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Oral history interview with Rudy Burckhardt,  
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# Transcript

## Interview

**RB:** . . .for rent signs in every block then a little later I got married and lived across the street in the same block with Edith Schloss and Edwin Denby kept living there and now fifty-five years later or so my son lives there. Most of the time it was illegal to live there.

**MS:** It's right near here.

**RB:** On 21st Street. And this is an interesting little item, believe it or not. When we got there we got a telephone and the number was Chelsey 25097 and the telephone number is still the same except instead of Chelsey now it's 242-5097.

**MS:** That's extraordinary in this city that you would have that all that time. So Denby had lived there all that time.

**RB:** He lived there until he died about ten years ago and now my son lives there. Now he actually got it legal. He finally got together with the landlord and it's legal to live in lofts. At that time for a long time you couldn't live in lofts legally and then there was something called AIR, Artists in Residence and I remember Edwin had to pretend to be a painter and he had to make some paintings, and an inspector came. You couldn't have a loft as a writer, as a poet, because they don't need a lot of space. They just need a table and a typewriter. People don't realize that poets have to walk up and down. They can't just sit there. So you had to be a painter or sculptor or something to be allowed to live in a loft.

**MS:** You must have been among the first loft dwellers in the city.

**RB:** Sort of. Then there was de Kooning who lived right next door. He was already a loft dweller when we came.

**MS:** Was he in the same building?

**RB:** Next door in a very similar building. And actually before that he had lived in our building in a loft but downstairs there had been a bakery and he couldn't bear the smell of bread at night and early morning so he moved next door. By the time we got there the bakery had disappeared. It wasn't there anymore. And then he moved to the next block, to 22nd Street and he was there for a long time. We still used to see him a great deal.

**MS:** You describe in your book the loft that he lived in when he and Elaine began to live together. He built a room within the loft.

**RB:** Yes. He made a room, I think into the ceiling, more cozy bedroom and painted it a beautiful light pink. He made his own bed, everything, his own plumbing. He helped us with the plumbing too. We had to put in a shower. We didn't have anything like that.

**MS:** When did he do the portrait of you?

**RB:** About 1937.

**MS:** Did he just ask you to sit for him.

**RB:** Yeah. I sat for him a few times. He never finished it. The face\_\_ I think he had the face once but then he painted it out and now it's just of an oval. The pants are very well painted and the jacket and then he put a reflector with a light bulb in there because I was a photographer.

**MS:** But I think it's still recognizable that it's you. Don't you?

**RB:** How do you know? You didn't know me then.

**MS:** No, but maybe I've just been accustomed to seeing the painting with the name under it so I know who it is. Did he do most of it while you were actually sitting for him or would he work on it when you weren't there as well?

**RB:** He worked when I wasn't there too. I didn't pose for him that many times.

**MS:** Did he do a painting of [Edwin]Denby also?

**RB:** He did drawings. There is a beautiful small painting of an elderly man with his hands lying on a table. That looks quite a bit like Edwin. I don't think Edwin posed for it.

**MS:** Someone asked me and I don't know if you can answer this or not. But Denby wrote so well and they wondered if had helped de Kooning with some of the statements that he made. Sometimes he had to give a statement. Once at the Museum of Modern Art about 1951. It was a very beautiful statement that de Kooning made.

**RB:** I think he helped him indirectly by teaching Elaine to write and then Elaine wrote down what Bill said so indirectly I guess he did. But I don't think they ever sat down together and Edwin was writing what Bill was saying. But they talked a great deal, took walks at night and talked about everything.

**MS:** Edwin did help Elaine with her writing.

**RB:** That was during the war and Edwin was a dance critic for the Herald Tribune. Elaine was often accompanying him to the ballet. She was a very beautiful young woman and it was very good for his prestige to be seen with somebody like Elaine. She was very lively. He let her write two or three articles that were in the paper.

**MS:** That's what I thought. Again someone asked me if she had done dance criticism.

**RB:** But then that came to an end when the regular dance critic for the Herald Tribune came back from the war. It was a law that everybody had to get their job back when they came out of the army so Edwin didn't have the job anymore. He didn't try to get another one and then he wrote less and less. In retrospect it's actually very, very good. If somebody writes criticism for twenty-five, thirty years and then you have like 5,000 pages and you have to make a collective book. How are you going to know what to write. So in Edwin's case, they could print everything he ever wrote and it makes a nice size book. Besides, when you review too long, it's a very bad idea.

**MS:** I think so too.

**RB:** For your perception because you get so jaded.

**MS:** Did he work with you on any of your films?

**RB:** de Kooning?

**MS:** Well de Kooning yes, but I was thinking about Edwin Denby?

**RB:** Yeah. He did some films where he had the lead part, in some story films. One called Money. That was my feature film, longest feature film I ever made, about forty minutes long.

**MS:** Yes, I remember that.

**RB:** And he wrote the text sometimes.

**MS:** When you started doing films with [Joseph] Cornell, how did that come about?

**RB:** I remember he telephoned me one morning. I hadn't really met him and his work, his boxes, had been shown at the Stable Gallery, and the Egan Gallery especially before and he said, "Do you want to make a film with me?" and I said, "yes." We made a date to meet at Union Square on a cold Saturday morning in December. I brought the camera and he brought some rolls of film and I brought the tripod. He said he didn't like to use that, it's too technical. So from then on everything was handheld. A few times it was real magic, all kinds of things. I noticed all kinds of things that I hadn't looked at before. For example, that statue that's there. I never looked at it before.

**MS:** The one in the middle of the Square.

**RB:** Yeah. It's the School of Munich, some School of Munich sculpture 1900 or so, very popular sculpture in parks and so on. It's a woman in sort of a floating robe and she's holding a child by the hand and carrying another baby in her arms. It's very, very pretty. And underneath it has all kinds of lizards and butterflies. A little bit Art Deco, no, more Victorian figuration. We sort of made the film around that fountain and we filmed little birds, mostly pigeons and starlings and sparrows. He liked birds. They didn't have to be exotic birds. And then some strange things happened. One time a few boys came just running onto the lawn and started wrestling and tumbling around, just playing. My camera was ready so we got that in the film. Once I remember we were there looking at things and then I saw this dwarf coming towards us, a real short man with a big head. He was pretty far away, coming towards us and I said [whispered-inaudible] "Yes, but don't hurt his feelings." So I had the telephoto lens so I got him walking for quite a while coming towards us and he didn't see the camera. But then

when we looked at it about a week later he said, "no, no, don't put that in the film." He was like too peculiar, too obvious. These effects had to be very subtle and not premeditated in any way so he didn't get into the film.

**MS:** That's somewhat your way of making films anyway, isn't it? Subtle, understated.

**RB:** Yeah. Everyday things.

**MS:** In a sense also letting things happen, not always preplanned.

**RB:** Yes. I like things to happen. I don't direct and I don't predict. I can't predict what we're going to do. He never looked at any of my films. In one way he was very one-tracked, everything had to be his way and everything else didn't really interest him unless he picked something. And one mistake you could make is giving him a present. You find some old little doll or something and you'd say oh, Cornell would like that. And you gave it to him. No, he wouldn't want it. He wanted to find things himself.

**MS:** Did you ever go out to his home?

**RB:** I was there a number of times. His brother was there in front of the TV and his mother lived upstairs. And he had a room full of what he called his dossier, which was all kinds of magazines and information and pictures. Then he had the garage where he made his boxes.

**MS:** He had everything stacked around them, shelves around.

**RB:** Yeah, the boxes it took him a long time to finish. He would have them around for a long time.

**MS:** Did he talk to you about the boxes at all?

**RB:** Yeah. I remember once he called me like at eight in the morning. I was just waking up and he said, "Could you come out right now? I have something very beautiful out here in Flushing." So I said, "No, I can't come now. How about tomorrow?" "No, tomorrow will be too late." He probably had stayed up all night and then early in the morning he saw something very wonderful and wanted to create into a film.

**MS:** You never found out what it was?

**RB:** No.

**MS:** Was it several years that you worked with Cornell--

**RB:** It was over two or three years. We did quite a lot of filming in Little Italy in Mulberry Street which was much more Italian than it is now. Two films I think in Bryant Park and one day, it was a real magic day in November and we went out to Flushing to the cemetery and it was a warm, sunny day in November. The leaves were all on the ground and in the fountain there was orange and brown leaves floating. There were angels on the tombstones and we just used one roll of film, I think, and that became a film, I think it's called Angels or something. There was never any editing.

**MS:** Do you do much editing on your films in general?

**RB:** Yeah. Now I do it a lot in the camera actually which means you save a lot of film. I do a lot of things. I decide that's going to be very short, a half a second. Then you can't make it any longer obviously. Like most people they shoot three, four, five times more than they're going to use and then you cut it down later. I also try, actually now more than before, to leave things in the sequence that they happen to be. Not really, you can change it around. Take things out especially.

**MS:** In your earliest films did you do a lot of editing them?

**RB:** Well, maybe it don't look like I did editing but I thought I did.

**MS:** It does look like it. One can tell but they also have a kind of flow to them. It seems natural.

**RB:** You thinking about the one Under the Brooklyn Bridge? You see that one?

**MS:** Yes, a long time ago.

**RB:** That's one of my most successful films. People still want to see that. They like it better than my newer films, a lot of people do.

**MS:** Were you a film buff yourself? Did you look at a lot of films?

**RB:** I never was really crazy to see films all day long, no.

**MS:** Were there any film makers that you were interested in?

**RB:** Oh, yes. Actually my favorite film for a long time was The Man With a Movie Camera by Dziga Vertov Russian film made in the '20s which was very lively. I liked him better than Eisenstein. Eisenstein was of course the big famous man but he was very dogmatic and he wrote this book about what his films [crosstalk] my films would not be filming because I have quite a lot of stills sometimes in films where nothing happens. Eisenstein would never do that.

**MS:** But he had each frame\_\_\_

**RB:** Or else he would cut it very fast. If I liked the picture I would keep it on for several seconds sometimes which is still shorter than when it's a photograph. I was a photographer before I made films. I find filming films is easier because in photographs you really have to get everything very good because it becomes a fact, it never changes any more. How long can you look at it? But in a film you can have a still, nothing moves, two seconds, five seconds or half a second. So it doesn't have to be quite as perfect as a photograph. I mean perfect in terms of interest everywhere. You know a good photograph is interesting all the way to the corner, everywhere. In the film it doesn't matter so much because before you really take it all in maybe it's gone.

**MS:** Yes, although I think your films have that sense of how one would think with a still camera as well.

**RB:** I know and people used to say you can't do that in a film but I always kept doing it anyway. I still do it.

**MS:** Did you pretty much stop doing still photography separately when you started making films. I know you did all those years of photographing.

**RB:** No, I did both side by side. Buildings in New York and people moving in the street. I did some story films, that's something else, silent-type films. I did one that's been revived lately quite a bit. There's Larry Rivers and John Ashbury and Jane Freilicher who all became famous artists later on. We all were very young, we did this film called Mounting Tension which was a comedy. It spoofed psychoanalysis and the artist as a genius, a painter, a big genius and the modern museum. Those two things were kind of holy then, psychoanalysis and the modern museum. You're not supposed to make jokes about those things. A few years later everybody started making jokes in New York. They have books about psychoanalysis and the modern museum.

**MS:** That was around the mid-fifties.

**RB:** That was in 1950. Larry Rivers was a wild young man. Jane was his girlfriend and then Jane said to me, "Can I bring a friend? You know he could be in the movies." I said, "Okay," and she brought John Ashbury who was very young too.

**MS:** That's a very interesting document, among other things.

**RB:** It was quite funny when it was new and then the way it is with funny things, they're not funny anymore for quite a while and then they might become funny again.

**MS:** Does Larry mention it in his book of memoirs?

**RB:** I think so. I haven't read the book.

**MS:** I just glanced quickly at it. I don't think I'll read it.

**RB:** Actually some friend of his was reading some of it. I think it's fun for people who don't know him but if you knew him it's pretty much familiar I think. He was a lot of fun. He had incredible energy. Every now and then he painted his mother-in-law Birdie. He did a naked painting that's every woman. He was a very good natured man. He did these wild things but he's a very nice man. He was very good with his children. He adopted one of them. His oldest son was his wife's son from before and then he had a second son with her.

**MS:** Did you know Larry and Jane and so on through Nell. You said you were living near Nell Blaine. Did you meet them all through her?

**RB:** Larry lived in the same block for awhile, a rooming house there. We got together at Nell's and Larry was around. Nell was kind of a leader and everybody was following her. She put her foot down and said, "New Orleans jazz is dead. Dizzie Gillespie is now king." She was an abstract painter.

**MS:** I've seen those.

**RB:** And she was the first one of all my friends that showed some. I remember there was a big painting of hers in the second floor in the Madison Avenue somewhere in a gallery. That was pretty impressive.

**MS:** I think she actually showed also with Peggy Guggenheim. Peggy Guggenheim had a show of women artists and I think Nell was in that.

**RB:** I guess she was in the AAA at that time.

**MS:** And then there was the Jane Street Gallery. Were you part of that?

**RB:** No. I had a show at the Tanager Gallery a little later.

**MS:** Nell and Hyde Solomon and I guess Lee Bell was in it. Jane Freilicher. That was one of the first, the Jane Street was I think the first of those.

**RB:** I think so.

**MS:** Were you in on the founding of the Tanager?

**RB:** No. I became good friends with Alex Katz at the time. He was one of the active people there. Philip Pearlstein and Gabriel Laderman.

**MS:** Lois Dodd.

**RB:** Lois, yeah, and then Alex invited me to show some paintings there. I was never a member.

**MS:** When you came back from the Army that's when you were really doing more painting.

**RB:** When I got out of the Army in '45 I had the GI Bill of Rights and you could study anything you wanted and they paid the tuition and a little money to live on besides. So I didn't want to study photography because I don't think there was much to study. Film you couldn't study because there were no places, there were no film schools. So I studied painting for about three years and everybody I knew went to Hans Hofmann at that time. For some reason I wanted to be different. I went to Ozenfant who had a school in New York. He was a very interesting man.

**MS:** He must have been. I have a lot of letters that he wrote, an exchange of letters between him and Kurt Seligman because I have all of Seligman's letters and he was good friends with Ozenfant even after Ozenfant went back to Europe they kept on writing.

**RB:** Near the end of their lives there was a reconciliation between him and Le Corbusier. When I was there at the school they were bitter enemies, at least Ozenfant was very hurt by Le Corbusier's big success and he didn't have anything comparable to that.

**MS:** Your work is very different from anything Ozenfant was involved with. Was he a great liberal teacher?

**RB:** I was doing kind of primitive paintings and he didn't mind that at all. What he couldn't stand was sketchy paintings. The word sketch was not allowed to be used. You could make a study of something but sketch is nothing, that's messing around. And anything you did slowly. He first wanted to start you with a very slow 6H pencil shaded drawing, very carefully, and model usually. So I was working slowly and meticulously. He didn't encourage me to become more paintily. Maybe I should have gone to Hofmann. More freedom.

**MS:** Well it certainly was the opposite point of view.

**RB:** Very opposite.

**MS:** And then you went and studied in Italy for a time.

**RB:** Yes, and then Vilishlaus (?) and our little son was just about a year old. We all went to Italy. The GI Bill was still working over there too and I studied at the Academy of Naples. Nobody ever heard of that anymore. It was a very moribund place actually, very moth eaten and the only models they could get would be some old men like bums to sit. In Southern Italy you couldn't get a nice girl to take her clothes off. It just wasn't done.

**MS:** So you lived in Naples then?

**RB:** We lived in Ischia, an island and I was really hardly going to the place just once a week or so to sign in and it was okay.

**MS:** When you came back to New York after that time or say when you came back after being in the Army have

things changed a lot from the way it had been in the '30s? Did you find a lot of differences among the artists, the whole attitude about American art?

**RB:** Well, I didn't really know many artists in the service. Only in retrospect you know. People change like Guston painted murals for the WPA. He became an abstract artist. No, you weren't aware of what's happening in the world of art. Knew a few people.

**MS:** I think what I'm saying is that there was a perhaps in the later '40s a new kind of confidence in American art that hadn't existed in the '30s, a new feeling that American art was important, that the artists began to take themselves seriously.

**RB:** I never liked that kind of chauvinism that says New York is where it's happening now and Paris, nothing happening in Paris anymore. It was usually the second or third rate painters who were saying that actually. I never heard de Kooning say a thing like that. Never. I was never an abstract expressionist, I was painting my quiet realistic paintings. You knew that you weren't doing mainstream paintings. There was no question about it if you were a realist. But I didn't mind.

**MS:** Did they keep your paintings in the Stable annuals?

**RB:** No.

**MS:** Did you go to the artists [The]Club much?

**RB:** Yeah, I went there. They made me a member very near the beginning and Phillip Pavia was the guiding light behind it and he financed it, I think, and he kept it going. He had this magazine called It is and he knew me and one time he said, "Why don't you give me that picture and I'll put it in my magazine." So I said, "Oh, yeah, it would be nice but you know my pictures are realistic." He said, "Oh, no, no, no."

**MS:** They all had a lot of respect for you.

**RB:** They seemed to like me.

**MS:** As a film maker.

**RB:** I like to be around and listen.

**MS:** And of course you photographed all of their paintings.

**RB:** That's right. I was doing a lot of photographs for Tom Hess for Art News and that's where I knew a lot of them. We did I don't know how many of those stories. I think about twenty or more that I did the photographs for.

**MS:** I was looking at one yesterday that you and Elaine had done.

**RB:** Is it the one about Elvis? An abstract painter who lived out in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. What's his name? Gatch?

**MS:** Lee Gatch?

**RB:** Lee Gatch, yes. He was a very nice man. I liked his painting a lot.

**MS:** It was Hofman, I think. Did you and Elaine do the Hofmann thing?

**RB:** That was about the first one.

**MS:** Yeah, 1950.

**RB:** '48 or '50.

**MS:** I think it was '50, anyway Elaine and you did that.

**RB:** That was a lot of fun. He was great, Hofmann. He enjoyed the idea of painting a picture for a camera and for Elaine so he painted a picture in about two hours and I could get all the different stages. Most of the other painters said, no, they didn't want to paint in front of the camera. Tom Hess wanted the different stages of the painting. He didn't just want the finished painting. Sometimes I had to go back a week later hurry up the painting, everything developed.

**MS:** Do you have the rights to all of those photographs?

**RB:** I think so, yeah.

**MS:** And you have the negatives still?

**RB:** I have the negatives unless they're lost. No, I have them.

**MS:** It would be kind of an interesting book actually to reprint some of those articles with the photographs.

**RB:** Yeah. I find people read those too, quite a lot.

**MS:** Oh, yes. I'm sorry they don't do that kind of thing anymore instead some critic spouting off on it. You're really there, what's happening to it.

**RB:** Well it was all thanks to Tom Hess I think. Of course he loved de Kooning and the abstract painters but he also liked Fairfield Porter. Fairfield Porter was doing a lot of writing for him and then he did a story about Fairfield Porter painting a picture. And then Fairfield suggested people to Tom Hess like Azbe, a nice Russian painter. I remember when Andy Warhol came along and Tom Hess, it took him a while to\_\_we had a discussion once. He said, "no Andy Warhol, let's not accept him any more." I said "ndy Warhol is doing a lot of interesting, a lot of fun."And Tom Hess listened to me. He was a very open minded man and very enthusiastic.

**MS:** So you could recognize right away something in Warhol.

**RB:** Yeah, I was photographing his work for the Castelli Gallery because I did for about twenty years, all the photographs, black and white for the Gallery.

**MS:** You worked for several galleries. You photographed at Betty Parson's I think.

**RB:** A few times.

**MS:** For Janis.

**RB:** Sidney Janis, but only regularly for the Leo Castelli.

**MS:** I know I used to go in to review exhibitions in those days and there you would be photographing.

**RB:** There were other people who did it too.

**MS:** So you have a complete Castelli history in a sense.

**RB:** Yeah, and they have very good archives. They have records of everything.

**MS:** That's when you first came to know Warhol's work when he started showing with Leo?

**RB:** Yeah.

**MS:** That was very perceptive of you because I think for a lot of us who were emersed in abstract expressionism, what had been going on in the '50s, it came as a shock.

**RB:** How about [Roy] Lichtenstein?

**MS:** It was a shock to a lot of painters.

**RB:** Lichtenstein too. The comic strip.

**MS:** Lichtenstein, I remember the work he was showing in the '50s.

**RB:** He was a very talented painter all the time, wasn't he?

**MS:** No, not in the '50s.

**RB:** I think he composes better than any artist I know and that's not saying too much. When he copies a comic strip it comes out much clearer and much sharper when he does it.

**MS:** So Hess listened to you.

**RB:** Maybe he did, yes.

**MS:** You've known so many artists and been so involved and yet apart from in a certain sense the art world.



**RB:** Later Red Grooms became a very good friend and collaborator.

**MS:** You did films with him.

**RB:** Yeah, did some films, spent summers together in Maine in a small house. That was later when I had my second marriage with Yvonne (Jacquette) from my second youth. I was going to be fifty soon and that's when you need young friends, or you like to have new friends, young friends.

**MS:** In working with Red Grooms it does seem that you're able to sort of go right along, you don't stick with a certain age or point of view. You're not stuck in one point in history. Your own work has changed over. You're not always looking back to the '30s or '40s certainly.

**RB:** Red was amazing to work with. He was so pleasant and easygoing. But at the same time he had his own style -- this film called Shoot the Moon where Red did all the sets and the costumes and it was done pretty much on the shoestring but Red had this\_\_\_I didn't realize it right away\_\_\_nothing every day like must intrude in the movie. Everything had to be crazy. If anybody came in the movie had to get white makeup and some kind of a costume could be made of paper and quickly and it gives a lot of style.

**MS:** Do you have favorites among your films?

**RB:** My own?

**MS:** Yes.

**RB:** No. I like the ones that other people like usually. There's not too much point of getting very attached to your own work anyway. Once you finish it it's really for other people to look at. Some of them I don't like. I just threw one away the other day. It was a big relief. It was very silly movie.

**MS:** Are you working on a film now?

**RB:** A little bit. I've just finished one and they're going to show four of my films at the Modern Museum (MoMA) on the first of March, my new films.

**MS:** I will look forward to that.

**RB:** I don't get around much anymore. Isn't that a song by Louis Armstrong?

**MS:** Yes. It's a Second World War song.

**RB:** I don't enjoy traveling much anymore. I still look at things and enjoy some things and beautiful people.

**MS:** Are you working with any artists now?

**RB:** I did a film with Douglas Dunn who is a dancer. We did a film just recently. We might do some more. And then my daughter-in-law Yoshiko Chuma. She appeared in many of my films performing.

**MS:** Have you had any temptation to use video?

**RB:** No. The more I see of video the less I want to do it. My son just made a videotape and it turns out to edit it is very hard, very difficult. To change, let's say, to take one scene and put it somewhere else. You can't do that. You have to do it all over and you have to really plan it and then push the right button. I think that's terrible for editing. But no, quite a few of my films are on videotape now.

**MS:** It's different. It's a different thing.

**RB:** They've got such good color now in film and you stick it in a video and it's horrible, the color gets orange and blue and all kinds of crazy things.

**MS:** When did you do your first color film?

**RB:** There was something called Kodachrome in the '30s already. I think a little bit before the war and it turned out that film is very good. It doesn't fade. Early Kodachrome film. But later film, some of it fades very badly.

**MS:** This is true of slides also. I have early slides taken in the '40s that are as good today as if they were taken yesterday. It was Kodachrome.

**RB:** They don't make that anymore. It was peculiar color because it was not very naturalistic color. It had much more contrast. But once you get used to that kind of color it was okay. The new color film which is Negative,

called Negative, for movies you really can get very lovely color, very realistic color. What I use a lot is don't get a lot of color. Keep the color at a minimum and then when you want to have something bright or see something bright you put it in but not all the time.

**MS:** Because I knew your earlier films I always think of you...

[SIDE B]

**MS:** Anyway I was starting to say that you had written about the kind of work that you did in Maine and it seems that that is a subject that you value as much as the city perhaps.

**RB:** Yeah, and I usually travel a lot and take my movie camera along or my still camera. Usually not both, usually one or the other. So I have lots of films about Peru, Morocco\_\_ not Morocco, in Morocco I had a still camera only\_\_but Italy and Japan and Hong Kong. Most of the time I'm in New York and so I look at things here.

**MS:** Have you used the travel films?

**RB:** Yeah. I put one together not very long ago called Around the World in Thirty Years. It had travel film of it in the '40s and '50s up to the '70s, '80s, something like that in different places.

**MS:** Did you have showings of your films at the club ever back in the '50s?

**RB:** Once or twice I think.

**MS:** I thought so. I don't remember there being any other film maker.

**RB:** There were very few. I remember having a showing on 8th Street once in a gallery and once I wanted to do something very fancy and I rented the Provincetown Playhouse for a night and got a big projector, it was supposed to be very bright. The trouble was I didn't quite know how to use it. It was an arc light projector and makes a very bright light. I got it going but the picture started to jiggle all the time. It was very painful and I didn't know what to do about it. I had the whole showing like that. And then I complained later to the guy where I rented the projector. He said, "Oh, you should have stuck a match into it to increase the pressure on the pressure plate." Well, I didn't know that. I had a very full house actually, maybe 200 people or something, but I was very discouraged after that. I gave up films for about a year and then I started again. So I had very few showings at that time. And then underground film came along. I benefitted from that. My films got shown more.

**MS:** I don't remember anybody else who was doing the kind of work you were doing and certainly not anybody who was involved with all the artists in the way you were.

**RB:** Now everybody makes films about every artist.

**MS:** I know. You never did a film of somebody actually working did you?

**RB:** Yeah. I did a film about Alex Katz painting and one about Neil Welliver who was also a good friend. And I did one about Yvonne when she painted a mural and I did one of Charles Symonds when he was building his little\_\_

**MS:** I see you have a Symonds piece over there.

**RB:** Yes, he gave us that. A little ruin. I did about four pictures of artists.

**MS:** I remember they're on the list. I'd love to see the Symonds.

**RB:** Yes, it's kind of nice. He goes around in the Lower East Side at a time when it was in ruins, it was really in ruins. Since then its gotten much better. This was 1975 and people were burning cars. We got actually burning car in the picture. He's making his little so-called dwellings in an old brick wall and the car is running behind him. That was like every day. And people were wrecking their own neighborhoods. It was very strange. And then it turned around.

**MS:** I lived there in 1950 over on Stanton Street when people were just beginning to live in lofts way over on the East Side. Near the Williamsburg Bridge.

**RB:** In a loft?

**MS:** Yeah. There were a few Hofmann students in that building and Weldon Kees who used to write art columns for The Nation. You've seen New York through half a century, more than half a century. How do you like the city today?

**RB:** I still like it. I'm less excited about everything now but I think New York is still all right. The fact that it always changes makes it like a better New York. If it stayed the same it wouldn't be New York. So I'm not going to say oh it used to be better in the old days. Maybe I had a better time in the old days but then that was myself because I was younger and had more fun maybe. I came here in the Depression in 1935 and I was very lucky. I had some money from Switzerland that I had inherited so I had a very nice time. I didn't need to get a job. I could just play around and do what I felt like. Other people were sleeping in the doorways and on newspapers and things.

**MS:** And a lot of the artists even in spite of the project were having a hard time. They had a hard time getting materials.

**RB:** A lot of artists were very poor. de Kooning was very poor.

**MS:** He wasn't even on the project.

**RB:** It was his choice though because at first when I knew him he was doing windows for a shoe store and he did very well and they liked him. You know it was a living. One day he was offered a job in Philadelphia for \$150 a week. It was an enormous sum and he said no, he wanted to stay in New York and be poor and paint. Then he was very poor and then he got on the WPA project for a while and then the war started and then people had to have papers and it turned out he didn't have any paper at all. He was a stowaway and had no passport of any kind. So he had to quit but then he got a job at the World's Fair. It was in 1939. He painted a big outside mural there and then he got a job on a boat a little later to decorate, make a mural inside a ship. He had to go to a place called Newport News in Virginia and at that time the war had already started and he said, "I can't go there. I have no passport and have no papers of any kind, citizen papers." So somebody said, "Yes, just go and if they ask you are you a citizen say yes." And he did and they asked him if he was a citizen and he said, "Yes," and "You could do the work." And then later after that he didn't have anything for a long time. He sold a few paintings. Helena Rubenstein bought one of his paintings in the '40s. He had a friend on 57th Street, Mr. Kellar, who had something called the Bignou Gallery and he showed some of his paintings and he was going to be in a show but Bill didn't want it for some reason. He was struggling with his paintings, wasn't very interested and his friends used to be quite impatient with him, "Show it, maybe you can still paint." He didn't want to do it and people were kind of impatient with him, not taking advantage of when you get something offered. But in retrospect you could say he knew what he was doing. He didn't really know what he was doing. He didn't know what his paintings would be like later on and usually when you met him on the street and said, "How's your painting going?" He used to say, "I'm struggling."

**MS:** So it was with Egan that he had his first show.

**RB:** Yeah. And Egan was very bad about paying the artists. He had no money.

**MS:** But he was dedicated, Egan.

**RB:** Well, he put on these wonderful shows. I remember when he put on the Cornell show it took him a whole week to set it up. And when he finally had it it was very beautiful.

**MS:** I remember that space.

**RB:** You remember the Egan show and the Cornell show?

**MS:** Yes. And the other shows, Kline, de Kooning, Earl Kerkam in this little, small space. I think you got off the elevator at the 4th floor and then walked up another flight as I recall. And he had a conviction about what he was doing as a dealer. Now I know he wasn't very good financially. I suppose he's no longer alive. Haven't heard of him in years. I liked him.

**RB:** I haven't either. Then Bill from there went to the Janis Gallery. His first show there was a woman show and that didn't do well.

**MS:** It didn't?

**RB:** No. Maybe one of them was sold.

**MS:** Because Hess did a cover story for Art News. Hess wrote de Kooning paints a painting and puts one of the women on the cover. Did you do the photographs for that?

**RB:** Yeah. I did most of the photographs for that. Then I was going abroad and the painting was not finished. It took him a year to paint that painting. But then a friend of mine, Walter Averbach was continuing, doing the stages so that became very interesting, he had about seven different stages of that painting.

**MS:** Did you see much of Gorky in those early days?

**RB:** I never saw much of Gorky, no. I just met him a few times and Bill sort of kept his friends separate. But I remember being in Gorky's studio one time in Union Square. I remember his wonderful looks, his tragic looks, dark brown eyes and black hair, tall, "for twenty years I have suffered in America." He looked like an artist should look. Very wonderful, romantic.

**MS:** Did you like his paintings?

**RB:** Yeah. I liked them very much. He had a very hard time. People said "oh, his paintings are too much like Picasso and he wasn't accepted as one of the Americans. If you look at them now they're not like Picasso at all. You'd never mistake them for Picasso. He was very influenced by Picasso.

**MS:** Were you friends with [Franz] Kline?

**RB:** Kline was a wonderful guy. I knew him mostly from the bar. He was telling very funny stories, very macho stories. Some of them you can't even tell to a woman because they were so bad. But he was a really nice man.

**MS:** You didn't know him earlier when he was showing on the outdoor exhibitions in Greenwich Village.

**RB:** No. I once went to photograph his early work. There was one man who had this big collection.

**MS:** Out in Forest Hills.

**RB:** Yes.

**MS:** Douglas Orr.

**RB:** He had paintings of trains going through the mountains.

**MS:** He had all those early Kline's.

**RB:** I remember photographing those. They were very nice.

**MS:** They never show them. I don't know why that is, those early ones. I don't know what Orr did with his collection. Maybe he's still alive.

**RB:** I saw a small retrospective of Kline's. I think I saw it in San Francisco. It was wonderful, partly because it was small. They didn't show those early ones. He and Bill were real pals. They went drinking together and towards the end their paintings became a little similar. Kline started to paint a little more like de Kooning, not so much just black and white.

**MS:** Are you in touch with de Kooning at all in these recent years? I guess it's too sad.

**RB:** No. I understand nobody is anymore. I haven't seen him in a long, long time.

**MS:** I always thought very highly of Elaine as a painter.

**RB:** Oh, yes. Elaine was a wonderful friend and a good painter. She had a show recently, didn't she?

**MS:** There's a big show. I don't know if its happened yet. It's going to be in Georgia, a big retrospective of her work. Joan Washburn showed I guess it was last year some of those books that she did in Black Mountain.

**RB:** Yes, I saw that. In one year in Black Mountain. Just one year's paintings.

**MS:** Did you ever teach down there or work down there?

**RB:** Yes that same year. Elaine invited me to come down there and I went down there for about a week. It was a lovely place. It was a big year. They had John Cage, Merce Cunningham.

**MS:** Was Buckminster Fuller there?

**RB:** Yes. He was there before he was too famous and de Kooning and Elaine and of course Elvis. It was a lovely place to be.

**MS:** It was extraordinary. I still don't understand why way down there in that remote spot in the mountains so much happened. Everybody went through there as a student or a faculty member in the late '40s.

**RB:** It was very dangerous for young people to go there because they could stay there for three years and it's like such a Shangrila. Artists, everything, no problems, it's all by itself and they can have a wonderful time and then have to go to New York. They couldn't go back to Ohio where they came from after that. And then they have to get into the rat race and try to make a living. I know for a few of them it was very difficult.

**MS:** But something stayed with them. I mean look at the people that came out of there.

**RB:** Rauschenberg. Now there's Scott Higgins which is something like that but that only lasts two months so everybody knows it's like just a reprieve.

**MS:** There was a group of people from Black Mountain who lived out\_\_\_ I lived for thirty years in Rockland County in Stoney Point. They used to call it The Land. Paul Williams had established a community of Black Mountain people up there. Did you ever go up there? Cage lived up there for a time and then later other people came who haven't been at Black Mountain. Stan Vanderbeek who you probably knew lived up there. What it was is sort of trying to recreate the atmosphere of Black Mountain. I think it closed in 1955, it was only a short time.

**RB:** I was there in '48 I think.

**MS:** There was a very good potter named, was it M.C. Williams, anyway, one of the leading potters taught there. Ken Snelson was a student there and a student of Fuller's.

**RB:** Olson, the famous poet. Rauschenberg was there when I was there.

**MS:** What was he doing at that time, do you remember?

**RB:** No, I don't remember what he was doing.

**MS:** I have never seen any student work. I remember his first show at the Stable Gallery.

**RB:** I remember that show. It was down in the basement. He had these things he picked up in the street and had a way of putting them in there and operating on very little but it became art somehow. He is inventor of The Gap you know. Now they have stores called The Gap everywhere. He said I want to work in the gap between art and life.

**MS:** That's not really how the store got its name, is it?

**RB:** I don't know. Used to be a window dresser for Bonwit Teller.

**MS:** Did you know Duchamp when he was living here?

**RB:** A little bit. I saw him at some dance recitals of things. I didn't know him.

**MS:** Did you go a lot to see dance performances with Denby?

**RB:** Oh, yeah. The famous things at the Judson Church, wild things. Robert Morris was doing some things with Yvonne Rainer. They were dancing naked, completely naked, very close so you couldn't really see anything but the backs and they were dancing very slowly and somebody was reading the diary of the Renaissance man, Da Vinci, Leonardo Da Vinci, it was in his diary and Lucinda Childs was slowing unwinding a rope and they were moving very slowly. Very astonishing. Very avant-garde.

**MS:** I guess there was never any filmed record of those performances.

**RB:** There was no videotaping then as far as I know.

**MS:** And happenings. Were you involved in some of the happenings?

**RB:** Not personally no. I remember the ones at Red Grooms and Bob Whitman. No I was not in them. One or two at Red Grooms. He did some in the studio.

**MS:** Again I don't think there was any real record from those.

**RB:** We considered it recently. Red Grooms was doing some of them again like the moving train and the building on fire. He was doing them again at the Whitney or somewhere. There are some still photographs.

**MS:** I guess you just moved through all of this without looking back that much but you certainly have been right in the middle of things for a half century. There is no time that you think of as more interesting or more exciting than another in all those years?

**RB:** Sometimes I had a better time than in other times but it had nothing to do with the art situation. I think our history's all made up by hindsight and a lot of it is very inaccurate. Somebody says something and then somebody writes it down and somebody else reads it and writes it down again and then it becomes a fact. Like this camaraderie of the clubs. Things that are happening right now are just as good. Who knows.

**MS:** You're at least free from that being stuck at a particular point like so many people today will talk about how it used to be.

**RB:** Sure. They had a better time when they were young. We were always trying to beat the older generation. I remember de Kooning I think said, "Picasso is the guy to beat." Now de Kooning is the guy to beat. I'm lucky to have young friends like my son is twenty-eight. He's in that big show called Exit Art. Have you seen that?

**MS:** I haven't. Is it still on now?

**RB:** I think it's still on. Young people, they're doing all kinds of things.

**MS:** I'm going down to SoHo later in the afternoon. I'll go see it.

**RB:** I don't see the point of saying young people they don't believe in anything anymore. They don't know what they're doing. The art work is falling apart. I can't see that.

**MS:** I don't see it either. I teach so I'm involved with young art students.

**RB:** Yeah. It's very nice to have young people around. They're just as frightened as ever. They're much more attractive than old people. [chuckles]

**MS:** They have wonderful ideas and there are still things that haven't been done. They're not just reinventing the wheel. I'm glad to know you're still working on new films and I'll look forward to seeing the recent things at the Museum of Modern Art. Are they going to show them in the auditorium?

**RB:** In one of the theaters over there, probably the small one. At 6:30.

**MS:** Did you used to go there and look at the wonderful films that they used to show in the '30s and '40s?

**RB:** Not very often.

**MS:** So that was not a big thing in terms of your own work.

**RB:** One of my favorite films was Jean Vigo and I mentioned before The Man With the Movie Camera. But that was not around actually till quite later and I felt a great affinity with it. It didn't really influence me because I hadn't seen it. And then Rene Clair I used to like a lot, his French films.

**MS:** I was wondering how important it was for somebody who was a film maker like you to have those around. The first job I had was at the museum and I always would go down after work and go into the auditorium, get a film education.

**RB:** My films are more like painting or poetry, they're not like big films. Maybe I look more at paintings than at films.

**MS:** It's true. I wouldn't have thought of putting it that way.

**RB:** I read almost only poetry now. My eyes aren't very good so I can't read a lot.

**MS:** Have you always read a lot of poetry?

**RB:** The old poets. Now I read some of the new ones. My favorite poet right now is Alice Notley, you probably haven't heard of her. John Asbery used to be my favorite poet. He still is in a way. And Ron Padgett I admire him a lot. I tried to write some poems but I never could do it. I read Tanizak Diary of a Mad Old Man. Have you read that?

**MS:** I haven't read it.

**RB:** I started writing a diary of a vain old man. I haven't got very far. When you get old if you can't have an obsession then you felt out of luck and I don't quite have an obsession.

**MS:** Well you're certainly not vain.

**RB:** Very vain. But I recognize it. A lot of people are vain and they don't realize it. I keep watching it and I catch

myself.

**MS:** I guess that doesn't come through because you have a manner of being offhand or diffident that seems very modest. That's deceptive.

**RB:** I'm very lucky to have Yvonne. She's very wonderful and she's doing so many things and I can watch her and help her a little bit here and there. Cooking dinner or something.

**MS:** She's a wonderful artist. Ever since I first saw her work I have admired her painting.

**RB:** I saw you recently wrote about a man called Rosenberg.

**MS:** Oh, yes. Did you know him?

**RB:** No. I do not know his work.

**MS:** He was showing from the '30s. Ralph Rosenberg.

**RB:** Maybe I've seen him but I don't remember.

**MS:** In fact I'm going tonight to this memorial exhibition and I'm going to go and have dinner with his widow but Ralph always did small paintings so that they never showed with everybody. But he was a terrible alcoholic and so finally he'd always get thrown out of whatever gallery he was with. But he just kept right on doing these small beautiful paintings until the end. He was crippled in the end and he lived in just one room with his wife but he just kept on working. The thing that hurt him most was living in one of those new apartment buildings and there were people who played awful music on the other side of the wall and that's the one thing he cared about more than anything was music and he had to listen because the walls are thin in these new apartment buildings. You have to hear the awful bad music all the time. He didn't mind being in one room but it was the sound. Anyway he's gone. I'm surprised you never ran across him. He wasn't among the artists that much.

**RB:** Sholtzheimer (?) had a show just recently.

**MS:** I missed that.

**RB:** I knew him a little bit. I think we did a story about him. He used to paint on rooftops and he was one of the realist painters that was so respected by abstract painters always. One of the few.

**MS:** I think Egan showed his work.

**RB:** I think you're right. So I went to the opening. He had lots of people. Mostly relatives and grandchildren. The show was nice.

**MS:** I went to the opening of Elaine de Kooning's show at Washburn. There were lots of people. A lot of that generation is still around. A lot of old timers were there.

**RB:** Do you think we've scrapped the bottom of the barrel?

**MS:** No I don't think we'd ever scrape the bottom of the barrel but I think it's been interesting what you've said. I don't know if you have anything you particularly want to record.

**RB:** No.

**MS:** I think you've said what you've said in your films and all this is extraneous. END OF TAPE