Oral history interview with Robert Motherwell, 1971 Nov. 29-1979 May 1

Interviewer: Dorothy Seiberling, 1971 Nov. 29
Place: Provincetown, Massachusetts (Interview)

Audio excerpt: Oral history interview with Robert Motherwell, 1971 Nov. 29-1979 May 1

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Preface

Robert Motherwell (1915-1991) was a painter and teacher associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement. In this interview, he discusses his early years in Berkeley, California, and his education at Stanford University, Harvard University, and the University of California, Berkeley, including his interest in the Surrealist movement and his friendship with Gordon Onslow Ford. He also discusses his work during the late 1940s and early 1950s, including his first one-man show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery, his relationship with Jackson Pollock, and his teaching at Hofmann's School of Fine Arts. Motherwell also discusses his work with Surrealist automatism, his interest in the Spanish Civil War, his relationship with Peggy Guggenheim, and his work with the Dada artist Marcel Duchamp. He also discusses his work with the Spanish painter Joan Miró, his friendship with Mexican muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, his friendship with Max Ernst, his friendship with Jacques Lipchitz, his friendship with Stuart Davis, his friendship with Barnett Newman, his friendship with Mark Rothko, his friendship with Clyfford Still, his friendship with Willem de Kooning, his friendship with Ad Reinhardt, his friendship with Franz Kline, his friendship with Hans Hofmann, his friendship with Ernest Hemingway, his friendship with Saul Steinberg, his friendship with Alexander Calder, his friendship with Jackson Pollock, his friendship with Mark Tobey, his friendship with Leonard Baskin, his friendship with Ben Shahn, his friendship with Robert Rauschenberg, his friendship with Jasper Johns, his friendship with Frank Stella, his friendship with Roy Lichtenstein, his friendship with Andy Warhol, his friendship with Claes Oldenburg, his friendship with Jim Dine, his friendship with Robert Indiana, his friendship with Ellsworth Kelly, his friendship with Richard Diebenkorn, his friendship with Philip Guston, his friendship with Louis Bunce, his friendship with Lee Krasner, his friendship with Elaine de Kooning, his friendship with Helen Frankenthaler, his friendship with Sam Francis, his friendship with Ulfert Wilke, his friendship with Frederick Kiesler, his friendship with Ad Reinhardt, his friendship with Barnett Newman, his friendship with Mark Rothko, his friendship with Clyfford Still, his friendship with Willem de Kooning

PAUL COMMISCO: What kind of things happened? Or what was the most memorable thing?

ROBERT MONTEMURRO: Well, I'm a little, I'm kind of, I'm kind of, I'm a little bit of a, though I had spent two weeks in a very luxurious place in Costa Rica, I'm a little bit of a, I'm a little bit of a, I'm a little bit of a

PAUL COMMENTS: What about Rashomon? When did you get into Rashomon? Well, you, and that was did that come about?

ROBERT MITCHUM: Well, I mean, I mean, I'm, I'm, I'm

PAUL CONNOLLY: Well, what about Everything? No one, one of the two people who are selling always –

ROBERT ADDINGTON: Yes. Do you have the big, little, with an egg? Yes, I have the big one. Yes, I have the big one. Yes, I have the big one. And one of the other little ones. Ah, I'm sorry. So, so, so, so

synagogues in Israel,Israel,Israel,

ROBERT ROSENTHAL: Yes.

PAUL COMBINES: Oh, did that have any particular meaning at that point, being you?

ROBERT ROSENTHAL: No.

[Crew laughs]

ROBERT ROSENTHAL: No, really, really didn't know anything about it. I mean, I'd heard of it, of course, but I didn't know anything about it. I mean, I'd been there and I was a professor at the university of Wisconsin. I'd been there for a year and I didn't know anything about it. I'd been there for, you know, I'm sure that was the end of it.

PAUL COMBINES: And it never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never.

ROBERT ROSENTHAL: No, I'm sorry, and they, every time I ask you to have stuff anything, I don't know anything, and I'm anything.

PAUL COMBINES: Well, Bob, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Well, Bob, these ambitions, these ambitions, these ambitions

ROBERT ARDENNES: Kate, it sounds very exciting to me.
[Fade out]
[Title concentration]
ROBERT ARDENNES: Beginning in 1945, for the postwar people, the Cold War was the dominant reality. Nuclear weapons, the jet fighting, political long-lifes, which had to be in life-saving intervals. Well, I'm not a scientist, I'm not a politician, I'm just a writer, I'm just a teacher, and so what I do, what I do teaching, is that I take such ideas and I try to make them into stories. And I'm going to tell you a story now about a man, who was born in Europe the summer, and ended up in the Cold War, and he was a scientist, and he was a politician, and he was a writer, and he was a teacher, and he was a man who was a man of his time.
[Title: Dr. Strangelove]
FRED COMMONS: Hey, good morrow.
ROBERT ARDENNES: After having pointed longer-sight the whole history of the Cold War, I'm going to tell you the story of the operation of strategy, and I'm going to, in a short fiction, and then I'm going to tell you the story of the Cold War, I'm going to tell you the story of the joint-ranking high-prestige. [The ambiguity pointed so many years ago, the Cold War, the operation of strategy, the joint-ranking high-prestige, ending with, I guess, Operation of Western Air Force, which was also an NATO, I think, that's why, the joint-ranking high-prestige, I guess, that's why,

PAUL COMMONS: Okay. Well, I don't know. I think there's been some feedback where people say that they want to know what is the point of this. What is the point of this. What is the point of this. It is the point of a neurological change that can be seen into our neurological structure. It's the point of a change that can be seen in our behavior. It's the point of a change that is reflected in the qualitative results. It's the point of a change that is reflected in the quantitative results. It's the point of a change that is reflected in the stories we have in the file, which is the most detailed set of stories that we have in the file, which is the most detailed set of stories that we have in the file. It's the point of a change that is reflected in the stories we have in the file.

PAUL COMMONS: Why are you thinking that that? That can stride on?

ROBERT MOSENTHAL: Yeah. I'm a fan of stories.

PAUL COMMONS: Yeah. Yes.

[Inaudible]

ROBERT MOSENTHAL: You know, for example, I spent my whole life—I'm not trained as a professional therapist. I spent my whole life reading Freudian stuff. I've read Freud. I've read Jung. I've read Freud's Interpretation of Dreams. I've read Jung's Memories, Dreams, Reflections. I've read all of that. I've read all of that. I've read all of that

[Audio break.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —to believe. Otherwise, I wouldn't do it at all. I wouldn't even consider it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But now, you know, what—it's interesting. You said that that now is about 10 years old. Um, there've been some other publications on you, haven't there?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, well—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Recent, that you can think of?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: There are only three of any consequence. One, a very nice little catalogue done by a small Swiss gallery, which nobody knows about in America and which is mostly in German. Uh, and then a very good catalogue published by the Houston Museum by Carmine [ph] , a college retrospective. But again, it is not in bookstores. So that unless you happen to be in that museum in Texas, you don't know about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the third, which just arrived this week is, you know, unless you count a huge show at the Princeton Museum, in fact the biggest show I've had since the Museum of Modern Art show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the catalogue for that just came this week. But again, I don't know whether it's going to be distributed in bookstores because in a sense, it's a catalogue, but it has four essays in it, lots of pictures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Because I had wondered. I knew about the exhibition, but I'd never seen a catalogue or anything.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah, well, it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: There is one now.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: It just came. Yeah. There it is on the uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —table over there. I'll show it to you in a minute. In fact, I've only got two, but I've ordered a lot. When I get one I'll give it to you. And also give you, when you leave, the uh, Carmine [ph] catalogue, which must have come out since I've seen you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, well, I don't remember that one.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And it's the—it's a very scholarly, well-done thing. And Ameson is now hoping to finish the book on me, the big Abrams book that he's been working on off and on for years. He's hoping to finish a month from today, which means that would come out about a year from now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And you see, actually, the past 10 years that this book, the O'Hara book, does not cover—have been by far the most prolific of my three decades of painting. And I think the whole image of me will shift considerably because of um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean? In terms of, of uh—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, for example, many people don't even know the *Open* series exists. Um, I've done a collage on an ever-increasing scale in the past 10 years. I've been involved in much more intense color than I ever was before. Uh, the pictures in general are much bigger than —everybody thinks that there are lots of huge *Elegies*. Actually, in the first 20 years, there were only five that were huge. And I've made maybe nine since then that are huge, as many small ones. And lots of huge *Opens* and so on. Also um, it's in the past 10 years that I've done all my print work, graphics, which has become increasingly as important to me, say, as collages are. It's another whole dimension.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the prints start? Because I know there was one or two here and there and it took, seemed to take a long time to get them going.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, the—basically it started with Tanya Grosman inviting me out. And for a long time, I did lithographs with her. And lithography, for some reason, is very difficult for me. And I would spend a lot of time and energy getting one that satisfied me. I mean, as much time and energy as I could paint a mural-sized painting. And though, in one way, I enjoyed the printing and the papers and so on. In another way, I think I enjoyed even more painting a huge picture if I had the choice to do one or the other. Certainly, if somebody said, "Look. You've got this month. And here's a huge canvas." Or, "Here's this stone. Which would you rather spend the month on?" And I would have said the canvas. Um, and then to make a long story short—I'm getting tired and I feel I'm getting diffuse. Uh, finally I, with *A la pintura*, I began to work with etching and realized, as Hayter had predicted 30 years before or 25 years before, whenever it was, that etching is much more congenial to me. I mean, the way—obviously collage is very congenial to me in the same way etching is. I can make good lithographs in fact. I have several downstairs that I did with Tanya that I think are as good as anybody has done in America.

But etching I really took to like a duck to water. And then is when my interest grew. And we did *A la pintura*, which has almost been universally esteemed and shown in dozens of museums. Here, in Europe, and South America, everywhere. And then last year, last spring, Gemini invited me out. And I was terribly ill. In fact, if I'd gone on much longer I would have died. And had been misdiagnosed. And I was so ill that I couldn't fit in normally. And so I spent all my time that I was able, all the energy that I could in the studio, and then just went home and slept. And in the 21 days I was out there, I made 36 editions, which is probably the most intense working moment I've ever had in my life. And I learned an enormous amount there. And then as *A la pintura* was finished and I saw how remarkable it was, I wanted to go on with, again, with larger etchings and so on in that style. And Tanya gets involved in long projects. And it became very clear that, so to speak, I'd had my turn. And that I would have to wait around, as often happens, two or three years before she'd be ready again. And so one day, on impulse, I bought the same etching press she has, which is made in New York City. And began to do it on my own. And now that the art part of Gemini has moved here, you know, just down the road, I think probably a good quarter of my time will be spent in graphics, if not more. Also Brooke Alexander wants to become the publisher of my own prints. And he's the first dealer I've had whom I can collaborate with. I mean, what I mean is that his eye in graphics is so good that he can often make suggestions that are artistically helpful. And I've never had that in a dealer before in any medium. I mean, they've liked what they've liked, but it never occurred to them to be able to do that. So that's what's happening. And actually the first show—what Alexander is publishing now, are things I started on my own, with the exception that, of one series he'd found a kind of paper I'd never seen before, that is crucial. But this weekend, the first real collaboration with him is going to start via, vis-à-vis this English printer he's found who's a technical genius. And I think can help me with monotypes in a way that [inaudible] had helped me with *A la pintura*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Modern artists don't know a lot, especially the best-known artists, don't know a lot about those techniques. Uh, I was talking to a first-rate printer the other day about Picasso, who as you know is a very great graphics person. And he said Picasso's technical knowledge is really quite limited, but that what he does with the limited knowledge is miraculous. And I would think that would be typical of contemporary artists. Or to put it the other way around, the ones who know a hell of a lot technically are usually not very good artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. They become constricted by their knowledge.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did a few screen prints, didn't you? Silkscreen prints in—

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Yeah. For, that was commissioned by Marlborough, and I did those in London under very difficult circumstances. I didn't have a studio and so I had to do a lot of the sketches in the bathroom of my hotel room.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And the other sketches on the floor of a tiny office at the studio shop where people were walking in and out all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How terrible.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And I also think silkscreen is the most obnoxious of all the graphic processes anyway. So uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: For what reason?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Um, well, it's a basically a very insensitive medium. Many artists, in fact, while I was at this shop, which is a famous one in London—several times artists came with little mosquettes, little paintings let's say. And just gave it to the shop and said, "Do them." And silkscreen is so clumsy that if it's a painting or a gouache, it really comes out like a very poor translation. If you work directly, it's limited the way woodcuts are. What it can do is give you a very clear outline, but if you try to make any kind of nuance, it's fantastically coarse compared to a lithographic stone or a copper plate. There's just no comparison. And if it hadn't been a commission actually from Marlborough to work in that particular shop, I never would have done it. And in some ways I regret that I did do it, but that was my chance, that commission, to acquire this place, that I knew was the place I wanted to live in the rest of my life. And so I did everything I could in the two weeks I was there. We, again, we made 36 editions and maybe 250 proofs. Uh, I mean, a fantastic amount of work in two weeks. And then Marlborough got upset at the cost of my staying in London. And the corrections were made by mail and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, goodness. Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I, considering how difficult the whole circumstance was, it's a miracle that the prints are as good as they are. But I don't think they compare with what I did with Tanya Grosman or even with what I did at Gemini.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you did a couple with Irwin Hollander, too, didn't you? Yeah.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I did a lot with Irwin Hollander that year after the Museum of Modern Art show. I was so depressed and my painting was going haywire, that I found it very sympathetic to go to somebody else's studio and work with somebody else and not feel that terrible loneliness and depression that I was feeling alone. But I didn't know anything about printing really. And Hollander—and I made a stupid financial arrangement with Hollander where he could make a great deal of money because I felt sorry for him. And I think he exploited me a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I don't think he's ever made money as a printer or a publisher.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Well, he did on those. He did. See, normally you'd pay—in those days you would have paid a printer five or 10 dollars a print. You know, to do your prints. And instead, I gave him a third of the editions. And we made less of editions, 20 or 30. And let's say in those days, the prints were selling for $200 each. If he had, I don't know what, 2,600 or say 3,000 that belonged to him, that's $60,000 instead of my paying him a few thousand dollars just for printing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work on stones all the time? Or were there metal—aluminum plates, or transfer papers, or what—did you try all those different—?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Tried them all. We did mostly on stones I think. It's hard for me to remember now. And there was some aluminum, but I never liked aluminum. And it uh, Tanya, it's always been stone or copper. Here it's always been copper. At Gemini, it was mainly stone, but with lots of collage elements. Gemini was the first place I—I mean, I made one tiny collage one with Tanya years ago. But at Gemini, I made—half of the editions I made were collage editions, where you know, I used wine labels often, and even copied by a label maker. Had a label maker make an exact duplicate of a wine label—

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you could reuse it.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: A Chateau Latour.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, marvelous.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: They, you know, and again, they were very efficient. Before I went they said, "What would you like?" And I said, "Well, what do you drink? What's a good, good bottle of wine? I wouldn't mind having a wine label around." So Ken Tyler, who's moved here now, went out and bought a bottle of Chateau Latour. Now everybody thinks I drink Chateau Latour.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] All the time.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: I never, I never even saw the bottle of wine. I just got the label.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? You didn't drink the wine?

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: [Laughs] No. They drank it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Terrible.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: Then I got the label.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's wild.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: And that, that's exactly how I mean, every art historian can make a devastating case that I drank Latour and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Constantly.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL: —and smoked Gauloises. [Inaudible.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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