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Oral history interview with Esteban Vicente,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Esteban Vicente on April 6, 1982. The interview was conducted by Phyllis Tuchman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project, with funding provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

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

Interview

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Do you remember when you first met Mark Rothko?

ESTEBAN VICENTE: No, I don't. I really don't remember. You know, the one thing that happened at that time that's interesting.... As you know, there were about five or six galleries in the city, I mean real galleries. And each gallery had a group. Then when there was an opening in any gallery by anybody of these groups, the audience were the other painters. So that was the thing, nobody else. So if Rothko had an opening, the other painters will go and vice versa. As a matter of fact, I remember in the show at Sidney Janis, I went to the opening with Bill de Kooning. There was nobody there at the time so he came to the door to greet us. So that's the one time I...but I used to see him, sure. But I don't remember when I met him.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were these openings on Saturdays or...?

MR. VICENTE: I have to think about it. I think they were Saturdays. But many things happened since and everything has changed, so I don't know any more. But generally were on Saturdays, yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: And where did you show, and who was your group?

MR. VICENTE: First at the Peridot Gallery.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was Pollock at the Peridot Gallery?

MR. VICENTE: Yes, Pollock was the owner, Lou Pollock. And the people there were...Brooks was there. Who else was there? Also Guston. Oh, oh, I don't remember. Anyhow, there was a small group there. From there I left the gallery. I was not there very long. From there I went to Egan and from Egan I went to Rose Fried. And from Rose Fried I went to Castelli and from there to Emmerich. And now, as you know, I am with Gruenebaum. As I say, every gallery had a group. So then when I was with Rose Fried with other people. Everybody was close to everybody else. It was like a group of people that don't have much to do with the rest of the population. So that was the way it was.

MS. TUCHMAN: Where was Peridot before Madison Avenue in the '60's?

MR. VICENTE: On 12th Street downtown.

MS. TUCHMAN: It was on 12th Street?

MR. VICENTE: Yes. I would say between University Place and Broadway.

MS. TUCHMAN: So would you go to an opening and then go right across the street to the Cedar Bar?

MR. VICENTE: No. The Cedar Bar was not there yet at that time. The Cedar Bar appeared later. It was done this way. I mean we had the Club, the artists Club, on 8th Street. Every Friday was some kind of happening for the general public that we managed ourselves. Then at a certain point after the happening, whatever it was, sometimes a lecture, whatever, we would decide to get something to drink. So somebody, some member, would go downstairs and buy a bottle of whiskey. Then at this time Franz Kline, the one that started it, he was nervous and impatient, so he would rush to the Cedar Bar. At that time, nobody knew it although the bar has been there forever. So Kline would go there to have a beer. Then he has a beer and comes back to the Club. But then later he would not return any more. And then slowly other people started to go there and that was the beginning of the Cedar Bar. It was there but it had nothing to do with anybody we knew.

MS. TUCHMAN: So after an opening, say, at Parsons Gallery or at Peridot or Kootz, you'd all go to an opening and then you'd go out to dinner?

MR. VICENTE: No, no, no. Then there was a period where she was going with a close friend or whatever. And

then I don't know, the artist who was having the show would go always somewhere. And something that I remember, we did go to Chinatown after an opening, a group. But it would all depend. But that was the period when there was no audience. And the same thing happened with music during that time, contemporary music. The audience were the painters generally speaking and musicians, that's all.

MS. TUCHMAN: You mean like John Cage and Mort Feldman?

MR. VICENTE: Yes. We used to go to Cage and Feldman concerts and there was nobody but the painters and the musicians and that's all. No one, no audience. And the audience later grew away. As a matter of fact, the last time I went to one of these concerts, I didn't know anybody.

MS. TUCHMAN: And when you used to go you knew everyone?

MR. VICENTE: Everybody.

MS. TUCHMAN: What were the parties like in the late '40's and '50's?

MR. VICENTE: To tell you the truth, I didn't go much to parties so I don't know about it. I don't think there were many parties as such. The thing was to see each other. The Cedar Bar was a place, the Club, originally the Club. And then the thing disappeared. And then at that time also in the '50's, things started to happen. Some people went on to great rewards, and for some reason the whole thing began to be diluted and everybody disappeared, went home. And that was that. So we could visit each other but not the same way because everybody was busy. And the groups in the galleries disappeared too. So it's a complete turnover of the situation.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were there any special shows that stand out in your mind or events at the Club?

MR. VICENTE: Well, there was a show that was done and it was a show that never has been written about. And it was a very important show in the city, and that was-you might have heard about it-the 9th Street show.

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes, I heard about that.

MR. VICENTE: You know how it was made?

MS. TUCHMAN: Can you tell me?

MR. VICENTE: Yes. There was a building on 9th Street and it was empty. It was going to be torn down. And in that building was a big space that had been a business, some kind of business, and it was empty. So then the idea was to rent a place for a month, and then the artists themselves got together, I mean a group of people would get together in Ferrin's studio.

MS. TUCHMAN: John Ferrin.

MR. VICENTE: John Ferrin. It was there in the same block next to that building that was going to be torn down. And we had a meeting there and it was de Kooning, Kline, Marca-Relli, and I think maybe also Milton Resnick, and myself. And then we make a committee. The committee, the purpose of the committee was to invite the other artists, and nobody else was involved, only artists. The show was run by the artists, nobody else. So we invited everybody, and the show was very important. Everybody was there, including Clement Greenberg. We got a painting of his. Yes, so that was the show. Nobody else did anything about it. It was only artists. It was this committee, and then it was artists only, and we invited who we thought was important to be invited. From that moment on and later (it lasted one month) it was very well attended. And then after that the Stable Gallery took over and this show became an annual. After twice or three times, it disappeared also. And that is the show that I remember always because it was very significant and important.

MS. TUCHMAN: I've never understood. I know it was in a ground level shop.

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were the walls knocked down of the original store?

MR. VICENTE: No, no.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was the floor messy?

MR. VICENTE: No. We painted it.

MS. TUCHMAN: The artists painted it?

MR. VICENTE: Yes, and the walls. No, it was fine.

MS. TUCHMAN: And how did the younger artists...like I know Joan Mitchell was in that show and Helen Frankenthaler was. How was this younger generation...? How did the older artists know the younger artists?

MR. VICENTE: That generation was not the younger generation. It was not. They hung around with us like everybody else. So I would not call them the younger generation.

MS. TUCHMAN: It was like the first time that they had shown.

MR. VICENTE: Yes, right. Because, you see, I don't think that these people are younger than Elaine de Kooning. I don't believe it. I mean Joan Mitchell I don't think is or Frankenthaler either. So they were part of things.

MS. TUCHMAN: How has Leo Castelli's name gotten associated with this show?

MR. VICENTE: Because he wanted to be there but he was not allowed, that's all.

MS. TUCHMAN: Okay, but I just wondered if this was the same show.

MR. VICENTE: He wanted to intervene. And probably the most he did, I'm not sure now but I think so, is that nobody had the money to pay the rent. It was \$40 only. And I think he paid it or something, but that's all. He wanted to intervene, certainly he wanted to. As a matter of fact, he got in an argument with me about it because I was a close friend of his. I told him all the artists feel the same way-nobody could intervene who was an outsider. He had nothing to do with the show. Anybody who says so is a liar, believe me.

MS. TUCHMAN: In naming the list of artists that you just said, you didn't mention Rothko or Gottlieb or Newman.

MR. VICENTE: No, no.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were they apart from everybody?

MR. VICENTE: Well, you see, that was interesting too because from the beginning there was this split between the artists-I would say mainly there were two groups, generally speaking. One is Rothko, Gottlieb, maybe Hare and some others, I don't know now. And then the other group is de Kooning, Kline later appeared, Pavia, Resnick, and everybody else. And I am with them too but personally I didn't belong to any group ever. So I know both, but I was classified with the other, and I preferred the other. So in terms...I'm not talking about their work. I talk more about the attitude, general attitude, of these people. To express what I know, what I think, is that the other group, the group I mentioned secondly, de Kooning, they're the people who I understood. With the others, there's a kind of level that they think they are above the others. I believe that the Motherwells and the Rothkos, they have certain ideals-they don't want to mix with the others that way socially. And yet when there are openings, as I said before, everybody got together. But in principle, I think that wasn't the question. I mean de Kooning was a wonderful man and he was doing what he has to do. But the others, they had like a certain social status that is not the same as de Kooning. De Kooning was from the streets and they were not. They were, I think, of middle class. I believe so, I do. And that's what happened. There was no antagonism in any way, but that was the thing.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was part of the difference that Rothko and Gottlieb and Newman had university educations?

MR. VICENTE: I don't know, maybe. Anyhow, that probably is true. I don't know. It's a possibility. I don't know what it was based on, but this is a fact.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was Rothko an easy person to talk to?

MR. VICENTE: I would say this. My opinion of Rothko, I didn't have much to do with Rothko actually and I never talked to him about questions of painting. It was kind of a superficial relation. I knew him and he knew me. For instance, I remember when he got the children. You know, he had his children late in his life. And I remember once when we were in the street leaving the gallery, we talked. I said, "How is the little girl?" And I remember he said, "She's very sexy." It was a baby. This was his way. So I will not say I had any serious conversation with him ever.

MS. TUCHMAN: What did he look like?

MR. VICENTE: Well, he looked to me like a professor, maybe like a rabbi.

MS. TUCHMAN: Rabbi? No kidding! I could see it. I could see it, better than a pharmacist.

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: So you never talked to him at all about what it was like coming to America from Europe or anything like that?

MR. VICENTE: No, nothing, nothing serious really.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you remember him participating at the Club, going to meetings?

MR. VICENTE: Well, no, because you see...this is a thing also which is what I was saying before. Before the Club, these people, the group of Motherwell, Baziotas, Rothko, Barney Newman, they had a place on 8th Street. I don't remember the title. It was a school. And also they had gatherings in which somebody would be talking. Oh, Reinhardt was there.

MS. TUCHMAN: Tony Smith.

MR. VICENTE: Tony Smith, yes. So that is what they did. I said I was part of the artists Club. Then this came out, and there was no relation between the two. So this is what I'm saying. So this split existed. So in the process they closed that place themselves and then the Club remained for a long time and became a kind of center, the Club, really. So it was very interesting. So that's again the clear idea of what I'm saying between the two that existed from the beginning. And then this was a school they had. It was not against. It was separated, completely separated. Motherwell never was at the club. Rothko never was either, Barney Newman either. So it was completely separated.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you remember anything in particular that happened at the club, any particular evening?

MR. VICENTE: Well, I will say that the most interesting thing to me I think was first...there were a few things that happened there. Edgar Varese, the composer, came and talked and played his music. Then Cage was there too, and I think that was when he gave the first lecture about silence. And then also...there were things like that, interesting things. But the panels about painting, they bored me to death. But then one of the important things was this: Alfred Barr was asked to come for I think a panel...I don't remember any more about that. Or he was in the audience. I think he was in the audience. And then some artist began to attack him, telling him that "you don't know what is an artist" and he is defending himself. Then at that time was when finally Jasper Johns had a show at Castelli and somebody says, "Well, you don't really know which one he is." And that was an incident that was part of the Club too. And there were things like that from time to time. But the important thing about the Club, besides that, the fact that everybody was in the club. Everybody was friendly. The members use to come which was Harold Rosenberg and all kinds of people. I remember there was a priest from Fordham University and he gave a lecture on existentialism. So there was a thing like that. It was very alive, a very interesting place in which everybody met. As I said, there were meetings of the members when we met alone before Friday. Friday was the day for the public, and we would bring friends. And then that was a place in which everybody was-everybody. And it was a very important place and a gathering place that was needed, obviously. And then things started to disintegrate and it ended. Now also there are rumors and everybody talks about that too. And they are talking nonsense about what happened after the Club ended. You see, first it was on 8th Street. From 8th Street it moved to Broadway. And from Broadway it moved to 14th Street, and that was the end of the Club. And then somebody else took over, and they wanted to do something, and that was I, think, Irving Sandler. I was no more in it. Nor de Kooning, nobody was in it. It was the end of that. So they began to do who knows what, and that was the last. But naturally they'd talk about the Club.

MS. TUCHMAN: By then were people in the Hamptons? Artists, were they in the Hamptons?

MR. VICENTE: Yes. There is a story, yes. At that time we were going there for weekends, everybody.

MS. TUCHMAN: For a weekend.

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: It was a long drive.

MR. VICENTE: Yes. And then naturally the people that were there already or started to be there were people like Lassaw. And then naturally one that had been there for a long time was Pollock. And then Motherwell too. And then John Little and then Ossorio, Zogbaum was there long before anybody. And there was Brooks. And that period we are talking about now, everybody would go for weekends there, everyone. So it became a kind of something very fun to us all. And then slowly all of this disappeared. And the situation there today has nothing to do with what happened then. So there are people there and everyone is home and that is that. I see no more of this rush from here. And besides, the truth is in the process. Long Island is a very expensive place for any young person.

MS. TUCHMAN: That is true!

MR. VICENTE: So there was no way. So that's what happened. Now there are a few people who are still living there, not many. I mean de kooning, Abram Lassaw, John Little, Ossorio.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were the Ferrins out there? Were the Ferrins friends with the abstract expressionists?

MR. VICENTE: Yes, yes. Sure. They had a house there at the end. His widow lives there.

MS. TUCHMAN: At the beach would people socialize? Would you go to the beach together?

MR. VICENTE: Oh, yes. The 4th of July, it was a big thing, yes. So we all would go there. They had gatherings all over the place. That was the thing then, but now it's finished. All this is gone. So everything is settled.

MS. TUCHMAN: Going back a little earlier, when did you come to this country?

MR. VICENTE: Oh, in '36, 1936.

MS. TUCHMAN: Before July of '36, before the Civil War?

MR. VICENTE: Which war, in Spain?

MS. TUCHMAN: In Spain.

MR. VICENTE: No, no.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were you out of Spain by then?

MR. VICENTE: I was in France, and from Paris I came here. But in coming here, I went through Madrid to say good-bye to my father that I didn't see for some time-because I didn't live in Spain since 1937. I quit. So coming there, the war started after three days I'd been there. I had everything, my papers to leave and every thing with my first wife. So then at that time I thought I should not leave. I should fight.

MS. TUCHMAN: You were in Madrid? You would have had months and months.

MR. VICENTE: What do you mean?

MS. TUCHMAN: The siege of Madrid was pretty long.

MR. VICENTE: But I wanted to fight. I felt my duty would be to stay and do that. But then they told me you wouldn't because everybody was ready to fight but they had no armaments, nothing to fight with. So then finally they said it was better if you go. So I left. And later on here, the government asked me to represent them in Philadelphia.

MS. TUCHMAN: The Spanish government?

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: The Loyalists or...?

MR. VICENTE: The Loyalists naturally, not Franco! The Loyalists, sure. And till the end of the war in Spain.

MS. TUCHMAN: Just doing paper work?

MR. VICENTE: No, running the place. I didn't do paper work, no. I was the vice-consul. I would take care of the business, what happened to their businesses. It was a big...also it was very important because it was not only Philadelphia, it was not only Pennsylvania, it was West Virginia, Virginia, the Carolinas. The reason was that there were workers, Spanish workers around. The Spanish colony never was big anyway in this country. In most cases the colony was made of workers and in most cases they were miners in the local mines. So as vice-consul I took care of all these things. And also by that time the war in Spain...well, many people wanted to go to fight there. You had to give them passports.

MS. TUCHMAN: Between 1927 and '36 you were in Paris painting?

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Figuratively, cubism?

MR. VICENTE: No. At first I was...before I left Spain, I had a show in Madrid, the first show in my life. And there was nothing good in it. And then I went to Paris and I continued to paint. And then when I came here I had done

figurative paintings because I thought I should for my own sake because I studied from sculpture in Madrid. So I did that. And when I came here I had my first show.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

MS. TUCHMAN: What did the work look like that you made in Paris?

MR. VICENTE: Well, it's difficult to explain. It was a kind of construction actually and I can't find a way in words to define it. It's difficult.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you know other artists in Paris?

MR. VICENTE: Yes, sure. I knew in most cases people older than myself. I knew some people in the period of Picasso that came there, and Picasso too. But of my age? One was called Boaz, a painter; Venius was another one. They were my friends. And then besides that, there were other people there from Madrid. Dali I didn't see in Paris at that time but I knew him from Madrid. We were in the same class. Then I knew some French painters too. But most people went to Montparnasse to go to the cafes. I'm not because I had a problem there. To stay in Paris I had to make a living. So I had to do something. So I could not fool around. And then a close friend of mine was Sonnabend.

MS. TUCHMAN: Michael Sonnabend?

MR. VICENTE: Yes, a close friend.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was he a poet then?

MR. VICENTE: He never was a poet. He never wrote a thing, never. (Laughter) But he was a wonderful guy. We were very close. I have pictures with him. I met him in Paris and then we took a trip to Spain. A wonderful man but he never wrote a poem, never. I don't think he can write.

MS. TUCHMAN: What was he doing there?

MR. VICENTE: That's a good question, too.

MS. TUCHMAN: Great.

MR. VICENTE: He's a very good person, intelligent, and in Paris he read French literature. He knew a lot about... he was very much involved with that. And one of the things that he would say that was very funny and very good too, is that he used to say that the reason he left his country (he's from Buffalo), the reason he lived on the continent was because he's a short man and Jewish so he had no chance. But in France he's an American.

MS. TUCHMAN: So what language would you speak in, Spanish or French?

MR. VICENTE: In French.

MS. TUCHMAN: But would he teach you English? I'm intrigued that...?

MR. VICENTE: He didn't, no. The only thing he taught me was...no, not English. I didn't know nothing about...I mean the English language I didn't speak at all. I knew French, yes. I think Miro's the one that taught me to say fuck you. (Laughter)

MS. TUCHMAN: Great. Well, you must have learned English by the time you came here in '37.

MR. VICENTE: No, nothing, nothing. I didn't know anything. But I managed with French. No, I didn't know any English.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, how did you get a show by then?

MR. VICENTE: Well, first because you see my wife is an American so I was helped in that way too. And then also the fact is that I met Walter Pach. We became very close friends. Walter Pach, he used to paint too.

MS. TUCHMAN: Walter...I don't know his name.

MR. VICENTE: Yes, Walter Pach, a wonderful man. But he was a lecturer. He used to give lectures and so forth. He wrote a lot too about art and he was a painter. And he was related to the Ash Can group in a way.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, Pach.

MR. VICENTE: And he translated French into English. So I knew him very well. We were good friends. And he was in the gallery too in Kleemann. It was Kleemann Gallery. So that's that. Then I slowly began to learn the language and I read the paper every day, the *New York Times*. But I knew nothing about the English language. I studied French in school in Spain but not English.

MS. TUCHMAN: How did you get to Black Mountain College?

MR. VICENTE: They called me for an interview. You see, I know the college. It was a very interesting place, a beautiful place. When I went there, the two founders of the school still were there. You know, it was at the foot of the mountains and a beautiful campus. Then I went for the interview. And at the time I was almost ready to finish the interview, the last person I had to talk to was Albers who was there. But the school itself was magnificent and I had the impression that I had been in a place in the Middle Ages in which these people, the students, were a very compact group of people, very much interested in working together. And it was a beautiful thing to see that. Then I began to realize one thing. I could not be secluded in a place like that. So I did not take it. So then later these people disappeared and then Albers left and went to Yale University. Then the man in charge of the school was the poet Charles Olson and then they called me again. Then it was a very good experience to be there that way. But certainly before, I couldn't. I didn't want to be located in some place like that, far away. No, it was not right so I could not do that. So then I did and that was that. It was a very good experience. And I was also interested in how the school changed depending on the person in charge. With Olson it was like a camp. With Albers it was like an extension of the Bauhaus. So it was a wonderful place, really.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you have good students there?

MR. VICENTE: Well, yes, some. And I knew people like, for instance, Creeley the poet, very well. I see him many times. He is in Buffalo now also and he was working between Buffalo and New Mexico. He was a wonderful man. I had a little show in Albuquerque and he came. And then the other man that was a close friend [Unintelligible]. He was there for a long time. And then there was Cage and other pianists, all kinds of people were there.

MS. TUCHMAN: Would the instructors get together at night?

MR. VICENTE: Well, yes. At that time with Olson because he was a terrific man. After we'd eat in the dining room, most people would get together with him at his table and talk. A wonderful man. But everyone went to his place. He was a very interesting person.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think you had to be a particular age to appreciate it, partly because it was so secluded?

MR. VICENTE: No, it's not that. In my case, yes, I thought so at that point because I came to this country as a stranger and I needed New York, so I couldn't be there. Not for me, that was my feeling.

MS. TUCHMAN: Has teaching at any one particular college been more satisfying to you than at any other, say, Berkeley or NYC or Yale?

MR. VICENTE: Well, about that let me say this. Before, I taught Spanish and French. I wanted to teach both. I studied it. So then later the first time I taught painting was when they called me from Berkeley in 1949 and I went there for one summer and from then on I began going to places. I was in 1950 at Berkeley again. Finally, in 1954 the last time at Berkeley. Since then I have been everywhere, actually the same way, invited. But I never wanted to be part of any faculty. I never did. So that was my position then. Also, teaching to me is part of my life. I mean it's not a conflict in any way. And then at the same time what I do mostly is not to have classes but to see the students and what they do, and have a dialogue about it and find out what they think and how they think and then I can say whatever I have to say. So that's my work. And I have been everywhere practically. Everywhere. Almost every major university. Yale University, American University, everywhere, Columbia, everywhere, in that way.

MS. TUCHMAN: Have you found that the students have changed in the last couple of decades?

MR. VICENTE: Oh, yes, yes. For instance, you see, at a certain point I think the students were more-I mean the quality of the students was higher than now. Why, I don't know. But this is the truth. I believe that maybe the fact that what happened also before, if a young fellow wanted to be painter, he knew what was going on around him, that it was hopeless if he wanted to live in a certain way. Now the thing has changed because everybody's talking about how much money this painter is making and this nonsense. So then probably that changed, the quality of the university student. I don't know what's the cause, but that's the fact. That's the fact.

MS. TUCHMAN: That's very interesting.

MR. VICENTE: Naturally always you find a few. You can talk to them and they can talk to you and it's a dialogue, it's a relation, and then I become friendly with them. I have a student from 40 years ago and still we get in

touch.

MS. TUCHMAN: That's nice.

MR. VICENTE: Even the other students in Spanish. For instance, I was teaching in the Dalton School. You know the Dalton School?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MR. VICENTE: I was there when the Dalton School was a girls' school, a high school. So I was teaching there for about three years. I had some students, four, who were in high school. They are now grown-ups, they have children, and I see them. One is Wendy Fuller, a photographer. So that's very good to me to see that, you see.

MS. TUCHMAN: That's great.

MR. VICENTE: The relation. As I say, I know that many painters complain about teaching because they don't want to, they don't like to, whatever. They don't like people or who knows what. But to me, it's part of my life.

MS. TUCHMAN: Exactly.

MR. VICENTE: If I have to be on a faculty, I refuse because you become part of the institution and the institution absorbs you and you've lost your identity, or your freedom, too. So that's why I don't like to touch it. And I still teach the same way. For instance, there is a school here, a very interesting school, the New York Studio School, of which I am one of the founders. I didn't found it, but the students forced...they call me. They wanted me to teach them so I started with them. That was 14 years ago that I came there. And I go there once every other week.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, that sounds nice.

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: You know what else I wanted to ask you about, Elaine de Kooning's article "Vicente Makes a Collage."

MR. VICENTE: Paints a collage.

MS. TUCHMAN: How did that come about? Was that a big honor to be in *Art News* then?

MR. VICENTE: I don't know. It probably was. The only thing I know was that was the thing being done in *Art News* with certain people. I don't know if it was an honor, it certainly was a distinction because they don't do it with everybody. But at the same time these distinctions are a matter of opinion. Right?

MS. TUCHMAN: Right.

MR. VICENTE: If I had been in the Whitney show or not doesn't make any difference. This is the way it is. For instance, a man that was interested in me very much was Tom Hess. So probably Tom Hess is the one that decided that at that time. Anyhow, the bulletin to me was that Elaine de Kooning needed...and she writes very well and she's a wonderful person and we were friends forever. And that was the question. I don't know really. Publicity again is okay provided that publicity is not bigger than you. If it is bigger than you, you get killed. So certainly the publicity should be at a level of your potential only, and who knows that better than the person himself.

MS. TUCHMAN: That's true.

MR. VICENTE: But people have lost their sense and they are willing to do anything.

MS. TUCHMAN: Would you remember if Elaine de Kooning came to your studio like real early, whether she came for a couple of days or anything like that? I'm asking partly because she did "Rothko Paints a Picture," and he's dead and can't talk about it now.

MR. VICENTE: Right. So you are asking had she...?

MS. TUCHMAN: Was she unobtrusive in the studio while you were working?

MR. VICENTE: No, it was very fine. What they do is this. She arrived and then the idea is this, I had to do something. And then the photographer takes photographs in black and white of the process. And then finally when the thing is completed, they send somebody to take a color transparency. No, she was fine. No problem.

She's intelligent. She asked the right questions. She's a painter herself, so it was really good. No, there were no problems.

MS. TUCHMAN: That's very interesting. Can I ask you a few more questions about Rothko?

MR. VICENTE: Sure.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you ever visit his studio?

MR. VICENTE: Never. Nor he mine.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were you aware of when he was painting the murals?

MR. VICENTE: No. At that time, I didn't know him then. But I knew the first instance of his work when he painted the figures. I was not very impressed. I thought it was mediocre.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you feel the same way about Milton Avery's work?

MR. VICENTE: Who?

MS. TUCHMAN: Milton Avery.

MR. VICENTE: Oh, no! Milton Avery was a nice soul. The first time I saw a Milton Avery painting I thought it was beautiful. See, this is a story. I can tell you this. When I came in 1936, the level of painting in this country was very low. There were a few...Milton Avery was one, Stuart Davis, then Dove.

MS. TUCHMAN: Dove, yes.

MR. VICENTE: And even Gorky at the time was painting like Picasso paintings but there were all those regional painters-Curry, Benton, all these people. Incredible. To me the level was so low. Terrible, terrible. These people were pedestrian, no brains. But the others-Milton Avery especially was one. And then the other one to me was the painter from Maine....

MS. TUCHMAN: Hartley, Marsden Hartley?

MR. VICENTE: Hartley, yes. And John Marin. Oh, yes, and Joseph Stella too, Joseph Stella. Those were the people. But the others, the majority, were impossible. Very bad.

MS. TUCHMAN: So even though Rothko and Gottlieb were influenced by Milton Avery, they didn't look like Milton Avery.

MR. VICENTE: Yes, true, true. So it's true. I mean Milton Avery was a big influence. But what happened then with the so-called abstract expressionists, to me there were two people. Jackson Pollock and Hofmann. These were the two main influences and they transformed the whole thing.

MS. TUCHMAN: Hofmann as a teacher or Hofmann as what he got his students to do, or his own paintings? Or all three?

MR. VICENTE: You could not separate that-because the way I see Hofmann is this. First, early Hofmann is a purely German expressionist painter and I don't care about his work then. Then later his work to me looks like a demonstration of his teaching. And then when the school is gone and he is old. The last aspect of his life is the best painting he did ever. It is free, open. But really through the school, he helped open up something. And then Jackson Pollock did the same.

MS. TUCHMAN: Through the example of his work?

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: What about through his presence as a person?

MR. VICENTE: Who?

MS. TUCHMAN: Pollock.

MR. VICENTE: What do you mean by that?

MS. TUCHMAN: I mean he seems to have misbehaved in public a lot. Do you think he...?

MR. VICENTE: No, I have different ideas about that. I knew Pollock well. Pollock to me was a wonderful man, very good person, disturbed person. And then when he got disturbed he got drunk. I see him drunk and I get away. But when he was sober, a wonderful person, really good person. De Kooning was too, and Kline was also a terrific person, a wonderful person and without any jealousy. Good people.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did Pollock and Rothko know each other?

MR. VICENTE: Yes. About I don't think they had much of a relation. I don't think so because, you see, I don't know what happened before with them, before I knew them, but I had the impression they were not.... I don't think there was any way to click between them. Pollock was more involved with people like Motherwell. I don't think that even Gorky was either. I don't think so. So in a way Pollock was very much by himself-in a certain way. I am sure also that at a certain point in the beginning some people were skeptical about his work. I believe so, painters, other painters, because he really breaks with something.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you remember the last time that you saw Rothko?

MR. VICENTE: Oh, yes. I saw him a week before he killed himself. I don't remember where-he's leaving with Rita Reinhardt and we're sitting in the lobby of this building.

MS. TUCHMAN: Apartment building?

MR. VICENTE: Yes. We had a very slight talk. I asked him, "How are you doing?" and so forth. And then there was nothing.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was he sober?

MR. VICENTE: I think so, yes. But he looked terrible. He was sober, yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: There's a Yiddish word, Kvetch (phonetic). Do you think he was a kvetch?

MR. VICENTE: What is that?

MS. TUCHMAN: Complainer. I mean I met him a few times just before he died and he complained every time.

MR. VICENTE: Yes. Well, my impression about that, what happened to him. My impression is that first is he's not living any more with his family and the children were very important to him. There's no doubt from the way he talked to me about them. So he was very much alone with that. And then for personal reasons, whatever happened between him and his wife, he's in the studio alone. And then later he had a heart attack and then later he started drinking also. On top of that, pop art began to make a big noise. See, I can't claim I know him. I didn't know him completely. I knew something about him. And then he was distressed by the fact that they were making a fuss about pop art and they didn't say anything about him any more and he couldn't take it. As a matter of fact, Rothko was one of the most egocentric people I ever met in my life.

MS. TUCHMAN: More than Salvador Dali?

MR. VICENTE: Oh, no. Salvador Dali is a performer. He performs in front of the crowd only. He is very intelligent, very intelligent. As a person he's serious. But not with the audience.

MS. TUCHMAN: So Rothko was more egocentric?

MR. VICENTE: Oh, yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: And you were just going to describe this incident.

MR. VICENTE: Rothko was a very egocentric man, but Dali no. Dali's playing the game, so he isn't. So anyhow I was going to tell you something about Rothko which probably you know, and it is not gossip. When he had his show at the Museum of Modern Art, there is a painter that you know. He's a young painter. He's not young any more but he was young then.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

MR. VICENTE: ...a painter who painted landscapes. Wolf Kahn. He saw the show and he's leaving. He met Rothko and Wolf says to Mark, "Mark, it's a beautiful show." And Rothko says to him, "It's not a show, it's an event."

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, no.

MR. VICENTE: Yes. The whole thinking of the man was like this. And when I went with de Kooning to the opening

of that first show, Mark said, "I found it." That's all he said-"I found it."

MS. TUCHMAN: Rothko said that?

MR. VICENTE: It was really very funny.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, he didn't say what he found?

MR. VICENTE: The way of painting-"I found it." It's done. Now. You know.

MS. TUCHMAN: Amazing!

MR. VICENTE: He was that way.

MS. TUCHMAN: When you look at a Rothko painting, what comes to your mind when you look at it?

MR. VICENTE: You know, people had been saying I had been influenced by Rothko. I had to laugh because in those days we were all living in the same time, in the same place, eating the same food. It was parallel. I don't know how it started. I think it started by someone some way in relation to somebody else, so it's political in a sense, silly politics. You know how it is. I mean it's silly.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did Rothko ever say anything to you about it?

MR. VICENTE: No. But it didn't come from him. I don't know who. There was somebody else. And I don't care because I know it's not true. Rothko was what he was and I am what I am, very different in many ways, physically too. Everyone is influenced by someone. For me Velasquez perhaps. Not Rothko certainly.

MS. TUCHMAN: Right. Can I ask you one last question because I feel I'm using up your time.

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think Rothko would have fit in, in Paris had he been in that kind of...?

MR. VICENTE: No.

MS. TUCHMAN: Why?

MR. VICENTE: Well, it is very difficult to explain because there are subtle things. You have to understand also the French. The French are a people that are so involved with themselves. It is changed, but at that time the French thought there was nothing but French painting or anything. And they thought the Americans were cowboys. So only now they say look. And they have Pollocks there and everybody says look. Before-I remember when there was a show done by Sidney Janis with American and French painters. The French were laughing at it. I mean they were laughing. So no, I don't think Rothko would have adapted to that. It would have been more with other people like Milton Avery but not with Rothko, no. American painters now for the first time transcend the borders, not before. Before was a kind of interior consumption. No one can react to Benton-when you are involved with painting anyway. There's plenty of painters like that too anywhere, I mean in Florence, anywhere. I mean people are there because of this country or this history. So it produces something that is nostalgia of yesterday and nobody can participate in that except the natives. Only certain natives, not the majority.

MS. TUCHMAN: You had just said that you didn't think Rothko would have fit in comfortably in Paris.

MR. VICENTE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think he would have...can you think of a period when he might have been at home other than America in the 1950's?

MR. VICENTE: I don't know. No.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, thank you very much.

MR. VICENTE: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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