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Oral history interview with Robert Mangold, 1994 June 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Mangold on June 3, 1994 . The interview took place in New York, and was conducted by William Weiss for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

WILLIAM WEISS: June 3, 1994 interview with Robert Mangold.

Okay, tell me when you were born and where you were born.

ROBERT MANGOLD: October 12, 1937 in North Tonawanda, New York, a small town outside of Buffalo.

WILLIAM WEISS: Outside of Buffalo—.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Between Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay. And tell me briefly about your parents, you know, their occupations, their interests, that sort of thing.

ROBERT MANGOLD: My father was a factory worker at Wurlitzer factory. He worked on organs and [pause] Cabinet finisher actually, sprayed finishes on cabinets and things, organs. He worked there, actually he worked there all his life. At the same time he was—we had a small farm, very small.

My mother worked, stayed at home for most her life. Then later on she worked when she was, well, when the children were grown. She worked at a kind of department store in—. Both in North Tonawanda.

WILLIAM WEISS: And did they have any interests that, were they interested in art at all? Did they pass any of that on to you?

ROBERT MANGOLD: No, not really. My mother had some music interests. She played the piano and played the organ. But I don't think at all anything of interest in terms of visual arts. They communicated some of that.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah, okay. So how would you characterize your childhood? In other words say up until you started high school. What kind of a childhood did you have?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Most of it, for most of it I lived in the country. I had a lot of time to myself. My brother, my only brother was seven years older than I was. So I kind of grew up as an only child in a way. He was away at school when I was very young and then he went into the Army or something at a point that I was in high school.

So I had a lot of time to myself. I enjoyed being alone, doing things alone. We lived along the Erie Canal actually, things like that.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you really had a lot of time just to be by yourself.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, of course in the summers, the summers were great. I had a lot of time just to—it was sparse population, so there wasn't a lot of kids to play with. But I had some friends. In school, you know, I did very well in school, a normal kind of situation.

WILLIAM WEISS: Did you start doing any drawing or anything at an early age on your own or—?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah. I don't know when it started. I used to go to the library. My mother used to go to the library a lot and I would go to the library with her. I started taking books out on maybe how to draw trees or how to draw whatever. I got interested in drawing fairly early and I had some skill at it for whatever reason. So I can remember even in early grade school or something being chosen to draw the calendar on the wall or something.

WILLIAM WEISS: Uh-huh. Yeah. So what's your earliest exposure to art? When did that start coming in?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, I actually—. I had a lot of art courses in high school. But I really—. I don't think I had any sense—. I think that today people growing up I don't know that you could grow up in the same way. But it

was a much more naïve and closed world. I don't think that I really knew that there was such thing as contemporary painters—.

WILLIAM WEISS: You weren't exposed to any of that, yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: —who weren't, you know, hobbies. You know, I knew there people who had a hobby of painting paintings, but I didn't know that there was really such a thing as fine art, you know, painters who went out and their life was making, making paintings.

So I was kind of interested. I went away to art school thinking of maybe being an illustrator.

WILLIAM WEISS: Uh-huh.

ROBERT MANGOLD: I kind of liked, you know, Norman Rockwell, all of that kind of—. At that time, this was the mid-50's and—

WILLIAM WEISS: Was that after high school?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah.

WILLIAM WEISS: You didn't take any art classes in high school did you say?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Oh, I took a lot.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, okay.

ROBERT MANGOLD: I took just about all they had to offer, which was everything from ceramics to, I don't know, mechanical drawing.

WILLIAM WEISS: But your teachers didn't really connect you with say art history or that there was a tradition?

ROBERT MANGOLD: There was a little bit of that. I mean, I can even remember having reproductions of Mondrian held up to me. But, it was all very obscure to me in certain way. Magazines illustration had a reality to me and I thought, this is what I would like to do. Is was only after I had gotten away to art school that I realized that, hey, I didn't particularly like illustration and I got—I realized that there was a world of people making paintings or there could be the possibility of that anyway.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you went to art school directly after high school, no military or any of that?

ROBERT MANGOLD: No. I worked a year after. I don't believe there was a draft thing. I don't recall that. I mean, I remember filing a draft card but I don't remember that there was any drafting. This was probably in '55 when I went away to art school. I think it was after the Korean War, maybe—would that have been true? And before anything else? I don't know. But it was in a period that I don't recall that there was any draft.

WILLIAM WEISS: It was after the Korean War?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah, and I think—I think the way the law was then was as long you were in college you weren't drafted and if you weren't then you might be or something. I can't recall it really.

I worked year after high school actually to earn some money because I didn't have any and my parents couldn't afford anything. So I saved up money to go and went to Cleveland Institute of Art.

WILLIAM WEISS: Cleveland Institute of Art. You picked that for any particular reason?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Probably a slightly naive reason also. I wrote letters to a lot of schools. Pratt, and—. I can remember several in Northern Chicago. They all sent me catalogs, and Cleveland was the only one who said, you know, why don't you come visit the school, it was a friendly letter. So Cleveland not being very far away from Buffalo, and I didn't want to go to school in Buffalo because there wasn't—but I kind of wanted to get away from home.

So I went to Cleveland, and never having seen an art school before, what it looked like, you know, it was this great big factory of people doing weaving, and making pots, and—.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah. It's quite outstanding.

ROBERT MANGOLD: —doing automobile design and everything and it's like, you know, incredible. So I was very excited and I made up my mind I would go there.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah. Well, at what point did you start turning toward a painter say, a fine artist rather than an applied artist?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah.

WILLIAM WEISS: How did that evolve?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Cleveland is a fairly traditional art school and you, everyone took the same first year courses. So it almost didn't matter what you were going into the first year. And maybe there were, maybe there was one or two electives or something, but they were minor, which you might have had the choice from lettering and, you know, there was not, you didn't really branch out until your second year.

Several things happened. Number one, I liked the teachers in the class, the department better, painting and sculpture teachers better than the other teachers. I liked the students in that area better. They were more interesting and they talked about art, you know. I went in and looked at the illustration rooms, the classes and things, and it seemed like factory work to me, which was what I was running away from. It seemed like, you know, this is not what interested me.

So I gradually, I saw that there were—. I didn't really, I don't know that I really thought of being a painter in a sense, but I thought that I could be a teacher, like the guys who were teaching me or the women who were teaching me and so on. That I could somehow make a living, make a life like that. It didn't seem bad. They taught two or three days and then you had the rest of the week to work, and it seemed, you know, not a bad situation.

So I kind of visualized myself as being that kind of thing, teaching and [inaudible]—.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay. So how long did you go there?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Four years.

WILLIAM WEISS: Four years. So you graduated with a BFA, is that it?

ROBERT MANGOLD: No, they didn't actually, this was—. They didn't give a degree at that time. You graduated with a diploma. You could go a fifth year if you were accepted to go a fifth year and you could get a bachelor's.

WILLIAM WEISS: Were there any teachers there that are worth mentioning at this point, that you felt were a real kind of influence over you in way or another?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, you know, a lot of them had an influence because I was from a very naive situation and never having been exposed to art classes other than high school. And so there were, there was a sculpture teacher named McVey, William McVey, who taught there who was very good and was very open minded. There was a painting teacher who was, Woey Bolza [ph] actually. He was Italian, came from Italy, but lived in New York for a while. He had a kind of modest career in the 40's I guess.

But there were a lot of other teachers. It was—you know, it was very positive reinforcement and I really felt like, you know, there was a life in this area and it interested me more than the others.

WILLIAM WEISS: How about visiting professors, did you have that there, anybody who stood out, that?

ROBERT MANGOLD: We didn't have much. Actually the curious thing, [Josef] Albers did come at one point. But this was kind of ahead of the game. This was kind of—. I'll tell you, I should go back actually because the big thing that happened to me there didn't happen in the school in a way.

I went with a group of students to the Carnegie International in '58 I guess it was. I was maybe in the beginning of my third year, or middle of my third year. It was the first time I saw New York school painting. There was at Carnegie—. I haven't been there since then, so I—. But I remember this very, very large room and in it there was the [Willem] de Kooning dock and a big Franz Kline. There was a guy who— [inaudible].

WILLIAM WEISS: Was it Stuart Davis?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, he wasn't in that room. But I think there was all of this very big stuff, plus some European paintings by Alberto Guerri. I think perhaps Picasso had a painting in that room. I mean, it was kind of amazing because there was everyone, you know. There was—at that time at the Carnegie International you could literally just about put everyone in one room or in one building, I mean from Tamayo to Ben Shahn, Andrew Wyeth. So you would go room to room with everything going on.

You know, I saw this kind of painting for the first time. At that point I—you know, I was very confused by it or

maybe even bewildered a little bit by it. But suddenly I realized that abstract painting could be something, (a), other than design and other than deriving its forms from nature, that it somehow could make this direct statement too. You know, it was a very exciting moment.

I went back to Cleveland and started trying to paint like maybe—

WILLIAM WEISS: What did it look like, the first paintings?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, they were kind of conglomerates. I mean, they would have—I might—I remember one that looked very much like Sam Francis [phonetic].

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Big squiggle kind of thing. Other ones were more—I was kind of interested in—as I got more interested in it I started, you know, reading the art magazines more and becoming more—seeking out more about the de Kooning and Gottlieb. I got very interested in Gottlieb's pictograms, compartmentalizing kind of thing. I was interested in de Kooning quite a bit at that point. I wasn't very aware of Rothko or Newman at that point.

WILLIAM WEISS: How about Langhart?

ROBERT MANGOLD: No, I don't recall being influenced by him at that point. I was more interested in this real direct painting much more, I guess much more than painting..

WILLIAM WEISS: So how old were you then more or less?

ROBERT MANGOLD: I would have been—let's see, 21.

WILLIAM WEISS: Twenty-one? That was a big turning point.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah, 22, something like that.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you went—from that point on out you just became much more self aware of yourself?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, see, what was so strange was that I left from doing still lifes or something into this kind of thing. You know, it was just like an overnight thing that I, you know—I wanted to find out what it was like to paint these kind of paintings. So after—so to get back to things, Albers came at a certain point and I wasn't interested in Albers at all. Because he was very regimented and doctrinarian and everything. And this wasn't—you know, I was very feeling romantic and free in terms of ideas. So I thought that seem and very restrictive.

I wasn't very interested in going to Yale. But in my third year I was selected by the school to go to Yale Norfolk summer school. There were two big summer schools, one was, Skowhegan and Cleveland would send one person to Skowhegan and one person to Yale and I was selected to go to Yale, the student to go to Yale.

I got a lot out of that summer. I met some of the teachers who were at Yale at the time, particularly Bernie Chaet. Albers had just retired. Chaet was very helpful in terms of, you know, saying, look—he thought I was good potential or something—and suggested that, you know, if I wanted to go to Yale maybe they could help in some way or something. So that's how I ended up going—or even though I wasn't very drawn to the Albers side of it.

WILLIAM WEISS: This is a good—. Let's move up to the time when you were at Yale. So you're a graduate student.

ROBERT MANGOLD: So, yeah, I was accepted at Yale. Actually before I left Cleveland I kind of recognized a problem that while I was doing these kinds of paintings that excited me and interested me in a way I somehow sensed that they were built on nothing, other than—. You know, I sensed the fact that I didn't know what the hell I was doing, other than imitating something.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, oh. Was it that you thought that you might not know what you're doing or that abstract art in general might be sort of a—

ROBERT MANGOLD: No, I don't think I was frightened by the idea of abstract art. In fact some of the work was very—some of the work did have elements of the world in it. But basically I somehow felt that, I somehow felt like I had carried this initial kick that I got from seeing abstract and expressionist art. When I got to Yale it was very good for me because I actually more or less stopped painting for the first year, did some drawing. I spent a lot of time studying art history in terms of the 20th century, studying, you know, what I didn't know very much about in terms of cubism, and Dadaism, and surrealism, and the history of the 20th century. I spent a lot of time digesting and I kind of, I did paintings that kind of echoed elements of all of those.

So it was a very, very creative in that period where I worked. But we're talking about a year, a year-and-a-half of very encapsulated study. And then of course at the same time, this was now 1960, at the same time the art world is changing. My first show was with Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg and Whitney, and, you know [inaudible]. There was all—so there was all these new elements of pop art kind of coming in and so on.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you started going to New York and going to the art galleries—.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah. See one of the great advantages—I had started going to New York a little bit when I was in Cleveland. I would make trips with friends and spend a few days. But one of the reasons I liked going to Yale was that it was close to New York.

WILLIAM WEISS: You could take the train.

ROBERT MANGOLD: And the other, the other reason that I went to Yale, and I think that a lot of people went to Yale in those years, was that Yale would accept students from schools without degrees into their graduate program where most schools wouldn't.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: So anyway I was at Yale. I would go to New York a lot and I would see a lot of shows. You know, every—you know, all the students were talking about everything that was going on. So I was—you know, I became influenced to a certain degree in terms of pop art just in terms of iconography and color.

WILLIAM WEISS: So pop art was the predominant art form that was being shown at the galleries that you were going to?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Those were new, that was the new world, new thing that was going on. A lot of the students, a lot of the students at Yale at the time, several students I knew I thought were really good painters and were really committed to being, going on and being third or fourth generation abstract impressionists.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: I mean, I recognized that there was no future in that somehow. So pop art was a way out of that, but I didn't know what it would be. Because I wasn't really interested in pop art either. It didn't interest me.

WILLIAM WEISS: Well, when you said—you mean you weren't—

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, I wasn't interested—

WILLIAM WEISS: It held no future. I mean, that sounds almost you're being almost, I mean you're being sort of cool about the whole thing. You weren't interested in it personally or that you had—

ROBERT MANGOLD: The abstract and expressionist.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, there was something so—there was something very self-sustaining and secure and almost phony about what was going on in terms of—. There was a language the way abstract expressionists and the students, it was all of this language of how you talk about your painting and about whether it worked.

WILLIAM WEISS: So it became kind of the established salon style?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah, it became a salon style. It didn't seem like it was, like it was very interesting to me. However, during that period I did discover Barnett Newman and that was very interesting.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah. He was quite radically different—

ROBERT MANGOLD: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

WILLIAM WEISS: —from de Kooning or one of those, Guston.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Right, right. And there was something about the kind of physical and yet architectural styles and scale and the way he related to those and so on. And so when I came out of Yale, at the end of Yale, I was kind of having certain kinds of color and almost letter form imagery. Someone actually while I was there said, oh, you know—. Oh I know, it was Alex Katz, who was a very good teacher. He was a—.

WILLIAM WEISS: Very good painter out of—

ROBERT MANGOLD: He said, "You know, you should look up Al Held. He's doing stuff that's very much like what you're doing." So I remember going to the Poindexter and seeing the show of Al's.

WILLIAM WEISS: So Al Held was out of school, older than you, is that right?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah, yeah. And he was showing in New York.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: And there were similarities because Al was doing these big kind of geometric letter things and I was doing the same kind of letter form thing. So there was, you know, there was an interest in that. And actually Al came to teach at Yale later, but after I was gone.

WILLIAM WEISS: You know, when you said Barnett Newman, though, that really clicked with me how your work and other people's work that could be put alongside yours. It comes from that sort of—

ROBERT MANGOLD: Barnett Newman was—yeah, he was very—yeah, he had a very strong influence I think on a lot of, a lot of people.

WILLIAM WEISS: You said, architectural scale.

ROBERT MANGOLD: A lot of the people who somehow got lumped together in that minimal area or something I think were all influenced in one degree or another and the elements from that came out of Newman.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah, yeah. And even, just, this is a little—we're off on a small but interesting tangent, who else besides Barnett Newman? Does anyone else pop into your mind that you are—in that context maybe that was influential?

ROBERT MANGOLD: At this time?

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah. I mean, Barnett Newman was certainly an established artist. I guess I'm asking were there any other established artists?

ROBERT MANGOLD: There were—I'm trying to think of people that I've—. I was interested in some, somebody that you probably wouldn't know. George Ortman actually, who at that time was showing at the Stable Gallery. He was doing these, these constructions, these little things that were cut out. I was still very interested in this kind of—I was much more interested in kind of constructed painting at that time, constructed physically constructed painting than I was later. So I was interested in that.

WILLIAM WEISS: Did you see John Chamberlain's collages or any of those things or—

ROBERT MANGOLD: Later. I don't remember seeing them at that time. When I came to New York after Yale, I got a job as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art. And I think that was the period, I think Rothko had a show there actually at that time, '63 or something like around that time.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: That was very—. Also, slightly earlier too—I lived in Buffalo and so I used to go and visit my parents all the time—Still had this big show.

WILLIAM WEISS: Clyfford Still?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah, at the Auburn. That was very interesting. I mean, all that was kind of in the mix.

WILLIAM WEISS: No one from Europe at that point?

ROBERT MANGOLD: No, I think I had really, I had really bitten this idea that I was really interested in America, in American art, that there was a real break between—. And I'm not sure that it was all, that it was all a lie in a way because I think there was a totally different attitude that came out of the School of Paris, and Matisse who came out having a feeling about painting and color and so on. There was like a, there was another attitude that seemed much more interesting, whether it came out of abstract expressionism or whether it came out of pop art. It was a kind of much, much less refined, tasteful thing and much more about contemporary experiences and so forth.

So—I mean, I wasn't—I kind of like wasn't very interested in European painting, although as a guard at the Museum, you know, I was looking all the time, whether it was Mondrian or whatever. But it was much later before I really got to the point where—.

WILLIAM WEISS: You know, it's interesting because your generation was the beginning in a way of—the generation preceding you, Rothko, and Newman, and Guston and so forth, they were really transitional figures. They looked at European art a lot.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Even though they—

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: —professed not to.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah. Well, they came from, you know, [Adolph] Gottleib, you know—

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah most of them came out of de Kooning—I mean Picasso and—

WILLIAM WEISS: Picasso and some from Matisse. But your—with your group it was more—you were the beginning of just from start of— you know, you started at a time where they enabled you to just look at American art primarily and not have to do a comparison.

ROBERT MANGOLD: And, you know, the 60's was a crazy time in terms of, aside from everything else, in terms of art because—you know, we talk today about there being no single style or something.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: But it was incredible then because there was kinetic sculpture, stuff that was making sound and blinking lights. I mean, there was—I mean, for everything it was wide open in terms of what was going on, from all different directions.

WILLIAM WEISS: That's the best way.

ROBERT MANGOLD: And, you know, I can remember, you know, the Happenings were going on, Kaprow was doing environments. I mean, there was all this stuff, all different directions. So it was really very open. Galleries were looking for people. It was very easy to get into a gallery. You know, it was kind of a very mixing, exciting time.

But it was really focused on what was happening at the moment and in the recent past. I don't think there was a lot of connections with what—I think that later as people from my generation—it reminds of when we traveled and went to Europe and had shows in Europe, kind of reconnected in a funny way. But up to that point there was kind of everyone.

WILLIAM WEISS: Well, okay, so at what point did you feel that your, what you would characterize as your mature work started to come out? When did that happen?

ROBERT MANGOLD: I came to New York in '62 I think. Actually Yale had a situation where every student at Yale had a different program designed for their degree. I was to spend a year—I guess it was two years in residence and a year out of residence. It was a three-year program. I'm trying to remember now. I think that's the way it was, two years there and then a year out of residence.

What out of residence meant was that you could live anywhere and be anywhere. You would still be enrolled in the school. And then you would come back and you would pass the jury and get your master's degree. So I moved to New York and got a job. I was married at that point. I met my wife. Sylvia was a painter at Yale.

So we started a normal life. I went back and got the degree and I didn't, you know, I wasn't—I had already started showing, so I wasn't very involved in whether I had a degree or not. It didn't really mean a great deal to me. But I thought, you know, I should go up and try to get it if I can get it.

And I—my mature work I think started about a year after I came to New York. I was doing interesting work, but I don't think that I really got into—I think that after I got to New York and worked and made transitions—and I was in some group shows, and the shows were early, almost within a few months of coming to New York. But it took me about a year-and-a-half and then I think maybe around '64 or '65 I kind of really began whatever, you know, I have been involved in since.

WILLIAM WEISS: How would you describe your work at that time, at that point?

ROBERT MANGOLD: I was making kind of—when I first came to New York I was also, I was very excited about the city, the physicality and awkward places, everything from the subway, you know, I was very intoxicated with being in New York, Lower Manhattan and that kind of—

And I was doing paintings that were like sections of walls. They were sections and they were literally made from materials that you would make walls from, sheet wood and plywood, and some were made from sheet rock. And in some cases they were painted like wall colors, brick red. I had some that were cut in, that had two layers of color, like institutional walls, a dark color and—

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: And I was doing these wall sections and, you know, it was abstract. There was this connection to pop art because it had a connection to the street in a way, and yet it also had kind of a connection to that Newman direction in abstract art that interested me.

WILLIAM WEISS: Now who were you—was there anyone of your comrades at that time that you were sort of on the same track with?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, I mean, oddly I met Brice [Marden] at Yale. We were students at Yale at the same time. Also I mean Richard Serra was there at the time, and Nancy Graves. But a lot of us went different ways. Brice went to Europe. He got a Fulbright or something like that and he went to Europe after Yale. Richard, I don't know exactly—he might have gone—actually he might have gone to—I can't remember.

WILLIAM WEISS: How about Robert Ryman?

ROBERT MANGOLD: I met Bob. After I came—actually what happened was it was all through being a guard at the Museum of Modern Art because Bob had been a guard at the Museum of Modern Art. He was just quitting actually as I—

The Modern at that time had this very nice habit of hiring a lot of writers, poets, painters, artists. I met Sol LeWitt there. Actually I met Lucy Lippard, who was Bob Ryman's wife at that time. So I got into—I met a lot of people that, you know, became lifelong friends.

I ended up getting—Sylvia and I got a studio on a floor in this building. I was telling you before that we were—each floor was $180 for a floor. This was in the same building that Bob Ryman was in, the first floor was. The second floor I don't know.

And Sol LeWitt was very nearby. He was over on Hester Street, and Sol actually helped us find our second place. So I knew of—this would have been, this would have been '62, '63 time period, before Bob Ryman was showing. Actually none of us were really showing very much, just small situations.

WILLIAM WEISS: How long did you live in New York,—when did you leave there?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Lived there about ten years.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you were really only there ten years.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah. From the early 60's until the early 70's, I mean really living there. We still kept the studio and still kept some space there for quite a while.

WILLIAM WEISS: Did you look—did you move primarily for economic reasons or because your children needed a more wholesome—

ROBERT MANGOLD: It was very complicated. When I try to think back on this actually it was very complicated issues and it somewhat connects to the time frame. I mean, the 60's became a very depressing time in lots of ways. I mean, there were the political assassinations, the Vietnam War. A lot of things were affecting me in their own ways. I remember that Eva Hesse, who was a good friend who lived right on the same block on the Bowery, got very seriously ill at that point. There was like—I don't know. It was like, I felt like all, oh, and there was another aspect of it aside from this sense of doom and gloom about the world and everything.

There was—I also got to feel very harassed somehow about careerism somehow, about everybody—suddenly all of the people who I had known and that I was friends with suddenly—a lot of things were going on. It was like everybody was aware of who was on the cover of Art Forum this month, who was in this show and who wasn't in this show. I don't know. It all became very distracting and very depressing.

I just—and plus Sylvia and I we weren't, we really didn't have very much money. We—Sylvia didn't have a very good studio. We had two children and couldn't afford private school. I got a Guggenheim, which at that time was maybe $10,000 or something. We decided to buy a house in the country with it, which at that time you could still do. We bought a place in the Catskills actually in Sullivan County and thinking that we would just live there in the summer, we would try going there in the summer.

We enjoyed being there and being away from things so much that we after maybe one, spending one or two summers there we moved there permanently. Then after about four or five years of that we realized that that was really too far and we missed the connections in the city. So then we moved to this place here.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah. This is a good distance. How far away from the city are you? Do you take a train? You can't take a train.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well, there is a train but I've never taken it. It goes to Hoboken.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh.

ROBERT MANGOLD: But if I'm not driving I'll take the bus.

WILLIAM WEISS: You know, just to digress for a second. There's one thing I realized we missed. During the time when you first got to New York and you began to paint with what became your sort of more mature style of painting, if you want to call it that, did you feel at that time that you were part of anything or did this historical context kind of happen later on?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Well—

WILLIAM WEISS: At what point did you become aware that critics were putting you with other artists, I mean, and they were calling this minimalist?

ROBERT MANGOLD: It was much later. I was aware that there was something going on because I was doing—I mean, in a lot of ways a lot of people were doing things unknown to each other in a certain way. Sol and I were very good friends. But what Sol was doing was—was more or less totally three dimensional, structural, and was very different from what I was doing, which was—and at the same time—but very soon then, in the early 60's, I can remember seeing Carl Andre's first show.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: And suddenly there were all these people who were working in this very limited way, with limited numbers of elements in their work. At that time it wasn't called minimal, you know. And the Jewish Museum show, which was the big sculpture show at that time, Kynaston [McShine], he was a modern artist and the chief curator he came around to my studio because he was aware that there was all this work going on but hadn't been connected by it.

But curiously he decided or whoever it was decided in the end that it would just be a sculpture show. So the painters, whatever painters there were that would have been connected were kind of eliminated from that. So then not long afterwards—let me see, why am I—I blanked out his name—at the Guggenheim, he died not too long ago, he did a show called Suspended Painting. Lawrence Alloway.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT MANGOLD: Which kind of picked up the painting side of—

WILLIAM WEISS: So that was a significant, historical show?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah. That picked up the painting side of what the Jewish Museum showed.

A WILLIAM WEISS: What year was that? What year was that more or less?

ROBERT MANGOLD: That would have been 60…—I'm trying to think because I'm trying to think of the work that was in it. That would have been about '67 or '68. I don't know, maybe it the Jewish Museum was '66 or something like that, but it followed a year after. So people like Brice, I'm not sure if Bob Ryan was in it because Bob was a—Bob strangely was someone who wasn't—they didn't know what to make of these brush strokes back then. Because it looked to everybody still like abstract expressionism in a way.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, really?

ROBERT MANGOLD: And they didn't—or I don't know what it was. But whatever it was they weren't able to connect it with what was going in the more, you know, blank kind of painting. And so—

WILLIAM WEISS: And it's more like traditional painting somehow.

ROBERT MANGOLD: So it was only kind of later that Bob was kind of linked and, and in a funny way too. Although his work was preceding all of it. You know, he was—his work was certainly around. You know, people

went to see it. Dealers weren't interested in showing, however.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay, let's come to the present now just for a moment. Do you usually work in a series of paintings that will last a year or two and then you'll sort of get a fresh start on something else?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah, I usually do. I work in groups of paintings. I mean, usually an idea will suggest itself and will open into a group. It might be a group of ten or twelve, or even a smaller group. But usually it's a group of work that usually takes me one or two years to go through or maybe three. And then that may open up into another group of work. They are distinct bundles of work that have a beginning and an ending.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT MANGOLD: I feel like I've gone as far as I can go with that particular thing.

WILLIAM WEISS: So basically you work intuitively. You're not working with any kind of pre-defined plan?

ROBERT MANGOLD: No, I don't. Yeah.

WILLIAM WEISS: Even kind of a scientific…

ROBERT MANGOLD: I go through a panicky period after I've finished a group of work because while I'm doing them I'm thinking in the back of my mind what I might do next. I really don't know. Then I get—

WILLIAM WEISS: That's how you know you're getting toward the end?

ROBERT MANGOLD: Yeah. Well, just at the end when I realize that any additional things I'm going to do now, like if I do it this way or that way, are becoming repetitious. It's predictable, you know. It no longer has the excitement like when you're putting something together that you don't quite know how it's all going to work.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yeah. Now when you look at those bundles over the last 20 years do you see—I mean, is there anything to remark about that that you want to say? Certainly there's a continuum, but do you have anything else to comment about just the overview?

ROBERT MANGOLD: No, I—I don't know. I think that— I don't know if it's this way for other artists, but I don't think I have a very good overview of my own work. I think that I'm very connected to what I've done most recently and there's some bundles of work that I have very little use for at this point, and then maybe five years from now I'll be more interested in that bundle than I am now.

But it's very hard for me. I find doing retrospective shows of my work almost painful, you know because—

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