



Art Gallery of Ontario
Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario

Robert Motherwell Artist Talk

Ontario College of Art, December 3, 1970

Dennis Young, Art Gallery of Ontario Curator:

It's a particular pleasure for the Art Gallery of Ontario to be associated again with the college, and especially on such a distinguished occasion as this is. And it's my great pleasure and honor, indeed, to introduce to you the speaker this afternoon, Mr. Robert Motherwell, who is in the city coincident with the opening of his exhibition at the David Mirvish Gallery.

Mr. Motherwell began his career as an art student, like many of you here. But he changed to the study of philosophy and went to Stanford University and to Harvard and ended up, as I understand, in Grenoble in 1939, still following the pursuit of the scholar. And, it wasn't until the beginning of the war that he returned again to painting, largely under the influence of the Chilean surrealist painter, Matta, with whom he spent a good deal of time in Mexico in 1941-42.

And he returned to the city, indeed, I think New York, really, for the first time, to live in 1942 where, of course, the migratory surrealists of Europe had already assembled. And I'm sure he's going to tell us a good deal about that this afternoon.

He became associated, at that time, as you know, with the most distinguished group of painters in the history of American art. The group that formed the school that has grown and become known as the New York School. I won't call it the Abstract Expressionist school, because there's a good deal of contention about a term like that, and I think he's, perhaps, going to talk about that, too.

He wrote automatic poetry with Jackson Pollock, and he had his first one-man show at Peggy Guggenheim's The Art of This Century Gallery in 1944. And in 1965, he was honored by the art lovers of America by a one man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

And, in between those two events, following his scholarly pursuits, he published two books, one on the painters that he knew in New York in the '40s and another, "The Dada Painters and Poets", in the documents of modern art series. Which became--it's too easy, perhaps, to say it became--a bible. But, certainly, it became a very strong influence on the generation which was to follow his generation of painters in New York. It was responsible for quite a lot of the inspiration behind the movement that we know of as Assemblage or Neo-Dada or Pop Art.

I should explain, perhaps, that the last-minute nature of this meeting this afternoon is due to the fact that we weren't aware that Mr. Motherwell was actually to be in Toronto at this time until two weeks ago. When I happened to meet him at York University and asked him if he would speak to us this afternoon, and he very generously consented to do so. Mr. Motherwell, we really are very glad to have you here, and we welcome you.

Audience: [applause]

Robert Motherwell:

I'm very pleased to be here, too, and, first off, I would like to make something clear. Though Abstract Expressionism, as they say, is often regarded as an American movement and a New York movement, my own feelings – and I must say that I differ somewhat from most of my colleagues in this respect– have always been deeply international. And I don't especially feel either a New Yorker or an American as much as I do. Primarily a painter, and primarily a painter in what used to be--a very important word--a Modern painter with a capital M, in the sense that the French speak of *l'art moderne*. In short, I hope none of you have the impression that I'm coming as an American imperialist or Caesar.

Audience: [laughs]

Motherwell: On the contrary, I feel that I'm one of many representatives in many countries of a kind of underground that, though it has some established status in some places, nevertheless, has been in modern society perhaps the most creative single direction in poetry and music and painting and sculpture, and, indeed, in part, what has come to be known as Abstract Expressionism from my point of view. And, again, I must insist that many of my colleagues would disagree with me about many things because we were very different characters with very different origins in many respects who happened, at the same moment, also to have some overlapping intentions.

In a similar respect, what we did was actually an effort not to let American painting remain provincial, or, to put it the other way around, to internationalize it. And, though to people of your age this may be as remote as Cubism, which they say is far in the past now. I would think the Canadian artists must, somewhere along the line, have to line up either on an international side or on a nationalist side. It's a dilemma for all artists and has been a savage struggle among all artists for more than a hundred years now.

There's so many things that I want to say that it's hard to keep a certain order.

In fact, the critic of "The New York Times," when there was a big show of Abstract Expressionism at The Museum of Modern Art--I think it was last spring, or maybe the spring before--writing a long article about it, said that, in his opinion, though it was particularly American painters, in many respects did what Parisian painters might have done if Parisian art, for reasons that remain a mystery, hadn't largely collapsed after the end of the Second World War.

And, to a certain extent, there's a great deal of truth in it. At the same time, obviously, an American is not a Frenchman, and there were in our efforts some inevitable transformations. Lately, I've been editing a book on German Expressionism, and going through a great deal of material published in Berlin and Munich before the First World War.

And what becomes very clear to me is the artist most admired in general among German Expressionists was Matisse, who happens also to be my favorite painter of the 20th century, and at the same time, it's obvious that the French Fauves are closer to Matisse than the German Expressionists.

But nevertheless, the impulse is relatively similar, so that one inherits one's ground, one's light, one's environment, one's place, and when they have international ideas, that they are modified by one's particular situation, but that doesn't mean that one is then mainly German or mainly French or mainly American.

In the same way as we know, with the exception of Matisse and Braque and Léger, most of the masters of the École de Paris were foreigners. Spaniards and Romanians and Russians and Germans. In the same way, among my colleagues in the New York school, de Kooning was a Dutchman, was your age, when he came to the United States.

Hofmann was a middle-aged German when he came to the United States. Rothko was ten when he came from the ghetto in Russia. Newman I think was the son of immigrants. Baziotes was the son of Greek immigrants.

Actually, in the New York School there were very few native-born Americans, very few of English-speaking descent, very few Protestants. So I would say New York is kind of the Constantinople of the western world. In the times that Abstract Expressionism began during the Second World War, was opening its arms to refugees of all sorts from everywhere.

In the same way that for generations before that Paris, in its cold but tolerant way, had embraced people from all over Europe who had come for more spiritual, artistic, sexual freedom. So I hope I've emphasized that point enough.

Now, if one takes the problem, that one has a relatively thin and localized painting tradition, which was our problem. And I should also add that America, the United States in the 19th century produced Eakins and Whistler and Albert Ryder, who are very remarkable painters, the equal almost to anybody in the 19th century, apart from the French. We also, in the earlier part of the century, had some very fine painters such as John Marin, or an international sculptor such as Alexander Calder, and so on.

Nevertheless, certainly when I arrived in New York in 1940 the Whitney Annual, which is a kind of democratic exhibition of what's going on with very little editing, and would have perhaps 130 pictures in it each year, I would think in 1940 would have perhaps six abstract pictures, and six fanciful pictures of one sort or another.

Maybe 20 expressionist pictures, and nearly all the rest would be what we call social realism, which is a painting critical of society, or what we called regionalism, which is paintings of farms and cities and subways and so on. So that the modern tradition though it existed there was extremely thin. And the problem was how to go about it.

I remember for example... Well, perhaps I should go into that a little bit. So I have to backtrack a moment. See, I was a maverick in the group, because I was a university trained person. I didn't go to art school. I longed from the time I was three to be a painter, but I grew up in San Francisco and attended Stanford University.

My father was a very powerful businessman who regarded art as an abominable career. And who moreover, thought that I was throwing away any marvelous chances to make something of myself. I knew no artists and I had an instinct from the beginning that painting was something more than just painting. That it was an environmental thing.

Which to say, once, when I was young, I was a very good tennis player. And I remember once at Stanford when I was seventeen or eighteen, after a tennis match

my partner saying he was going somewhere for a drink and would I like to come along.

And I said no, and he said well, I was under the impression you were interested in pictures, and these people have some pictures. And I said in that case fine, and we got in the car and went. Well it turned out to be at Michael Stein's, and I saw the first Matisse in the flesh that I had ever seen in my life.

And they made an impact on me, that to this day I can see them as clearly as I can when I was three in the kindergarten, and the teacher on the blackboard with colored chalk every day would do what the weather was. With blue lines in a very Miró way. A round oval, orange for the sun and blue chalk for the rain. And something in my heart would just jump as I would see those abstract lines convey meaning.

I felt the same way with Matisse. But what I instantly understood was just looking at Matisse would get you nowhere. In fact, this is one of the most fundamental points I would make to students. That though looking is essential, looking and copying what you like gets you nowhere.

What you have to have in your hands is the process and the intent. And what I immediately understood, it is obvious that Matisse was a Frenchman. He was a bourgeois man who liked colours and girls and sunlight and so on.

And actually, I was a bourgeois Californian who liked sunlight and girls and so on, but I realized that wasn't enough, that I really should know something about French culture.

I happen to be tone deaf, to be a terrible linguist after being in France a lot, I still speak French like an Oriental houseboy, because I cannot modulate my voice, and it's hard for me to distinguish sounds. I can't recognize the melody, though I've listened to music all my life.

So in the end I went to France, but before that I collected, I suppose, one of the biggest collections in America of translations from the French, of Baudelaire and Mallarmé and Proust and of André Gide and André Breton and Rimbaud and the whole shooting match.

Because I also discovered that in relation to modern art, and now I talk about it in its broadest sense, that music and painting and poetry all can be modern, that the poets talk the most about what modernity is.

I should also make clear that here in North America, I don't know how true it is of you Canadians because it's hard for a stranger to estimate how much you're influenced

by the United States and how much by England and how much by France and how much by your whatever is different from all of those things.

But I would think in many respects, you're not so different from us. What was I saying? Oh, and the word modernity. You see, now you talk about modern art as easily as you talk about pop art or rock and roll or whatever.

It's sort of naming a thing but not an issue. Fifteen years ago or more I was a guest of the German Republic, which I accepted mainly because I felt very anti-German and I don't believe in prejudice and I thought I should go. [laughter]

And something that struck me very much-- I was with a party of architects. Town planners, a sculptor, but people in the arts, it was in the times when West Germany was still making friends with the rest of the western world.

One of the things that struck me was in places like Nuremburg, which was a medieval city, and had been largely obliterated by bombing and they had to rebuild it. And it became a question, "Shall we make it medieval again?" This is very possible to do. In New York City there's a gothic church by Cram that was really superlative, that was done in 1910 or something.

Unbelievably good, to the degree that that is possible at all. And one could make Nuremburg believably, especially for tourists, medieval again. There were other people who wanted to do it quickly and moderately, in kind of this anonymous, conventional, modulist style.

There were other people who really wanted to take the opportunity, since the city had been obliterated in many parts, to get somebody like Mies Van der Rohe to rebuild the whole city, or Corbusier or Walter Gropius or whoever. And in one of those cities, I forgot which, I saw a very Mies van der Rohe building.

And next to the medieval buildings, it seemed to me to make more sense than something middle of the road, because in its intensity and purity of expression or form, it had more in common with the purity and intention of the medieval thing than an early 20th century conglomerate had in my opinion.

But people would fight each other in the streets about whether we should be medieval or whether we should be moderate or whether we should be modern. And in that sense, modern art until relatively recently, has been as much a cause or an issue as I don't know what,

being a communist or being a royalist or whatever. It's a specific position with specific consequences. And I realized that, when there are real consequences in the

external world, the whole enterprise becomes much more real to oneself, if I make myself clear.

Now, so, I made French culture real to myself, let's put it that way, including spending a year in France. At the same time, in order to live--because I was totally incompetent--I made a *modus vivendi* with my father that, if I would get a Ph.D., he would give me \$50 a week for the rest of my life and let me do whatever I wanted to do.

Audience: [laughs] [applauds]

Motherwell: And I more or less proceeded that way, and that's how, accidentally, I became a scholar. It's also how I studied philosophy because, in those days, the art departments were miserable. I mean, I knew I wanted to learn modern art. And, in those days, one was either taught in the academic tradition, or, if somebody were relatively enlightened, in the States one would be taught, for example, to paint like Cezanne. Which, I would think, is probably the most complex way of painting ever devised by the human mind.

And, to present 18 year olds with Cezanne's problems seems to me incredible. In fact, the complexity of Cezanne's mind, to be able to handle all of those relations simultaneously without interrupting, seems to me more staggering than Bach may be, because it's more empirically done.

So that there was no point in studying painting. I tried literature, but it was Victorian and the novel and so on, and I realized that all forms of naturalism and the way that they were understood then were the enemy. And, in the end, I discovered that, in U.S.A. universities, a very nice place to be was the philosophy department.

There were very few students. One only talked about ideas. One became very friendly with the professors netting into the concepts, such as the nature of the particular versus the universal, or the nature of the tragic, which I spent a whole year on. Or, what constitutes the aesthetic, or the nature of value judgments, or even mathematical logic, in the sense that it revealed to me that, symbolic structures, regardless of their content, are meaningful in simply being relational structures helped me enormously, in that I was able to begin as an abstract painter in a way that none of my contemporaries could, because, if one begins in the usual way, studying from the model, dealing with nature, worrying about political and social and sexual issues, et cetera. And one simply makes a line on a piece of paper or colour, one has a frightening feeling, if one has been reared that way, does this really mean anything?

I knew *a priori* relational structures are meaningful, and could begin with absolute confidence. Whereas I say Matisse is one of my heroes. I think the moment Matisse left the face out in his figure paintings, it must have been a staggering decision for him to make. And most of my contemporaries were faced with similar hesitation at a certain moment.

So now to get back to New York, I happened to be very friendly with a Chilean painter named Matta, because I was studying with Meyer Schapiro in New York, who then was the only person in a reputable university teaching a survey of 20th century art, and who realized that I really wanted to be a painter, and encouraged me to paint on the side and realized, because I used to haunt him so much, having no idea how busy New Yorkers are, that I really should be around painters, that I was an internationalist at heart, and the most intellectual, and then relatively young, in their early 40's, artists around with Parisian surrealists, introduced me to them. I hung around with them. They accepted me because oddly enough, most Americans were afraid of the Europeans or extremely hostile, because American modern artists were regarded as nothing.

So there was bitterness, jealousy, poverty against international claims. I mean the modern museum in New York, for example, celebrated all of these people and wouldn't look at us in 1941. But I was in a way too innocent to care or even know this. Because I hadn't, as most of my colleagues had, spent five or six or seven or eight years on the WPA, on the public works program for \$26 a week. Going to an easel from five to nine, and so on.

Which is to say, when I think of it now, I blush at my innocence and naiveté and how I wandered into the jungle that the New York art world is. But among the surrealists there was one my age, more or less, named Matta. Who had originally been an architect and a student of Corbusier who also came from a bourgeois background, who had an American wife and spoke English reasonably well and we became very friendly. Now I don't want to go into the history of Matta, but let's say in shorthand he had a kind of Oedipal relation with the surrealists.

And at a certain moment wanted to show them up and conceived the idea, being also indoctrinated by his fathers that the only way to do it would be to show something newer than they had done.

And so he and I began to scheme how to do it, and I went to Peggy Guggenheim, and she offered, with amusement, her gallery to us for a month. And we originally had the notion of making the gallery symbolic of the 24 hours of the day. And that

half a dozen of us would take some hours during the day and make some kind of imagery. It seemed possible.

Because I'd come from the university world, I knew hardly any painters and no American painters. Until I met Baziotés, and we became instantaneously very friendly. But he had been on the WPA. And so, when I said we were going to do this, because he was interested in this scheme too, who do you think would be a likely prospect? Because most of the people on the WPA were regional or social realist painters.

The Stalinist pressure on the WPA in New York was fantastic. And the abstract painters were in a small corner and largely disregarded, so I'm told.

The consequence was, that he said there was a guy named Pollock and there was a guy named de Kooning and there was a guy named Gorky and a guy named Kamrowski and several others, and he would introduce me.

So to come back to where I began. For example, when I went to Gorky's studio whom I think became a first rate artist, he showed me, and this was not in relation to this project, I met Gorky independently through a young artist who happened to admire us both and brought us together. And Gorky invited me to his studio. Gorky's studio was filled with the most beautiful Cézannes. The most beautiful 1927 Picassos and so on, that were partially his. Which is to say they were not Cézannes, the Picassos, but sole influence.

There was not an identity of his own, really. And at the same time the craftsmanship was unbelievable. And I realized that was Gorky's problem, and later we didn't like each other at all. He regarded me as presumptuous and young and inexperienced, which I was, I'd been painting one year.

At the same time, I was 26 and had seen a lot of the world and thought a lot about painting and had a very good eye. And, in a funny way, knew more about the culture of 20th century painting than Gorky did, but Gorky knew much more about how to make a painting than I did. But, to say, I had, then, already began to understand some of the processes that were being used, where Gorky understood how to make the pictures but didn't understand the processes.

De Kooning then was making beautiful, somewhat Renaissance, somewhat Picasso-esque, rose figures. Pollock was very influenced by the Mexicans and, again, by Picasso.

My work didn't exist, so that I basically could look at this with a certain amount of detachment. Because, all the time, in my mind was the problem, if we're going to show the surrealists up, so to speak, that there is something beyond their horizon, how are we going to do it?

Moreover, a collection of individuals won't do any good because, after all, surrealism was a movement. And, if somebody shows that he's extremely talented, that's perfectly OK for him and himself, but that's certainly no counter-reaction against surrealism.

Certainly, one of the possibilities would have been abstraction, full-blown abstraction, because Miró – I'm speaking now of '42, or something like that, '41 maybe – Miró was quite suspect among the surrealists as being too involved in Picasso's cuisine, as they used to like to call it.

But, anyway, in going through all of these things, collecting in my mind all the insights that I could, it seemed to me the principles of automatism were the best chance. Automatism is a lousy word in English, because it's the noun for automatic, and it was a method highly developed by the surrealists in many different ways, which would lead me to a lecture on surrealism, why they did it.

But the part that we took over--and there are a thousand different ways of doing things automatically--the part that we tended to take over, in idiomatic, I reckon would be called doodling. But, doodling also means something on a small pad, where we began to doodle wall-sized.

Now, it sounds trivial when you put it this way and in another way demeaning everything. I remember one day talking to Pollock when I first knew him, saying that I thought painting was a noble pursuit. He in his abrupt and articulate way said, "Well then, obviously you should paint nobly".

And to tell the truth, I think one of the things that Abstract Expressionism did, despite its faults, was that it was a rather noble expression. When I think of Rothko and de Kooning and Still and Newman and Gottlieb and Pollock and the others, I think it's one word that could be legitimately applied to it.

So that one must think, in referring to doodling, of something serious, large-scale... For example this is one of the places that American painting broke with French painting, was that French painting had insisted on being on an intimate scale.

French painting was made for French rooms. The French, as you doubtless you know liked to, as white Russians used to, liked to have lots of pictures on the same

wall in tiers. So that a picture this size functions very well in French culture and the majority of Braques and Matisses and Picassos are relatively small pictures. A picture like Guernica is an extraordinary exception and was a specific commission over a specific political act.

So that we did make them larger, we also were involved by chance in ideas of the sublime. We were probably less sensual, because North American culture from Panama to the north is less sensual than Western Europe.

But maybe in a certain way, if more crude, also more one's-heart-laid-bare so to speak. But not in an exhibitionist way, but in an effort to get rid of all the baggage of the past and of civilized culture that was between oneself and the immediacy of a complete experience.

For you say in certain respects maybe the affinity was closer with the caves of Lascaux, or with African art. And now, I'm not talking about visual-ness. I'm talking about a tremendous effort to make an art that was not an object, that was not a representation of something nameable.

But which nevertheless, I was violently anti-constructivism. Anti design, in fact I think the disaster of the present moment in art is interior decorators are dominating everything, because the art made now is perfectly adaptable to the interior decorators purposes. We were trying to make the opposite, or not the opposite, something different, something to which that would be trivial and irrelevant.

And as I'm sure the German Expressionists saw before the First World War. I'm sure Fauves saw this, I'm sure the Cubists saw. I'm sure Mondrian felt. It's different from Dadaism essentially. The surrealists grew out of Dadaism and retained a strong negative quality that the abstract expressionist did not have, in the sense of being absolutely committed to painting.

Where the surrealists were absolutely committed to surrealism of which painting was a minor aspect, and very often, potentially, in their eyes the enemy. Just as to many environmental artists or pop artists and so on, painting is – in the sense of a canvas and a brush – the enemy.

I don't know, it all sounds like words. I wish I could make more vivid to you that it was a real military campaign that every country has to undergo, regardless of the result if the art is to be serious. Because in the end, what human beings have in common is much profounder than the regional differences.

And though regional differences are interesting and curious and in some ways fascinating, there's never enough expression of what is deepest in the human being. And in the 20th century, we are increasingly bombarded to a point that is almost unendurable by every kind of sensation that is relatively trivial.

I mean it's a real... You know, when I see people going around looking for excitement. I can't help reflecting to myself that most of my time is spent blocking away excitement, so I can feel what I really want to feel.

And Abstract Expressionism had something to do with that. Now I should also say that most of my colleagues would disagree with a lot of what I say. A lot of them had such hostility towards Europe. They really wanted Abstract Expressionism to appear like a virgin birth. Or like Venus arising from the sea in the shell, all fully formed.

All of them universally detested surrealist painting, used to deny that there was any surrealist connection whatsoever. There was in automatism, but the automatism was the automatism of Miró and Masson and Klee and that sort. Not at all automatism of Dalí, which is the automatism of free association of ideas rather than technique.

But even in the case of an artist like Tanguy who uses a highly "academic" manner of painting. The original little figures in those dreamy landscapes are made with doodles. Which to say with a doodle you can leave it as abstract or bring it back as close to the everyday visual world as you like to.

You can turn a doodle into a portrait of your mother if you want to go that far. Or you can turn it as far away as the highest abstractions that we know. Now there's something I'm leaving out.

Well, I tell you what, why don't I quickly show you some slides of my own work? I don't have any of others. They'll be something to look at, and then maybe we could have a little discussion afterward if you want. Or it's hot and sticky in here, if you want to leave, I wouldn't feel offended. You're starting at the wrong end. Is it loaded that way?

Man 3: Yes.

Motherwell: OK. Well we'll start backwards then. And just keep shooting them. This was from my last show in New York last year. This was ten years ago, it's 20 feet long called "Africa" and was made by automatism. [49:11] These are a series of pictures called Elegies to the Spanish Republic, which was to my generation what Vietnam is to yours. This is called the "Homely Protestant". And when I finished it, it was done in 1948 when I had been painting five or six years, I knew it was a figure

but I didn't know how to call it and I like titles that may have some association but are not misleading.

And then I remember something from my surrealist days. I was only with the surrealists a couple of years. And when they were stuck for the title they would very often take a book, but it had to be a book that meant a great deal to you and put your finger down at random. And so I took Joyce's "Ulysses", opened it at random, put my finger down at random. It came on the words "the homely protestant" and I thought, "Of course that's what the figure is. And moreover, it's me!"

These are 1970 pictures again. The one on the right belongs to the Greenbergs, the one on the left is in the Cleveland museum. These were shown at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels in '66. I gave a lecture last night in Georgia, and obviously that man who ran the slides didn't put them back right, so that is why they are in no sequence. I didn't have time today. OK. It's a small sketch which I like very much, but traded for a 17th Century Japanese Zen picture which I like even more. [laughter]

Some people have been puzzled at the relative formality of my recent work compared to the general expressionist tendency. To me, the differences are not so great in the sense that I think when my pictures are most successful, and I now begin to think most modern pictures that I like, this is true of, regardless of whether the forms are fuzzy or hard edged or what, they should look more or less as though they were done instantaneously. Well, not instantaneously, but as a continual process that just started and finished, like making love. There shouldn't be this sense of the guy went off her in the middle for three days and then came back and...

Audience: [laughter]

Motherwell: ...finished it, in that sense. The other thing is, all my life, until relatively recently, I started with disparate elements and desperately struggled to organize them. In fact, when my show was in London an English critic wrote, very perceptively, that when a picture of mine succeeds it's a miracle, meaning it's a miracle that I was able to do it, I so often can't. And he was quite right. And I think it's because of starting with disparate elements.

So a part of what I've been doing recently is starting with a field that is already organized and then making it as disparate to the degree that I want to. And what I've discovered is, Oriental painters have known for centuries, that once you start with something organized you want to make it very little disparate, or you need very little "disparate" to have it feel the way one would like to, if I make myself clear. OK. Those are thumbprints.

Audience: [laughter]

Motherwell: It was very sweaty in Georgia.

Audience: [laughter]

Motherwell: Next please. The one on the right, which I liked very much, you can't see it well here, because the orange is done stroke by stroke with the most subtle nuance, but on sized canvas. I think un-sized canvas is both perishable and too easy. And the lines are done with French charcoal.

And when you see the picture in the flesh there's a very painterly quality with a real charcoally quality that is part of the essence of the thing. Also, with the lines not connected to the top, it's not as much of a window as it is in some of the other pictures. That makes the space both infinite and finite, which is something that I like in pictures if the infinite thing is not at all dominant.

OK. The picture in the center there was done at a terrible moment in my life, and it has some words from a poem by Paul Eluard which mean, I can't read them from here but, "In the daytime at home at, night in the street", which was how I was living when that was painted. Next.

That's an aquatint and way off in color. The color is the color of the Valencia orange. Next.

That's upside-down.

Audience: [laughter]

Motherwell: That's the very first of the Spanish Elegies done in 1948, and was originally called, still is called "At Five in the Afternoon," after the refrain from the poem of Lorca's to the fallen bullfighter. But people used to say to me I saw the most beautiful picture of yours the other day it had something to do with cocktails. So I really began to search for other titles. Next please. The world is really like the Marx brothers. [laughter]

This is a studio, the best studio in many respects I ever had on 86th Street and 3rd Avenue in New York. It was a pool hall. You can see the squares on the floor where the pool tables were. It was enormous, 5,000 square feet. And it was the second floor. And to my despair, they tore it down and built a one story building, which has something to do with real estate tax laws.

It was more economical for them to have a one story building than a two story building. So they tore down my studio and made a one story building of stores, and I lost it.

Next please. Now, this is one of about 600 pictures called the Lyric Suite, made on Japanese rice paper. After my Museum of Modern Art show when, no just before when I was very, as they say nowadays, uptight. It's a terrible strain to have a major show.

For a year scholars go through all your papers and ask you questions. You have to decide out of thousands of works which ones you want. And sometimes they like ones that you don't like, and the whole thing is a terrible interruption if one is basically withdrawn and a loner, as I am. And because I felt uptight, then the two artists I was closest to were my wife, naturally, Helen Frankenthaler, and David Smith, who was our best friend. He had a key to our house and often stayed with us, was like a brother.

And both of them are prolific artists, and one day I thought feeling very uptight, forget everything you know, forget the whole shooting match, just put some stuff on the floor and work on it. So I went to a Japanese store, not for that purpose, to buy a toy for a friends kid, and I saw this beautiful Japanese paper and I bought a thousand sheets. And made up my mind, this was in the beginning of April 1965, that I would do the thousand sheets without correction.

I'd make an absolute rule for myself. And I got to 600 in April and May, when one night my wife and I were having dinner and the telephone rang. And it was Kenneth Noland in Vermont saying that I should come immediately. And I said, "what's happened?" And he said, "David Smith's been in an accident."

And I called the garage, I had a very fast Mercedes then, and they sent the car over. My wife threw some things in a bag and I drove at 110 miles an hour to Albany. And he died about 15 minutes before we got there and I never resumed the series, in fact, forgot about them.

And then one year I had them all framed, and I like them very much now. I should also say that I half painted them and they half painted themselves. I'd never used rice paper before except occasionally as an element in a collage. And most of these were made with very small, I mean very thin lines. And then I would look at amazement on the floor after I'd finished. It would spread like spots of oil and fill all kinds of strange dimensions.

So that they are half my gesture and half what ink and rice paper do to each other. But in the sense, that I like something now done in one fell swoop. I think these have the quality. By themselves they don't seem so much. When you see hundreds of them together the infinite variations are interesting.

Next please. There are many different series of them in different colors and so on. This happened to be four slides I had. Oh well.

And this is a whole different series called "Beside the Sea". My summer studio is directly on the water with a very thick concrete bulkhead against the sea, which has an 800 foot tide twice a day. And when it hits against the bulkhead it does with great fury. And spray splashes up.

And when I was negotiating to buy the shack that I converted into the studio. There was three months where the people couldn't make up their mind, and I used to go and stand there and watch the sea come in and contemplate what I would do if I finished it. And I had the idea of making spray.

Now some people think they're very erotic too. That's the deck there, but what I discovered is if you just tried to paint it, it didn't work at all. And if you did it with more force you would break the paper.

So finally I got five-ply rag paper glued together so strong that I can't tear it with my hands and used the brush like a whip with the full force of my arm and shoulder and torso, and then it began to have the quality that I wanted. And I realized, as Arp says, nature is marvelous but not its imitations. It is its processes that are marvelous.

Go on. That's the studio there and there's the bulkhead I'm talking about. This is taken at low tide, but at high tide it comes nearly to the top and water is very heavy, you know, it's like throwing mercury against it. Go on.

I think that's the greatest thing that every artist contends with, that's the shock when I was contemplating getting it, I think the greatest thing every artist contends with is timidity. All of us are too timid and the worst mistake everybody makes is thinking maybe this is too much. And when utmost to the degree that it seems subjectively almost insanity. Which it isn't at all, it's impossible for the human mind not to organize what it's doing. It's just barely enough.

But the difficulty is for one's self to recognize it. Another person can say you're beginning to break through. But to one's self it seems like chaos and its only months afterwards when one thinks why was I so afraid of chaos. If I make myself clear. Go on.

I mean now I wished I used an Argentinean bull whip for them. [laughter] That's the first collage I ever made in the first year I was painting. I have a certain affection for it, primitive as it is.

This picture began as an elegy. It was done in Spain. And I used to be very interested in bull fighting. And took my wife who had never seen one, on the day as it turned out, the three greatest fighters in Spain were fighting, Dominguin and Ordonez and so on, and also the Queen of Persia, who had just been rejected by the King because she was barren, was present.

And of course, bull fighting is a royal sport and the bull fighters outdid themselves, till the center of the ring, which is yellow ochre sand, was a pool of blood. And Spanish bulls are very small coal black with tiny joints. So if they turn too fast, they're apt to trip over, very quick, and gleam like coal.

I was printing this picture internally in formal consideration, so to speak. Adjusting among edges, curves, rhythms et cetera. And it was only long afterward that I realized, and consequently I called it Iberia, that I painted the underside on one of the black bulls against the sand of the arena.

Next. This is very early work during the war. The Second World War. This is a drawing, it's one of a long series. There was a time I wanted to buy a Degas, a statue, a bronze was then very inexpensive. But I couldn't raise the money for a pregnant nude. And looking at it and wanting it so much. I suddenly made a lot of drawings of pregnant nudes. Some of which were very markedly resemblant. And this is the very last one, which is the belly and the leg and the most removed. But nevertheless, in a funny way, feels the most pregnant to me.

Next please. That's a pregnant woman holding a child. That's a collage from a show I had in Paris. And that is called the Golden Fleece. If those had been in sequence, they would have been different stages of the same picture. I think that's sufficient. Thank you.

[applause]

Dennis: Mr. Motherwell will stay a bit longer and answer questions. I'm sure there will be a lot of questions. Maybe we should just take a one minute break. So that if anyone wishes to leave at this point they can, and then we'll go on for a little bit. I think I'll ask Mr. Motherwell to come up here again and just simply field these curves as you throw them. I'm sure after a lecture touching on so many profundities, there must be a great number of questions, if no one else has I've got about 500. So Mr. Motherwell, would you like to?

Motherwell: I just wanted to say one thing which is...

Dennis: Oh yes, Mr. Motherwell, since we are recording this, people who ask questions are asked to stand up so that we can get the questions recorded. And we've got something like one of those sinister directional microphones. I'm sorry.

Motherwell: Well. Let's begin.

Man 4: Mr. Motherwell, you said you were looking for something to go beyond surrealism in the early forties in the area of automaticism [*sic*]. And you were considering things like doodling. Around '42, Max Ernst observed the techniques for swinging a tin can from a string would be considered painting. These are a couple of major paintings. Do you know if there was any direct influence on any people here?

Motherwell: I know there wasn't, because I saw him do it. And at that particular moment, I didn't work at all that way, and I think most, with the exception of myself I would say... I mean, it is my opinion that my colleagues detested his work. [laughter]

Motherwell: In fact, he always liked me, because it was so unusual for an artist in that group to respect him as I did. He's also a brilliant writer and, I think, has the most beautiful titles of any artist of the 20th century. He did it on Cape Cod, as a matter of fact, where my summer studio is. Peggy Guggenheim had rented a large house. They were married, briefly.

[laughter]

Motherwell: And, they were only there about three and a half weeks when he was arrested by the FBI. It was during the war, and he was technically a German alien, though the two years before that, he'd been in a great show in Paris called "Modern Masters of French Art," and was, of course, immediately released, but like all technically enemy aliens, was not allowed to be near the seacoast. In fact, I was then married to a Mexican actress, and she used to write home to Mexico about that [break in the audio]. And there was much excitement, and my wife wrote in Spanish to her mother. My wife was a childish, Brigitte Bardot type.

[laughter]

Motherwell: And the FBI visited us, too. [laughter]

Motherwell: She wrote about it as though one might, that a chicken had laid three pink eggs or something. I should say that, to be more serious about what you're implying, now, when you say, in the same way that many of the Americans were anxious to suppress any connection with Europe, the French, who are the real

Caesars of the European art world, have desperately tried to show that we were merely the offspring. And Max Ernst was one of the people being used for that purpose, as early Masson's are.

But again, I would say, I would guess, among my colleagues, without exception, their favorite painter, European painter would have been Picasso or Matisse, or both.

Man 5: I just wanted to know, what is your feeling or relationship towards avant-garde in New York today? Like how do you relate to kinetic light, et cetera? And do you feel like for instance that during the period of the 50s when you were working there was a sort of a crest of American art?

Motherwell: That's been a very real problem for me because I do lots of things besides painting. I paint about 80% of the time, otherwise I'm an editor for a publishing house. I give lectures, and most important of all in this context I serve on the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation that gives the art fellowships. [77:52] So that every year I see 500 Canadian, United States, and South American artists, and have one of the votes in whether they are going to get a greatly wanted fellowship or not.

So that it's a very practical problem for me to be as tolerant as just, as fair as I can possibly be, which is not in a funny way difficult for me. Intellectually, I come from a long line of Scotsmen who must have all been judges or something, because I was raised in an atmosphere of harsh fairness, along with Irish hysteria on my mother's side.

And, to put it easily, as fast as I can, what I look for seems to be indisputably authentic, regardless of its mode of expression. It's also evident that I'm deeply committed to painting in the literal sense of a brush and a surface and to warmth of feeling to non elaboration but non simple mindedness. Actually there's a very, which I haven't been able to go into, a very complex background of references in my own work, simple as they are.

So that the more cool, as one says nowadays, the less painterly, the more it becomes an object, the more it could be shown in a President's office, or in a bathroom, or in a cafeteria, indifferently, the less feeling I particularly have for it.

Which doesn't mean the Guggenheim foundation hasn't awarded many life artists, plastic artists etc. fellowships, they have. But I certainly feel personally much more diffident about it.

I should also say, because I think it would interest you young people, that in my opinion, watching it over the years, there is a very marked change among young artists, away from painting and away from sculpture, as it has been generally regarded, much more toward new materials, toward gigantic sizes.

And one sculptress or woman sculptor last year who got a scholarship, one of her entries was 1200 feet long. But I would think that, there is a marvelous American philosopher, I must say named William James. And he used to say that at any given historical moment reality seems like a wall, but a wall the more you observe it the more there is some place where it conceivably can be penetrated.

And I think this is absolutely true. And differs in different historical moments. I think the most adventurous spirits of an age seem to find where that crack in the wall is, so to speak. My guess is that in 1970 when one is 22, the crack is not where painting and normal sculpture are. But maybe much more movies or happenings or carving up the landscape, or whatever.

I also equally believe that painting is an irreplaceable experience. So that if contemporary artists, young contemporary artists, do something else, it is something else. In the same way that when one sublimates the sexual impulse, it's not the same as sex, if I make myself clear.

And in that sense I think there also will be a permanent endurance of painting. But there can be whole periods, centuries, among the greatest countries in the world in which painting very nearly disappears.

I think with the exception of the Far East, where it has had a continuous tradition. But under present conditions I suppose it will be wiped out in China, or maybe already has been. But nevertheless, I also wish youngsters Godspeed in that I think the most adventurous people should go where the adventure is, even if it suddenly makes me, who ten years ago felt like part of the avant-garde suddenly feel like Bonnard. Yes.

Woman 1: As an art historian and also as a painter, are there any schools you could recommend that would have a really good interaction between both studies? The study of art as a discipline, and a study of art as something to do.

Motherwell: I can give you a comic answer. If you buy today's New York Times, which I read on the plane coming up there's quite a long piece about the new art school in California founded by – with Walt Disney's money. Pointing out that they have, that the faculty there believes that all the arts are interrelated. I don't mean in the sense that we all know that somehow poets and musicians and painters have something to do with each other. But they really want to criss-cross everything. The

painting students will be also dancers, also making movies, also flying to the moon or whatever. This is going to be the policy of the school.

Also outside New York City, Governor Rockefeller's favorite project is being built. Which is a first class university that is going to be devoted to the arts, around a great quadrangle with some of the best architects in America building the buildings. And one building will be painting and sculpture. Another will be movies. Another will be dance. Another will be music. Another will be rock and roll and so on.

And I'm sure in that university, which will be completed in two years. And which is only 25 miles or 20 miles outside New York City, there again be the interpenetration you are talking about.

I personally am somewhat skeptical about art schools. Except for stalling ones parents or playing for time. Which to say, I think schools, I mean I think its the nature of the situation that students are too, no I shouldn't say students. The whole situation is too much an artificial feeding process, like chickens being fattened for the market. And in this case where there is no market. [laughter] [applause]

I think one has to go out and take what one wants. And by that, I mean learn what one really wants. And what one really needs to know is what is relevant to one's own purposes. My father, for example, devoted as he was to California wanted me to stay in California. But when I said I wanted to study philosophy in graduate school to gain myself more time. He said, his first question was, what's the best arts school in the world? And I said, at this moment Harvard University, and he said you go to Harvard University.

And, you know, businessmen have their awful qualities. But they also have some marvelous qualities of seeing what the point is. And I would say to any of you is smell out, which is all one can do, where the action is that attracts you. And according to what it particularly is and what it particularly is, is all that counts. Do your best to associate yourself with that place and group of people, which is often not easy. I beg your pardon?

Woman 2: I'm curious to know, is there any art that you hate?

Motherwell: A little. I've never liked Vermeer, for example. And I was delighted to read several years ago in the most learned art history journal, called "The Art Journal" in fact, that he used a machine to make his pictures. I used to wonder, there's something about them that goes against my grain. And they are generically a different kind of painting. Most contemporary art I don't like. At the same time there's no non-contemporary contemporary art that I do like. [89:56] I should amplify that a

little bit by saying that most people who think they like painting, don't. A great deal of painting is made for people who don't like paintings, to be able to say they're enjoying their painting and this is what they like. I mean it is a specific function, and it's made by people who also don't like painting, but think they do.

I mean if it's honestly made, as for example, in the United States. Andrew Wyeth, I imagine, honestly makes paintings for people who don't like painting, but who do like a myth about America. What?

Woman 3: Do you watch yourself paint. Do you stand away from yourself and watch yourself processing and doing like something.

Motherwell: No. I paint like somebody who's been hit by a sledgehammer. And just barely function in a wall of pain and clumsiness and density.

Man 6: You made a remark about timidity and about fear of chaos. And it reminded me that a number of painters that you knew in the forties were undergoing some sort of psychoanalysis. And it interests me to ask you whether you feel that that experience contributed in any sense to the breakthrough that did happen in New York at that time in terms of this fear of chaos.

Motherwell: That's not an easy question to answer accurately. One has to have gone, no I was about to say a contradiction. I was going to say one has to have grounds by faith. But of course what faith means is a belief without grounds. [92:36] Let's say if one has faith, it's helpful if there's something reinforcing. To the degree that we thought that there was a subject matter and it was, however you want to put it, invisible or indescribable or intangible. The fact that some of us were interested in psychoanalysis, though too many resisted it really. Nearly everybody is dead partly because they did.

You know, in a way, earlier I said that I knew from the study of logic that abstract symbolic structures are meaningful. And in the same way I knew – I did my undergraduate thesis on O'Neill and psychoanalysis, I knew that there were meanings, not conscious. I mean, I never had any question about it. Pollock knew it too. I think we were the only two really interested in analysis. I can't think of any other, Baziotés, for example, was interested in flying saucers.

It was also characteristically, until this present generation, an alcoholic generation. Every major American writer of the 20th century or nearly everyone has died of alcoholism. Nearly all of my generation of painters died of it directly or indirectly or committed suicide, or died accidentally probably under the influence of alcohol.

This was also true in France. The two most promising in France [break in audio]. In fact, it all seems more programmatic. All of this was done in the most crude primitive way.

And most of my colleagues who were much older. Most of them were ten or fifteen years older than I was. So that I was in my twenties, and they were in their thirties and had taken a horrible beating from the United States, from Europe, from their backgrounds, from everybody and everything, used to look at many of my ideas with great hostility, indifference etc.

But I then had, which I no longer so much have, enormous enthusiasm and enormous belief in the possibilities of the future. In fact when Harold Rosenberg and I made a magazine together we called it "Possibilities".

It was something very different from the atmosphere nowadays. In the sense that people are cooler now. Some art historians now talk about Abstract Expressionism as the last flare up of romanticism. Whatever that means.

It certainly was romantic in that there was an enormous amount of egotism in it. And a real hatred of being anonymous, in fact the latter, the last ten years of history was largely the various artists disowning each other, which characteristically happens when your best friends are also your greatest competitors.

Dennis Young: Well, I think our guests and students and staff have all clearly expressed what I was going to say. But on behalf of everyone here and all those concerned we would like to express our warmest and most grateful thanks. [97:20] And in this instance we really feel we have a very much more intimate concept of something we all found terribly exciting. Thank you again very much for fitting us in.

[applause]

[1 hour 32 minutes]