

**Interview with Alfred Skondovitch on 5/24/2000 - Tape #5
Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK**

(Re wearing underwear)

I was about 15 or 16, spent the night at a home of a friend, and I stripped off, and he was horrified, even had pajamas for me. He said, "Don't you wear underwear?" I said, "No." So he insisted that I put on underwear. This was my first singlet, my first jockey shorts. In the country [earlier when evacuated] I wore long johns. But when I went away from home I kind of dispensed with that as a nuisance. These things were soiled, throw them. Besides it was the custom not to wear underwear.

[Now Alfred returns to end of Tape 4 subject]

One Thanksgiving—there were always colleagues that we went to school with, and the women would prepare—the girls would get together and cook a turkey and things like that. And there were painters from Pennsylvania, there were guys from Arizona, and really the Thanksgiving dinners were very splendiferous. And also Christmas as they were cobbled together, once again with a turkey and stuff like that. There was an illustrator who was studying at Parsons School, whose name was Newton, and poor Newton was really a troublesome kind of fellow who would tend to destroy any happiness that abounded. And we threw him out. We said, we've had enough of this and we threw poor Newton out of the loft on Second Avenue—the one across from the Cooper Union.

(Who else living with you?)

There was Arthur Teagar, his brother Bobby, there were sundry girls living in there, I think Bobby Beecham was there. There were painters on the G.I. Bill of Rights and they had

money and they could live very splendidly. Anyway, there was an assortment of people living in these condemned buildings.

So we threw Newton out and then we felt bad about this. People were saying, “God, it’s Christmas and we threw that poor bastard out of here.” And we thought let’s get him back. So I remember fanning out across Cooper Union Square, this is a wide square in the West Village across from the Wanamaker’s Store, which I don’t think exists any longer, and we couldn’t find this fellow. I really suspect that he was hiding in a doorway just to ruin our Christmas. So we couldn’t find Newton and we returned and then thought the hell with this and we just packed food to take to our homes or lofts. It was a struggle to live, and yet everyone was in the same boat, and

(Couldn’t understand the next part, about Alfred’s means of support—muffled)

... a union scale job in Manhattan was worth something. Then there were medicals, had their own hospital and stuff like this. So I was doing all right. But I envied these other people who could paint all the time, even though I knew they had it rough. And I envied the guys who would come in from New Jersey who had jobs there or had family—I kind of looked at them with a jaundiced eye. Alan Kaprow would come in from New Jersey, but he was teaching at Princeton I think.

The one loft we were in, the one I found near the Brooklyn Bridge, at night the shadows of the bridge would illumine the walls, and it was just a wonderful sight. I’m aware of paintings that were done of the bridge. Frank Stella made an industry out of it, but de Kooning would look at this. Finally we had to leave that building. I think the roof caved in and a wall fell away, it was a disaster, the fire engines came.

(de Kooning was with you in that loft?)

Yes, he was there checking that out, and he seemed to enjoy it very much. He had painted there.

There are two things that I remember about that loft that we lived in temporarily. There was a little restaurant in the corner of the building, one of these restaurants with a hot table, like a cafeteria, you get a plate and you'd sit down and eat. On Second Avenue we had one of these. And they had wine and the food was delectable in that area, wonderful, ethnic, Polish and Jewish. And the loft was kind of suffused with these fragrances. And also we'd turn out the lights and see the bridge, and dusk would bring the shadows of the bridge into the loft. There's always something magical about a shadow, it creates sculpture that is thrown up against the wall.

And I went to visit de Kooning some years later on Long Island, when the money was pouring in to him. There was this architect who was designing a home for him. This was in the Hamptons area. The architect said, "We've got to *finish* this, Bill. You understand? We want to finish this, and this is simple and I can't come out here over and over."

I had to walk there, a number of miles from the train. I was hungry, and I thought, why the hell don't you invite me to eat something, let's eat, when will the invitation come? And all the time there was the fragrance of food which aggravated my condition. And not only that, at the end of a long day the sun was setting, and he had some beams that were cantilevered out for further construction, and there were cross beams all ready to accept a roof or wall. At dusk these things were illumined into the room just like that magic place where we stayed. And then he said, "Are you hungry?" And the lady left who was dressed in white, she looked like a nurse and she wasn't, she was a cook. And we went downstairs, and there was a hot table of food. So for hundreds of thousands of dollars or maybe a million he had recreated this little cafe near Delancy in that old loft that we got run out of. And I knew there was no way the architect would

finish that. He never understood what the hell was going on, and de Kooning had him working on another side of the building.

(Was he still living with Elaine at that point, or were they separated?)

I don't remember seeing her on that visit. I wanted to go up there again when I was visiting New York, I was visiting Budd Hopkins, and he said, "I wouldn't go out there, you can get your throat cut." He meant that things had changed—de Kooning had a daughter, born out of wedlock.

When we think of art and these gestural painters, we think of Franz Kline, we think of Willem de Kooning. It's always like Gallagher and Sheen, the music hall act. And I really had to report to Elizabeth, Franz Kline's wife, about whether he was involved with another woman.

I said no. But I said, "The boys are interested in two fine young ladies. They are not as beautiful as you are. And they are the Ward Sisters (I don't remember their names) who are identical twins."

So Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning were going with these women who looked exactly alike. We discovered that de Kooning was not married to Elaine de Kooning. The license wasn't signed, there was a brouhaha by the family. She didn't have any rights except maybe under common law in New York, so she lost out. Bill became very dysfunctional, as I have said. Also Franz really loved Elizabeth, and he felt guilty about bringing her here to this country, and her going kind of crazy, you know—delusions of grandeur and stuff like that. She was institutionalized for a long period. I remember she loved to have her hair combed when the sun would come in. I remember her cocking her head and Franz combing her hair, and having this rainbow of color in this lady's hair.

She felt it a good idea that Franz should have somebody and the Ward sister seemed like the deal since de Kooning was going with one of the Ward sisters. So that came about. I think she feared one woman, but she somehow felt this diffused by their being twins, you know, absurd.

When de Kooning and Kline rented a summer home at Ridgelyhampton, there was a singular happening. They knew that de Kooning couldn't travel abroad. I don't know why—his papers were screwed up. We had the same lawyer but I moved forward on this and finally got legalized. I don't think he ever was legalized, although he had a whole rationale for this sort of thing, which I don't want to go into—an anarchistic point of view of government.

We got the house for them. There were a number of people who worked on this. There was a German architect—what's his name—he was also an occupant of this house, a sweet little guy. The men moved into the house, and Elaine de Kooning drove them there and her idea was that she would put on a show as his wife. So he had this farmhouse, a commodious house, a working house. We as you know painted the toilet [another story]. And he arranged to have his mother brought to the United States.

This is his first successful year. He sold about fifteen thousand dollars worth of paintings, that's all. Here's a guy, white-haired, in his sixties by now. This is his first successful year. Down the road a ways at Springs was Jackson Pollock, and he had sold the mural for eighteen thousand dollars and by now was in Court with Peggy Guggenheim who claimed that painting belonged to her. Because her name was on the lease for his house, and this was a condition: that anything he painted there belonged to her. So he won in this matter. When you see pictures of Jackson Pollock working out at Springs, there are horses, they had these eastern hemlock barns with knots missing from the wood and where the wood had shrunk up you can see

the sky. This is where he worked, this is not just picturesque. This was a house that I think Peggy bought for about \$4500. Springs was a little unincorporated community that was a satellite to some of these other towns on Long Island. It came about as a location for servants who worked for the rich folk in the mansions; this would be where they would live. So the artists glommed onto that. Motherwell dragged a Quonset hut there and lived in Springs, Barney Rossett of Grove Press moved there, and Captain Rufus Zogbaum helped in every way possible. Because he was there they all learned to paint springs. His son was a very fair sculptor. And David Smith, the sculptor, was also a resident of Springs and worked there.

And I had the task of running Pollock off, for some reason he was scared of me. He was drunk. He would come by the house in Springs in Ridgehampton, he would sideswipe cars, wreck furniture. When he was drunk he was terrible. I know that his first success was just bludgeoned by that terrible woman, Peggy, and he went on a rampage. It was Lee Krasner who went to court and fought for that money. Life magazine decided that something should be done about this oddball bunch, and they fixated on Pollock. What he did seemed so absurd that it was worthy of caricature. They didn't want to hear anything about the other stuff, Pollock was the one. And there was no gainsaying the fact that it started a groundswell of affection for this cowboy or neo-cowboy hornswoggling these people in New York. And there were machines that you could buy at fairs and in novelty shops where you poured paint in a container and you turned the thing around and you created a Jackson Pollock. And his work came into demand because of this orchestrated insult, and the people in Cody, Wyoming, wanted him back to run for the Senate. They said anyone who could hornswoggle a bunch of New Yorkers is worthy of Stuart Hart Benton, the only one they could compare him to. They wanted him back. Not that he ever lived there for long.

(Wasn't Benton a painter?)

Yeah, but his brother was Senator Benton.

There was a groundswell of affection for this guy Pollock. Also when he was sober, he was really magical. Some people said, referring to his work, "This is against nature." And Pollock's answer was, "*I am Nature.*" He was just great, but when he was drunk he was really an ugly son-of-a-bitch. He would bully young painters, really bad news.

So this strange scene occurs: poor Elizabeth is still institutionalized, and de Kooning at long last brings his mother, with great pride, to America. Nothing prepared anyone for the sight of that lady. She looked like some black figure from a painting by Rembrandt. Her clothes were black, and she was tough, with huge hands. This was a tough lady. She was a prostitute most of her life, and like most successful prostitutes became the owner of a Rotterdam tavern, a waterside tavern. And if someone would get wise-ass with her, or sailor, she'd grab the son-of-a-bitch and throw him right into the canal. She was tough with a square head. So this woman comes unto the farmhouse at Ridgehampton, a place with an outhouse with three holes. Elaine is putting on a show as the loving wife, doing things she hasn't done in years like trying to bake cookies which were a disaster. And meanwhile, of course, Kline is ensconced with one of the Ward girls, and the other Ward gal, who loved de Kooning—she did—would hover around.

On the second day, in appraising Elaine de Kooning, his mother said—the Ward girl turned up with cookies or something like that, to say hello—and this old whore grabbed the ass of the Ward and said, "This is what you *need*, to give me a *son!* I need a son, a boy, a child, you understand, you're wasting your life! You're destroying mine! Look this woman can give you a baby." And then turning to Elaine, she said, "This woman is *barren*. She will never give you a baby."

God. It was like something out of another world. Anyway, there were tears and uproar over this. And then we all had a picnic. We all went to this public beach and there was barbecue stand and stuff like that, and they found this huge throne-like chair for his mother. God, I'll never forget this sight. There was a moon over the sea and her son, her 62 or 64-year-old baby, had his head in her lap and she was stroking his hair. And he promised that he would produce a child, and yes, that woman, he'll pursue her. After all I'm an artist—trust me, his mother said. So it was legal for him to do this.

There was a huge hurricane which destroyed all the summer's work in the barn. They had paintings, papers in the barn, and these were strewn all over the landscape. And they had these municipal workers and military, who would see these abstract paintings and throw them into the garbage. The following year this stuff was selling for tens of thousands of dollars, then for millions of dollars. I'll never forget the sacks of garbage in the municipal trucks and going to the landfill. But I had some other problems on my mind, we were alive, that was the main thing.

And I had to report back to Elizabeth Kline about what's going on here. I said, "Well, nothing much really, though I think that Bill is going to marry the Ward girl, and Franz is going with the other lady. She is not as beautiful as you are, believe me. She's a nice girl, you'd love her."

De Kooning never married the Ward girl that he went with, and she bore him a daughter, who was the spittin' image of his mother. I've never seen her, just seen photographs of her. I'm thinking of how we lived in condemned buildings, and explaining that. And this young lady (de Kooning's daughter) comes before the court and says I can't possibly live on \$8000 a month. She is single, she's in a motorcycle gang, and the gang was accused of smuggling dope, and they became ensconced in the studios of de Kooning out on Long Island. And if you wanted a de

Kooning cheap, these boys would deliver it on a motorbike. And they would get quite angry and ugly with other people who had a legitimate reason for being there. This young lady was arrested for taking narcotics, and her defense council, a lawyer who had helped artists, I think he helped me once on an immigration problem, said the reason for this, your honor, is that her father is a wealthy artist. The value of his paintings is in the millions of dollars, and this young lady is struggling along on a pitiful \$8000 a month. So the court agreed to give her \$25,000 a month and she promised to clear up her act. That's how justice works.

(How did you find out about all this?)

I read this, and I saw a photograph of her once in a leather jacket, and I thought my God, there's the square head of [de Kooning's] mother, and a black jacket. There is nothing of the Ward girl or him, just this dynamic block of wood. I wanted to go out there and see her and see Bill, but at this time something very disquieting happened. We got a letter asking for contributions to bury Elaine de Kooning. Ten years ago, and I thought my God, couldn't the estate do something. But no, the estate didn't do anything.

De Kooning had kind of advanced to a state of senility or Alzheimer's. He had no memory or recollection of anything. And his paintings were strictly linear. There were none of these emotional serrations or accidents or unconscious acts. I swear to God the last paintings were in sort of gentle pinks, reds, blacks and I always think of the Brooklyn Bridge, the lights that came through. Of course the paintings were attacked as being done by an Alzheimer's person. But they're really pure, he could still do this, put on his bib and tucker and go out there and paint, but this time with a great sense of peace and happy memories.

People came to Greenwich Village from all over the world. If you were an artist, that's where you could survive and that's where you could study. I lived on Thompson Street.

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I had a friend, Chuck Mongreviti, whose father was the head of the Art Department at Columbia. He's the one who said that Picasso and Matisse had discovered everything and it was our job to consolidate their discoveries, and not mess around, and people in the Village are just idiots. Chuck didn't agree with his father, of course. He was an engineer, and was the prime contractor for Orgone boxes. And he said if you're not doing anything, if you're getting fed up with going out to the garment industry, you could help me with these Orgone boxes. It was like building an outhouse, a very simple structure. They were laid in a certain way, with metal outside and organic inside like wood or excelsior, and a little seat in there just lacking a hole that would turn it into an outhouse. And people would happily sit in there, and I thought this was the funniest thing. But it was dangerous because all these things were forbidden and if you had a book by Wilhelm Reich, under the law at that time, the FBI could enter your premises and seize that book and seize you. Reich was a Federal prisoner, I think he died in prison. I think he had a laboratory, not in upstate New York, but in New Hampshire, in blueberry country. The farmers there adored him, they loved him. They needed rain and they'd go and talk to Wilhelm Reich and he'd give them rain. Stuff like that.

He had a defense against flying saucers. I joined a flying saucer group who were looking out for flying saucers. I was kicked out because they all swore they saw a flying saucer. I was intoxicated or drunk or asleep and I said no I didn't see anything, so out I went.

And also you could make these Orgone boxes and possibly be arrested, and I thought that was very thrilling. So I made Orgone boxes. Then Chuck ran into some other guy who had fled some major company, like Hughes, with a design for a potentiometer. These are very primitive things, he said, and at the dawning of the atomic age we need a potentiometer that can give you a reading to a quarter of a million rather than one in fifty. So he was on the run from his company

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who had private investigators searching for him. So it was logical that he would wind up in the Village, and he had set up a lathe in a bathroom of a cold water flat. He was building this super instrument. All in the same building all these dramas were going on. I helped Chuck and Ed Weigner, a physicist who had fled and the FBI were now looking for him because this was a component of atomic bombs.

I thought, I better get out of this area said I to myself, in much the same way as I said I've got to leave England. When I moved into tenth street, because de Kooning said there's a place down below, you'd like it. He lived on the first floor, we were in the basement: myself and a fellow named Gandy Brody, and occasionally Robert de Niro. A great disaster had befallen him when they kicked him out of the condemned building, which is now the Law School for NYU. So he would occasionally drift in. Meanwhile, I was intrigued by the building and the people there, everyone had this ragged Bohemian patina, as though they had been pissed upon like *L'homme du Mouton*. But there was a girl who didn't seem part of this, and I thought my God who is this beauty. And she was Miss Potato Queen of Iowa, this was a big thing, and I thought my God, this is America and they don't have princes, they have these, these are the princesses of America, splendid idea. And she had a boyfriend who was very troubled and he didn't have much to say to anyone. I didn't know what they hell they were doing. *What* are you doing in the *Village*? And the girl was encouraging to her man and she was with him all the time. He wore a collar and tie at all times.

Then I went to an opening at Poindexter and we were visited by Anan Lal and his wife. This was the Indian Ambassador, and under this policy of going to any show by a dominion painter, here I am on the run from immigration and didn't really welcome this interest. But I met this lady and she invited me to have dinner at the embassy. And I went back to the little building

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on Tenth Street and I told Gandy. He said, "Can I go?" And I said, "No she just invited me, man." I told de Kooning about this and somehow, the beautiful young lady learned about this in the course of things. She told her husband about it. Meanwhile everyone was worried about me: you don't have clothes, but I did have clothing and people coming up with ties and shirts, and I had to polish my shoes. I had to watch it because I am going to eat with these people. And Anan Lal was respected, I think he wrote *The Charterhouse at Parma*, a classic novel of transformation of India and her people. The truth is, I don't know if he was Indian or the Pakistani Ambassador. Also they thought that I shouldn't go in the subway. The embassy was in the seventies and that I should go by taxi. So they all coughed up money for me to go uptown in a taxi. Here I am preening myself in front of a mirror, and I go out to the taxi and this young man comes running down and grabs me, pulls me away from the taxi. And this is his story.

He says, "My name is Philo T. Farnsworth. My father invented television, and what did he get for this? Nothing! *Nothing!* He works and earns \$15000 a year." Which seemed like a generous sum of money 50 years ago. He said, "I'm told you're going to see the Indian Ambassador. Tell him I have an atom bomb the size of a soccer ball. I have an atom for him. It's in the building here. *Tell him!*" And shoves me back in the cab. And that's the Village. His name was Philo T. Farnsworth, I read up about this. I thought that son-of-a-bitch has got a little atom bomb, in that fucking building? I'm getting out of here! But how I've a mind to think that by going from Tenth Street to Fifteenth, I'd be safe.

I think that in my peripheral vision was a guy named Lee Salisbury whose daddy owned a bookstore on the other side of Tenth Street. I never saw him. There was another painter in the building named McAbee. He was very busy, very industrious. God how I envied him, I thought so young and to be so disciplined, none of this all night parties and stuff like that. And then a

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couple years went by and I asked about him, and they said, oh he died. So this young guy of 26 died, leaving nothing really.

So I think of Philo T. Farnsworth and his goddam bomb and I wondered what happened. Chasing after the cab and saying the Secretary of State will give them a license, they are an allied nation and stuff like that. All it needs is a license, and I say yes, okay. And I didn't go back to the building because of this bloody maniac. I thought am I being had? But then I went to the library and read about his daddy, and his daddy was the first one to come forth with a coherent signal. None of this cathode ray stuff, and engineers perusing what had happened. He was inspired by a plowed field, said the elder Farnsworth, and his company was making atom bombs and his son glommed onto one.