Interview with Morton Feldman, 1968

by Kurt von Meier

*The following interview, by art historian Kurt von Meier, took place on August 7, 1968 at 111 E 73rd St, New York City. It was recorded and transcribed by von Meier, and the transcript is reproduced here by kind permission of Larry Barnett, curator of the **Kurt von Meier website**, where much more material from the von Meier archives, including a photo of Feldman in conversation with him, can be found.*

Morton Feldman: Interviews have to be on a high level of performance - it's like a radio program. The best interviews is when we are not relaxed. It's when you're under pressure - you're on the radio or it's a live show. There's an audience out there. What is this?

Kurt von Meier: It's a hot medium - an interview is a hot medium.

MF: We can pin this down to a specific piece, performed on April 4th, right?

KvM: Was it April 4th? In San Francisco. The first time it has been performed. It was its world premiere. The name of the piece...

MF: "First Principles."

KvM: We talked about the title at the time, which you admitted was descriptive. You felt it was for you a coming to terms with or an expression of first principles, in terms of your own music. Is that right?

MF: Have you ever heard of Rabbi Akiba? Rabbi Akiba was perhaps one of the greatest symbols in terms of religious and intellectual survival. He was the last great rabbi before the Jews went into the Diaspora. Of course anything that was profound and wise in those days was attributed to Rabbi Akiba. So a few hundred years went by, you understand, and if somebody said something very smart, they put it into the collected remarks of Rabbi Akiba.

Now the reason I mention Rabbi Akiba is that in the past ten or fifteen years - this is already a cliché - that we're living on the brink, artistically, socially, politically, we know that, it's becoming more and more apparent, that we're living in this eschatological state, and that was the state, religiously in which the

Jews were as they began to disperse throughout the world. As you may remember, the Romans were at first permissive, then became less permissive; they started to clamp down, clamp down to such a degree that the persecution became intolerable. They were up against it. If there was ritual, they were killed. If there was any propagation of the faith, they were killed. They were faced for the first time with one of the most modern of modern problems: they had to learn how to survive with just faith, and without demonstration of ritual. They didn't know how to do it. They had all this ritual.

So they would go to Rabbi Akiba, and would say, "Look, we can't have this religious practice any more, how are we going to be Jews?" He says, "Forget about the religious practices." They would come to him with some other problem and he would say, "Forget it, you don't need it. Honor your family"...He started to give them, you know, basic interpersonal psychological therapy, in terms of their family, in terms of their friends. He was summoned to the Roman general, who was a very intellectual guy - probably played by Frederick March in the movie - very debonaire - and they would have these long intellectual conversations about life and religion. The general was continually not only interested, but he wanted to trap him. I remember one of the things that was said at one of their conversations. It had to do with the Roman general trying to find out just who is this guy, what is this guy? So he said to Akiba, "Who is greater, or which is greater, in this whole bit about God and man, which is greater, God's creativeness, or Man's inventiveness?" So Akiba answered, "Man's inventiveness because," he said, "God created the kernel, but Man invented bread." And they would proceed with that kind of very classy and very interesting repartee. But it got to the point (I don't know why I'm talking so much about Rabbi Akiba, but it's very important for the title of my piece, and for the state of the times). I'm part of the times - I help make the times. I hope that I'm not trying to say that I'm Rabbi Akiba, No but it's crucial - it's absolutely crucial. We can't go on to talk about technical things, or even aesthetical things, unless we pass through this door, which is the dispersion...

KvM: Are we now living in a Diaspora of a parallel time?

MF: Of another time. In different terms - completely different terms. Naturally I'm only using this as a historic, symbolic analogy and I think it's an apt one. They finally came to Rabbi Akiba - he was already in jail - and [the Romans] said, "You must not teach Judaism any longer." So the people came to him and they said, "Well, what should we do?" He said, "This you can't give up. Regardless, you can't give it up. It's the only thing; it's the final thing. In fact, the teaching is more important than faith. Because if you ban the teaching, then you can't have the faith." I mean they were so connected, but in terms of which

came first the faith or the teaching, finally it seems as if the teaching was the most important as action, as ACTION.

KvM: There was always the chance for faith as long as there was teaching.

MF: Yes, it's as if the religion was made out of faith, but teaching was its subject.

KvM: Faith was its content.

MF: Faith was its content. Teaching was its context. Context as content. You see, they were inseparable. So they of course burnt him at the stake. And with that the Jews started to disperse, from Israel throughout the world. Now, getting back to "First Principles", I think I felt the way so many feel today, that the whole ritualistic element that makes a work of art is not the work of art. I think we feel that. I think not only do we feel that in modern art, but we feel that in various attitudes the clergy would have in terms of say the changes in the catholic...

KvM: Liturgy

MF: The loosening up of conducting a service from something which was extremely, you know, ritualistic.

KvM: Well now the fact that the Mass can be said in English.

MF: Yes well, it's an important thing. But you know the whole idea of content and context is also very interesting in terms of the early Jews. One of the first arguments was the whole interpretation of the Word. How literally they could take the Word. Some took it so literally they said, "Well look, if it was given to us in Hebrew, then Hebrew is a divine language. If that is the only language we had, and if the Word was given to us in Hebrew, it is the only language we have." I was reading a review in your field, the New York Review, this morning, where some lecture by some German art historian about the whole decline of form in modern art tying it up with the decay of civilization and trying to make an analogy between the breakdown of form and the breakdown of civilization. Absolutely ridiculous. Only because some ideals were given to these people like to some of the early peoples thinking that if this was given to us, then there was nothing else as holy.

KvM: So thought the Muslims also. Allah spoke in Arabic.

MF: Exactly. Exactly. But let's get on to "First Principles". I'm stuck with that bag myself and especially in that piece because what do I take with me in my

dispersion. I'm leaving history, I'm leaving the way instruments were used, that is, I'm practically not even using them. They're not a source of ritualistic virtuosity. Cause and effect is gone, one is just left with the experience - but how does one analyse an experience not in relation to its causality?

KvM: What do you retain? You retain the instruments. All sound is produced by what we would call conventional instruments, although they're not used conventionally.

MF: Conventional instruments. It's like retaining a human being. I mean we retain human beings throughout history, but that doesn't mean they all speak the same language. I mean, to me that is something I cannot leave. The conventional musical instrument. It's almost like the feel of a canvas - the feel of paint.

KvM: But isn't painting in oil paint on canvas precisely one of those rituals of expression?

MF: That's what I have to discover - now that's a marvelous point you make. Are they making a work of art or are they re-enacting a ritual - of that which went about making the work of art. That's the problem.

KvM: There are those composers who would argue that the use of conventional musical instruments is just ritualistic. There are worlds of sound beyond them and that these are the worlds toward which we might better turn our attention for investigation.

MF: Yes, but it's a very interesting thing, that when they get hold of new instruments or new means, like the electronic means, they use them like the old instruments. In other words, nothing has come about in which the working out of the piece with the new instruments are worked out as a new instrument creating an absolutely new world demanding new terms.

KvM: I have a challenge, just to see what you think, Morton. La Monte Young comes to mind: a composer who is not using conventional instruments - indeed, his instruments are sine wave generators. La Monte stands for other composers who I think are investigating this world of non-conventional musical instruments, in ways that really do get pretty far away from the conventional conceptions of sound. I don't think they're bound by this convention. The music might be built on the experience of musical instruments - but I think it's a good thing that they do, in fact, succeed in getting away. I don't know how many do this.

MF: Well, La Monte is a very special case. But there was another factor here, where he doesn't get away, for example, from the whole idea of continuity. In other words, his music goes on and on and on and on...The way Mahler could go on and on and on and on. This is not to put down La Monte. La Monte is in a very special class because he is also involved with other metaphors. He is involved with a kind of endless, eternal quality of Eastern philosophy.

KvM: I think the aspect of continuity has an even more important place in La Monte's music than it does in Mahler's, or Brahm's.

MF: Do you think so? I was thinking - just a point about the continuity also - he wanted Dream Houses, where his music would he going on all the time, literally. In that sense you come to the music, and there's no real continuity unless you yourself create it, and you come to the music and you leave when you want. I mean, you know, just like there is continuity in of life and you participate or you don't. That doesn't seem to be the conventional sense of continuity.

KvM: To some degree, he is using the music itself as a metaphor, for you to get involved with that other metaphor. The Eastern metaphor.

MF: Yes, so...

KvM: The philosophical metaphor, whatever its sources.

MF: So...to what degree he's interested in sound, you see, is questionable. I think what he would want to do - what his innovation would be - is to try to create a certain sound that could float.

KvM: I wish La Monte were here...that would be fair to La Monte, to talk to him. Let's just get back to your music for a minute. Let's get back to your music for the rest of our minutes. Do you feel that all of the sounds you need you can get with musical instruments? Sometimes - well in San Francisco, at this concert, and on other occasions - at Pasadena - I felt that (something that I very rarely felt with other people's music—namely that there was this wealth, this richness, possibilities of sound, in terms of pure sound...the experience of this sound...that had begun to be explored certainly, but that there was an awful lot of room left. There is room for a dozen Morton Feldman's...all of them different.

MF: Of course it's absolutely ridiculous for me to expect La Monte to be other than what he is - and what he is I find extraordinary. I'm very interested in La Monte. But I also think that I shouldn't be other than what I am, neither should it be expected of me. I feel that all I want to do is bring something that never

existed before into the world. And I feel that's where my job ends. And I think it's not realistic to say, "Now look what you could do with it."

KvM: Look, I only meant that by way of saying that there were indeed enough possibilities within conventional, symphony-orchestra instruments - that I thought it wasn't too restrictive. I'm not challenging you to use electronic instruments. I tend to agree with you that I think. this is rich enough. In fact so rich that there's plenty of room for other people to go in different ways.

MF: Well listen, just let me further articulate my whole feeling about it anyway. Unfortunately, I do have a point of view. For example, I couldn't use electronic music, or electronic sounds, because they are not anonymous in character.

KvM: I think the initial reaction would be to say that they are impersonal and more anonymous.

MF: No, they're not anonymous. It's like hard edge...they're very aggressive. I prefer the Rothko edges of the canvas - you can't make them disappear - you can't make it go into nothing. Every time you hear electronic music it's as though you always have to hear something. And sometimes I like a content that doesn't have the significance of something. That physical world of electronic music gives the impression that something is always happening.

KvM: But do you thinks that's really due to the quality of electronic music - or just the people who produced it?

MF: I think it's inherent in the quality. It's that kind of: WOW. It's very "thingy." ZING and ZANG and WOW!

KvM: It's no-nonsense business: We are now listening; to this music, to this sound.

MF: Yes, but it's a kind of ersatz urgency.

KvM: But you don't think it's just the urgency of people who are first experimenting with something, and therefore overdo it...

MF: They're not overdoing it, they're not undergoing it. It's inherent in the sound. Remember, I'm not putting it down but I'm just saying that it's not for me, because I for one wouldn't want the right to create a kind of music which is on the peripheral between something and nothing.

KvM: When you talk about Rothko's edges, are you talking about the forms that are unclear, that are shaded - you don't know precisely where they stop or begin, or become background or foreground.

MF: Precisely.

KvM: Or, do you know Robert Irwin's paintings? We had two disc paintings at the Jewish Museum recently - he's concerned with this too: a non-image, a color, a sense of something there but not a thing. Not an object...And there is something about electronic music or even La Monte, and La Monte's is in the best sense a vast object - like that young chick who wants to make five-mile sculpture. But a highway is still a highway...and La Monte is still a highway...an object big enough to enfold you, to encompass you...It's interesting that La Monte is concerned precisely with this continuity, extended so as to create an environment of sound. A world of sound.

MF: But you really have to remember that, being a colleague of his, I'm not walking along that path - I'm in an airplane looking down on it...and I see it telescoped, and I see its proportion, and I see that it does have a beginning and it does have an end. And it has sides, and curves and levels. In other words, I see it, in a sense, the way we see something old - you know, the way we listen to Mahler. Can you imagine how Mahler must have sounded? I bet Wagner was very much like La Monte - but a more kind of accessible type of La Monte, in those days. Can you imagine how those last operas sounded, going on there for three hours? Well, they had breaks for wurst and beer.

KvM: Well, La Monte has breaks for meditation.

MF: A lot of it has to do with, for example, getting back to first principles, and what you take into this new world we are making. For example, the whole element of time, in relation to La Monte and me. The whole relation to Rothko and a happening. Now the reason I don't enjoy happenings is because...not because it is not structured or programmed for me. It is because time...you are given the illusion you are in a naturalistic time. Consequently, you don't have a feeling of time as an anxiety - one of the great things about say, conventional works of art is that there is an anxiety - that is, you have to hear it in this amount of time - you have to hear that little nuance, that little twist. In a Beethoven quartet/ you only have so much time to get it and if you don't get it you lose it, you see.

KvM: Time becomes part of the medium that is articulated, the expression is articulated.

MF: You don't know what is articulating what. You don't know if time is articulating the expression or the expression is pointing up time. You can't fathom it. Again the difference between content and context. Now when things are thrown into this big diarrhea of what is considered to be natural time, you lose the anxiety to articulate something important. You just lose the anxiety of time. But one of the interesting things about a Rothko is that you have this big scale - you have this big time situation and you have the anxiety of the time divorced from the anxiety of an object.

KvM: Unlike the Beethoven quartet, where an object or an occurrence happens within time.

MF: Exactly. here you're left with time, as if it's something philosophical...as if you look at a Rothko, it's like Wittgenstein, Einstein, and you're looking at a tremendous philosophical manifesto, or something. You know, it's fantastic. At the same time you can't call it an Object, and the same time he's not making it the way Matisse would create his anxiety of his time, his stasis, creating his tension, you see, in terms of the nineteenth century dialectic. And Rothko did the soft edges of the form that avoid this mechanical articulation...as in hard edge painting or painting of forms conventionally. At the same time this is set apart as non-naturalistic time. What is it that does this? The edges of the canvas itself as opposed to the forms on the canvas?

KvM: I don't know what does this. I don't know what does it...it might just be the scale.

MF: But there's something that does do it - otherwise you're confronted with a paradox: taking this time outside of, in contradistinction to naturalistic time; the other problem, the one of the non-hard edge, the shading-off of the differences into subtleties**,** to form a context. Who was it - some great Greek philosopher - I don t know who it was, spoke only of time as an image...time per se, time by itself as an image. I'm very involved in that. That's also a part of "First Principles." I'm very involved that as time itself - again not knowing what content or what context this content fluctuates in this time - but an image just of time seems to be a very powerful thing. It's like Proust. The fact that he can cover a period of his life - forget the incidents, right? - the fact that he could present those memories of all those years.

KvM: Proust...the fact that it is amazing despite the incidents, you were saying...

MF: Yes, I forgot what we were saying, while you were changing the tape.

KvM: Proust and Joyce...

MF: Oh, I said that is what Proust is all about. When he takes...

KvM: The statement about time. Time is the content of Proust, would you say?

MF: Yes.

KvM: And Joyce.

MF: Now the whole thing is that, say that time is their canvas. If time is their structure, I think that anything connected with their life becomes significant.

KvM: What's to articulate that or so present it so as to keep it from being involved in "the diahrrea of naturalistic time"?

MF: Well, who would be naturalistic time?

KvM: I mean, Joyce isn't, Proust isn't. Joyce is structured, at least certainly more than Proust. Perhaps the fact that he is writing about this - anything - setting it down in words, on paper...in black type...

MF: Take someone like Delacroix...would he be, like, naturalistic time?

KvM: No, full of conventions.

MF: He wouldn't be naturalistic...in terms of the times?

KvM: No. Courbet got charged with this. Maybe that's a little closer. Zola, I guess in novels. But now we look back at Zola and say how romantic these conceptions were...that somehow, if we're poor and ugly, we're somehow more real. What about beauty, what about nobility, what about elegance, what about degeneracy? Aren't these things real?

MF: Well, they were looking for...Yes, a mythology of naturalism.

KvM: The reason that they're not real is that they were looking for "significant" material, to fill up this time. It almost became, seems to be that the more significant the material, the less relevant the work was. You know, grandiose themes...

MF: Sure, sure. We know that in academic paintings, for instance.

KvM: Now take Picasso. Picasso is going to become camp - he is already, I think - in terms of just the grandiose technical facility, he seems to be camp.

MF: I was thinking of things like "Guernica" - serious "statements."

KvM: No, I was saying that his virtuosity was camp.

MF: And this challenge...you don't need virtuosity?

KvM: We don't know. What is the virtuosity of a Mondrian?

MF: It is very beautifully painted...Mondrian is an exquisite painter.

KvM: Does that have enough of virtuosity? Where were his ideas about how to break up the right angle? It wasn't as ingenious as Picasso. Where is his virtuosity? I mean, we mentioned Picasso. How did Mondrian demonstrate his virtuosity? But let's get back...not to Mondrian...let's get back to first principles.

MF: Well, I think you're very close to first principles with Mondrian. That would be it...a basic philosophical problem which he investigated with variations on a theme, from 1917 until 1944 when he died. His virtuosity is in developing the wealth, the richness, the associations with these minimal techniques, as opposed to the conventional sense of virtuosity.

KvM: Yes, but is it minimal?

MF: Well, constrained, yes...pretty minimal. No, it's not when you get into it. You find out that Mondrian did not just use red, blue and yellow, white and black...that in fact he used hundreds of shades of white. So it's very deceptive. That he did use right angles, but then he used lozenges.

KvM: Wouldn't you agree in a sense that his paintings are about time? While Picasso isn't?

MF: Yes, go on. It's not as clear a problem...that Piero Della Francesca is about time and Uccello isn't. So what happens is that for me, time is part of my Diaspora. In other words, am I going to leave time behind me? How can I leave it behind me when I don't even know what it is?

KvM: How can you take it with you?

MF: Maybe by throwing out my watch...I don't know. I don't know. But I would say one thing, if in a sense I am forced to sign a confession about what I believe...something with a Reader's Digest title: "What I Believe." I would say that unless there is the pressure, if not the anxiety of time, there cannot be art, regardless what image, regardless what happens.

KvM: Is this especially true for music?

MF: Any art. Naturally it's especially true for music, and of course for painting...I feel as close to painting as well. Well, not so much painting, but anything that might develop from...it can be done with anything...anything but seashells...anything you want to use.

KvM: How do you see time? This image of time...is it a continuity? A linearity? An encompassing environment? A cloud? A Jove who comes down and embraces you?

MF: I think it rather has to do with...you know that Kafka remark, where he says, "Don't give me freedom, show me a way out." And I think there are two types of people. I think there is one kind of guy that deludes himself that freedom exists. And another guy that's just looking for a way out. I'm the kind of guy who's looking for a way out. John Cage is the kind of guy who thinks that freedom exists. I can have a life because I don't ask for freedom. As you noticed...

KvM: I don't have to take your word for that. But this business about time is crucial. It becomes almost a gag. It's a mystique. An artist censors it.

MF: To me it's the missing ingredient in his work. Now in the 19th century it would be how he manipulated it. If he just goes along like Rossini, and rolls it out like spaghetti - or lasagne - then of course he was a minor artist. But if you would listen to the Hammerklavier, er...the late Beethoven piano sonata, you would see that it's almost insane with its manipulation of time; that in a period of one minute, maybe twenty different things are happening, like crazy mosaics fitting into each other, making some kind of crazy totality, not necessarily organic - if anything, it's anti-organic - pathological in its manipulation of time. But it works.

KvM: It works when who plays it?

MF: I know, very few people play it, too. But in a sense, that would be...I would say that if the tenet for creating alleged masterpieces, if you live in the 19th century, you couldn't make it unless you manipulated time, the way Picasso manipulated the right angle - which was again 19th century, in terms of invention...inventional motivation.

KvM: Manipulation is 19th century?

MF: Yes, Cubism's the height of 19th century painting.

KvM: I agree, although for other reasons. But I'll take yours too.

MF: Well, you're the art historian. Now, I think...what one has to do now...let me fantasize...we're all friends, Allow me to say that I am Beethoven. I'm the latter day Beethoven. And the lesson for my work is, the law that my work is, how do you do it by having time and not manipulating it?

KvM: I think this is very close to the idea that I had about your music in the sense of space, this time adds the other dimension to it. That is what I wanted to hear you say. We talked about the music and its space in the way a Rothko might be architectural. But because it wasn't defined as a thing or as an object "out there" it could flow over into this space and function architecturally. Maybe that time - the fourth dimension of time - is really the medium of significant architecture in that it is space perceived in time. Architecture is a four dimensional medium, as opposed to, say, sculpture, which may be just three-dimensional - even though we know we perceive a piece of sculpture in time, still, it's not articulated as part of the medium itself. Now you're suggesting that music is not only architectural, or, it is a metaphor of architecture, in the sense that it is a four-dimensional medium.

MF: I would say that it's a metaphor of time. That is you try to create a certain substance...you're not working with clouds - you are using sounds.

KvM: And the three dimensions of physical space are the metaphors of music - which functions primarily in that fourth dimension of time itself.

MF: Yes, the only thing that is not a metaphor - the only thing that is realistic about music - the only thing that is natural about music is time. Everything else is an artifice. It has to do with how much talent you have, to invent new combinations, or new situations, it has to do with your hang-ups, your allegiances, historical devices you want to bring along with you. Not really - you are making something, you are fooling around. But time is real. If time is real, then leave it alone. How do you leave it alone? How do you leave it alone?

KvM: These media of architecture and music are complementary then? In a sense both of them involve four dimensions. Architecture involves the dimension of time but it works within the three dimensions of our conventional experience of space. Music involves the dimensions of space, but it works within what we conventionally call the fourth dimension of time.

MF: Yes, it's as almost in Rothko, you know, what gives that...You know what I think the élan vital is? It is that similarity of how artists left time alone throughout the ages. So we can look at a Rothko and we can feel as if we are also looking at history, and you don't even see history in the canvas, And I think that feeling has a lot to do with art.

KvM: Maybe this is connected with the idea of Rothko as a religious painter - as in the paintings he did for the St. Thomas chapel.

MF: Yes.

KvM: How can you have a non-objective, and non-figurative, totally abstract painting be a religious painting? As Rothko said...Well, the same with La Monte's music...

MF: It's religious music. Yes, there are no melodies in La Monte's music. You can't pick out the chants. (Gregorian modes).

KvM: It doesn't look for graven images.

MF: Yes, yes. Maybe the truth is that only non-representational artistic expressions can be religious. Or at least that they are closer to being more purely religious in effect. I think the more we get away from the artifact - not only in art but also in our lives - the more real the experience is, right?

KvM: You were concerned with architecture in "First Principles", in its performance, in the placing of musicians in the four corners of the room.

MF: No, no, no, no, no. That was not my idea.

KvM: That wasn't?

MF: No.

KvM: That just happened at the...

MF: Yes.

KvM: How was the piece originally conceived to he performed. Didn't it matter?

MF: As one homogeneous situation.

KvM: But you liked that idea?

MF: I liked it for other reasons. I liked it just for that room, because acoustically that room wasn't a good room. I would like it coming from one place. But maybe that's what it's all about. It's like time - you leave it alone.

KvM: How important is that piece for you?

MF: It's a crucial piece.

KvM: When did you write it?

MF: Oh, about a year ago. Very crucial piece, because it's a piece where I'm also re-investigating the whole idea of content. Let me talk a little bit about how the piece was made, because it's interesting. Now, I have other pieces that sound like that piece. But for some reason even if I make things "less" than anyone else makes things, I'm always wound up in an object. That is, there is not the anxiety about time, but the anxiety about making a certain move...that, perhaps, was a move I didn't have to make - only because I felt I had to say to the girl, "I love you." In other words, if you don't say to the work of art at certain moments, "I love you", you feel as though you're going to lose it. Sometimes it is not wise to say "I love you." But, being that at heart I'm a romantic, and I'm always saying. "I love you", I decided, how about writing a piece where I just let it alone - a mature affair. Well, I wrote such a piece, which means, "This very inspired artist has to calm down." And it was very creepy. It was very creepy because it went into time areas, it went into a certain scale, certain type of proportions which were new to me. I broke the pattern. I began to get involved with a series of pieces, which - I didn't know what they were. Now, if I presented it - it also seemed as if this very complex piece, say for four or five instruments, if I presented it - in other words, if I heard the piece - I would feel that that was just a fragment of this new experience. But I continually started to write these pieces, and I had about five or six of these non-pieces. Oh, of course they're "pieces", but if you would hear it, and if someone knew my work and liked my work, they would say, "Gee, that's awfully strange - that doesn't seem to have the creative pressure..." That is, I'm not telling even my admirers that I love them, within the boundaries of my esoteric experience. But I continued to write these pieces, and I had four of these pieces. I didn't know what they were. Well, on one morning, two of the pieces were lying side by side. I looked at one, and I looked at the other. And I took one piece, and I put it on top - forgive these sexual digressions, but that's what it amounted to. I put one piece on top of another piece, and it started to float...in a way my music never floated before. Then I put the third piece on top of that - had a real orgy. And I put still a fourth piece on top, and I said, "This is it." But I had to saturate the time with Feldman, in order to reveal time. So "First Principles" is really a collage, in a way, of four and five pieces played simultaneously. You see, with one piece you would still feel the contours - in other words, you would feel its highs, and you would feel its ground. But with the four or five pieces together, I lost all sense of contour. Because I wasn't in control of its final contour.

KvM: This sounds more like Pollock than Rothko.

MF: Yes, but at the same time, the moves are made in a way that suggests a hidden logic. So as Brian O'Doherty recently wrote in an article on De Kooning where he went off to talk about my music to explain, something about De Kooning, he talked about my work as having an almost equal quantity of both enigma and a maddening logic. The logic is in how I do it. The enigma is in what I allow to happen after I did it.

KvM: Do you mean in the process of still performing and composing, or do you mean in incorporating chance elements...

MF: They're not incorporating chance elements...but incorporating, more oblique context or a more definable content. Because after all my content is definable. There are these free-floating; sounds. That is the content. But the context...one can't pin down.

KvM: That is logical - just briefly - about how you do it?

MF: The act of doing it is logical. That is enough. The fact that I can do it is logical.

KvM: But why would your music be worth saying that it is logical...as opposed to...

MF: I didn't think of that...Oh, let's not go into that. Maybe it's because of my omniscient attitude that I can't make a mistake; in terms of my moves. But look, I'm allowed to give up so much after I make my own moves. Which brings us back to Rabbi Akiba: "How do you give it up?"

KvM: What is it you're giving up?

MF: I'm striving for a more fortuitous time structure.

KvM: How is the time structure of "First Principles" and the music after "First Principles" different from the context, or the time structure of your music before this?

MF: It is less manipulative. But it takes on a structure because of the more definable elements within it. But it brings us back to Rabbi Akiba. He said, "all is foreseen, [yet] choice is given." Now after all, let's not make this so mysterious. How many moves is it possible to make? Especially being that I'm like Mondrian. How many moves, can I make?

KvM: Maybe an infinite number. But certainly it's a set, even if that set is infinite; the set has definable characteristics, predictable characteristics, although within a certain boundary purely aleatory.

MF: For me, the time structure is the "All is foreseen" within Akiba's metaphor. "Choice is granted" is the moves you make. Again, it's like life.

KvM: How did this come out in your work since "First Principles", for instance?

MF: Well, in my new piece - may I give a plug for my new piece? The title of my new piece is called, quote: "Of False Relationships and the Extended Ending", unquote.

KvM: Extended ending?

MF: Extended ending.

KvM: That's like these old rock and roll records of the fifties, where that guy is still singing, as Ivan Karp says, "And Not Fade Away" fade away, fade away...He's still going, somewhere.

MF: I think in a sense what's happening is that the enigma of time is what I'm after. The content is already there. It's already there in my personality. It's already there.

KvM: What happens in the new piece?

MF: What happens in the new piece? Is where I'm trying to do it with less amount of superimpositions. In the new piece I do it with two.

KvM: Does that enable you to articulate, to define those elements more clearly than before? You can saturate the time with Feldman with only two overlaps. .It's more efficient and clear-cut.

MF: Yes, but it's less…you see…it's hard to do. It's easy to do, as a technical device.

KvM: Almost automatic...

MF: It happens almost automatically too. And then in the piece I'm planning to do after this one, I'm trying to get back again to one.

KvM: So that is a quest for elegance almost.

MF: Yes. In other words I want to do it with one, and which is the most difficult.

KvM: The difference between projecting three slides, overlapped, or weaving a Turkish carpet.

MF: Exactly.

KvM: What does extended endings mean? I didn't mean to put you off.

MF: Extended endings? We have to remember, and I feel that art is artificial to begin with. And I think of art - or a work of music as an extended ending. - not just as a work of art. I don't know if that's clear.

KvM: Tell me what happens, maybe it will be clear.

MF: Nothing happens. It is living out its life. And eventually it ends. But the ending is long and extended.

KvM: We have about an eighth of an inch of tape. Is that enough for an extended ending for this interview?

MF: That's short. Very short.

KvM: For all anyone knows, the tape recorder is still going...

MF: I begin to see my whole life's work as an extended ending. It is just one ending.

KvM: Or a way out?

MF: How does it end is what interests me. Not how does it begin. Or what happens.

KvM: Anyone can begin.

MF: Eh?

KvM: Anyone can begin?

MF: Any...what can begin?

KvM: Anyone can begin.

MF: Yes. How the hell to get outta this fuckin mess?

KvM: Laugh your way out.

MF: Well, you know that is one of the things characteristic of the fifties. It wasn't how to begin a painting...they used to talk about "How do you end it?" And De Kooning once said, "It's the last STROKE that ends the painting."