



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Herbert Ferber, 1962**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Herbert Ferber in 1962. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Seckler on the subject of environmental sculpture for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

## Interview

HERBERT FERBER: ...doing to my mind something that the surrealists did when they made those...there was a famous show in New York and there have been some in Paris where the surrealists made a real environment for the kind of thing that they were interested in. You came into a low doorway...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MR. FERBER: ...you had to push aside a fishnet curtain, you wandered around and there were strings hanging in your face. In other words, you came into contact with things in the environment which are in constant relation to the works of art themselves. And there's a close relationship, it seems to me, between the kind of surrealist approach and what the more realistic happenings are concerned with. They're really...surrealists were not concerned in the same way with the world that happens. The surrealists are obviously concerned with a kind of dream world. Perhaps the boys who are doing the happenings-as they say they are, if you can trust what they say, which I think you can-are concerned with recreating scenes from real life. Oldenburg, I remember, in a forum that we were on together, said that he was never interested in abstract art or non-representational art and was really interested in recreating those bizarre and frightening accidents which we see, or those scenes which we observe in the street. I have nothing like that in mind at all. The only relationship between his kind of thing or some of the other boys and mine is that you enter a space and you're not looking at the work of art as an object around which you can walk in the conventional sense as all art has been with some exceptions on which more later. But the kind of thing I'm interested in, first of all, it's non-representational; it's abstract, but you can envelop yourself in it in the same way that you envelop yourself in these scenes or these happenings that the other boys are doing. The idea, of course, historically speaking, is not a new one. If you think of an Egyptian tomb where you walk into a cubicle the walls of which are decorated, there is sculpture in it, you're in a special kind of ambience created by the...in that case by the references to the man's life and so on. An attempt was made to recreate the spiritual and real life of the dead king and it was done in a limited space. Nevertheless, the objects in that space are all visible in a sense, one at a time. But I think there was a relationship. Michelangelo did it. Michelangelo, when he made the chapel in Florence for the Medicis, the Medici chapel, he created an architectural environment for his sculpture. In other words, he made a space in which the sculpture would live and a space which would house the sculpture. The sculpture inhabited the space. It was, of course, relevant to the time and more in our-since-our...well from our point of view I suppose more, I was going to say conventional but I think it's silly to use that term. It's just an older idea about similar....

MS. SECKLER: Well, Menes' projections in space were very dynamic and....

MR. FERBER: Yes. I don't think Dynamism has anything to do with it. You can make a dynamic figure which has extensions on it, legs or drapery, which baroque sculpture has. This is different, because you still have that piece of sculpture in any space. It can be moved from one space to another. The kind of thing I'm thinking of is a sculpture in a space which is so related that if you move one you'd have to move the other. If you removed the walls from these sculptures you have nothing because the sculpture would collapse. The walls support the sculpture, and the curves of the walls and so on are related to the sculpture; if you remove the sculpture you'd have an empty shell. This is quite different from having a dynamic Baroque form which simply extends into space the way the branches of a tree do.

MS SECKLER: When you're making a model for one of your new sculptures you of course see it as a unit complete; you can...it's small enough that you can see it from all sides, whereas the spectator will never have that particular experience of it. How can you imagine the spectator's experience in being so small in relationship to projection? Have you...?

MR. FERBER: Yes. Well, this is one of the problems. When I first made some of my small models into environmental sculptures by simply adding enough walls and putting little models of figures, I mean like that one up there on the shelf, that one....

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. FERBER: I didn't know how it would look and I was indebted to Gene Goossen who said, "Nobody will understand what you're talking about. They'll look at that as if it were a stage set which must be seen from the front." So he suggested that I make a model which was large enough so that when you put it up on stilts you could put your head in the bottom, leave a hole...

MS. SECKLER: Mmhmm.

MR. FERBER: ...put your head through the bottom of it and then you'd look around and your eye would be at the same level as that of a person that was walking through it and then you could begin to visualize. So, of course, it's a big problem and when I made the room for the Whitney I had three months to make it in and I had to make that huge piece of sculpture. I didn't even have time to find a new studio and I made it in my old studio which was too small to ever erect it until it was finished, and when it was finished it was too big to put in the studio so I had to wait until it got to the Whitney. And when I saw it up in the Whitney I saw things that I would like to have changed because then the spaces and the relationships were quite different from the way they looked in the models from which I worked. So....

MS. SECKLER: Was this a matter of different in terms of-well, a slightly different sense of rhythm or a slight variation, or was it really a totally different experience for you when you saw it?

MR. FERBER: It was a completely and totally different experience because, when I looked at the model, though I made every effort to imagine myself looking in one direction at a time, I could never forget what I was seeing out of the tail of my eye. When I looked at the thing in the Whitney I could not see what was behind me.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. FERBER: You had to actually turn around, you actually had to move in order to see different parts of the sculpture; you could never see it all at once. No matter where you stood in that room you could never see all of it at once. So that it was like opening a door of a chapel of a Gothic

cathedral. You walk in and you close the door and you look up and you see arches and windows and this kind of thing but you never see the whole logic of the structure.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. FERBER: You sense it. Now, of course, in architecture where you have a kind of structural engineering logic, if you see an arch going this way, you're pretty damn sure there's one going this way; if there's one going behind you, you know there's one in front of you. With a sculpture which is asymmetrical, such as these are, you can't imagine where the other piece is going to be; you have to look and see it and then you can remember as your turn away from it and see the rest of it, so that you have to participate in the sense that you're carrying in your head the directions, the forms, and so on and see how they relate. But this kind of experience is entirely different from that of looking at a model or looking at any sculpture no matter how big it is because size is not the question. This sculpture that I'm going to do for this museum in Vermont will be 40 feet long and 25 feet high. But the room in the Whitney was only half that size and still it gave the same impression. And if I'd been able to design the walls of the Whitney I would, I think, have been more successful. I would have produced some different result at least. But starting with given walls is perhaps not the optimum program. I think you should really start with...from the ground up, and that's what I'm lucky enough to have in this commission; I'm designing the walls myself.

MS. SECKLER: Is there to be a conventional roof... [For about the next five minutes the machine is extremely noisy and the only words that can be made out are:]

MR. FERBER: ...actually the room is now standing up in San Francisco and it was in Minneapolis, and I wish I'd known about the Archives then because I would have suggested that you could get a really professional movie man and in Santa Barbara. ...well, yes, we'll see it if we can record. I hope we can because it's a nuisance to have to make notes. Now see if you can get back.

MS. SECKLER: We can just try it.

MR. FERBER: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: Well, go ahead and see where we were. You were on the fact that you had first seen the possibility in this particular sculpture that you did that had two walls and a roof and then...

MR. FERBER: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: ...and then you conceived the possibility of a person walking into it?

MR. FERBER: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: At this point I'd like to stop for a moment because it strikes me that, although this may seem like a very natural thing for you to have thought of in terms of what's been going on in the world recently, that it wouldn't have occurred, of course, to a sculptor probably in another time; that there must be some particular readiness to project a viewer into this particular kind of position that would make this idea rather than another one become important to you.

MR. FERBER: Well, I have no doubt that I'm a product of my time. I think of it now, but I think this is ex post facto reasoning, that so much painting, so much sculpture, so many exhibitions, so many museums are all around us. Not that we can do with fewer of these things; they're important-but the constantly changing exhibitions, the constantly...the constant acquiring of paintings and sculpture by museums leads to a terrific confusion. And one of the things that has struck me is that

people go to Europe or go to Greece or go to Egypt to look at something, they travel thousands of miles and they remember what they've seen; people go around the corner to the museum and they see a hundred paintings and fifty sculptures by as many artists and they hardly remember what they've seen because, as I've said someplace, you can stand in one museum and if you stand there from October to April you'll see twenty five exhibitions; it becomes a vast moving picture. Things get terribly superficial and confused. And I think one of the things that the painters who made these very large canvases were unconsciously, perhaps transcending, was the idea that a picture could be put on a wall and then taken down and another one put up, or five pictures on one wall, and so on. They wanted to make their pictures in a sense permanent. Now, unless they painted them on the walls, they weren't, but by making them large they emphasized their sense of position in space. They emphasized the kind of immutability, the difficulty of moving them. They created an environment by making a picture fifteen feet long and ten feet high. Now it's true of these pictures that if you get close to them you become enveloped in them. You can't...no matter how close you get to a Rembrandt or no matter how close you get to a smaller picture, the edges of it are always within your limits of vision. When you get up against a large Jackson Pollock or a Barney Newmann or a Rothko it seems to curve around you and in that sense it exudes an atmosphere or it envelops one. Now you could say, "Well, why don't you just make a sculpture very large and perhaps this would do it?" Because you can always walk away from these pictures, you can always walk away from the sculpture, you can get far enough back so that you can see it as a unit. The think that I wanted unconsciously to do was to make a place for a piece of sculpture which was permanent because even a sculpture in a public square can be moved out of the square and you still have the public square. The sculpture doesn't lose anything, it's true, the square loses but the square is not destroyed. And although there are museums with hundreds of pictures and if you take them out and put them in another museum, the museum has lost something. It's an impermanent kind of loss; it's not a real loss because the museum exists. But if you make a painting on the wall, or if you make a sculpture which is so large and so fastened, so related to the walls that you can't take it away, you've created an entirely different image. Now, maybe this is just the result of the fact that there are so many paintings, and so many sculptures, and so many moving exhibitions and so many changes in our scene that perhaps unconsciously I was trying to achieve some sense of permanence on the scene. In other words, it's better than having a one-man show or a retrospective show because that comes down. Maybe it's something of this kind. Now I don't know whether this is really factual or not. As I say, I think that I came to these ideas in a purely sculptural, in a purely aesthetic, way, and not in any sociological way, which is what I've been talking about up to now. I really developed it out of my intense desire to have sculpture light and airy and off the ground.

MS. SECKLER: This is a very...a feeling that so many sculptors and architects, too, have had, this feeling of off the ground. Can you...have you ever thought of what that means, or any associations you have with that sensation of being off the ground that might be particularly important to people in our particular frame of mind today?

MR. FERBER: Well, since I'm a sculptor and since architects work with materials, I suppose... [Machine extremely noisy] There is; there's something wrong with the bulb. Well, I don't really know which one. You know, I suppose neither the sculptors nor the architects could have done anything- I'll watch the light-could have done anything without the steel and iron and so on. You know, the Eiffel Tower could not have been built of stone. And this idea of soaring or having open forms is dependent upon steel and reinforced concrete, and in sculpture upon making things out of metal. But it's not entirely true. This is just an easy way to look at it because, if you think of the Gothic cathedrals, which were made of stone, they're as light and graceful and airy as any modern buildings. And when they began to have fenestration in the walls they had to figure out arches and

various ways of holding up these tall structures which gave them a sense of airiness. So I don't know. This is for art historians to think of. It's difficult for me to try to relate the Middle Ages or the Gothic period to our time just because we talk now of a sense of soaring or of lightness and try to relate it to our buildings and our sculpture when they did it too. And Bernini was working in marble and he certainly got his figures off the ground, too. So I don't think you can make a facile connection between these things.

MS. SECKLER: Your sculpture at this stage, of course, comes very close to architecture. Does that pull you toward thinking of it in even larger scale at times, or of relating it even more organically to architecture?

MR. FERBER: Well-yes-you mean these environments are large...?

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. FERBER: ...and related to architecture?

MS. SECKLER: In another little while these could become ramps, for instance, when people could actually walk on the various curving surfaces of them. There's no reason why you would have to stop at this if you wanted to go on and further integrate. I just thought it had occurred to you or that architects had mentioned it to you.

MR. FERBER: Well, I mean...sure. There are no limits to what obviously somebody else may think of and may decide to do with these original ideas. But I still in a sense am a classical artist in that I want the sculpture to be looked at and not used. That is, walked upon doesn't offend me. Only it introduces another note in the participation which is a little bit like touching, which some people feel necessary when they look at sculpture. I don't think it's at all important whether you have the desire to touch a piece of sculpture or not. Your eyes are verification enough whether it's rough or smooth and so on. Blind people have a different problem. As for the size, there is no limit with modern materials: plastics and lightweight alloys. These sculptures can be made gigantic. But, as I said before, it's not really a question of size. I'm not involved in that idea. It just has to be large enough so that you can walk through it. And I had an interesting experience when I made the first large sculpture that I made, which was only twelve feet high, for a building, for Percival Goodman; you know, that was that Burning Bush thing that I did.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. FERBER: When I made it I had to make it on the ground and I had to work at it by crawling through it and sitting on it and then was really the first time that I got an entirely different experience of form and of space because I myself was moving through these forms and not just looking at them and not just penetrating them with my eye. I was penetrating them with my body. And when that sculpture was finally erected on the building, it lost this quality of immediacy which I found so important at that moment. It gained another quality, but it became an object in an environment instead of forming the environment, which is what it did when I was walking through it on the ground...

MS. SECKLER: Mmhmm.

MR. FERBER: ...when it was lying on the ground.

MS. SECKLER: Can you recall the feeling, the specific kind of sensation you had in that case when you were crawling through it on the ground? Was it a sense of being enfolded and surrounded or...

well, I mean could you recall it very specifically? What was it that was good about it?

MR. FERBER: Well, it was very...the best way in which I can describe it is that it gave me a sense of the presence of the work of art. It was like...it was just like the difference between being face to face with somebody and talking to him on the telephone. It gave you a sense of immediacy, of a kind of contact which was much stronger, much more-stronger, I don't know a better word-stronger. It enveloped one. Now I don't mean that it enveloped one the way a tomb envelops one, or....

MS. SECKLER: The way a tree or a bush-would it have any association...?

MR. FERBER: No, none of these things because, you know...

MS. SECKLER: No....

MR. FERBER: I never think of these things in relation to my sculpture. I'm not interested in landscapes. I'm not interested in trees or flowers in relation to my work. I think of them as non-representational forms which have emotional value if you can use such a word, but which I'm also doubtful about. In other words, they don't inspire hate or love or anger or emotions of that kind. They invoke a different kind of feeling which is an aesthetic one and I think the word "aesthetic" covers it. But there was a sense of immediacy and of presence of...well, that kind of thing. I had an experience like that when I was in Florence. I was there just after the war and some of the figures of Donatello from the Campanile had been brought down and put on the ground during the war and I was looking at them face to face, these over-life size figures. Some years later when I went back the figures were back in their niches and they were just little dots up there.

MS. SECKLER: Mmhmm.

MR. FERBER: When they were down on the ground, I was face to face with them and it was a sense of presence. I could feel them, I mean visually feel them, see their texture, see their...the quality of expression. When they were up there, they were out of contact; they became decorations. And I suppose what I'm trying to say is that when you're face to face as close as that with a sculpture it's no longer an object. It really is a work of art. Which is different. Well, by going one step further and making it so-large enough-I'm not...I don't want to say "so large" but just large enough so you can walk into it, then you get a complete destruction of the work of art as an object.

MS. SECKLER: Did Frederick Kiesler's work a few years back-would that sculpture that was shown at the Museum have any effect on your thinking at all?

MR. FERBER: Perhaps it did. I don't know. You know, I didn't think of it and, as you look back, one sees that that's a predecessor, but so is Michelangelo, the Medici Chapel, a predecessor.

MS. SECKLER: Mmhmm.

MR. FERBER: You might say that there were other ideas of that kind around. Kiesler-I wrote an article in which I credited Kiesler with being one of the first to make such a thing. And you could actually stand in his thing...

MS. SECKLER: Yes, I remember it very well.

MR. FERBER...in his Galaxy.

MS. SECKLER: Mmhmm.

MR. FERBER: Yes, perhaps there's some relationship. His was self-sustaining, there were no...

MS. SECKLER: There was no attempt to...?

MR. FERBER: ...there were no architectural structures in relation to it, which I think is important although not necessarily so. You know, there is a sculptor by the name of Suvero...

MS. SECKLER: Yes!

MR. FERBER: ...who did a large thing and I had a talk with him about his.... He has no idea-it's very much like the Galaxy...

MS. SECKLER: Mmhmm.

MR. FERBER: ...that big thing he did. It's much more closely related to the Galaxy than anything I've ever done. But he thinks of it as a...it's a completely academic, conventional fashion. He says this is a big sculpture, I want to be able to walk around it and not into it, and so on. It's just a big sculpture.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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