



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Interview with Raoul Middleman and  
Unidentified Woman**

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# Transcript

## Preface

This interview is part of the *Dorothy Gees Seckler collection of sound recordings relating to art and artists, 1962—1976*. The following verbatim transcription was produced in 2015, with funding from Jamie S. Gorelick.

## Interview

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: We don't really know how to handle this. We came from a very committed world. Committed in so many ways. You know, we were committed politically. In our physical relationships there was a commitment. It became a very big word for us. And to suddenly find that we're bringing up children who are that detached, and even understanding that it's self-protective, it's very frightening. I know it's frightening to me.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: A kind of numbing process.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Don't you feel that way, Dorothy?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm scared speechless.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Yes.

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But say something loud so I can see if this thing is—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, it's a numbing process in a sense that—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, that's what you were saying about the art before.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Like if you left yourself exposed to all these different stimuli, you'd be destroyed.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: And you feel you live this way? In other words, you have achieved a certain amount of numbness, so that you can continue to function in your world?

[Inaudible due to sound system failure.]

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: —My passion becomes a little bit out of my fictional work. I mean, I try to keep my life fairly organized. I just can't do it all the time. I'd rather not put this on tape.

[They laugh.]

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: No, well give us again—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I'd rather talk about theoretical things.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: All right. So talk about the painting. You had made a statement before about projecting outwards in creating art.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, I think it's like—what I was trying to say before was like there should be—like I like the Renaissance idea of the tension between creation and originality. Like copying and mimicry of an outward form. And to have a tension between the two, so that it's brought into question whether this is an original act, or this is an outward act. Is this an act that begins in the subconscious, in the subjective, or it's an act that is—it's an in—between act. I like the painting to be a gesture in between where you don't have—the inside and the outside are suddenly thrown up against each other and in question.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, could you make that a little more specific? Let's say take your painting of—the Howard Johnson one. I think I know how you'd apply it. But you were speaking before of also the iconic and so on.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, that particular painting I, like, the idea of a picture within a picture, which is like an old kind of idea. And so that you have the painting which is a picture of a man driving into a Howard Johnson. But for the man the Howard Johnson becomes a pictured Mecca. So that one becomes a dream within another dream, which is one idea. And the idea of the Mecca that we drive into being gaudy, bright and inspiring, kind of the last gasp of a kind of romanticism, the horizon dream. And at the same time be a kind of emptiness, a place that could be like a tomb. And so that we have the meeting of both of these ideas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's wonderful as far as that painting is concerned. If you were to take that and contrast it with a subjective attitude, let's say an Abstract Expressionist where everything has to come out of subjectivity. In other words, here you're playing between the subjective, your own feeling.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, it was the ambiguity that we were talking about, I think, the other day. Remember, I think the first day that I was here.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: And we both agreed that we were looking for some form of ambiguity in the work that we were doing. The interesting thing is that now, three weeks later, my ambiguity is a very different one from the one you're talking about. Because mine has to do more with, again, the content. Because I'm a little hung up on this thing, coming from where I come from. His is quite a different thing. Raoul's is something else. Now, how exactly—state that again and this kind of ambiguity that you're talking about.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, I mean it's like—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: It doesn't have to do with realism and fantasizing, I gather. I mean, this is not—  
RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, there's a tension there. First of all, I was talking to Dorothy about that earlier. It was like we were tracing the whites like in the painting. And comparing that with like American realists where they wouldn't be done at all the way I'd do them. Like there would be like tonal adjustments to give a sense of space and distance and perspective. Where mine are done completely from a mental position, you know like to—not that that wouldn't be mental, but from a more abstract position in this sense. It's like a very inner thing in the sense that for the power of the icon, or the central image which I'm trying to convey, the whites are pulled across purely for abstract—not from an aerial perspective point of view, but from a mind point of view.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is an icon in that sense too. I'm doing something on Byzantine art right

now and this is the way a Byzantine artist would think about it.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How does it work to make a kind of presence?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: So, there, right there we have—here we have an ironic nature scene which is like looking out. The man is looking out. You're looking at the man looking out, which is the picture within the picture. Which gives credence to the reality of the outside. I mean, that's the way that works. A fiction within a fiction makes the so-called fiction real because it's looking at another fiction. So you start to play with all these different ideas of fiction.

So you're looking out on the world. But yet the way it's done is a complete inner way of doing, it in the sense that I'm not really looking at the lights in the outside world. I'm not really looking at the fall of light in the outside world. Rather, it's an iconographic mental construction where the lights would be pulled together by—the different patterns would be pulled together purely from mental considerations rather than looking at the way the light plays across a natural form.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, hasn't that always been true pretty much, Dorothy? Really in all painting where the painting has been successful as a third reality, let's say. You know, really it stands by itself. I think this has always been so.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But only to a very slight degree. If you take a kouros standing in front of a scene with an aqueduct, he does of course finally simplify his tones until they're quite classical. But they really have to correspond tone for tone. He doesn't change the register. He doesn't change what's there, but he brings it into a—he harmonizes it.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Harmonizes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is a very different thing from actually transposing it into another kind of—almost symbolic. You know, the white has to be hard on Raoul's painting because hardness has certain associations with things in our environment. Not because the Sun was at a certain point in the heavens, you know?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Yes. No, that, I understand that too.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Of course, you only have this problem—like in 19th-century landscape painting, Baudelaire said about the painters that they don't know how to lie well enough to be able to tell the truth. So, I've always had this—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: That's a great line, isn't it? [They laugh.]

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I might not be quoting word for word, but that's more or less it.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, I think that's true in all of art. That's exactly what happens. The truth is a very strange thing that you can't deal with unless you're willing to deal with illusion as well.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that's where Picasso quipped it from. [They laugh.] Whatever he said. "Art is a lie that makes you realize the truth."

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I didn't know he'd read that much Baudelaire. [Laughs.]

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, he might have come upon it in his own experience. But yes, like that interesting painting—like the Renaissance painting of the spinners by Velazquez. You have the artist making the rugs, spinning them. They make this arc. And then you look through it to this tapestry that's hanging and, like, full of light. And there are people walking around the tapestry, like people from the court, you know, aristocratic types.

And then you see the people in the tapestry. And you can't tell which are the people in the tapestry and which are the people walking around the tapestry. So you start to get this ambiguity between appearance and reality which I think is like at the core of all art between truth and fiction. I'm getting back to my original—between copying a thing as it exists outside you and originating the idea. So that's what I'm saying is, like, the ultimate tension. These same tensions are between the subjective which would be creation, you see, and the objective truth, which would be the thing that you're copying.

Today we have a particular problem in the sense that we have a difficult time trying to find something outside ourselves that we can believe in, in the sense that a Coke ad is our own fabrication, our own machination reflected back. It's not like a romantic landscape which beckons you to enter, but it's your own voice coming back at you. So there's a kind of ownistic reverberation in contemporary culture which makes for a kind of tragedy in the sense that we can't break through the walls and the mass of our own invention to a reality beyond.

So that every time we meet our own image, we meet our own self. So in this kind of I guess narcissistic environment there's a kind of desperation, a kind of desperation to get to other realities, which we can't. Which makes part of the tragedy. The tragedy that you see in a Warhol, for example. The constant reiterated image that you can't break through. That becomes a wall.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. That's about the most interesting comment on Warhol I've heard for a long time. [Laughs.] And that's true.

[Side conversation.]

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: No, it's true, you do. You absolutely sense this detachment completely. And I think I was able to sense it long before I was able to get to some understanding of it. And it's something that we reject, we start by rejecting because it seems so meaningless. The thing that's frightening is where you go from there. After the detachment. If everybody gets nice and detached.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, it's like—you can't blame the artist for this position, or you can't—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: No, of course not. No, this is part of our whole society at this point. No question about it.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: The sickness is like a pervasive one. And the artist is one who's been able to function in it. To a certain extent they use it to show—not to take it as like the great idyllic scene, but to show—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: To expose it.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: —there is a desperation in it.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, it's an exposure, really.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Which brings us right back to McLuhan again, the neutral probe. In other words, there it is without comment.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Any other—we seem to be running out of gas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I lost you for a minute. I was interested and I had to wait for a minute.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: You just missed my most important statement. It was taken over by the highways of the—

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'll play it back for a minute to hear your most important statement.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You wouldn't agree, Raoul, that this business of let's say the Warhol repeated image that doesn't let you get through isn't exactly a neutral probe though, wouldn't you? I mean, it's really not neutral.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: No, it's not. Of course that might be my position and my way of looking at things that project on his world. But the way I look, like the repeated death image. The car, or the car crash image for me is an idea that we really can't get to death. And like we're kind of puzzled by the lack of meaning of this terrifying image we constantly run up against. And we repeat the ritual over and over again. We feel the despair. Not feeling what we should feel at this scene becomes—"that might be me" becomes the real tragedy of this repeated image. Our senses are so numbed by the sensation that confronting it doesn't provoke the kind of terror and horror that it should.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, this has been true in—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: So that that becomes a meaningful statement. That repeated image becomes very meaningful in a sense.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, this is happening in literature too now, where our writers are using violence and very violent situations, whether it be murder, or war, rape, God knows what. And all written in this very cool, unemotional way. It's the same thing again.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right, but it's in our public media. Like take *Life* Magazine will take like monks burning up in technicolor, in beautiful color.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Yes, I know, with the flames licking up and the whole thing.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. But they used the same treatment, the same kind of photography, the same kind of color would deal with like Grand Canyon, you know, or some other archetypal American landscape for vacationers, would be the same thing as a burning body with all these leaping flames. And it's done in the same noncommittal cool way and the same kind of insensitivity.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well then, however, you would not recommend that artists take a similar scene and treat it in any other way. You would still feel that the artist accepts this in personality in

his work. He reflects it.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: No—

[Simultaneous Speaking.]

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: —well, it all depends. For myself I like to assume the mask of a personality and then work through it. Let the irritation work through it. I guess that's where I'm not really pop.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you deal with an image such as an immolation in your work?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I would—I don't know. It depends—I'd have to find a way. I don't think I really would want to, right now. But that's because I'm interested in a certain comedy/tragedy point of view. And maybe that's too—who's to say. I might someday do that. I really wouldn't—I'm not interested in that right now. It's not a stage thing for me. I guess if I could put it on a proper kind of stage I could do it.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, that's very emotion provoking—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: See, I don't like the idea of taking such supercharged elements like that, real pain and suffering, and real cause, and making a picture out of it. Like making it art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Wouldn't the pop artist automatically remove it once by putting it, let's say, as a *Life* illustration in a picture rather than actual reality.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: See, that's the kind of reality I would deal with, yes. I mean, if I were going to do it I would do it that way. But still it involves too much media death for me to deal with like in a discursive journalistic way right now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: McLuhan's point that the service that the pop artist performs was—or maybe this wasn't McLuhan—was in sort of cooling the piece of environment, whatever it is. It puts it in such a framework that we can sort of become aware of it. And becoming aware of it actually allows us to have an attitude of both involvement and detachment from it.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I guess I need a little bit of that. I mean, but I think there's also a moral point of view. Who am I to take this kind of suffering and—I mean this very flamboyant, dramatic suffering and use it.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: I don't understand.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: It's like, can I use an artist where I disagree with the aesthetic? I don't like, say, for example, in Baskin's drawings where he uses this very elegant line to describe real human suffering. I mean, to me that is like—I don't want that kind of coolness and detachment to take real suffering and then make it art.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Make it pretty, you mean.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Yes, right.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Make it into something beautiful.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. Then like what am I doing? Like I if want to really do something about this situation, if I really want to get involved is this—would this be the way to do it? I mean, I have a

very safe—it maybe underscores the really safe position the artist has.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: You just said that you felt that you remained uninvolved, protectively, that your very detachment was the thing that was saving you.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: I can understand that because I think we're all going through that now. We really can't afford emotionally to be involved in everything that's going on in the world today. Detachment becomes the protective covering. Maybe that's what you refer to as the mask. And you do. And the once—removed idea, of course, does this for you. The problem of the immolation of the monks.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: But there's quality of mask.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: If you see this in a dotted print magazine, reprint, it doesn't have the impact that let's say a painter could bring to it, that a Goya could have brought to it in all of its horror. And yet there's something more horrible about some of the things that are being painted today in this completely detached fashion. This is what I'm interested in. It has a shocking, an absolutely shocking value.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What are you thinking of?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: The things that Raoul is doing, for instance, in their very harshness, in that kind of pow, hard—line, clumsy almost, you know, but a studied clumsiness, something vulgar. There are vulgar lines. Really quite repelling in a way. And I suppose you know that.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: I mean, this is part of what you're doing. And you're drawn to it, you're repelled by it, and yet you also sense this removal of the personality. It's as though the person is willing to project completely outward and leave it there. He doesn't want it inside him at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What do you say to that, Raoul?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I mean, I agree essentially with that. I was thinking about the immolation thing because I think—if I were going to do it I would do it in the sense that I would try to get the very technicolor *Life* magazine—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Kind of carnival.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: —carnival colors that would work in opposition to the very real tragedy of it. That would be the way—I think I could handle it that way. The answer to that question if I were to going to do like war scenes I would try to do it in that way.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, I think the Warhol image could be used for that, where you would have a repetition of the image. I think in assaulting the sensibilities, finally, in sequential form in that way that you really can destroy the impact of the thing. Which is really what we're trying to say, that there is all of this horror around us and yet with enough of it being beaten into you day in and day out you finally come to the point where you're not reacting in the way you and I, Dorothy, think that we should. And used to. You can't anymore.



RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: And then the other thing is like the real horror is not some exclusive battlefield. The real horror is like everywhere. It's like the idea of death. We all think we're on a train ride and we're not really going to get there. It's like somewhere in the—like in the very distant future.

But like it's here at every moment. I mean, the process of death and destruction, dissolution and so forth are at every moment, every cross—section of our life.

So that I'm happy that you see the brutality or vulgarity or so forth that would appear in our domestic scenes. That would be part of our actual environment, and not some exclusive environment where the real battles are carried on. It's like Robert Frost, when they asked him to do something during the war for his country he said he thought writing poems was doing something for his country. I think e e cummings said something about that too, about the idea of war, that the artist involved with war is not—the battlefield is not the only place for it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Actually, the nun immolating herself in Vietnam does so out of an intensely rooted conviction that she's going to do better in the next incarnation, or in her religious sense is providing herself with a marvelous future. Whereas the man driving to Howard Johnson's has only the bleakest of futures and the least of meanings to work with. Maybe he's as tragic in his way.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. Well, the other thing is she might be doing it because she wants to participate in the iconographic projection of *Life* magazine cover. You know, the final publicity. Like she suddenly becomes this idea, the archetypal idea of immolation, suddenly spread out across nations.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I hope not. [Laughs.]

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, the other terrible thing about this is that I know for myself I feel a little sorry for her.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: That's my detachment, I guess.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: You know darn well that she's not going to be reincarnated. I don't have that belief. And the whole thing seems so pointless and so futile. And there is that added kind of—

DOROTHY SECKLER: But her meaning, her belief is not futile. No matter—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, for her, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —how disappointed it may be.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: No, I'm speaking of it from my point of view. We see it as a quite useless act.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But everything in her life has had meaning because of that belief, nevertheless. She has not had these mornings of waking up and wondering if anything adds up at all because she was always sure that it all added up. And that was a pretty wonderful experience to have had.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I have some further ideas about the kind of tensions we were talking about earlier which would kind of clarify my position.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Good.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Between—this kind of ambiguity between the subjective and objection states, you know, whatever you want to call it. It would be in the sense of the image that we choose to live our passions in. You know, like we have this public image in which we—it's a very narrowed image where we live, we throw all our anguish and passion and feeling into this receptacle, for feel.

And sometimes it's hard to tell where, say, the real image of self leaves off and the artificial one begins, and vice versa. In the sense that how much of our identity is wrapped up into the myth. Now, there's a kind of irony that runs into the myth. Like the myths for the Greek gods, now that's the ownistic aspect I was talking about before. The myth for the Greek gods where like they really were ulterior reality, that we could understand in human terms because they were still driven by human passion, and so forth. But they had their Olympus, and so forth.

But our gods, like our gods are completely manmade and fabricated. Like the kind of gods—we live in the myth of speeding across the highway with the chick, you know, her hair flung out into the breezes. Or the Hollywood myth of the star, and so forth. These are manmade gods. They don't really participate other than their kind of ubiquitous promotion in any kind of universal immortal state. So that becomes the connoterra [ph] of the icons, the idols that we worship. And it kind of puts us in a position, the kind of ironic position of worship and then realize the whole thing is a fabrication, an artificial god. And we live our life in—so we live in our life in certain ritualistic participation, and in their footfalls and in their gestures. So I thought that would be—

DOROTHY SECKLER: This becomes sort of the core of what you're dealing with—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —this kind of public icon that is manmade and is in replacement of the older sense of something that really was, really existed outside of us.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Exactly, exactly.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: And now the illusion becomes part of the truth. If not the whole truth it certainly becomes part of it. And it's exactly what we were saying before. I think this generation of ours finds this exceedingly difficult. Because in finding and following the lure of the illusion—I read this the other day. I thought it was an excellent way of putting it. They have finally confused the map for the territory, and they're willing to go along with it, and give up, and destroy all of the old so—called truths for these illusions. And we're not equipped for it. This is what makes it so hard for us to grasp at all. We can't deal with it.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. Well, the reversal would be, like I think another painting that I had a guy in a bathrobe eating a sandwich and drinking a glass of beer and it's called Midnight Snack. But I made this sandwich which would just—the sandwich didn't really achieve identity until the fact of its being eaten, you know. And then suddenly this sandwich was an outside—reality achieves its identity.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Now, wait a minute. Explain that. So, how did you make the sandwich into a piece—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: No, it was a very happy sandwich and it seemed to have like a real delight in the fact that it was going to be devoured. In fact, his lip became like overlapped with tomato so

there was this ambiguity of like sandwich and his appetite. But it's like the Shmoo, you know, the Al Capp Shmoo. The outside world could take on our desires given identity. Whatever we want it to be. And on its own it's like nothing. [Laughs.]

It's like the modern manna. And we have instances of that, I guess. And I would venture some terrible opinions about plastic. But like the idea of the plastic world, the world we live in in the sense that the constructions have a substitutional kind of reality. You know, you can pick a cathedral. It can also be a Howard Johnson's. The same kind of form. The same kind of reality. The same kind of texture. The same kind of interior.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Once you're dealing with this kind of ambiguity you can really substitute in any direction whatsoever.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. And we live in the world. That's the horror of it in the sense that things don't have their outside—

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: —and their outside realities either.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. So that you know, it's only through a very limited and obsessive naming that you make a church a church. You could also have a banana split or a cherry phosphate in the pews and with a different type of Muzak, I guess the illusion would be appropriate.

[They laugh.]

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I want to get a cigar now.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'd like to get back to the subjectivity, unconscious, what is true for myself thing that is where you two actually take I assume rather different stands. Raoul is making a mental construction in dealing with the Howard Johnson painting. But, we assume it also involves as it became clear in the tape, very deep feeling. But Yan, I assume, believes that there is a way of dealing with this world subjectively that would have a greater truth and that the Warhol—if we were to assume that a Warhol—or let's say take the Warhol death chamber repeated endlessly is really not probing, is not really dealing with the subjective in the sense that it needs to be articulated in some way.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well I don't think that I am agreeing or disagreeing with Raoul. I'm really in a position right now of trying to find out what people like Raoul believe and that—even that really becomes the wrong word because it isn't a question of beliefs. There's enough difference in age between us so that he actually comes from another world than mine. I think this is what's important. I'm trying to discover his world because it's something so alien to me. It has been so alien that I—this is what I come across when I frequently see paintings never mind pop, even that too—and the kind of thing that Raoul is doing it's not something that we've been able to pick and use because it's simply is not part of our world.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was objectively, of course. We did, you know—Howard Johnson's was a part of our world but we didn't see it emotionally, right?

We didn't see it emotionally and I'm wondering if Raoul sees it emotionally. He says emotionally and yet he keeps saying he's detached and he's protectively detached—

[END TAPE 1.]

[BEGIN TAPE 2.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Raoul Middleman in Provincetown on August 23.

We are now looking at the painting which you have just finished. Does it have a title, Raoul?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: *Howard Johnson's*.

DOROTHY SECKLER: *Howard Johnson's*, which is a pretty nice, logical and clear title since what we're looking at is a painting of—which has a Howard Johnson's as one of its main motifs. From now on I'm just going to give it to you, Raoul, and let you interpret it, or, you know, free associate about it.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, the idea of cars have always fascinated me, the idea of traveling through a landscape in a car. In the sense that you're walled up completely by the human environment, the glass, the metal, and you're speeding along a highway. And then there's nature through that. But in such an abstract way. I mean, it's like the Greek gods would travel through their chariots to a kind of spectacular earthy landscape. Here we are traveling through like—participating in the role of swift gods on important missions while we view nature, which is like an anachronistic view of nature.

Like we're looking through like trees bending in the twilight and so forth, while our own climate is controlled by dials, and while we live in a completely—like we don't really experience, taste, and suffer any dire effects from nature because we can adjust the climate, air conditioning and so forth, to suit our own demands. We don't have to really experience summer, nor do we have to experience winter. So here we have man relating to nature in a very abstract way.

So, I had a job commuting to another city, from New York to Baltimore. And like I would have to travel it in the morning very early. And it was like an obsessive thing. The Howard Johnson's, this great Mecca of our dreams was like on the highway. And like the big moment, the big moment I think was like approaching the Mecca. Like once you got in there it seemed like—you could just walk around it and drive out again almost. It was like that moment, that romantic vision of a sun rising or setting on its orange rooftop that became kind of important to me. And so I played with the idea for a long while, because I was always afraid of dealing with nature directly. I feel so cut off from nature I feel that any approach to nature would be—I don't feel like there's any kind of direct rapport between man and nature, as it was. So I had to figure a way of using nature that would be ironic and artificial. That the space could be dealt in an artificial way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you happen to arrive at the idea of using a sunset? A very flaming, flamboyant, fried egg sort of sunset.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, because when it grabbed me most as an image it was like in the morning or at night when I was coming back from Baltimore, or going to Baltimore. So that would be the situation that I would view the Howard Johnson's. More or less the sun rising or falling would be in my mind.

And also the idea of using a cliché of nature, like the most archetypal, clichéd instance of nature. So that like the sun would be like some huge egg as you—like breaking its very bad yolk over the kind of scissor—shaped, or knife—shaped rooftop of the Howard Johnson's in a kind of drool and dripping quality, the kind of saturated sentimentality that could be undercut and make vulgar,

seemed to appeal to the kind of work I would do.

And I hesitated to do it because all my work prior to this had been, like, cut out from nature. I always saw the artist as somewhat of a rapist in the sense that he uses the world for his own devices selfishly, like any artist, and takes from it for his own devices. And I also felt funny in dealing with nature directly in the sense that I really don't believe in the inner or outer harmony between man and nature. I feel like nature is a fabrication, that our relationship to it is very artificial.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is specifically in our time. This decade.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right, right. But I think it's sad that it's become that. But I don't feel like there's any kind of external godhead in nature that entices us to it that is meaningful and believable. And I also feel like in our times we've cut off the—the romantic dream has been cut off, so that we're faced with our own image reflected back.

You know, like you look out into nature and you find a postcard reality, or you find a billboard reality which is man's face, the big, slobbering face of man kind of joked back is a huge burlesque ache. You know, the sun bursting over the rooftops of manmade romance. So that as far as the goddesses or druids of the hill appearing from the landscape and enticing you into her inner chambers, that dream I think has passed.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So landscape, how does it actually seem to you? When you're looking at landscape and there, let's say, is not a Howard Johnson's in it. Of course you still know it's a Howard Johnson's kind of world. But you feel there's really no rapport with it. Once the religious nature as a kind of substitute for religion is gone, that there is no way of relating to it ideally.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I'm like a contradiction between the—well, like the way the picture is focused the man, like a kind of advertisement where you have a V come out of a person's eye, and within that V you have the image to be advertised. So that the driver coming into a landscape, the landscape appears as if from his eyeballs. And the fabric in the design carries through the fabric of the V design. So this becomes like the advertisement of his desire.

Which is a nice way of putting it because you see, advertisement and desire, just to think of that, it's like the advertisement of his desire which is like an objectification of what is subjective, a dream, an ownistic vision, you see. It's not—and the idea of the picture being set in a windowpane within another picture becomes—gives it a certain remove from any kind of direct rapport. The idea of the mirror being blank is—

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is the car mirror now.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right, the car mirror, would show the kind of emptiness that we all come from. Like as soon as something becomes like a moment old in our culture, it's like torn down. Or worshiped with a kind of ironic nostalgia. Like the idea of a meaningful tradition becomes hard to hold onto. The built—in obsolescence. Like the playgrounds of our youth are now supermarkets, and all kind of structures obliterate the memory of the playgrounds where we formerly worked out our passions and our dreams.

So that we're constantly projected into a future, but a future which doesn't incorporate, or is not nourished by some external fabulous reality, but rather is the concoction of our own artifice. So, the extension of our own nerves, rather than we participate in another—a palace, a palace that would be peopled by gods, or would have other kind of promise.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Some people, hearing you describe this scene in this way, would assume that you were making a satirical statement in a classical, you know, 18th—19th century vein. And therefore might assume that you really had the intention of moving people, affecting your audience in such a way that they would find some other world beyond the world of Howard Johnson's. Is that any part of your intention at all? Are you more detached?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, I don't—I feel that this is it. And like—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You have no message.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: It's a double statement. No, there's no message like that, like you would exhaust this metaphor and there would be other metaphors waiting for you. No, it's like the world is a big counter where they serve food. And the food has like—appeals to a man's taste bud. And this would be—like there's no other alternative. The other alternatives are either arty or too luxurious, luxurious in an old—time way which would become like fossilized antiques. There's no viable alternative for me, the way I look at it. There is excitement and vitality in this, in a certain sense. But it's also tragic. There's excitement in the sense of it's another facet of the tragic burlesque story of man.

It's like Rembrandt, for example, in the Washington gallery has a picture of Christ being taken down from the cross. And he's in his winding sheet. And one of the characters taking him is coming down the stepladder, part of the winding sheet went across his eyes, so that he's reaching for the next rung and he can't find it, you know. Like at that very, the most tragic moment of man's history you have a clumsy, clownish act. And like there was a complicated vision, an artist that—I feel like my vision, in a certain sense, tries to carry on the complications of a tragic comedy vision—tragic—comic vision in which at the one point this is a very gaudy, hilarious spoof on the tail end of romanticism. On the other hand, there's a kind of emptiness. And at the other hand there's a kind of awe—inspiring wonder to this great monument of our times.

And like it's the complexity of those different feelings that I think would push this image beyond satire. You see what I mean? Like there'd be the complexity of movement with the bird flying upside down, right—side up at the same time. This kind of non-discursive, impossible, statement that I think art can make. For example, when Keats said, "Unravished bride of quietness," in the "Ode to a Grecian Urn". It's an impossible—it's a non-rational statement. If she's bride and she's unravished she becomes like—but this impossibility I think, this nature of non—discursive statement is that which lifts art beyond the limited possibilities of, say, satire. Which is I think like a more primitive form of it. For example, in a de Kooning painting you'll have supreme elegance and very beautiful, lyrical colors. At the same time you'll have a grotesque violence. And it's hard to say which one it is, whether it's like a Mondrian exactness of space and light with Impressionistic follow—through, or with the kind of tension in the Cubist grid. Whether it's like the kind of vulgarity, a heaviness and the kind of weight and centrality that would hark back even to a Rembrandt.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So, this ambivalence of attitude seems to you to have been part of the recent modern movements, in any case?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I think it's part of all art. And this necessity to boil down to what you mean is like, you know, what do you mean. Like, give one simple statement. Is this satire, or are you against the society, or are you for it. I think it's a celebration at the same time it's being irritated. It's a complicated statement. And, like, to say are you for our times or are you against our times is like taking the poetry of art and making it prose or prosaic. And you lose the meaning.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This goes to McLuhan's point that, you know, there's no point in asking are you for it or against it. It's here. The idea of for or against of course goes with the 19th-century idea, probably, of progress. If only this weren't here we would have a better.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I don't believe that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't assume that.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: No, I don't think art is—I think that there's always got to be a renewal of form to carry the feelings. But I think that all great art emerges equal in the same of tapestry of judgment. I think like in a certain sense you can listen to Charlie Parker and Bach at almost the same moment.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Talking a bit about the image again, is there anything you'd like to say about your interpretation of the man himself? Is he a kind of self—portrait to any extent?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: No. No, not that way. I thought of him like on a very surface level as the salesman with the—the salesman, the powder blue shirt and the very stiff, nervous, tense on the sell, on the make, coming to the landscape. Like he would be the person on the road. Vulgar, seamy, and a little glimpse of motel on the right side would be his abode for the night, maybe. And on the other hand by the indifference. In other words, like his back is to you, the viewer. Then the viewer can participate in the same dream so that you participate in his fiction of identity by his indifference to you. Or you see through his shoulder, through his eye. In that sense I guess a salesman becomes like every man on the road, every man on the make.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We're all salesmen, actually.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Out to make a pitch. Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Move it a little closer, Raoul, if you don't mind since you're turning your head toward the picture.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I know you're interested in the quality of the automobile, of the car dashboard that one sees a bit through the lower part of the painting, and the windshield wiper, and so on. Is there anything you'd like to say about the quality of hardness in all the shapes? I mean, of course it goes—that same mechanical quality is picked up all the way through things, which even the clouds have some of it, although they also manage to retain a reference to real sunset, you know, beautiful bursts in dark clouds.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, I think everybody—I mean, I feel the culture is trapped. Like our feelings, the spilling of our feelings are like contained and very tooled clichés. So I like to think of a painting as—the forms of a painting as a kind of a locked thing that gets distorted and jostled by an overripeness. Like if you could slice into the cliché it would be like a kind of lava—like form. And like this tension of a locked surface which gets distorted by the feeling behind it, is like the kind of tragedy, the kind of world that we live in, in the sense that the outward forms, the forms, the viable forms of our life contain and yet don't satisfy the need of the human spirit. So, they're very much made things. And a lock—in at the same time that there's a sense of—a certain cramped sense that I try to get.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's also a sense of great loneliness in the picture.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There are no other people visible, even in the Howard Johnson's, or outside, as I assume is intended as part of the—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: A lot of times you make rationalizations. For like the complexity. Like you try to state what it is that you're doing, and like your real intentions are the real truth. I also don't say I'm going to try to really get loneliness here. But like, I guess those things happen. And that's part of the complexity.

Another thing interesting is, like in a lot of my pictures I try to work with the idea of a centralized iconographic image versus a fragment, or image that bleed off to the side, out in the world. So that you have a tension between centrality, and that is like the altarpiece, the idol of our dreams, and the centralized mythic being which we pay homage to, versus the kind of uncertain relationship between man's subjective and objective realities. Between his relationship to the bureaucratic world about him. So, like the kind of not knowing the total scheme, not knowing the inclusive reality. When you don't know the inclusive reality without, your outside, also your own relationship to it becomes jeopardized. So that uncertainty versus the centralized image becomes a kind of a tension that I'm interested in.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very beautifully put. In a curious way as you were using the word "icon," it flashed into my mind the way the Howard Johnson's with its steep—pitched roof could almost be a kind of wayside shrine thing too.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right, right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And particularly the exaggeration you're giving that whole sheltering kind of structure thing there. And then of course the pinnacle on top takes on a curious kind of—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: A cathedral. It's a modern cathedral.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: And also loneliness. Like I do have a feeling of loneliness. When I actually go in the doors of the Howard Johnson's and sit down at the counter, such a feeling of all—an invading feeling of emptiness takes over. Like the limited choice, the food refined down to a nub, the passionless, tasteless, but very gaudy pap. That everything tastes alike. That there's no real distinction. Like the average palate would be satisfied.

And any excesses, any really passionate palate that you would have couldn't find—although it looks like it's going to be like the end of culinary art. It's like very dull and bland food. So that kind of emptiness is—probably has something to do with the kind of loneliness that that image, you know, having felt that I guess that image partakes of that sort of loneliness, that kind of loneliness. Like the disappointment and the lack of fulfillment in those aspects of the Howard Johnson's.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was interested in the changes that I watched on the painting, and the way you handle the lights inside the Howard Johnson's. In the beginning they had a kind of nice painterly luminosity and change of color. At that time we were remembering Manet's use of reflected lights in—was it *Bar at the Folies Bergere* you were thinking of?



RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Yes, I like that painting a lot. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then—

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: That's another appearance/reality thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And then later they had all been cooled and made into a harder and more—also more somber and sort of a chill atmosphere.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: It's like a place you could go in and die, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And that tomb feeling is certainly curiously there, outside the flaming orange roof and inside this curious tomb—like silence.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. And that's one aspect of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's a very silent painting. In spite of the fact that you're in a car you do not hear a sound in that painting.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Yes. Well, I want that walled out. Like man being walled out and away from nature, the sense of being isolated and alone. And like the only kind of participation he can have is through a kind of reflective. He throws his identity out into the world and then he communicates with it. But like even nature, that's a plastic sun, in a certain sense. That sun is not—that sun is like a sun maybe made in Japan.

[Seckler laughs.]

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: You know, it's like—but if it gets too much it might get too cute that way. It's got to have a reality too. If it gets just too much of a kind of witty play, I think you lose the loss. So there has to be some intimation of the loss that man has undergone.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very beautifully put. And I felt that so much in looking at it. That sunset is just halfway between what you really have noticed about some of the beautiful sunsets, you know, the dark clouds over the sun, and so on. And then turning just at the last moment into a little bit of a caricature of itself too.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Well, in my work I like a kind of a tension between like a hand which—like there's a hand there which could be something out of Smokey Stover or a cartoon. At the same time it could be a hand out of maybe a classical painting, maybe a Michelangelo or a Rubens. You know, at the same time you as a viewer, your stance to the painting is not clear. And like you yourself can't take a static approach or know to relate to it in any given stance, any automatic, given and autonomous stance to the painting. So on the one hand I might be spoofing you. On the other hand I might have something serious to say. And that's kind of an adjustment of tone that's pretty much interested me for the last several years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think just for the record in winding this up we should perhaps—it's a large painting. I mean, is there anything you'd like—and the materials. I mean, you are using—I believe you're using oil paint, right?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: I could say something about that. Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In spite of the fact that we might expect plastic, and so on.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. That's good you brought that up at this time because I do under—paint. I just recently started under—painting in plastic. But I like to use oil paints because my paintings are in position of this kind of irony, or the ambivalence between whether it refers to the tradition of painting, or whether it's a spoofy gadgetry of contemporary invention.

In that sense I use the oil painting because I can make it refer both ways. The plastics would read to contemporary. I like it to read back and bring on in an ironic sense the tradition of painting at the same time as to be a contemporary invention. So the oil being a medium which could work both ways, where plastic I think cuts itself off from the past too rapidly for that kind of richness.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You've never been tempted, apparently, into using the more kind of stylized thing which recalls a medium such as, for instance, a Lichtenstein would use the dots, or as Andy Warhol and the others have sometimes used silkscreen. Your feeling is—I think this is one of the ways in which you are different from pop art in a sense too, not only in outlook, but in the way you even use materials and so on.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. I think that and the sense that I use volume a lot. And maybe our world is so flat and shallow that the sense of gyp, you know, being gypped from more powerful forms to contain my energy makes me get even by making it a 3D supersonic kind of image, rather than the flatter, shallower image.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's this curious sense of a very 3D thing being put into a shallow space sometimes, which is almost like mannerism.

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Right. That's another tension. That's the kind of tension that would be flat at the same time it would be completely volumetric. You could put your hand behind the form and lift them all. I'm glad you really see that. And so that, like you have that in Cézanne. Like he'll have a fruit which is turning into 3D, and then suddenly he'll have a line around it which cuts it off. And I like that kind of tension because I can make these things like shaped canvases, or try to make real sculpture, but I like the tension too much between a fabricated, artificial flat thing and the implications, the illusions of volume. And that kind of tension is very exciting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that's beautiful. Should we stop there?

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN: Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]