

CONVERSATIONS I – III

by
Bianca Hildenbrand

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Graphic Design: Dominik Denzler

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Artists:

Ivo Stoop as Willem de Kooning,
Matt Black as Barnett Newman,
Whitney Ramage as Louise Bourgeois,
Tony Wylene as Robert Motherwell,
Eric Rieper as Richard Lippold,
Dan Warden as Adolph Gottlieb,
Jack Callahan as David Hare,
Alexander Wood as Ad Reinhard,
Shannon Lee as Janice Biala,
Andy Wellington as William Baziotos,
Rick Manlapig as Alfred H. Barr,
Kelly Larsen as Herbert Ferber,
Michael Ryterband as Richard Pousette-Dart,
Peter Brensinger as Ralph Rosenberg,
Lukas Küng as Hans Hofmann,
Ryan Smithan as David Smith,
Madeline Stratton as Hedda Sterne,
Liam Martin as James Brooks,
Brendan Kirk as Norman Lewis,
Michael Bonner as Ibram Lassaw,
Jessica Adams as Bianca Hildenbrand

Dedicated to Dad

They have a touch which I am glad not to have.

HOFMANN: Yes, it seems to me all the time there is the question of heritage. It would seem that the difference between the young French painters and the young American painters is this: French pictures have a cultural heritage. The American painter of today approaches things without basis. The French approach thinks on the basis of cultural heritage – that one feels in all their work. It is working towards a refinement and quality rather than working toward new experiences, and painting out these experiences that may finally become tradition. The French have it easier. They have it in the beginning.

DE KOONING: I think, whatever happens, everyman works for himself, and he does it on the basis of convincing himself. I force my attitude upon this world, and I have this right – particularly in this country – and I think it is wonderful, and if it does not come off, it is alright, too. I don't see any reason why we should go and look into past history and find a place or try to take a similar position.

BARR: What is the most acceptable name for our direction or movement?

SMITH: I don't think we do have unity on the name.

ROSENBERG: We should have a name through the years.

SMITH: Names are usually given to groups by people who don't understand them or don't like them.

BARR: We should have a name for which we can blame the artists – for once in history!

REINHARDT: The question of abandoning titles arose, I am sure, because of esthetic reasons. Even titles like “still life” and “landscape” do not say anything about a painting. If a painting does have a reference or association of some kind, I think the artist is apt to add a title.

STERNE: I don't think anybody really has a right to know exactly how I feel about my paintings. It seems too intimate to give then a subjective title.

REINHARDT: You're putting in everything about yourself, but not everything outside yourself.

MOTHERWELL: It is not the real issue. All of the people here move as abstractly or back to the world of nature as they like to, and fight at any time for that freedom.

FERBER: I think the day of the “masterpiece” is over. When we look at our own work, in ten or fifteen examples, we really understand what we are doing.

DE KOONING: It seems to me that in Europe every time something new needed to be done it was because of the traditional culture. Ours has been a striving to come to the same point that the had – not to be iconoclasts.

GOTTLIEB: There is a general assumption that European – specifically French – painters have a heritage which enables them to have a benefits of tradition, and therefore they can produce a certain type of painting. It seems to me that in the last fifty years the whole meaning of painting has been made international. I think the Americans share that heritage just as much, and that if they deviate from tradition it is just as difficult for an American as for a Frenchman. It is a mistaken assumption in some quarters that any departure from tradition stems from ignorance. Is a problem of knowing what tradition is, and being willing to reject it in part. This requires familiarity with his past. I think we have this familiarity and if we depart from tradition, it is out of knowledge, not innocence.

DE KOONING: I agree that tradition is part of the whole world now. The point that was brought up was that the French artists have some “touch” in making an object. They have a particular something that makes them look like a “finished” painting.

NEWMAN: What ties us together as a community of artists?

HARE: I see no need for a community. An artist is always lonely.

REINHARDT: Why can't we find out what our community is and what our differences are, and what each artist thinks of them?

HARE: The artist is a man who functions beyond or ahead of his society. In any case, seldom within it. I think our problem would seem to be fundamentally psychological. Some feel badly because they are not accepted by the public. We shouldn't be accepted by the public. As soon as we are accepted, we are no longer artists, but decorators.

FERBER: So far the community of artists goes, it seems to me the question would involve the question of difference – between us and other artists.

In that way we may have a feeling of community.

HILDENBRAND: Our community has become invisible. It's an illusion of a community. Everybody for himself. We are as individual as possible. It seems to be the standard for today. Numbers are essential. The urge to have a community is diminishing, especially in the most physical way. Communication has become abstract, allowing anonymity – and at the same time, it offers you a new way of self-portrayal.

HOFMANN: It just means one thing to me; to discover myself as well as I can. But everyone of us has the urge to be creative in relation to our time – the time to which we belong may work out to be our thing in common.

MOTHERWELL: What then exactly constitutes the basis of our community?

POUSETTE-DART: The museums can, at any moment, bless any one of us. The disaster is that they can cause disparity among us, too.

HARE: I can't see that museums have anything to do with the artist. In general, museums are involved with art as décor, while the artist is involved with art as a way of life.

LIPPOLD: I can't see that my relationship to the museum or to

the public is concerned with what I am making. I am interested in how other people work.

HILDENBRAND: Do all of us have different needs from a community? Is the public our community? A community is an attitude.

HARE: I think this group activity, this gathering together, is a symptom of fear.

HILDENBRAND: Finding myself in a community evokes fear. It's a fear of representing myself.

STERNE: We need a common vocabulary. We don't mean the same things with the same words.

REINHARDT: If we are doing the same thing, or have the same problems or have the same fears – what are they?

LIPPOLD: I feel that if we are going to learn something from each other, let's dismiss our problems in relation to the public and concern ourselves with the problems of creativity: how each one begins his piece of work and how he proceeds with it.

BARR: How important is conscious emotion such as pleasure, grief or fear in making your work?

HOFMANN: It depends on the personality of the artist. Everyone is clear about himself as to where he belongs, and in which way he can give esthetic enjoyment.

DE KOONING: If you are an artist, the problem is to make a picture work whether you are happy or not.

BROOKS: It seems to me that it is impossible generally to clarify the emotions that go into painting. We can't get away from the grief or joy we put into a painting; it is a very complex thing and in some cases a very ambiguous thing. We are in some cases identifying ourselves through our painting and that means everything we are and a great many things we would like to be.

HOFMANN: Painting is esthetic enjoyment. I want to be a "poet." As an artist I must conform to my nature. My nature has a lyri-

BARR: The general public is very much interested in that factor of the word. How did the artist feel when he did the thing? Was it painful? Was it a matter of love or fear, or what not? Very often he gets no guidance at all from looking at the picture. That's where the factor of titles comes in. At the same time the title may distort the picture a great deal.

ROSENBERG: The title is always arbitrary because we deal with unseen audiences; the reason for a title is that every Tom, Dick and Harry has to have some link. Once I had a show where I had numbers from one to twenty, and when it came to a question of reviewing, the critics found that number six was better than four, etc. I hope that the onlooker will make up his own title!

SMITH: I think titles are a positive means of identification. I never objected to any work of art because of its title. The only people who have objected were critics because they did not like the work.

REINHARDT: Titles are very important in surrealist work. But the emphasis with us is upon a painting experience, and not on any other experience. The only objection I have to title is when it is false or tricky or is something added that the painting itself does not have.

BROOKS: I have a very hard time finding a title and it is always inadequate. I think when titles are very suggestive, they are a kind of fraud, because they throw the spectator away from the picture rather than into it. But numbers are inadequate.

HARE: It seems to me a minor problem. There are in general two kinds of title, poetic and those which note the content. A number seems to me only a refusal to accept responsibility.

FERBER: I think that numbering pieces is really begging the question. Because numbering the piece is an admission or a statement or a manifesto that this is pure painting or sculpture that it stands by itself without relation to any other discipline. We should not cut ourselves off from this great rich world.

POUSETTE-DART: I think if we could agree on numbers it would be a tremendous thing. In music they don't have this dilemma. It would force people to just look at the object and try to find their own experience.

SMITH: This is the time in which I live and have to function. I exist in the best society possible because I exist in this time. I have to take it as the ideal society. It is ideal as far as I am concerned. I can not go back, I cannot admit that there is any history in my life outside of the times in which I live. Nothing can be more idealistic for work than right now – and there never will be an ideal society. Therefore, it has to be ideal. How can I consider an ideal society as ideal in one that I can't possibly live?

MOTHERWELL: What distinguishes these people is they are trying to act ideally in a non-ideal society.

POUSETTE-DART: Its an ideal society, but only the artist realizes it.

NEWMAN: Language is so bankrupt that we can't use it. I think the possibility of finding language still exists, and I think we are smart enough. Perhaps we are arriving at a new state of painting where the thing has to be seen for itself.

HILDENBRAND: I see my work as autonomous and independent from the artist. My work has its own language and should be considered without the biography of its author. To explain the work to the public is to eliminate the personal experience from the work.

BAZIOTES: I think when a man first discovers that two and two is four, there is "beauty" in that; and we can see why. But if people stand and look at the moon and one says, "I think it's just beautiful tonight," and the other says, "The moon makes me feel awful," we are both "clear." A geometric shape – we know why we like it; and an unreasonable shape, it has a certain mystery that we recognize as real; but it is difficult to put these things in an objective way.

STERNE: I think that for the artist himself the problem is not "beauty," ever. I is one of accuracy, validity and life.

HILDENBRAND: Furthermore, I'm not encouraged to use the word "beauty" to express what I feel among artists. Art has always been engaged in a philosophical discussion, which includes "the beauty" and "the sublime."

GOTTLIEB: Any general discussion of esthetics is a discussion of philosophy; any conclusion can apply to any work of art.

cal as well as a dramatic disposition. Not one day is the same. One day I feel wonderful to work and I feel an expression which shows in the work. Only with a very clear mind and on a clear day I can paint without interruptions and without food because my disposition is like that. My work should reflect my moods and the great enjoyment which I had when I did the work.

HILDENBRAND: Without joy, we shouldn't even start. "Unless the sun inside you is burning your gut," as Bukowski said, "don't do it."

BARR: Is the work of art an act of confidence or pleasure?

DE KOONING: It is some kind of feeling that you want to give yourself a place in the world.

BOURGEOIS: I try to analyze the reasons why an artist gets up and takes a brush and a knife – why does he do it? I feel it was either because he was suddenly afraid and wanted to fill a void, afraid of being depressed and ran away from it, or that he wanted to record a state of pleasure or confidence, which is contrary to the feeling of void or fear.

LIPPOLD: I would like to say a little about the beginning of my method. I have never begun a piece from the point of view of "pure form." I have never made a piece without its springing from the memory of some experience – an emotional experience, generally. I almost always, from the beginning, have a title which labels that experience, because I want it to act as a discipline in eliminating any extraneous ideas which might come into the sculpture.

LIPPOLD: Then the problem of how to work out the experience which I have had presents itself; I may begin with the idea, and I have to adapt it to my medium. I have to make it clear enough for others to see in its relationships. All of this take place in the sketch stage – in the models I make from drawings.

LIPPOLD: When an experience has made itself so persistent in my unconscious or conscious mind – or both – that I feel that I want to make something which reflects that experience.

STERNE: Painting is for me a problem of simultaneous under-

standing and explaining. I try to approach my subject uncluttered by esthetic prejudices. I put it on canvas in order to explain it to myself, yet the result should reveal something plus. As I work the thing takes life and fights back. There comes a moment I can't continue. Then I stop until next time.

LIPPOLD: When is the work finished? How do we know that?

BROOKS: It quite often changes in the middle of a painting, but the "end" is a very difficult thing, something this is determined, not by the form that is "finished," but by the fact that I have worked on it. It satisfies a need of some kind.

GOTTLIEB: I usually ask my wife...

LASSAW: I would consider a work finished when I sense a "togetherness," a participation of all parts as in an organism. This does not mean that I entirely understand what I have created. To me, a work is at first, quite unknown. In time, more and more enters into consciousness. It would be better to consider a work of art as a process that is started by the artist. In that way of thinking, a sculpture or painting is never finished, but only begin. If successful, the work starts to live a life of its own, a work of art begins to work.

BOURGEOIS: I think a work is "finished" when I have nothing to eliminate. I make constructions that are usually vertical; when I start them they are full of colors and are complicated in form. Every one of the complications goes and the color becomes uniform and finally they become completely white and simple. Where there is nothing else to take away, it is "finished." Yet I am disgusted by simplicity. So I look for a larger form and look for another work – which goes through the same process of elimination.

POUSSETTE-DART: For me it is "finished" when it is inevitable within itself. But I don't think I can explain anything about my painting, just as I can't explain anything about a flower or a child. When is anything "beautiful" or finished? I can't discuss things about my paintings. The true thing I am after goes on and on and I never can completely grasp it.

BROOKS: I think quite often I don't know when a work is "finished," because I often carry it a little too far. There is some

peculiar balance which it is necessary to preserve all through a painting which keeps it fluid and moving. It can't be brought to a stop. I think you have to abandon it while it is still alive and moving, and so I can't consider a painting "finished."

REINHARDT: Disturbances arise when you have to treat the work as a finished and complete object, so that the only time I think I "finish" a painting is when I have a deadline. If you are going to present it as an "unfinished" object, how do you "finish" it?

NEWMAN: I think the idea of a "finished" picture is a fiction. I think a man spends his whole life-time painting one picture or working on one piece of sculpture. The question of stopping is really a decision of moral considerations. To what extent are you intoxicated by the actual act, so that you are beguiled by it? To what extent are you charmed by its inner life? And to what extent do you then really approach the intention or desire that is really outside of it. The decision is always made when the piece has something in it that you wanted.

HARE: A work is never finished, the energies involved in a particular work are merely transferred at a certain moment to the next work.

BIALA: I don't think a work of art is finished until it has found its audience.

HOFMANN: To me a work is finished when all parts involved communicate themselves, so that they don't need me.

BIALA: Nothing exists by itself. It only exists in relation to something else: when it can find one other person in the world.

REINHARDT: Exactly what is our involvement, our relation to the outside world?

FERBER: It is impossible to escape an attitude towards the world. The Artist, not as being, but as man, and not as a mere practitioner or craftsman, because if we have any integrity at all, it is as men and woman.

NEWMAN: I think we start from a subjective attitude which, in the process of our endeavor, becomes related to the world.