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Alfred Skondovitch meeting, 5/17/00 - Tape 3

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

With Sharon & Patti

To get mixed up with avant garde people is like a commitment to what is radical, what is insecure, where the only permanent structure is change, in your lives. It was really the offspring of these people, and there was a certain glamour to being here illegally, you see. It was a plus for you. Then I remember when Franz Kline had his first show when he was 47, in the 1950s. It's hard to describe the success, when you feel an upswelling in support of a painter. It's not universal, it doesn't affect the institutions in a country, you are immediately at odds with all these people. And to the people who are embattled, you are embraced, particularly in my situation. And you have allies in the most unlikely places. I remember the first one-man show for Franz Kline and artists came there from all over the western world. They came on tramp steamers, ships---they were in the country legally; they got here just to see this show and many of them went back home. They were permitted to sleep in the Gallery. There was a circular staircase that went up to the gallery, and a little 3-man elevator---Egan Gallery at that time. I don't know when Charlie got kicked out; it was still the Egan Gallery. People came to see these new works; how the hell did they hear about this in places like Copenhagen, or Japan. Then I heard about it in London; they can do these things in painting.

How can I describe it: to the people the downfall of the communists regimes that controlled the lives of hundreds of millions of people, to me was signaled by defiant, long before the Wall came down. Almost a decade before this happened, they placed paintings in Gorky Park on the recreation ground, and they were all done in the style of Pollock, and de Kooning and Franz Kline. These were bitterly and obsessively attacked by the Communists. The secret police brought in tractors and ground them up into the mud. I'm thinking of what President

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Kennedy said, when he awarded Medals of Freedom to de Kooning, Kline, and Rothko. The investiture was conducted by Lyndon Baines Johnson because of the assassination. Kennedy said that as long as we are a free people, we shall admire their works. But the Russians were not a free people, but they put up our works and they could not crush the spirit of the paintings. Just as Andre Malraux tried to crush our movement, or Aldous Huxley—this wasn't worthy of them, to encourage the vandalism of our paintings. Mr. Malraux said something that was like a cliché. He said, this is an idea whose time has come (referring to the American boys), which I've heard before a thousand times. This is a very unoriginal thing was said by this original man. Which meant that his job in the French cabinet was over. The idea that Malraux, who wrote *Voices of Silence*, a wonderful book about art; the man who discovered Angkor Wat from the air, which we now take for granted. He was a fighter pilot during the Spanish Republican war, and flying around, and he saw it. This would be in the mid-30. A man full of piss and vinegar was used as an attack dog by the French Ministry—only Charles de Gaulle could pull a stunt like that, tell a guy that he should do it for *vive la patrie*.

[how did you learn about all this; when was this?]

I lived in Paris, and I met all sorts of people, worked there. I was there when I finally got my green card and my British passport, and went there. Around 59 or 60.

[so this was long after these events had taken place, the attack dogs..]

Yeah, I never saw or could join the passage of my works, you see. I don't know what happened to *Ten Americans*. They showed it in New York and Staten Island, then elements went abroad, I don't know what countries.

[so some of what you knew about the attacks on American art..]

We were being attacked, kicked around in our own country, equated with hooligan on motorbikes who had taken over a town and raped everybody. We are like that? No we weren't like that. Also learned about it through critics in the papers.

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Living here I've been cut off from things. The incident of the toilet seat, I told you about that, and the interest in it that engulfed about 13 historians who really should have been spending their time in a more productive manner. My daughter sent me an article sent me an article from the Times, and we wrote to the fellow who wrote the article. But in New York you were aware of these attacks. When I came to Alaska, I was able to travel freely. I'd go down to Big Sur, where I met Giles Greville Healy, who was related to Andre Malraux. So once again I posed singular questions to Andre Malraux through Giles Healy, and through him I received the letter of introduction to Picasso. This was in Big Sur.

I think when you are part of a movement then history takes care of you, but then you still wonder why people bludgeoned you over the head. Something succeeded, and it's great, but why did these people carry on this way? And one by one, I realized why. These countries were desperate for American money, had populations who were starving, they needed money. Some people came along called the Beatles, they were presented with medals, Order of the British Empire, can rightly be called "sir". They brought money to England, like \$600 million a year. The French had a market here that had a value of around \$1.4 billion a year.

And yet, going back to the turn of the century, to the exhibition at the Armory in New York where we learned about Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, then the official art in this country which you have to contend with if you do avant garde work had embraced the British and the German School of art and Greek sculpture. You go to the home state of Abraham Lincoln and you'll see an official portrait of Abraham Lincoln in a Greek toga. These were the predominant schools: classic, the English going back to the portraits of George Washington, and so forth, all done in the British School. At the turn of the century, squabbles in the art world where provenance was an issue or esthetics were an issue would all wind up in a British courthouse. Whistler is an American. What's he doing in a British court demanding damages for a painting which some guy said looks like hawk swill. And he won a farthing, the lowest

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coin of the realm. But got his costs paid. And the quality and adjudication of a painting done within the British school would bring forth R.A.'s, members of the Royal Academy.

The art of Rothko, when an art dealer stole all of them, his life's work, and smuggled them out into other countries to take them to England. **(After he died?)** After he died. He set up a probate thing, and there were painters on it, some of them I know, some of them I don't want to know, can't think of their names... But they were on this probate board, and they had agreed to this, that the paintings belonged to the President of Marlborough Gallery in New York, a thief. And the paintings were in a trans-shipment warehouse in Canada ready for shipment abroad. The thing that stopped this was a lawsuit by his 17 year old daughter. She demanded that the paintings be returned, that they belonged to her. And they became involved in a battle called the "Sixty-Four Million Dollar Question". And she won the custody of all his art work. There were people in the art business who were trying to curry favor with Marlborough and the other galleries, and guys I'm really ashamed of that testified against this girl. "She wasn't interested in the paintings so why should we give her all these paintings, blah blah blah." It's horseshit, nonsense.

But this is something some decades before would have been settled in a British Court, with people asserting, "yes, these are done within the style of the Royal Academy". So these great cases now take place here, because the experts are here, not some creepy guy, an action banker in the dock, speaking up to the issue.

(Well I thought Rothko was an American when he died, wasn't he, and his daughter was living here?)

Yes, the family had lived in Seattle.

(And you think that in earlier times....?)

If these were paintings done under the aegis or specifications of the Royal Academy, a British Court...an American painter named Whistler—

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(But he lived in England all his adult life; he never came back to the U.S.)

Well, that's where he made a living but we loved his paintings.

(But he was an expatriate really—)

But this is a most notable case, you see. Whistler's Mother, I mean it's unbelievable that he's trying to show this quality and provenance in a British Court. I could just see Jackson Pollock setting up shop in a Court of Law and explaining his work to Dutch people, or the British or the Germans. Impossible. But in New York there would be support for him. I can see all the experts with, people with x-rays, infrared readings, palimpsests, and so on and so forth.

Going back to the turn of the century, all of the money that went to American artists amounted to no more than just less than \$100 million a year. But to the French alone, they took more than 10 times that, over a billion dollars. And the British and the French, too, made lots of money. When the American school of painting came about and studied the wherewithal, you couldn't study this phenomenon there and people came to study here in the United States. It was a school. And during the boom the sales of American paintings in Manhattan alone where there were 12 galleries that catered to us, and getting into them was very precarious. You had to have baggage.... The gross sales of the efforts of something like 1200 men and women exceeded \$2 billion in Manhattan alone. I remember there were four print galleries, two in New York, one in Chicago, one in Los Angeles, selling prints. Now the galleries that sell prints, about 10 years ago I think there were about 36,000. We're talking about gross sales; now the gross sales of the garment industry, which affects the attention of 440,000, and I've been there. I survived the unions, somewhat reluctantly at first. Their gross sales are \$1.2 billion. They produce clothing right to the middle west; they have a little bit of an argument with sportswear coordinates in California---- But a handful of people have doubled their gross sales. That's what I mean. Perhaps it's not apropos to talk about print galleries, some massed produced but that's all a spinoff.

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Well, it was a disaster for the French. They wanted to revive their sales here. It's why Malraux was hired as a yard dog.

To go into the home of Picasso just outside of Vallauris, it was a 3-mile walk and I'd walk there. There was a little post house next to a gate and in that little house was a little circle of tables. And it was piled with letters and the letters spilled down onto the floor. So in this little guardhouse, you walked over letters. The guardian of the gate was the Spanish poet and companion of Picasso, Jaime something or other. I remember my letter was just one of those thousands. Walking through this darkened post house, I'm trampling on letters from the Metropolitan Museum, people like that. Jaime de Savartes. He fled the Civil War in Spain with Picasso. The first time I saw him was in a barbershop in Vallauris, and the Master had had a haircut that morning and I'd missed him. But here was this little guy and he had a little dustpan and a brush and he was gathering up the hair of Picasso and putting it in a plastic bag. And then they ran a vacuum cleaner over this and the barber said, "He always does that because of the evil eye." Someone might get hold of one of Pablo's hairs and make his life miserable or even kill him.

I went to Picasso's house on successive days and I'd leave the house where I lived, a dorm in Vallauris and walk to the Villa California. The first time I went there, people were picketing his house. These were German artists or students and I kind of remonstrated with them, and then had to walk back to Vallauris. The next time I went, there were huge black limousines and people with guns, automatic weapons, French Police and Russian Police officers, which seemed strange. Russian bodyguards which is kind of unusual; you know, they're not in Russia. That's why I was told to get away, and trooped back to Vallauris. I went again the following day and it was quiet and I banged on the little gatehouse door. The slot opened and these crazy eyes of Jaime de Savartes looked out.

He says, "What do you want?"

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I said, "I want to see the Master and I've come a long way."

He said, "Well, he's a busy man."

I said, "I was in Rome and I had an audience with the Pope."

He said, "Well, that's his job. It's not Picasso's job to leave his work." And he closed the slot. I banged again. I thought, well, I've walked 24 miles there and back, so I muttered some obscenities and turned about and began walking away from the house.

Then I heard hollering and shouting at me and it was Jaime. And he said, "Have you pissed?"

I didn't know what to say. You know, in God's name! Maybe I don't speak the language or something. And I said "No."

He says, "Well then come here." And he had a Spanish boda, a little wine thing, and he said, "Here drink this, drink all of it. Follow me."

And I followed him into this little house and here's this table with this mound of letters and we're walking over letters from God knows, and we come out into the courtyard. And there was the Maestro, and he was doing something very ancient, very time-honored. He was doing a series of sculptures *L'homme du mouton*, a shepherd and a lamb. He had just received a shipment of one of these, and he was urinating over it. Now, when you get the thing straight from the forge, straight from casting, urine creates really a good patina on brass or bronze or whatever it was.

So I was directed to piss over the lamb actually, but this was rudely disturbed by Jacqueline Gilot who was in the jeep with four children. And my first thought was My God what are children doing here, and why is this woman shouting at me? She's insisting that I leave and Jaime says, "You'd better go now, and thank you." And so I went back to Vallauris.

That was very hurtful, but many years later when Lady Bullard and Sir Edwin came here to conduct a seminar at the UAF Geophysical Institute, she had two girlfriends. One was

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Jacqueline Gilot and one was the wife of the author of *The Ascent of Man*, and I knew both of these ladies. Well, I can't say I knew Jacqueline Gilot except she told me to get the hell out. But I knew the other lady as someone who came from my district of Lithuania to Bow. And Lady Bullock says I want you to talk to these ladies and tell them to come up here. Tell them how nice the weather is in June up here, beautiful. And they put me on the phone and I thought Jacqueline this is where you get it.

And I said, "How do you feel about when you ran me off out of Via California and I was doing the traditional thing for sculpture, directed to do this by the Maestro."

And she said, "I'm very sorry, I won't do it again." But now she's married to Dr. Jonas Salk. And the other lady who I remember as Sandra, said, "I can't come, Alfred. I remember you. I can't come because my daughter's getting married tomorrow in Phoenix and I have to be there, believe me."

I said, "I believe you." So that story played out up here under the aegis of Lady Bullard. I was introduced to Sir Edwin at the penthouse at the Geophysical--he's a Nobel Laureate for tectonic plate theory--and whilst I was there at this lunch, they had some sort of hot table setup. Dr. Kienle, the late Dr. Kienle, and Dr. Turner were there, and there was an earthquake. And I remember Turner and Kienle falling to their knees and doing calculations with slipsticks and slide rules and stuff like that. They placed the location of the earthquake, and I said, "It's Badger Road." And it was 3 point and it was the first earthquake that Sir Edwin had ever experienced, and he was an expert on earthquakes. He was so happy, and I just ate my English muffins, and said I'd leave well enough alone and get the hell out of there. He was here for one year, and Lady Ursula did some sketches of our cache. She's the lady who went to the old Artworks on College Road and saw something recent of mine, and said, "I've seen work before." She had. At the Whitechapel Gallery in London. I was just a student at the time, and she recognized the style after all these years. So I enrolled her in the Herride sketch group that had been going on

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for years. And then they came back the following year, his talks were very popular. She died, and I think he died. Everyone's dying. Good grief.

We often think of Picasso as a doctrinaire communist. Of course this supported Soviet policies. But when the actor Gary Cooper visited him, Cooper had received an award at the Cannes Film Festival for the movie *High Noon* and he took his six-gun to Picasso and wanted a painting in exchange for the gun he wore in the movie. To everyone's amazement, Picasso went bananas and threw him out, and said, "I don't want your gun. You are imperialists who stole the soil of Spain. California belongs to the people of Spain. And he ran his ass off. I often think about that. That's sort of an antediluvian, historical thing. How can you believe in empires and that California belongs to you and yet be a communist?"

(He apparently didn't worry about contradictions all that much?)

No I don't think so. And yet the evil eye, every hair would be picked up by Jaime. A very real fear he had of the evil eye.