumped into him, you know Alfred Werner. He's dead now, too. Too many people have died. Well, he died of cancer. And he said he bumped into him working in some hotel and he mentioned my name. Werner liked my stuff. And he came up to this house I would say in the, maybe the late '50s, and then I lost sight of him. But he was more like, if you read about England's modern art with the Roger Frys and the Duncan Grants and all, he would have fitted more into that species. He was that type of guy, you know, very intriguing.

MS. BERMAN: Then the next person I want to ask you about is Godsoe who was running the next gallery and that's how you said, the Secession Gallery.

MR. SOLMAN: Right, the Secession Gallery, not succession, secession. I guess named after the Vienna Secession. Well, he came to run a gallery - I don't know how he came to run a gallery. I liked art and he got a place on West 12th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues. He had us on the programs, and he certainly had quite a stable, not only the whole group of The Ten but he had a woman named Helen Westheller. He once had Alfred Maurer's estate. Couldn't do much good in those times and it was given back. Put on a show of Maurer and it was marvelous, marvelous. Wasn't that a shame they weren't ready for it in the '30s. You know Weyhe Gallery used to support - didn't he commit suicide, Maurer?

MS. BERMAN: Yes, he did.

MR. SOLMAN: He did. That's an earlier suicide. I regard Pollock as a suicide, not anything else. You don't get that drunk and bump into a tree unless you're self-destructive, just as much as Gorky and Rothko were suicides. But you know, with Smith fooling around the way he did - he was a Rabelaisian character. He loved eating and women. He was a wonderful guy, wonderful to talk to and very natural. He was very easy going. He talked like a street worker. But his success and that death in the car - I wouldn't call that suicide like I would call Rothko, Gorky or Pollock. But when you add him to the list of Kline who was told clearly by the doctors not to drink any more because his heart was bad and he continued drinking, I call that suicide. If they told you something was going to give you cancer and you're convinced of it and you still did it; that to me is suicide. That's an awfully large proportion - there's something disaffecting or strange or weird. That's for Dostoyevsky to go into. There is something there. Maybe it's a good assignment for you to dig into that.

MS. BERMAN: I don't know if I could -

MR. SOLMAN: Maybe you have a feeling of a neo-novelist.

MS. BERMAN: I don't know if I could bear that. I mean, it's so sad.

MR. SOLMAN: It's pretty grim. But you have to admit that the percentage is alarming.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, absolutely.

MR. SOLMAN: And it has to do I think with making it too big at rather too late in age. You know, you should get inured to it. You have a first success at 22, at 25 you're the public's darling, and then at 28 you take a little vacation. I mean it should be a little more organic and natural than that.

MS. BERMAN: Now, how did Rothko get into Godsoe's gallery, do you know? I mean, how was he brought into it or how did Godsoe know him?

MR. SOLMAN: I am trying to remember. Maybe Kufeld could give you the cue there. Of course, he knew Gottlieb and Rothko better than I did. I didn't meet Rothko in Contemporary Arts where he had a one man show, his first, nor did I meet Gottlieb there. I met them at Godsoe's and I don't know who got them into that gallery. Whether they solicited it themselves or whether Godsoe found them in the Uptown Gallery where a lot of us were showing. That's possibly a good clue for you.

MS. BERMAN: And then as you said that Godsoe got - there were too many artists in there and so -

MR. SOLMAN: Too many artists who were we thought a little meretricious, kidding around a bit too much, you know surrealism was a little "in" then and of course Godsoe loved surrealism and he even wrote, and was on the radio in some interview about it, which is perfectly all right but he began to get some people without much artistic background, buying a lot of things in the 5&10 and pinning them up and putting them together, and we thought that was a little too chi-chi and we felt the seriousness of the gallery was being violated. That's really what it amounted to.

MS. BERMAN: And then you did form The Ten or The Nine at first, and you said that you first met to discuss your problems in your studio. That's where you began. When you said "problems" or "discussions," what did you see as problems, or what were the sorts of things that were being discussed?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, we felt that we were serious, shall I call it rebellious artists, or let's say modern artists who weren't given much opportunity to show or much encouragement, and we felt we were serious and we wanted to push ahead and Godsoe wasn't giving us the opportunity to do so. At the beginning he was. We owed him a lot then. So we decided to go forth on our own, so to say leave mama and take to the road. That's what it amounted to and then we kept knocking on doors and got shows, one or two a year. We did pretty well somehow or other for vagabonds. We were sort of a vagabond group, vagabond modern group. Because you must remember, as I mentioned, that Davis had the Downtown Gallery and so did Ben Shahn. Knaths had the Downtown Gallery but he wasn't part of this so he wasn't shown much. Max Weber did, Marin had Stielitz. You know what I mean. We were homeless.

MS. BERMAN: Well, when you were doing this, who tended to emerge as the leaders in this group?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, you know I'm pretty talkative and they met in my studio. I would say that - I would say that Rothko and myself were the most articulate members and had the most ideas. Lon Shanker was just a good natured guy - Ben Zion is a strange guy. He paints prophets. I think he's a wonderful painter. He's 84 and still alive, but he only shows in Israel. He hates the scene. Kufeld was good natured. Lou Harris was shy. Yes, I would say it - but, of course, the votes were always taken and the suggestions were taken by everybody. I would say Rothko and I were the most talkative, were the current leaders.

MS. BERMAN: What was the sort of the atmosphere of the meetings?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, in the first place we believed in each other's work. So now we had a comradeship, just like a club, and army club or whatever, which gave us far greater confidence. As probably the group of The Eight, I don't know. I don't know what their formation existed of. But, you know, misery likes company. Loneliness likes company. So, we felt very good about getting together. We talked the evening through, would go out for coffee, we comforted each other. It was very helpful just in that sense. The spirit was one of comradeship and fight to go on with our work.

MS. BERMAN: The first show that you had was at the Montross Gallery. Was this old man Montross himself who set you up in the show?

MR. SOLMAN: No, I think he was dead. It was a worker there who ran the gallery. He seemed to be like just a nice laborer I would say. He really was. As I remember, he was kind of big and heavy. Let's say by that time the Montross Gallery was fading, had lost its past glory. It used to be a very well known gallery, and I think when we came to him, it livened him up and he - I don't think he cared for our art particularly, but he gave us a show. They were showing nice ceramics by Henry Varnum Poor who was a great ceramicist, much better than as a painter, although I liked him as a man. He was with us on *Reality* magazine. Did you ever see issues of *Reality* magazine? I wrote for that and so did Maurice Grosser. He was a very good satirist. Yes, I think it was as much to pep up his gallery as to pep us up that he gave us the show.

MS. BERMAN: How were the works selected; the ones that were going to be shown?

MR. SOLMAN: I think we selected - we showed three examples a piece. We didn't do any judging.

MS. BERMAN: He didn't pick them?

MR. SOLMAN: No. Each artist picked his own. We were always very free about that. Rather, we maintained that sense of integrity. I think I did mention Joseph Brummer. That story is in my book I loaned you. You can have it for that matter. You know, how Joseph Brummer encouraged us because Joseph Brummer knew Rousseau and Picasso and everybody else, and I think he liked us and felt a little sorry for us and wanted to give us some Parisian push-off. It didn't help us very much but it was awfully nice of him and we certainly felt great that this big dealer who sold Greek statues and hundreds of thousands of art works would send us off on a show, pay all the bills, and tell us not to mention his name and get a critic to write a preface. You know, that's kind of nice when you're young.

MS. BERMAN: Certainly. He just did that out of the kindness of his heart?

MR. SOLMAN: We invited him down to our studio to see our paintings, and I can't remember whose studio we were in then. It wasn't my house. My house wasn't big enough but some other person's studio, maybe Tschacbasov. But he said you've got a lot of guts, boys, and let me tell you something. You're not going to make it here unless you have a Paris show. I'll help with that. I don't want my name used. I take care of all the shipping. I'll get the gallery for you and so on. You see, he had big contacts, a man who knew Picasso, Rousseau

and everybody else. It was very sweet. He had Waldemar George write the preface to our catalog.

MS. BERMAN: That's interesting because Brummer is known as a very difficult suspicious sort of person.

MR. SOLMAN: He was a very quiet, strange guy. He used to put up one show a year. Don't forget, he dealt in antiquities - I don't know where he picked them up or whether he stole them or something, but you know he would sell these Greek statues to museums and so on. Once a year, however, he opened his gallery to put up a show, a sculpture show. One year was Maillol, and another year was Despiau's portraits, another year it was Lipchitz long before the Modern Museum had them. They were great revelations. One year it was Brancusi. A complete show - about 50 or 60 objects.

MS. BERMAN: All right. Well, in 1926 as a matter of fact, when Brancusi came over here to hang his show, he and Duchamp arranged his show at the Brummer Gallery.

MR. SOLMAN: Really?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. SOLMAN: I didn't see it that early.

MS. BERMAN: No, no. You wouldn't have seen it but Brancusi even came over for him [Brummer].

MR. SOLMAN: Really? He knew them all. A strange, tight-lipped man, but he certainly did us a big favor.

MS. BERMAN: When you mentioned sculpture I just was curious. To go to Rothko for a second. I have found no indication so far that Rothko was interested in sculpture.

MR. SOLMAN: No, Schanker was and Ben Zion had done some. Those are the only two members I recall of the group who did - Schanker did a lot of that, but of course he did, as I told you, I think the best color woodcuts in America. And I tried to talk him into a book because he was left a fortune by his wife Libby Holman and he toyed with the idea a little. We were going to have lunch about it, but he's not one of the world's great spenders. I don't know why. If you've got all this money and you're old, what the hell are you going to do with it? But that's another theme.

MS. BERMAN: Let me see, Montross gave you a second show, right?

MR. SOLMAN: Right.

MS. BERMAN: I was asking you about the second show because since he didn't sell any work, that's why I'm curious to know why he gave you a second -

MR. SOLMAN: Who sold any? You might as well know that outside of your Alexander Brooks, your Rockwell Kents, I can't remember now, but there was a bunch of names that had status then who sold. I think Stuart Davis had a tough time selling even though he had a very well established gallery. But the average artist and the average talented artist, even with the motivation of our group of The Ten, we didn't sell. I sold some gouaches so we could buy some theater tickets, so we could see some good plays or something like that. By the way, that's why I have the largest collection of my '30s work. I wish I could say that about the interiors which became popular after a while, and I've saved these two for my two kids, but otherwise they're all in museums or private collections. I must have done about 30 or 40 of them - I have very few works for that period except an occasional collector, a good friend of mine, so there might be six or seven of them out and most of them I own. I'm rather glad I do, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Now.

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, no, I like old work around. A lot of artists like some examples of their old work around. I'm sorry for an artist who cleans out his studio, successful or unsuccessful unless he never sells and I do. But it's nice to have it around you. It's different than an author who always has a piece of his book. What the hell? In the old days it was a two dollar book, now it's a $15 book. But, you know, well, look, Picasso saved a lot of his work through the years.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, certainly, for reference and inspiration -

MR. SOLMAN: And do you know that Paul Klee didn't sell drawings for many, many years because that was his storehouse for his paintings and water colors, and little by little they seeped out. When I first saw Paul Klee, I never saw drawings of his. It's very important for an artist to be - you know Constable made some of his great paintings from drawings 15 to 20 years back, and let me remind you again that when you go to London, all the Constables in the Victoria-Albert. One year I went there they didn't have the little ones up that his daughter gave

him, Isabella.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, the oil sketches -

MR. SOLMAN: The little oil sketches. They took them down for me because I insisted on seeing them. I'm going back to '56, quite a while back. So they brought them down and they showed me them. I had a great thrill because I'm a great Constable fan. Later they put them up - not because of me but they were rearranging it anyway. But there's one thing called *A Leaping Horse* [final 1825]. It is the second study before the final study that's in the Royal Academy. I think that's one of the world's great paintings and I want you for my sake to look it up again when you go to the Museum - how long are you going to be in London?

MS. BERMAN: Two - well, I'll be in England two weeks, not all in London. I'm going to go to the country too, but I'll be there.

MR. SOLMAN: When you go there, look up that *Leaping Horse*[1825]. I think that's a masterpiece of impressionism, abstract expressionism and realism combined. I think it's a masterpiece.

MS. BERMAN: I will look at it. At this time the New York Times critic was Edward Alden Jewell and you got negative reviews from him. Now when you saw this, did this crush you? Were you hurt?

MR. SOLMAN: I absolutely laughed. I will say one thing about the real artists and writers have a lot of self-confidence. If he didn't like Rouault and he didn't like Klee, then how could we feel bad if he didn't like us? You know what I mean. We knew his philosophy, so we disregarded that. We laughed about it, the fact that he wrote us up at all was amusing to us. If it was a critic that we thought highly of, we might have been insulted or crushed but never Alden Jewell, not at all. At that age, too - don't forget we were 28 to 35 - thereabouts. We were pretty cocky about ourselves.

MS. BERMAN: I was just wondering that this business with Jewell might have related to a rather famous letter that Rothko and Newman wrote to him in '43 -

MR. SOLMAN: Was Alden Jewell still around then?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Well, they wrote saying you don't understand our paintings, etc, etc.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, I'm a little surprised at Rothko. I'll tell you why. Because I regarded Rothko as a brilliant man, but at that late date to think he could have taken Jewell seriously. We laughed at them - we laughed at his criticisms. So either my dear friend Mark lost his sense of humor or got so deeply involved in his work (and don't forget, he was older than I was) and combating the scene with his work that he got maybe a little too grim. When you get a little too grim, you can lose your sense of humor. I'm sorry for Mark because he had a good sense of humor. You know, he had a sharp wit, and I feel bad that he bucked something as dull as Edward Alden Jewell and made pontifical statements. I don't think it was worth it. It's like - I'm trying to think of an analogy - of a great actor or actress being razzed by some puny critic and taking it seriously.

MS. BERMAN: Now, I want to go on to Georgette Passedoit and -

MR. SOLMAN: She had come from France, you see, with lovely works by Rouault and Dufy Derain, a lot of the French school and she naturally having her heart in the modern school was very sympathetic to us. We were thought of a New York counterpart of the School of Paris with our own accent, with our own New York-ese accent, with our own grim, dark palette and whatever. She offered us a show immediately and we had two shows with her, I think, and she was very, very nice. I remember her with glasses, gray hair, a small and very lively woman whose past I never quite inquired of her, but she must have had an interesting past. He had a lot of verve to her like some French women have, and she was lovely, she was lovely.

MS. BERMAN: Did you see her after you had stopped showing with her at all?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, I would drop in sometimes because a few of the members I think asked her for one man shows and I can't remember now whether she didn't give one or two of them one - I was already with Bonestall Gallery by that time. I was in another gallery. I'm sure she would - she liked my works very much. I'm sure she would have given me a show but I had a gallery already. I know she showed a few other Americans for one man shows. So, it would be more than likely that she showed one or two of our men in a one man show sometime in the past thereafter.

MS. BERMAN: Would either she or the man at Montross ever give anyone loans or anything like that?

MR. SOLMAN: Money?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. SOLMAN: No, a lot of us were on the Project and a few of us had - that is, Adolph Gottlieb's wife was a teacher, you know. So, no, no, no. That hard up we weren't. We led a very skimpy life but when you're young you can take a lot of things. After all, you're a young kid. How old are you?

MS. BERMAN: I'm about to be 32.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, you can take a lot. You tell me about some of the wages they pay in art magazines which I think is atrocious. How about art teaching? You know what they pay art teachers? They used to pay art teachers - I taught at the Museum of Modern Art back in the early '50s one night a week, Monday night. I knew Chanin and he asked me to teach there. They only paid $15 a session, $15 a night in the '50s - and Art Students League - I never taught there but a lot of my friends did. They used to pay - now they've gone up. I don't know what they pay now. But God knows in the '50s and '60s they used to pay no more than maybe $140 a month for a session. That's pretty grotesque. The only time I was ever paid well in teaching was when the City College called me in '67, but then I only made it half-time because I didn't want to have it full-time. And I'm afraid I'm very suspicious of the academic life, and they pay very well. City College pays well.

MS. BERMAN: I'm going to ask you about your teaching but a little bit later. I do have some questions on that. Also while you exhibited with Passedoit, Jacob Kainen wrote a very intelligent review of the show and did you know him previously before?

MR. SOLMAN: I knew him at the Artists Union, yes. He was a painter. He was on the Project, and he - here again I don't want to sound egotistic - but when he had his first one man show at the ACA [American Contemporary Artists] everyone said he was very much influenced by me. Everybody said so. I mean it was influenced by our - no, I knew him very closely and I think I was the only one of The Ten that knew him that well, but he liked the group as a whole.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if he was enlisted as a friend to help the cause?

MR. SOLMAN: No, no, no, no, no. Don't forget, he was I think a member of the board. He was quite a writer, you know, a curator at the Smithsonian, and became -

[END OF SIDE ONE]

MS. BERMAN: He's written a lot, he's done a lot. Now, I want to go to the Whitney Dissenters show, but before, why don't you sort of start out by telling me what you told me before, that you tried to go to the Whitney and -

MR. SOLMAN: That was somewhere around '36 to '37. We each brought in our work to the Whitney to be seen. I forget what the stipulation was. Whether you gave one or two or three examples of your work, we left it there. We all went through the back alley, left it there, and the next week you pick it up and we certainly had no response whatsoever, no letter encouraging, no nothing. But as I said previously, the shift came about eight years later when they flip-flopped over, when it was all modern, good, bad and indifferent, and very little figurative. Just as previously it had been figurative work, mostly bad, dull, or they had a penchant for picking work that looked like hard work. It reminds me of an epigram Oscar Wilde made on Henry James' work. He said Henry James writes as though it were a painful duty - elaborate, you know, carefully and so on. So that they never had the slightest use for Avery who looks as though he does it with three strokes. He does have almost an oriental way, just washing in a few colors. Sometimes it hits and sometimes it doesn't, but they could never understand that concept, whereas we painters liked him so much because he had that wonderful freedom.

MS. BERMAN: Actually though, I think I will say for the first five years if you were asked to be in the annual, they let the artist select his own work. So what you saw for about the first five years were the artists' choices.

MR. SOLMAN: I didn't quite get that.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, the first five years or so on the annual, the artist were allowed to pick their own work.

MR. SOLMAN: The Whitney annual?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah, the first five years. And then the curators decided they didn't always like what they were getting, so they would go to the studios and select.

MR. SOLMAN: So it was their fault?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, wherever you put blame, the result was awfully dull exhibitions.

MS. BERMAN: Well, the Museum was the institution selecting the artists, wherein it's their taste but within the

artist that they chose, the artists made the decisions.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, I think the choice is negligible there. If you pick a Schnackenberg, what's the difference whether they pick them or he picks them?

MS. BERMAN: Now, who is Bernard Braddon?

MR. SOLMAN: Bernard Braddon is right now a close friend of mine. I don't know him at the time he ran the gallery, the Mercury Gallery, on Eighth Street. A lot of little galleries used to pick up and fade out, just like boutique shops or antique shops today, you know. Not too many, but lovers of art who then didn't have the resources to carry it out, and he and a friend of his - and I can't remember his name - Bernard would tell me and he still sees him - ran this Mercury Gallery. They just loved art, that's all, and I wasn't around when that show took place because the Project had sent me to Spokane to help them organize exhibitions. Anyone who was resourceful, articulate and talented, they asked if they would go out of town and help the art centers they were establishing around the country, and that show took place when I was out of town. I only met Bernard Braddon many years later through the fact that his daughter and my two kids went to Little Red Schoolhouse and then we got very friendly, became close friends. I painted a portrait of him, his wife, and he owns pictures of mine, and you know - but he just retired recently. He was in the record business. You know, he used to work for Liberty Music, Phillips, and finally for RCA [Radio Corporation of America]. So that was his job, but he always loved art very much.

MS. BERMAN: And does he live here in the city?

MR. SOLMAN: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And is he listed in the phone book?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, Bernard Braddon, I'll give you his phone number.

MS. BERMAN: I'll ask for it later because -

MR. SOLMAN: He's a lovely man, lovely.

MS. BERMAN: Do you know what other sorts of works he handled at the time?

MR. SOLMAN: He's told me, he's told me many stories about it. He's told me that he had Pascains and diCiricos that he couldn't sell for $300, but Julien Levy says the same thing in his book. It seems hair raising now. He says I had no money to buy it. I was making nothing for a week or whatever, I don't know what he was earning. But he's a fine most interesting gentleman. He'll tell you some stories which I wouldn't know.

MS. BERMAN: Actually during that Whitney Dissenters show, evidently Bolotowsky had been asked to be in the Whitney and he actually was in the annual the same year, even though he was -

MR. SOLMAN: Right, it was a curious paradox, he didn't know he was going to be invited when we arranged the show.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, I was wondering if you considered that a sell-out on his part or if you -

MR. SOLMAN: No, no, no. I was a little surprised that they were beginning to - maybe because of all the criticism or pounding at their doors, they began barely to open the door a little. I don't think he knew he was going to be invited. No, no it wasn't a sell-out. We didn't regard it as that. We were glad we got a foot in, you know. As I say, I wasn't in town then but I know that that's not the case.

MS. BERMAN: So at the time though, it was a sort of one for all and all for one sort of feeling anyway.

MR. SOLMAN: Absolutely, absolutely, yes. We were very well integrated as a group. Since we formed as a group of artists, even some political differences, and of course at that time there was a very hot political climate, did not at all deter us from our art comradeship. And that I find an interesting fact. We just - personally on the side. For instance, Rothko and his wife were over once and we were over at their house and the Spanish War was on and Rothko's claim was that he didn't believe; he was sort of a Gandhian, Mahatma Gandhi, because he didn't believe we should fight back. So my wife said well, you mean if they came in with guns to shoot your family, you wouldn't fight back? And he said, no. He kind of had a non-violent attitude, philosophy at that time which, of course, is just theoretical. Of course, if they came in, he would have had to fight, but I do remember that distinctly, having kind of a tough fight. It had nothing to do with our love of art or our feeling of The Ten. You know, we would disagree on things like that. I remember that as I told you Rothko, Gottlieb and Bolotowsky left to - left with others to form a group in the American Artists Congress who they felt hadn't condemned Russia on the aggression pact or on the Finland thing, or whatever it was. I don't remember. But there were altercations

there. But it didn't affect our group. When our group broke up and I remember it was in my loft, it was - we just discussed it as a decision. A few of them had galleries already and we said, look, boys, maybe we've done all we could; each one go out and seek his fortune. There was no dissention, no fight.

MS. BERMAN: Well, speaking of something related to politics is that many of The Ten and various permutations were Eastern European, Russian, Jewish and did you find that there was any sort of anti-Semitic feeling toward the group, or did this make a great deal of difference?

MR. SOLMAN: On the part of critics, you mean?

MS. BERMAN: Well, any - you know - I don't know who would -

MR. SOLMAN: No, I'll tell you why I don't think that - don't forget, you're in New York City where the Jewish population is so large. You take the Project and I've already indicated the wide variety of people. After all, you couldn't want more of a tough philosophical character than Stuart Davis or let's say Marsden Hartley and Milton Avery, or on the other side, the Jewish side Walkowitz or the group of The Ten and others. There wasn't the faintest feeling of prejudice. As a matter of fact, I think I liked - certainly in those days I liked the art world very much because as I entered it, you take Milton Avery who was married to a Jewish woman, Sally Avery. You take my friend Miriam Vague who is Jewish, married to a gentile. The sculptor, John Vague who is not alive now and there was continual inter-marriage like that or Byron Browne who was - he looked like a Norman Rockwell rustic American character married to this Jewish Zaftig blonde, you know - Rosalind Bengelsdorf. Looked like a young Shelly Winters, that's what she looked like. So, I mean we all got along so well together. There was never sort of - in the art world and I imagine in the literary world that plays a very tiny part if at all, and I like that world for that matter. Whereas I'm sure that in other worlds, in brokerage houses, I don't know. I never worked in those, but it could be a very different story.

MS. BERMAN: I'm glad to hear that and one reason I asked that because at the time, because there were people - these people, of course, were more associated with the American scene, but if you take say an ideologue like Thomas Craven, champion of say Benton, would say things, that Stieglitz was a Hoboken Jew in print, in his book, and there were other -

MR. SOLMAN: Benton said that?

MS. BERMAN: No, Thomas Craven said that in his book.

MR. SOLMAN: Craven? That son of a bitch. Well, you know - he came along at a period of super patriotism. You know what I'm always surprised at? That the Modern Museum at one time knuckled under to, not to Craven, but to some of that crowd with a few American shows. I'm really surprised. I think in the '40s. I don't remember exactly when and I was really surprised to see them show such a lack of courage. But in the art world itself - I never met Craven in my life. Pollock was a student of Benton, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, certainly.

MR. SOLMAN: But, no, no, no. There was no - there wasn't the faintest semblance to my mind of prejudice on the Project amongst the painters and sculptors. Maybe there was on the part of the dealers, but I couldn't read their minds. Now we had a group when we worked on *Reality* magazine. There were quite a group of Jewish fellows like myself, Soyer, Sol Wilson, Jack Levine, and there were gentiles like Hopper and his wife, Isabel Bishop and Anthony Tony was Italian. And you know, Kuniyoshi. Well, he could feel like a stranger, too being Japanese, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Now to go back to the Whitney. After the show, do you know if anyone from the Whitney, any of the curators came over and looked at it or said anything to Braddon or -

MR. SOLMAN: To Braddon? I don't think so. You would have to ask him. He never told me that, so I don't think it happened.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that by calling it the Whitney Dissenters, was it a good attention getting device?

MR. SOLMAN: I think so. We tried it and I believe we got as my scrapbooks show, we got three or four reviews which was something even in those days. We got some attention grabbing, yes. We meant it. We were young roustabouts. You know, we wanted to speak our piece.

MS. BERMAN: Right, and during this time, too. By the way, for this show you got to select your own works, the ones you wanted to go in.

MR. SOLMAN: I left the works to be delivered by one of the members, yes. Yes, we selected, we always selected our own works. There we always left it to the artist. We did not try to jury anything.

MS. BERMAN: Did you keep any records at all? Were there any bookkeeping records at all for The Ten or was it just a discussion group sort of?

MR. SOLMAN: No, we didn't. Do you mean by bookkeeping, sales -?

MS. BERMAN: Sales or dues - I don't know.

MR. SOLMAN: I wish there were an occasion to do some bookkeeping.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if there had been a diary or -

MR. SOLMAN: No, no one kept a - no secretary kept records.

MS. BERMAN: Do you know, by the way, if Rothko was in the habit of keeping a journal? I know you kept one for a while and that's why I was wondering.

MR. SOLMAN: How did you know I kept a journal?

MS. BERMAN: Because it's in your papers.

MR. SOLMAN: You mean the fact, not the journal itself.

MS. BERMAN: It's microfilmed.

MR. SOLMAN: I still keep it.

MS. BERMAN: Well -

MR. SOLMAN: No, I couldn't have given them the journal. I don't believe it. I haven't even typed it. I never even typed it down. I've been meaning to week by week, type it over so it would be a little clearer. I don't know. That you would have to ask Diane Waldman or some super authority. I didn't know him to keep - I'm not sure that Rothko, bright and brilliant as he was, did any writing. But I wouldn't be surprised if he did. I would suspect a person like Ben Zion might keep a journal. I'm really not shocked but I'm rather surprised to hear that something of that is on microfilm. I gave them some letters and my scrapbook. That's all I gave them.

MS. BERMAN: And your journal from about '43 to '56.

MR. SOLMAN: Really?

MS. BERMAN: Did you keep more than one? I mean, this one is just your impression of other art and artists. I guess the last Ten show was at the Bonestall Gallery -

MR. SOLMAN: Was it at the Bonestall?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah, which became your gallery eventually.

MR. SOLMAN: That's true. That's true. I thought we had two shows at the Bonestall Gallery. We had quite a few shows there in those few years; that was pretty good. Two at Passedoit, two at Bonestall, two at Montross -

MS. BERMAN: And one at the Mercury.

MR. SOLMAN: And one at the Mercury, that's seven. Not bad. We showed at the Municipal Art Gallery once, too. That's eight. Not bad for about a five year period. We were getting almost two shows a year, pretty good.

MS. BERMAN: Was it Mr. or Mrs.? Who was Bonestall?

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, no, Blanche Bonestall, a woman, a Christian Scientist. She was a nice woman though. She had Ben Zion and myself. She handled two of The Ten. See that's how we each got our galleries. Ben Zion and I got that gallery and that's how I met Hans Moeller who was a wonderful guy. Did you ever see his work? He's at Midtown Gallery.

[NOTE: A mouse ran across the room. Discussion about the mouse.]

MR. SOLMAN: So she took on two of us. I forget where all the others went.

MS. BERMAN: Let's see. So you did part friends and I guess in reference -

MR. SOLMAN: Oh, yes, when I bump into Ilya on the street we begin to talk about the scene, you know what I

mean. Since we have such a background, we begin to talk about pop artists or Warhol or what's happening, or we discuss how if someone has a show like a Jack Tworkov who I don't think much of, he was always such a crank and such a complainer, you know, he's one of these who kvetches all the time. He finally made it by imitating de Kooning who knew Bill very well. He changed his style a lot. In fact, he once imitated me - I'm not bragging about that - and when he had a retrospective at the Whitney because he was in with the gang - you know, they were showing all of them - he didn't show any early work and he had some rather nice early work. It's like overnight - Now I don't know what Rothko, if Rothko was alive, whether he would have allowed any early work in too, but after all he made quite a decisive change or maybe he felt he had first found himself. But Tworkov had been painting for many years, had one man shows with figure or still life, and rather semi-abstract and pretty good and yet it's as though he had never been born then. That he was born to be an abstraction. That's silly. Imagine a Cezanne show not showing some early work?

MS. BERMAN: It's not possible.

MR. SOLMAN: Ilya and I laugh about that.

MS. BERMAN: In retrospect, I was wondering if you might during the lifetime of The Ten, what strides do you think you made in your work from how you thought it -

MR. SOLMAN: Through our association?

MS. BERMAN: And in general, through your own maturation during the years.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, the fact that some of us had a great freedom in the Project just to paint in our studios and develop and organize our influences, mature in our influences, the fact that we had the group was a great, great help in the fact that we gave each other courage and support, moral support, aesthetic support, and I think exactly like the early group of, you know, Picasso, Braque and the gang there or like The Eight, or like any group that forms that feels they're a little avant-garde and so on.

MS. BERMAN: I want to ask you about the three man show that you and Rothko and Gromaire had in 1940. First of all, this is the first time Rothko's name appears as Mark Rothko.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, you know how that was changed.

MS. BERMAN: No, that's what I was going to ask you.

MR. SOLMAN: J.B. Neumann said Marcus - his name was Marcus Rothkowitz. He said, Marcus, I have so many Jewish painters, why don't you make your name Rothko. It sounds interesting and he just took that hint as a good suggestion and changed it because J.B. Neumann had suggested it. I think I was there when he mentioned it or Rothko told me about it. Rothko. That sounds almost like a Greek name doesn't it?

MS. BERMAN: It's certainly more - it is more memorable, certainly.

MR. SOLMAN: It certainly is.

MS. BERMAN: Was he called Marcus or Mark by his friends? I mean, you refer to him as Mark in conversation, but did he actually go by Marcus?

MR. SOLMAN: I never call anyone by two syllables. So I certainly must have called him Mark. I guess he was called Mark and Marcus.

MS. BERMAN: Excuse me for being so ignorant, but I don't know who Gromaire is. Evidently, he had the reputation -

MR. SOLMAN: Marcel Gromaire was one of the French school using a kind of cross between cubism and Rouault, like a dramatic - if Rouault was a cubist, you would get the idea - but representational, simplification -

[NOTE: The mouse reappeared.]

MR. SOLMAN: Would do cathedrals, cemeteries, shipyards, but much, much better than Bernard Buffet, you know, straight lines this way and that way, but quite a nice good sense of a cemetery or a cathedral or a street. He was quite well known in his time and he does well at an auction today. But then Gromaire and Segonzac were much better known in those days along with Tredeau. They were ranked around that - and Soutine and what have you and so on, but somehow or other they went backwards. I talked my sister-in-law into getting a wonderful Segonzac landscape at one of the auctions for $6,000, a wonderful landscape. I said if you're ever disappointed I'll buy it from you. But she was very lucky. It's a humdinger of a picture. Yeah, he was known then. He was quite well known then. I say he's known in that school. So it was a very proud occasion for Mark and

myself, that show. Then our group had just about disbanded and he lived in Brooklyn. I think he lived in Brooklyn by that time, so I suspect he was seeing Adolph a lot. Maybe I'm wrong. Schanker lived in Brooklyn. But anyway, their friendship continued more closely. That's why I didn't see him much. Do you know the widow of Gottlieb or are you going to see her - Esther?

MS. BERMAN: Probably. I'm sure -

MR. SOLMAN: Are you going to see her?

MS. BERMAN: I'm not sure. There are three or four different people doing this.

MR. SOLMAN: She would tell a lot about it. They knew each other. They knew each other much more.

MS. BERMAN: Rothko was using a sort of soft neutral palette. Is that correct? Was that around 1940 or so?

MR. SOLMAN: Yes, he was using a very limited palette. It was black, gray, ocher. He wasn't even using that murky color that we were looking at in the book. He was trying to - he was trying to clean his palette and get away from fussiness or anything, messiness, and he tried to stylize his drawing and flatten his planes out much more neatly. That's true. What that was about I don't know, but it was just a phase he went through, very amorphous, things looking like vague twilight or dawn coming in until he found himself. He certainly went through a lot. The discussion that I had with you about that, Avis, after you had left, a day later, I looked at a Schwitters book I had and I noticed that there's no two careers alike or anything of the sort, but that same phenomenon took place in Schwitters. I noticed his earlier work [1918-19] was a little, was a little dullish and expressionistic, not with any great personality and it took him about - a shorter time I would say, but about four, five or six years to find himself just as we were discussing Rothko finding himself. I put the book out to show it to you. Rothko isn't a unique example. I'm going to show you something. Now look at this. 1917 - that's pretty bad. Let's face it. Who would have known Schwitters if he did that and who would have known Schwitters if he did this? Now he's gone abstract, right? Pretty bad. So he's trying out different things.

MS. BERMAN: He wasn't getting more interesting.

MR. SOLMAN: But a third rate futurist, in 1918. Now he's coming in, but it's overcrowded. It's not organized well. Now, we're getting somewhere - 1919. That's three years difference. Now he's getting somewhere. Now he's using a little of the lettering and it's kind of nice. He's still fooling around. He's almost got it there but he didn't. Now, it's 1920, four years later. He's getting it there but in my opinion he really gets it around, around '22 he's really getting it. Now, he's getting it. I think his most beautiful things are even a little later. To me the crown of this stuff is these beautiful things, these gorgeous things. That's '26, but you know what I mean? He first gets it around '22. That's about six years.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Oh, I wanted to ask you about - John Graham was in The Ten for a little while.

MR. SOLMAN: He was in for a few years because we had an empty spot and we all liked his work and we looked around to pick it out and we chose him and he was glad to join. He wasn't painting much then. He was in for a few years because we had an empty spot and we all liked his work and we looked around to pick it out and we chose him and he was glad to join. He wasn't painting much then. He was elaborating a book of some kind or other. So he showed earlier work of that period that I told you he was affected by Picasso's '22-'26 period, mandolin and guitar, but done in his own fine, sharp, discreet way.

MS. BERMAN: Well, he is always described as charismatic and I was wondering if he did have a special influence on the group or what he used to talk about?

MR. SOLMAN: No, our group was very well formed and he didn't speak much at the meetings. He hardly ever came to them. He liked us or he agreed to join us and exhibit a painting. He had charisma. He spoke with an accent, you know, his own curious Russian accent. He was a kind of a - what do they call those Russian officers, the white guard or something. He had been. So, he always dressed very nattily and so on, little blue eyes, little moustache, and he - after all, he had been an advisor to Frank Crowninshield. So, he's up with the elite, some of the elite group. Spoke very nicely. But he loved to hang around with artists as he did with Gorky and de Kooning, but I told you that story - when I last met him, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Met Graham?

MR. SOLMAN: The Metropolitan Museum story. Didn't I tell you that story?

MS. BERMAN: No.

MR. SOLMAN: That's a precious story. Years after our group, years after Graham had turned against Picasso and painted that mistress of his who was beautiful but cockeyed and imagine coming to a show and seeing 36

portraits looking at you cockeyed. That's the most astounding show I ever saw. Not the most spectacular, but most unusual show I ever saw and he had -

[END OF SIDE TWO]

MR. SOLMAN: - at any rate, many years had passed and abstract expressionism finally triumphed in I would say in the late '50s. And I was walking on the ground floor of the Metropolitan Museum, maybe the Egyptian section, and I bumped into him. I hadn't seen him for years. Nattily dressed as ever and little twinkly blue eyes and I said, "John," I said, "How are you," and I said, "Well, what do you think of your old friend, de Kooning and the abstract expressionist movement and what's happened?" And he stiffened his back and he looked at me and said, "For me there has been no painting since Degas," and he walked off. And he meant it. He denied not only Picasso, all of modern art, all through impressionism because Degas is truly an impressionist. Drawing, he had gone back to drawing, the Renaissance, and so on. And he wrote an article once for *Art News* on the rules of the game. Tennis has rules. You don't hit a ball over into left field like you do in baseball. And he meant there are rules in painting. He had gotten - I wouldn't even say rigid, you know. He got just as - I told you Stuart Davis called abstract expressionism a belch from the unconscious. Graham certainly didn't care for abstract expressionism, if it makes you feel any better. And I'll tell you another story. Someone told me that they saw a show of the abstract up at the Modern Museum and there was old John Marin and old Max Weber sitting together on a couch and they both looked at each other "What do you think?" and they both shrugged their shoulders. But that happens. Like I say this is not necessarily a critical comment - good, bad or indifferent, but a generation gap. That can happen. Like for instance I think Warhol is so superficial that I think he thinks he himself is - to me its commercial art of which he was a member. But not necessarily - Matisse told Picasso that he visited Renoir and he showed him a picture and Renoir said he didn't understand it but then Renoir said, but he said, Renoir said, but how you keep black on the surface is quite surprising and good. You know, he saw some little thing in it. You know what I mean? Did you ever see that drawing that Picasso made of Renoir?

MS. BERMAN: No, I haven't.

MR. SOLMAN: One of the greatest drawings, a big one. He was very old and paralyzed. I'll show you a reproduction.

MS. BERMAN: That would be great. So John Graham never talked about Jung and all of the other sorts of things?

MR. SOLMAN: No, no.

MS. BERMAN: About this period, you did, I guess not see other artists for a while because you were in your defense job, is that correct?

MR. SOLMAN: No, you're talking about '42 to '45. Yes, that's true. I would meet them in the cafeteria. No, I would see the artists. I would show at the Bonestall Gallery. I saw artists then.

MS. BERMAN: I had gotten the feeling from your writings that you were maybe a little big temporarily isolated because of these things you were doing.

MR. SOLMAN: No. The year or two I spent out in Hartford, year and a half or two I spent out there I didn't see any artists, but no, when I was in town - no, no, my association at that time, I developed that folio.

MS. BERMAN: Also I guess in '41 you got your job as a handicapper, is that right?

MR. SOLMAN: Not as a handicapper, no, no, no don't make a mistake in that.

MS. BERMAN: I don't understand racing.

MR. SOLMAN: I just sold tickets, many tickets to customers. That's all. Punch out tickets and take the money in, just like the cashier does at the movie house. I just sold tickets. I got that through a brother-in-law who called me up. The Project was - we were indoors then doing posters for the war, you know, before we got into the war - maybe we just got into the war, and I remember Byron Browne and Lee Krasner and I doing these posters and just telling jokes to each other. But he called me up and said they were looking for workers there and I said what kind of workers. He said well you only work in the afternoon, he said half a day work. I said I'll try it out. So, that summer of '41, I think that I left the Project. I figured I would try this out because in those days you worked for six months. It was a very easy job and I figured I would have the other six months to paint in, which is exactly what I did for a number of years. Rather than teaching a lot, you see. That job took nothing out of you, you know what I mean - mentally, or physically or so on.

MS. BERMAN: Right, it definitely wouldn't do that. When Rothko was getting into this myth business, did you ever talk with him about this or did he explain this to you?

MR. SOLMAN: No, he didn't explain it to me. That's a good question. By then, as I say, he was very close with Adolph and Barnett Newman and Stamos but I think he was - I think he knew that I wouldn't go for that. Period. I had quite a mind of my own and so he never did try to talk me into it, nor was I in the group of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors at that time. Of course, the Artists Union ceased to exist then. And then it was wartime. No, no he didn't. I certainly would have argued with him about it, since as you know I once made a statement if I can quote myself, that for me the subject of what we call the motif has more drama, more tension, more abstract designs than anything I can invent. But that's a theory for myself. I don't push that theory on anybody else and to this day I feel that way. I was out in the street today doing some of those silhouette streets and, my God, I could see a whole new period of monotypes if I can transform them into monotypes.

MS. BERMAN: When did you join the Federation?

MR. SOLMAN: That's a question that's very hard to answer. They kept asking me to go in. I said, "Well, they say they're not political and then they talk against this, that and the other." So many of my friends were in there like Bolotowsky and everyone else, and Avery. My guess is - is it '81 now - my guess is the late '50s.

MS. BERMAN: And what did you do as an officer in the group?

MR. SOLMAN: Well, we always discussed looking for shows just like I did in The Ten. I was on a delegation with Lou Harris who is a former member of The Ten group, to talk - what the hell's that building on 47th Street -

MS. BERMAN: You mean Seagram's?

MR. SOLMAN: Not Seagram's. It's on 47th and Park. I think they moved but they had their offices there - very famous corporation. We got them. We got about three or four shows out of them. In other words, how to get a show and to get a little publicity for the show. That was really the discussion of the group at the time I was in it.

MS. BERMAN: You said you knew de Kooning quite well. Did you know that much or observe the relationship between Rothko and de Kooning?

MR. SOLMAN: I don't think there was any relationship. I don't understand how - I opened a magazine once and I saw de Kooning interviewed about Rothko. Nonsense. He was not a close friend of Rothko at any time. I suppose he bumped into him but de Kooning was way out there on the island and they were never friends during the Project. I was friends with de Kooning through a mutual friend of ours, Mark Craig, a sculptor. But they just wanted to use de Kooning's name, they wanted to use Rothko's name. Believe me, I don't call it a hoax but it was a namby-pamby nothing. Rothko wasn't close to him at all.

MS. BERMAN: Let me see. Now you say about '40 or '41 you didn't see him again for a while, or you went in different directions?

MR. SOLMAN: I didn't see him for a while. By the way, I want to add to that. In the '50s about, in the '50s when de Kooning was making a name but not selling big yet, he had a studio right down here on Tenth Street. I would come from the race track sometimes and walk home from the subway, bump into him in the street, and he would invite me up for a drink or so, but he wouldn't stop drinking. I had to get home for dinner. And I would see some of the new things of his and I remember a remark he made about Rothko, to show you how they weren't friends. I said something to Bill, I said, "I will give you credit, Bill. You were fooling around with abstract forms long before it became fashionable," and he said, "Yeah, I was up at some house," he said, "And I saw a big Rothko there." He says it's just a nice decoration, that's all. You know, I could see that he was knocking it really. You know what I mean? He looked upon it just as décor. At that time I might have thought the same thing, I don't know. I didn't know his work too well, the new work, outside of one show I saw at Betty Parsons and the one at the Modern Museum and the ultimate show - I saw that show in Venice. I happened to be in Venice at the time one year and it wasn't a good show and it wasn't a good place to show it. The ceilings were so high, his pictures looked - they weren't well lit up and they weren't well chosen. The show at the Guggenheim on the other hand was a very well chosen show.

MS. BERMAN: That was nice. Were you interested - although of course your art was quite different - in getting into either the Peggy Guggenheim or Sidney Janis or Parsons Galleries in the '40s?

MR. SOLMAN: No, I didn't. Peg Guggenheim and Betty Parsons, it was the kind of stuff I didn't like, the movement. I wouldn't even have knocked at the door and asked, even though I know Betty Parsons. I was in one group show with a portrait of mine, some student of mine, Stamos - he wasn't a student of mine but he would come to the class, he told Betty Parsons about me and I had a portrait in a group show. That's beside the point. But Janis, you see, is a different story. He liked my work very much and when I had a show of interiors, my first show, not these interiors but earlier ones and still lifes he wrote a foreword for me for the Bonestall Galleries and he got me in a book called *Surrealists and Abstract Art in America* [Sidney Janis; New York, Reynal & Hitchcock: 1944], and I was neither one and he knew it and I knew it, but he found - this is the picture he put into the book.

It's black and white, it almost looks abstract. That's about '42. But because he liked my work he got me into that book and I didn't belong in that book. I mean, I was glad to get in it, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Of course -

MR. SOLMAN: With Knaths and a lot of friends of mine. And when I did these interiors, Avis, from '45 to '51 and I went to - no, about 1950 - I went to Janis knowing he liked my work and he was beginning to show some of the abstract expressionists and he looked at the slides and he gave me a very sweet polite brush off. I don't know what it was. I would have loved to go in his category because I always regarded myself as a modern artist, but had to take second best and go to a figurative gallery. I was not a real social painter like Gwathmey and Evergood, but since Herman Baron exhibited my work in group shows, and always liked me and so on, he had asked me, and so I finally drifted into that. I should have tried harder. But I did - I tried Knoedler Gallery and one of the guys there loved my work but the boss said he wasn't doing well with American art. He wasn't going to add a new American art. So I was rather frustrated in my attempts to get in a modern gallery at that time.

MS. BERMAN: Did you know or meet any of the artists in exile like Ernst or -

MR. SOLMAN: I only met Leger. I remember up in Arshile Gorky's studio. There was a big meeting of artists. I forget what the occasion was and I remember him because he was a very forceful looking character. But I didn't meet any of them to talk to, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Or perhaps did you meet Duchamp or Mondrian?

MR. SOLMAN: No. I would have loved to have met Ernst. I think he's one of the giants.

MS. BERMAN: Do you know, by the way, if Rothko was in the habit of or destroyed paintings during the time that you knew him?

MR. SOLMAN: Not when I knew him, but I heard a clear cut story that he bought from his first wife a bunch of the early paintings and destroyed them. He felt that - well, in his case I could kind of understand. He felt that this phase that he had reached was not only apotheosis of his striving but that he had found himself as you and I even discussed it, so that he had very little use for that. You've heard of writers destroying early works.

MS. BERMAN: It's harder to. I mean you can't destroy every copy.

MR. SOLMAN: You can't destroy a book that's been published but you can destroy early manuscripts. You can destroy early poems. If someone's going to finally publish your complete poems, let's say, and so on. Emily Dickinson never had a chance to edit her poems. I happen to think she's great.

MS. BERMAN: She doesn't need too much editing. I don't think she needed too much if any.

MR. SOLMAN: But she would have done some editing, you know her.

MS. BERMAN: Certainly. Well, I guess I'll ask you a little bit about the first Mrs. Rothko. Did she have an understanding of her husband wanting to be a painter and of art?

MR. SOLMAN: I think she liked his work. She used to be at - not our meetings - well, sometimes they would be at his house, but when we would go to the openings at Secession and other places, she would always be there, warm, considerate, and sympathetic towards art. Absolutely. She was not a hostile person towards his art at all. Did anyone ever indicate that?

MS. BERMAN: I don't know, she's - I won't go into that. You were going to tell me about the last time you spoke to Rothko.

MR. SOLMAN: It was maybe six months before his suicide. A woman had asked me for a friend of hers who was a collector, whether I could introduce her to Rothko and get her over to the studio to buy one of his late things and I said I didn't think he sold things from the studio. She pressed me a little. The woman who pressed me was a collector of my own work, and finally I decided there's nothing too wrong with it if I could put some bucks into Rothko's pocket and I called up and he was extremely cordial, although we hadn't seen each other for years, and I told him the case, and he said he didn't understand why the woman couldn't come over. I said actually to save some of the gallery discount money and he said, "No, they have an exclusive on me." And as we got to talking I told him that although I didn't like many aspects of abstract expressionism I was very fond of his work. His color was beautiful, and I described the canvas he had at the Metropolitan Museum, that show that - oh, he used to be curator of twentieth century art there.

MS. BERMAN: Geldzahler.

MR. SOLMAN: Geldzahler, yeah. I call him the gelded czar of the Metropolitan, and I can't stand him. I described that large picture that I thought was beautiful in the Rothko room and he seemed very unenthusiastic and down in the mouth and I said, "What's the matter? Don't you like your fame?" And he said, "I don't like the scene." So I said to him, "Mark, if you're complaining about the scene, then what would you expect me to say? I could keep you two weeks on end telling you what I think of the goddamn scene." And I didn't ask him specifically what he meant by that. Whether he meant the insurgence of pop art or what. I had no idea that he was depressed with his uppers and downers or what was going on with him. And he just asked about my wife, very cordially - asked when I would have my next show, to surely let him know. And I told him about a book that Crown had published and he said he would look it up. That was the last conversation I had with him, and I'm sorry I didn't visit him then. But I didn't realized it was a personal depression, you know what I mean? I just wasn't smart enough to realize it.

MS. BERMAN: I want to ask you a couple of things now. You go to Gloucester and I would like to know why you decided to go there in particular as your summer home.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, in the early '50s someone had recommended Rockport as a nice place for a vacation. I still was working at the race track but I would get a month, a month and a half off during August when the ponies go to Saratoga. So we went there and we fell in love with it. Our two kids were very young and each summer we would go there for three weeks, five weeks, whatever I could afford. I would do some sketching then, maybe a little painting then, and we fell in love with that area. Well, I think all of New England is glorious. And in 1967 through a few commissions and selling some paintings to a few dealers, I suddenly had for the first time in my life about $10,000 or $11,000 in the bank which seemed tremendous to me. When we visited our friend, Hans Moeller who invited us to Monhegan Island for eight days with him, they're wonderful people, on the way home we stopped off in Rockport to say hello to some friends, but I surprised my wife. While she was visiting, I went to a real estate agency and asked them if they had something around Rockport or Gloucester for such and such a price. So I said, "Good, I like that." So I called up my wife, said, "We're going for a ride." She says, "Where?" so I showed her. That was the first house they showed us, we fell in love with it and we bought it. That's in '67. We didn't enter it until '68, although my son with his first wife had a honeymoon there. And that's where I began to take up monotypes because I had seen the great Degas show of '68 at the Fogg. I had tried monotypes long before on several occasions. I didn't know how the hell to do it. They came out very weakfish, but I found a book here called *Monotype Printing* by Rasmussen. I took that with me and after throwing away 15 monotypes, I finally developed my own method of printing with turpentine and sponge and from there on, that's what I do in the summertime. I go out sketching, take the long walks, and I do monotypes. I regard them as my country dances, my bagatelles, my little lay-to's, my fun - although I treat it very seriously, I work as hard on one of them sometimes as on an oil painting. And during the other eight and a half months I do my oil painting.

MS. BERMAN: Do you tend to work in the mornings or the afternoons - when you're not interrupted by people interviewing you.

MR. SOLMAN: There's hardly any phone calls out there. We're looking over the gorgeous marshes, and we can see the ocean four blocks away. Yes, it is conducive to great relaxation - work, walks, and a lot of other things, lovely, lovely - looking forward to it. Although I love the city - I'm a city rat.

MS. BERMAN: And so you go for three or four months every summer?

MR. SOLMAN: About three and a half months roughly.

MS. BERMAN: I want to ask you about your collection. You have specialized in drawings and prints.

MR. SOLMAN: I specialize in drawings mainly because I could hardly afford oil paintings by the men I collect. Don't forget, ironically enough, Avis, when I was with J.B. Neumann's gallery, he was asking $300 for an oil by Olkay, not a water color. I'm talking about solid oil, you know, that now would be $150,000. But to last the week with something in those days on $23.86 and as I told you, if you sold a gouache for $15, you could go to a few of the plays, do something exciting, or go out shopping and buy a dress for your wife. But it's ironic that in the early '60s when I picked up a Nolde water color, it's a long story, very cheaply through a Hartford Gallery. He liked my work, so he allowed me $250 on my painting and my one painting was $200 for this, I think, but then I swapped that over to a Paul Klee thing that I saw in Weintraub Gallery and I added money to it, and then my wife began to work - the kids were grown up in school and she was getting some part time jobs at the Third Street Music School and so forth. So she was bringing home enough for the food on the table. So if I got a portrait commission for $400 or I sold something for $400 or $500, I would have a little extra money. I went up town shopping and so I bought a Morandi drawing for $300. I'd put down a deposit and pay it out and little by little I got the fever of a collector. I always liked collecting, and drawing collection is something I always thought - drawings are so beautiful because they're always genesis of the vision of the artist, you know and so I always loved them. I had gone to many shows of them. So here I was feverishly trying to buy one here and one there. Fortunately I was able to collect some by. I exchanged with another artist I know, as well as a dealer, Art Fair

that used to be on Second Avenue. They sold a lot of my gouaches. Did you ever see my newsprint gouaches? I did them on the way to the race track. Well he would sell a lot of those. So I picked a lot of them and so on and so forth. But it was a nice hobby until drawings that I was paying $300, $500, $600 and $800 for began to sell for $6,000 and $8,000 and I had to stop collecting. And that's the simple story of my collection. I think I did my biggest collecting from about '59 to '65. A good time to collect if you had a little money.

MS. BERMAN: Well, then did you start funneling or having a direction? I mean, did you think, ok, I'm going to get this or I've got it - in other words -

MR. SOLMAN: Well, I had a lot of favorites as you know. A lot of them are on my walls, a lot of enthusiasms. People that I felt had nourished my own art. And it was not paying them back, but it was so enriching for me to own an original of their's. If it wasn't a painting or sculpture, at least a drawing (and I don't say "at least" because to my mind sometimes a beautiful drawing is just as beautiful as a painting) that I felt a great, more than kinship toward, something that, retroactive relationship if I bought a drawing by one of the people I admired so much. And it was another impulse. At that time I was selling, and if I sold a good painting, a painting of mine that I admired very much, but naturally a customer or a collector liked it enough to pay me money for it, in the early days when I would sell paintings, I would always go out and buy an art book to get something back from that painting, and later it got to be like a - I liked to pick up a drawing to get something back for that painting. You know what I mean, so I wouldn't feel so badly that I had lost it.

MS. BERMAN: Well, there you are.

MS. BERMAN: I hate to go to the library. I would rather have the book.

MR. SOLMAN: There you are. So, you understand. I said all I'm doing is - you know, I would sell a painting for $500 in those days and all I'm doing it paying a lot of bills - the kids' school, this, that, one thing or another, and what am I left with? So I decided by God, I ought to - I never thought of it as investment. That was just luck that all of this turned into money. A Henry Moore drawing I paid $800 for, the very dealer I bought it from is offering me $12,000 and I think it's worth about $15,000. That's just sheer luck.

MS. BERMAN: Well, speaking of collectors. There was the one point when Hirshhorn became interested in your work and -

MR. SOLMAN: He became interested in my work I think around the early '50s at the ACA [American Contemporary Artists]. He bought a few things of mine and I think that was due not only to the fact that artists have always liked my work and told him about me and he saw it, but I also think that his then wife, Lily Harmon, an acquaintance of mine at the National Academy. She is on the Council with me. She's a Vice President. I think she - I know she liked my work very, very much, and she must have told him too. So that he had already bought about five words of mine including two of my interiors that he must have liked very much. Then when I had a show in '54-'55, just some portraits of my friends, I had returned to portraiture, and he came before the show opened and bought four out of the show. So he owns about I would say 15 paintings. About five or six years ago I bumped into him at some gallery and he asked why I didn't call him. I never knew I was supposed to call him. So he wanted to come down to the studio and he bought about 18 monotypes. He buys wholesale you know. But he bought mice monotypes of mine which he hasn't put in his museum, but eventually they'll go there I suppose. In fact, I started a portrait of him -

[END OF SIDE THREE]

MS. BERMAN: You taught at the Museum of Modern art, and you taught also at the New School, is that correct?

MR. SOLMAN: I pitched in for a friend of mine, who, yes, I had recommended him - yes, I taught there for about - oh, I know what. I pitched in. Herman Rose was teaching at some college and he asked me to pitch in for a year, one term for him, and then I pitched in for somebody else there. I never applied for that per se. I wasn't that much interested, but I taught there for about a year, a year and a half.

MS. BERMAN: I would like to know about, I guess, the pros and cons of teaching for a professional artist.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, I did teach for a number of years, around ten years, a private class of about six or seven pupils, most of whom had come out of either the Modern Museum class or a class I taught out in Roslyn North Shore Art Center in Long Island, and they were very faithful students of mine. Now, in the private class I was devoted to, I'll tell you why - I didn't let anyone into the class who didn't know how to draw, had some basic experience. I wasn't out to teach beginners. So I could carry them along and bring in books or set up still lifes a la Morandi or Picasso or Braque and teach them my ideas of the contributions of modern painting, whether it was cubism, flat space, this, that, bring in prints and so on. And we painted always from models or still lifes. That I would say was the most intensive teaching which I enjoyed. It was one night a week, and of course I made a partial living with that. When I quit the race track in '63, that was an important part of my rent paying until

about '67 when they called me to the City College. Now, there they paid very well. All I charged for our students was about $35 a month and so I paid rent for both the studio and here, but in City College they paid well. But I must say teaching either at the New School or the Modern Museum or City College, and particularly City College where a lot of students just take the course to get the credits, is not very fruitful. If you find two or three talents that are sincere you're lucky and you not only spend most of your time with them but you enjoy the time you spend with them and you try to push them along, and give them something and you get something out of them, they get something out of you since you put something in - the rest is very routine and is just spending time to earn your money. It is not to me a very important thing. I'm not so sure - there are artist who enjoy teaching like Will Barnett has been teaching for 40 years or more at the Art Students League and Edward Laning. I know friends of mine who taught all their life there and I think there is a great deal of give and take with their pupils. Pupils tend to idolize you, imitate you and so forth and so on. I don't need that so much. I'm not immune to it, but in that private class even where I was very devoted to them and they to me, I found that they imitate me so much, even though I tried to show them other artists, and even sent a few of them to other artists to learn. I said you've had enough of me. They become eternal students and eternally slavish students in a way, which is a detriment to themselves not to you as the teacher, and any other questions about teaching you want to make, ask me.

MS. BERMAN: Ok, I guess I would like to know what your methods were, what you tended to tell them or advise them.

MR. SOLMAN: Well, I'll only say that years later when I meet them somewhere, they quote me. They also misquote me. One of them will say all I remember from your course and it made a big impression on me is you always talked about children. I was afraid of that. I was sure I didn't like them too much teaching.

MS. BERMAN: You mentioned Edward Laning. Are you acquaintances?

MR. SOLMAN: We really became reacquainted in the National Academy. He was on the Council. But in the first days of the Project, you know Herman Rose, I, and another painter were assigned to him to help him with a mural. Well, his aesthetics and ours are so different that he let us just bring in sketches once in a while that he wasn't going to use. But he was very nice about it later on in an article. It's cute. He said we had such assistants and he mentioned my name and Herman Rose to show that there were eminently qualified artists on the Project.

MS. BERMAN: So were you supposedly helping on the Ellis Island murals or the library?

MR. SOLMAN: Not on the library, on the Ellis Island, but we got quickly shifted anyway. That didn't last long. Incidentally, coming back to Rothko another time. I love kiddy drawings because of the instinctive spontaneous quality they have. So I have a little collection. See, I'm an old collector. And I got some from Ben Zion. He used to teach at the Greenwich Village Salon and Rothko was teaching at some settlement house at that time and I went down there and I got a few and by God in one of them you'll see the Rothko influence. You see a teacher, even when he's teaching kids, I don't know how it rubs off, but do you want me to show them to you?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah, in a minute or two, that would be very interesting. So you have in other words, a children's drawing that was Rothko's influence.

[Solman shows Berman a drawing a child made that looked as if Mark Rothko had touched it up slightly.]

MR. SOLMAN: Well, it was from his class and somehow maybe it's after the fact that I see the influence.

MS. BERMAN: Well, Klee of course, you said was your great hero. Now, did you ever meet him?

MR. SOLMAN: Just a great love. No, no, I never met him. Well, I never got to Europe until '56, my first visit, and he was dead in '40.

[END OF CASSETTE - Interview interrupted by guests arriving.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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