

Notes: Alfred Skondovitch meeting, 5/10/00 - Tape 1

Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK

The focus of the beginning of the meeting was to be on Alfred's experiences re art and artists in New York in the 40s and 50s. Patti, Alfred and I discussed also how we might structure this project: getting on tape and on paper Alfred's memories and stories as an artist, and other memories that come up as we talk.

In the late 40s, the hostility towards so-called action painters, Abstract Expressionists, was led by the head of the art department at Columbia University, Professor Peppino Mangravite Meyer Schapiro. Professor said Picasso and Matisse had discovered all that is discoverable in art, and that we should consolidate these discoveries, and this was put to his students to do this.

There was a political underlay to this: Picasso was a high ranking member of the Cominform, representing Spain as an expatriate. So there was a left-wing underlay to all this kind of thing. A great deal of turbulence in the 40s because there was an unwavering support of the Soviets as the darlings that would save mankind, and what was overlooked was what a dreadful society that was. With the war, there were people, like Meyer Schapiro, who cast this society further and supported the idea of a popular front, which was one of the shadow organizations set up all over the world. In other words, if you came to New York in the 40s as an artist, you had to have a left-wing agenda. You sought the sponsorship of historians who supported the popular front, even after the fracture when the Soviets signed a Peace agreement with Nazi Germany. There were many who jumped overboard when this occurred.

So you had this mentality of Schapiro supporters. There was a show of 180 painters that he supported, I think in 1947-48. Then overnight he changed to a different political agenda, and

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would no longer support these things.

Anyway, the idea of an American School of Art seemed ridiculous, and there were paid hands who bought this poverty-stricken group. We're not talking about opinionated people on a street corner or in a bar, but Andre Malraux, the French historian who became a minister without portfolio in the French Cabinet, and it was his job to shoot down this threat to French trade, to shoot down that school specifically. This was a country recovering from war and one of their great assets was the export of French paintings of the modern schools, that yielded them close to \$1.2 billion a year. And they saw the emergence of this school as a threat to themselves and they attacked it vigorously. In England, Aldous Huxley attacked this--thanked America for helping them during the war--but these paintings were the work of idiots, said he. This was a warning of the Coca Colonization of Europe. The only people who were really sympathetic were the Italians who were defeated in war and would kiss anybody's ass. But they were part of the attack; Germany was essentially prostrate, though they came up with painters who flocked to Paris and did able work like Karl Appel and Hans Hartung.

Anyway, this opposition to what we did was supported by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I found myself involved in picket lines. Every year they had a show of paintings, an invitational that was traditional, that went back to the turn of the century, and frankly if you turned up with an action painting, you were told to get lost, get out of there. If they were left on the premises of the museum, they could be vandalized. This was made clear to you. These older painters like Jack Tworkov, de Kooning, Mark Rothko, got out on the streets and picketed to make clear what was happening. They were unrelenting, would not allow our work in there. There were only 12 galleries that really attended to our work, and they were

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insecure with it. They thought, this is a phase, people are going to grow out of it. But, hell, this man has been doing this for years, and we'll give him a break. We'll have a show for him and keep him off the premises.

To illustrate the disrespect for painters I had a friend---the mother of Robert DeNiro (the second) there was a school for actors run by Elia Kazan called Method Acting, and she was the secretary. Robert (the artist, father of the actor) would go there to see his wife, though divorced, and being Italian he was really overwrought by this, they had a son. I picked up some friends who were doing method Acting, one of them being James Dean who was getting kicked around, because they thought he was imitating Marlon Brando. He was a vision in cowboy boots, black leather jacket, you know ordinary looking fellow. This will illustrate the lack of esteem for us.

There was a big battle in the Egan/Poindexter Gallery. Charlie Egan was really a great dealer who bought all these people when you talk about de Kooning, Franz Kline Call these people had a chance to show for the first time. Of course he was really a pain in the ass, he'd get drunk, he'd bed your models, always in a fistfight or a brawl. The son-of-a-bitch would tell you, I have more talent than you bunch of mothers, but he sold our paintings. This was a gallery despised by the other dealers. He was thrown out of the partnership with George Poindexter. He looked for money to support his painters he believed in, and Poindexter came out of the woodwork and said I'll give you money and he did, but there was a minor case of embezzlement by Charlie well, he kited a check. Poindexter is a somewhat explosive man, and he learned of the check kiting. It was \$70 piece of sculpture by Ruben Nakian. Charlie made a \$70 check into \$170. We (the artists) don't care, because he believes in us, this is what he has to

do.

I knew we had a lot of college painters who mercifully went back to teach or get married or commit suicide, and here were these two men, de Kooning and Kline, who I knew intimately. I knew they were going over to the Sydney Janis Gallery, which was an important gallery then. The Janis would handle works by Picasso, for instance. They were told to bring work over and schedule a show. These two had never been able to muster a one-man show. In the case of Franz Kline, his one-man show came at the age of 47, and in de Kooning's case at the age of 56. I might be off a year either way, but think about that. A show: you have to buy canvases, you have to room, you have to acquire space, it's very difficult for them to put all this together. There are kids here who feel they have a right to have a one-man show and they have a thesis show, I understand all that. It culminates studies, you see, but others go out into the real world. At that time, there were just 12 or 13, I never say 13, galleries. At some you had to have a homosexual agenda, at others you had to be left-wing and so forth. I spoke to de Kooning and Kline, who'd known me going back to '48. They'd helped me and I'd helped them. I'd really helped them more than they'd helped me.

I said, 'I know you're going over to Janis, could you take me with you and introduce me to Mr. Janis.' Now one guy's wearing a soft cap like a burglar would fancy, and a navy peacoat, and blue jeans streaked with paint. He looked like a bum. He always looked like a bum. Franz on the other hand was wearing sneakers with holes cut out to let out corns or carbuncles, and he's not a very prepossessing sight. I sensed they were reluctant to take me over there, but they said 'Ayeah, come with us.' And we're going over there, and we picked up this kid that we knew from Mrs. DeNiro (Admiral). James Dean had glommed on to us, so we were

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all there that day. I said, "Jimmy, we're heading over to C I think I've got a break." You know, this is my big day. So here are these three guys, one guy, James Dean, he looked like nothing. He looked like someone who comes in from the west on a Greyhound bus, gets knocked down, robbed, they wind up in the law courts or something. And the other guys looked like bums. I never thought about that, but we went into to gallery, and they were reluctant to introduce me to Mr. Janis. But finally they did. It was a shambles. James was leaning up against the wall, one foot up on the wall. I've seen later magazine photos of him doing that, but anyway, normally in a gallery, the painter will go into the office or inner sanctum of the guy who will represent him. There are other rules about not going to the gallery when your show is up on the walls. That's strictly adhered to, but you'll see violations of this as I move forward. The museums many have a policy of no living artist is allowed in; of course, they are frightened that an artist might arrive drunk, rebellious, vandalize his work, or raise hell. And this was their riposte to our demonstrations. Well, we're in this gallery and this guy comes out of the inner sanctum, and he knew about me, and he said, "Why do you hang around with people like this, with bums like this? You know Alfred, you should really become an actor. Look at how you speak and your appearance, how you dress."

I said "I'm dressed like this because I'm working for Oleg Cassini, and I can't walk in there looking like a bum. These are my work clothes. This evening I'll be just like these guys."

He said, "And who is this other bum you've brought in."

I said, "His name is James Dean, he's an actor, working out of the method studio."

So I thought I won't move over here. I'll have to go back to Poindexter. So then they came up with another show, with a new director. It was "Five Younger Americans", which

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meant that I had been downgraded that I'm now showing with some college students, people like that. I really felt profoundly bad about that, as I believed that this would take off. Time magazine always referred to us as hoodlums, bums, a new field for functional illiterates. There was a movie with Marlon Brando called The Wild One and AThe Ten Americans@ was called The Wild Ones. This is not the way to treat people.

Life Magazine decided they would put a stop to this tommyrot, we are going to trash them in a professional manner. The people all over this country look at our photographs, and we're going to do it with class. And for some reason, they fixated, of course, on Jackson Pollock, as a fellow who drips paint onto canvas. And people just loved his workCpeople in all walks of life. He [had] lived in Wyoming, and they wanted him to come back and run for the senate. Anyone who can hornswoggle a bunch of city slickers is what we want in Washington. And so on and so forth. And people started dripping paint, and they realized they were not coming up with these masterpieces, that they fell short. And there was a magic in his paintings. So this move to submerge us, just ended.

I was kept on at the Gallery has a bodyguard to George Poindexter, because poor Charlie had arrived drunk and demanded this and that, and I was the bouncer you might say, which never endeared me to my colleagues who all loved Charlie Egan. They really did, they loved that bastard. He was a sort of desperate, unorganized, virus that would come to our support. He really felt like a gangster and there=s a strange amalgam of artists and their spokesman would be poets. You know, just like a gangster needs a good lawyer we needed poets to speak up for us, to write our catalogs and things. I had Sherry Abel, sometimes Frank O=Hara, but he was a homosexual and there were homosexual dealers with homosexual artists, who I respect, but he

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was beholden to them. But a very kind, wonderful guy. Whenever I see the Status of Liberty, I see Frank O'Hara, as representing something iconic. Another good friend of all of us, in a landscape of disrespect, was John Button who worked at the Museum, and we could always get in free when John was working.

Another thing happened in a non-transparent way. Nelson Rockefeller had a hatred of the Mexican painters specifically because they had crucified, he felt, his father. He had a campaign for Governor, and George Poindexter loaned me to him as a bodyguard and I would appear on the street. That job lasted for two days because the methods used people guarding a political candidate are standard. They asked, 'what if someone took a swing at the Governor, what would you do Alfred?'

'I'd take a take a swing at the son-of-a-bitch and knock him down, that's my job, right?'

'No! You don't do that. And it's bad that you think that way.'

'So what the hell do I do?'

'Well, you have to block the punch, anticipate the punch, tread on the guy's toes, grab and break a finger or kick him in the balls, so that the press cannot see what's happening. He just falls into a sea of faces. Can't you *do* that!?''

I said, 'Jesus!'

'They're meeting tonight on the East Side, over on Tenth Avenue, and you once lived there, right? You know the people, Jews, Puerto Ricans and Italians. So you accompany the governor over there and we'll see how you do.'

So we were eating knishes and Puerto Rican Arroz con Pollo. And then borscht and pea

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soup, and it's a sickening experience for me and I came down with intestinal flu. I really had a great deal of respect for people in their political campaigning, and they felt I had committed a social error by taking a swing at a guy. And this would have been visible on camera and that was intolerable. I was told about this and kind of dismissed and sent back to George Poindexter.

Rockefeller remarked about our paintings: "You see he learned that George Poindexter had sent me over and he knew a little bit about me." He said, "You know I love your work, I love the works that these boys are doing because it can do us no harm." And "can do us no harm" is always something, you know when a powerful man says that, I think about it.

I remembered I had met him before. I would take the subway uptown and get off at the stop across from Rockefeller Center. And there was Nelson Rockefeller in a phone booth. And I went to the booth and accosted him and said, "I'm a painter and why can't I show at the Museum?" He had installed himself on the Board of the MOMA. I said, "I don't seem to have a chance in this city to show." I had nothing to complain about: "I told you about people not having a one-man show until approaching their 60's. But then I was in this show at the theological seminary, which he *owned*; his daddy had founded it. So your bases are not covered when you accost somebody in this way. The thing I remember about this was that he asked me for money, because he was putting dimes and quarters into this phone, and I was with a friend who was sort of laggardly, Gandy Brody, I think he was hungover, and he came staggering across the street. And I said to him, "I have Nelson Rockefeller in this phone booth, and do you have any money?" It was our strategy to go to the Museum on a Saturday to pick up girls, and we never had any money, and John Button. Or Frank O'Hara would let us in, and they'd give us a ticket to go to the exclusive restaurant and bar on the third or fourth floor. We'd go in there and

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we=d order a dubonnet, and on an empty stomach it=s disastrous, but we=d tolerate that, and we=d be drunk, you know, the world belonged to us. The dubonnet a nominal dollar and a quarter each and that=s about what we had. We=d have about \$5 each, and here we are coughing up money for one of the world=s richest men. So anyway he consumed about all of our dubonnet money, and then he came out of the phone booth and sprinted into the building. I mean he *ran* in there, we couldn=t find him. So then I became critical of my own behavior, particularly when I learned that in his vast world, I had a temporary place on a wall. No complaints.

Another favorite place, we had avant garde artists who would teach at the New School for Social Research. It had non-academic teachers, people like Max Lerner who was a communist and a super-liberal I suppose. There was talk that the New School was closing down because of financial difficulties. This was really compounded by Max Lerner, with the support of Meyer Shapiro, and dozens of other people from the faculty who were on strike for more money. And the answer of the school was *Aw* we have no money , we are closing the New School. *@* A mysterious benefactor arrived and asked, *Aw* what do they want? *@*

Aw Well, they want an extra five dollars a week. They want more than a winter semester, they want a year-long contract. We can=t afford this tommyrot. *@*

And the benefactor said, *Aw* Give them what they want. What do you need to operate this building? *@* They said we need all sorts of things, and the mysterious benefactor gave them all sorts of money, and then he made a demand. He said, *Aw* All this I=ll give you, if you cover up that fucking mural by Diego Rivera in the cafeteria, which depicts my grandfather as eating what appear to be peanuts, but are Mexican peasants. *@* And that was Nelson Rockefeller on one of his

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secretive forays.

Also it began a war against those who survived the political order of things that represented Social Realism in painting, and its left-wing aspect which was not dictated by the United States or New York, but by Moscow which a very influential messenger named Pablo Picasso.

After he was Governor, there was a fire at the MOMA, and he arrived in a fireman=s cap and went up a ladder. And he had a choice of rescuing two paintings: one was by Ensor *Christ Entering Brussels*, from that series; the other was a bunch of figures copulating on the landscape by Jan Muller, a New York Expressionist painter, a product of the Hofmann school and the Hansa Gallery. Rockefeller willfully ignored the fate of the Ensor, which was ruined, and rescued the friggin= painting by this kid. He didn=t like Ensor=s attitude toward the establishment, they were all pigs and industrialist tycoons, people festering...