

Interview with Alfred on 6/7/00, Tape #9.

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

(Following paragraph is from the end of Tape 8, for continuity)

I was accused of getting into this mess, but all of them voted that I would go there. Anyway, we had a guy to run it, but Genovese had his own ideas of how to run it, so we were out. Just like that. We were out; told to stay away. Furthermore they felt too that my living in the Village wasn't very safe with Mr. Genovese taking a view of me. So I stayed the hell away from MacDougal Street.

This was in 1949-51.

Yes, I worked as a tailor, yes, I worked at an athletic club teaching boxing in New York, and yes, I worked on this idiot's lathe making a potentiometer. And all these orgone boxes for Chuck Mangravite, all this going on.

I ran into a fellow named Bobby Teagher, and he remembered one night I was thrown out of my abode. I had an easel with little wheels on it, and in this structure of this easel, I had a sleeping bag, and all my paint accoutrements. Bobby said, "What's the matter?" And I said, "I'm looking for a place in which to live." And I found a place in which to live.

And the funny thing was, harking back to de Niro, who helped in the Genovese matter, when he got through sobbing and weeping that I would wind up in the East River in a teabag. I stayed with him. They helped me haul my easel up there and I worked there. Then I checked the refrigerator; either he would get food or I would have to get food. There was no food in the refrigerator: Robert de Niro. But then I was out a couple of days later and I found a place on

TAPE 9. Page 2 of 13

15th Street which is just outside the Village. It was a studio building with Blume, that wonderful realist painter, Peter Blume. I'm not sure of his first name. He was like Ben Shahn, and the social realists. But he had something else, another dimension to his work. My roommate there was Elliot Bud Hopkins. He was a student of Meyer Schapiro, and then he took over managing the Poindexter Gallery when they ousted Charlie Egan.

You find in that business, and it is a business, people that you have comfort with. In that case it would be someone extreme. This would be like a convict escaping Sing Sing and finding a neighborhood that would accept him. His persona being complicated by the fact that he might be a raging sexual serial killer. But I had attributes and I needed a place of shelter, and the Village was it. And it was not difficult for me to find or latch on to, or be part of, a group who were trying something new. With an underlay of expatriate painters of a high magnitude who lived in their midst and inspired them, took them beyond parochialism. I'm thinking of Chagall, I'm thinking of Marcel Duchamp, I'm thinking of the two German painters, but I can't think of his name, he went down to Taos, New Mexico, sculptural work.... I knew his son who lived in New York. Anyway, they were a great inspiration to us.

And there was something in the air: we shall do what we like. We will not have people telling us how to put a painting together. There was an attitude that to move foreword, you must destroy Buddha. That was a prevailing attitude.

Regarding Miles Davis and that little hole-in-the-wall place that we all volunteered to clear out for him; on his first performance, in his own place, with his own band, with his friends, the son-of-a-bitch turned his back on us. People make a statement and don't try to disinter it, don't waste time. And that's what Miles Davis did, then I think he went to Spain and places like that.

TAPE 9. Page 3 of 13

It was rough on jazz musicians. We had befriended Joe Albany. I think that you find a group and you cannot articulate what the hell they are doing. I think the fame of Robert Motherwell was he was able to articulate what he was doing, and give to people the cause raison of what we were doing. And we looked to poets to interpret what we did, so there was this relationship. So that's how you wind up with a group of people who find one another and who exhibit together and then will finally break into a gallery. I don't know whether this is something that has changed—I don't believe so. You have to come up with something new. You have to kill Buddha, you see. Then you want a sensational show that will bring in a group of people, said this British group of artists, so they come up with a show with that title.

The original Poindexter Gallery was on 38th Street across from the Comedy Club Theatre, but he was willing, was George Dillon, to look at new paintings and he made a stand for them. **Then Rockefeller became interested and secretly supported the Expressionists.** And there would always be some eccentric like that, so you'd swarm into that gallery. This is where you would be welcome, and the word would spread like wild fire. To the guys who painted and having an exhibit didn't assuage their hunger. I mean you could have an exhibit but the money didn't come rolling in.

I showed with Charlie Egan, and he was the one who discovered these people and encouraged them. We talk about Poindexter and these other people, but it was really Charlie Egan. He could see the potential and the stirring that was being made. Some measure had to be taken of these people by law enforcement, by the universities, by this or by that. There was a battle which came acropper, it didn't work, and Charlie needed money to present these people in the conventional way. And Poindexter came along to fund the gallery which Charlie would run. And, alas, it was inevitable that they wouldn't get on, and Poindexter kicked him out. He kicked

TAPE 9. Page 4 of 13

him out from that business, from all that he discovered. He had him selling outside of Modern Art. I ran into him one day accidentally. I was visiting the Castelli Gallery which used to be on 74th Street and knocked on the wrong door, and poor Charlie Egan opened it. I glanced around and it was a vernisage prive, it was a private showing, and there were Rembrandt prints on the walls. He was a great art dealer. He loved painters and painters loved him. I feel terrible about the role I played. He kited a check, and as the gallery moved forward under the aegis of George Poindexter, he championed that gallery, and resources would come. **And then Charlie would turn up, drunk, and create a situation at openings, you know. So I was given the task of getting him out of the building and into a cab. Sometimes he'd really be obstreperous in an Irish way and I'd have to throw him out, but I don't want to really talk about it.** **Very sympathetic towards his colleagues and peers and the stressful situations they were involved in. He would do what needed to be done to protect them but hated every second of it.**

Poindexter had two charming daughters, Joan and Leslie. George was very interested in stereophonic equipment, which at that time did not exist except in theories the way computers were in garages once upon a time. And you'd look at these discombobulated things and take at their word what these machines could do from geeky-looking seventeen-year-olds.

Poindexter said, "Do you know of anyone, Alfred, who could set up a stereo system for me?" And this was a complicated thing to do. You'd have to buy the speakers one place and all the other equipment in another. A long time ago a stereo set was a conglomeration of wires that would never fit into anyone's environment. But people took a sadistic pride in them. Anyway the fellow's name was LeFleur and he was somewhat of a poet, but deeply interested in electronics. And he vowed that he could fix up George.

TAPE 9. Page 5 of 13

He set up the stereo in George's house. I think he converted the roof into a speaker system, but George just loved this sort of thing. It drove the daughters and his wife away from the house in which they lived. But he became enamored of LeFleur and finally he gave LeFleur advice on the first of these conglomerates that were bringing forth the beginning of computers. Overnight young LeFleur made a fortune. Some time later, he was on a boat in the Caribbean visiting the island of St. Lucia, where George bought land, and he spoke to the captain, and he said, "What time is it?" And the fellow replied it's three o'clock or four o'clock. And Louis jumped overboard and killed himself that way.

So I was blamed for this disaster. And also he married one of the Poindexter girls, which was also a disaster, and abandoned his own wife and three children in the process. So you can get into a gallery, and through these events which have nothing to do with you, you become a persona non grata. Because I brought LeFleur into their home to build a goddam stereo set; but really this is like harnessing a geek, nowadays. This was the only fellow I knew who could do it, and certainly they enjoyed his ministrations. Always feeling blamed

Of course, in later years I went down to St. Lucia because it became a regular place where people could prepare for shows in the Poindexter Gallery in New York. I went there when Nell Blaine put a show together, and saw her do a cover for Reader's Digest. That seemed amazing to me. But I went down there and didn't put a show together and became involved in the politics of the island. So I didn't have the show. I'm thinking about what happened to me on St. Lucia. I think there was a British painter, whose name I can't remember, who lives there on Christmas Island. It's like something out of Robinson Crusoe, really very beautiful. But I never got along with the people there and had to leave. But that's me, and these other people went there and it worked, so there "must be something wrong with me."

TAPE 9. Page 6 of 13

Patti and I went there about 36 years ago, in the Village, and visited the places where I used to hang out. But it had changed, it felt very violent. It was not the Village where I had lived and felt so safe. One day, for instance, I'd just gotten back from Provincetown, and there were two other guys who were students. One was from Colorado, Charles Armstrong Liddler; the other was a New York boy, George Capsis. Chuck went on to become head of the art department at the University of Arizona. It was in Provincetown, which was like the real world, he would opine that when he gets to New York, the first thing he wants to do is visit Mark Rothko. And I said, I wouldn't do that if I were you. I said Rothko hates everybody. He's finished with art, just stay the hell away from him. Trust me. Anyway he found an apartment on 57th Street. Here's a guy who's new in the city—of course, going out to the country was always a destruction. You'd lose the place where you were staying, you'd team up with new people. And this guy found an apartment just like that. Also, one night we were invited to an opening at the Guggenheim. Chuck had a car, a huge Nash Rambler. It was like an inverted bathtub. We used to park it next to the Koskuisko Bridge, which is the bridge that comes into 57th Street in East New York. We all went out, going to this party, and the car was gone.

And Chuck said, "My God, they've stolen my car!"

And I said, "Look at these other vehicles here, there's a Rolls Royce, Mercedes, and Cadillacs, largely Cadillacs. Why would anyone want to steal this wreck that we drove up to Provincetown?"

So in high dudgeon, he went to the police station. And I said, "This is a mistake, Chuck. I'd stay away from the cops if I were you."

And he said, "No. I'm gonna find out who stole my car."

TAPE 9. Page 7 of 13

So we got into this police station in the precinct, and it's like what you see in the movies. There's a sergeant who's adjudicating justice with two little lights on either side of him. Chuck approached the guy at this podium and said, "Someone stole my car."

The fellow said, "What's your name. Your car was impounded, son, and there's \$800 worth of tickets on it." He looked at Chuck and he said, "Where're you from?"

Chuck said, "I'm from Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and my dad is the judge there. Judge Armstrong-Littler."

And the cop said, "Really. Steamboat Springs." He thought this was very amusing. But the sergeant anted up a collection to pay for the parking tickets. Eight hundred dollars 50 years ago was like what, four thousand bucks now. We couldn't afford that; the car wasn't worth it. And they raised money in the station house for this kid from Steamboat Springs. I couldn't believe it. If it was me or George Capcis—well George Capcis would have gotten the boot.

So we get our car back and we went to this opening; I think it was at the old Guggenheim. This is when Jackson Pollock chose this social gathering to piss in the fireplace. And was given the old heave-ho, which really amused old man Guggenheim. I think I had a little too much to drink at this affair. I was there with Budd Hopkins and of course my roommates and was introduced to old man Guggenheim. He was such a little man, little, little fellow, and I said, "Why don't we take him home with us. I'll grab him and we'll put him on the mantle shelf." So they threw me out. My own friends said you can't do that, don't fuck around like that in here. You're not Jackson Pollock, you know. That's his garbage and he was forewarned about Jackson, but you'll wind up in trouble. So they took me out.

He had the sweetness of the saint, did Jackson Pollock. I observed him painting once, for just a few minutes, and I thought my being here might upset the spirit of his work and I've got to

get out. He seemed to glide. There was a delicacy about him. You wondered if his feet were actually on the ground. This choreography which I witnessed. He had a wonderful little studio that was near this restaurant in the Village on 8th Street. A wonderful little restaurant with a name like Luchows, but it wasn't that, another old old restaurant, but the food was wonderful. We could never afford to eat there. In the old days, the carriage trade would arrive and they had a horse delivery, and he was ensconced in the stable with this restaurant, was Jackson Pollock. We weren't used to his modus vivendi, his operation, though we knew that he put paintings down on the floor. We went to see him because he had a foam rubber mattress that he wanted to get rid of. Because he wasn't going to sleep in this place now he had a wife. And he needed to floor space; his easel was the floor.

Chuck was kind of timorous about things and I banged on the door. And Jackson said, "Okay, come on in, come on in." I told him it was about the foam rubber mattress. So this stable door opened out, to let the horse out. And the next thing I know—and I used to jump and leap and leap into rooms; I see this in my son—and I leapt into this room and my sneakered foot was on a painting. I had sense enough not to bring down the other foot.

And I thought *Jesus Christ what have I done?* I appreciated Jackson then, you see, and I thought *this is a masterpiece and how could I do something like this?*

But Jackson was very calm. He said, "Can you jump to where I am?"

And I said, "I can jump forward, yeah."

He said, "Then do that. You're on one foot now. Can you jump back to the door where Chuck can grab you? He'll grab you or I'll grab you over here."

I said, "I'll jump forward." So I jumped; I made a good jump off one foot and cleared the canvas. So I have a footprint in a painting by Jackson Pollock. These sorts of things happened, you see, because of the proximity of everyone and everything.

Across the way was a little art store supplying tourists. The fellow had visited Paris and had a wonderful bargain that we appreciated. It was drawings by Rodin. In France, when an artist dies—this sounds like a great idea—the government will take art works. In this country they estimate the fair trade value of the paintings and demand money up front. That isn't really very good; I don't want to go into horror stories. But the bad thing about the French is that they will say, for instance in the case of Rodin and *The Thinker*, they'll take the tax in sculpture. But the drawings they're not interested in. So they throw them in waste baskets, seeing the artist has died and the family no longer exist. Keck was the name of this fellow. So he visited the studio of Rodin and there were all these drawings over the floor. He patiently picked them up. Five hundred, and brought them home. You could easily buy them. He'd sell them for ten or twenty dollars each.

Around the same time, Monet died. The tax people came and they took the paintings that represented an aesthetic value, not fair trade value, but to the French the aesthetic value. They took the paintings in lieu of tax, but the huge paintings, the last ones of his life, they knocked aside. And there's a reason for this. Because in the last days of his life, he said I want you to become totally engulfed in the painting. There is an observer's position that you must take seven feet from the painting so that your peripheral vision is taken up with the painting and you become engulfed in the water lilies. But these had no aesthetic value to the tax people and they trod on them, they damaged them. They sheltered lesser works from the rain until the trucks came to take away what they thought had tax value.

Once again there were some American students that he had, that had worked with him, salvaged these great paintings and brought them to America. So you deal with philistines in every system. Those are interesting stories. Many are just horror stories of income tax—the hell with it, you know.

(Did you have a philosophy or idea of what you wanted your art to be? Did you feel you were in an art movement?)

I think whether you like it or not, as disparate as the different concepts can be, you wind up in a movement, because there is a uniform hostility to the newness of things. I think of Joseph Cornell who was part of this movement, but pretty much a loner and eccentric. It reminds me of when I saw the movie with the Bates Motel and the psychopath. He came out of some old house of the family had in nearby New Jersey and would journey into Manhattan. He looked like someone who would molest children and apparently his life ended on that note. He was in love with some 13-year-old teenager who was robbing him of his boxes. I can go on endlessly about people who were in the movement. But there were people who couldn't transcend this influence and emerge with their own thing.

I think that Pollock's great influence was paintings by Hart Benton. Impending storm, and people as colossi wielding tractors and so forth. But there is a compositional impact to the paintings of Hart Benton. His composition was very powerful and overwhelming. That is you could turn the painting over and still observe the greatness in composition. Pollock studied with him. But you see the influence in many of his compositions of Thomas Hart Benton. That there has to be a new kind of space. Pollock transcended that master with something that was uniquely his own.

TAPE 9. Page 11 of 13

There are people who never transcended this. There were people who went kind of crazy in trying to find themselves—killed themselves.

Painting was something I had to do whether I liked it or not. And I resented having to do this. And as luck would have it, I could do something that people would enjoy. I loved that. It's not really a philosophy; it's like the psychopath who has to do what he has to do. I had to do it. I understood the operating of success in the movement, and when those boys took me over to Janis. I knew something that they didn't know: that they were now embarking on a gravy train that would bring them millions of dollars. Of course within a couple of years of making money for the first time in his life, Kline got killed. The same is true of how Pollock handled his success. He got killed. De Kooning, the only thing that saved his life was that he was dysfunctional, he wound up with Alzheimer's. But I've always recognized that he was a person with that kind of mental dysfunction. But once again, kind of a magical creature, was de Kooning, too. A discussion with de Kooning, particularly if he was confronted by young people, would be the Katzenjammer Kids. He would sound like the captain in that cartoon, with this Dutch accent, and there were all these little painters like the Katzenjammer Kids. Sometimes he would say, "What am I gonna talk about tonight when I meet these people? Why do we have to talk and defend ourselves?"

I said, "The best thing you can do is study Kierkegaard. Just remember one line and take it to a cocktail party or what have you, and the people will slide off your back. You have an accent and it makes everything excusable. Remember Kierkegaard and you'll be on your way."

TAPE 9. Page 12 of 13

Typical of the Village was living in a building that was three stories high. This guy Philo T. Farnsworth with his atom bomb. My idea was not to go back to the building because what if that bomb blows up. I'll be safe living on 15th street? What kind of brain did I have?

But then I met a young lady that was called U.C. I thought this is a plain girl, and really very nice and she's honest. Meanwhile I was being pursued by another girl who had this big black vehicle; I think it was a Plymouth. She was dreadfully rich, from Philadelphia. And a good painter too. Phyllis Yampolski was her name. She wound up organizing action scenes or Happenings for the city of "New York, New York". She had this job organizing these affairs at Central Park. I thought she's very rich because she has a big car.

And U.C. was poor, plain, and she had a little car. And I liked her. And U.C. stood for Union Carbide which her Daddy owned a huge portion of. And the little car was a Porsche. So what you had in my case was untrammelled ignorance. I'm embarrassed at how I carried on.

And yet there was Chuck who charmed everybody. Chuck, going back to Nickerson Lane, that little street in Provincetown where we studied with Hofmann. There was a Widow Nickerson. That was her name. And the Widow Nickerson would not allow any students in her place. And every year without fail, students would knock on the Widow's door during the period of the few weeks when they were looking for places to stay. She would position herself in a rocking chair on her porch in this clapboard house, and you would walk into the house as I did once upon a time.

She said, "No boys. I'm not having anyone in that shed yonder." And we'd leave. Everyone would try this.

But one day Chuck Littler walked in there. I said, "Forget about that. She won't let us in, she's never done that."

She says, "Oohh, yes, you can stay there." So we moved into the barn. We thought well the Widow Nickerson doesn't have to know we're slipping over the back fence. How explain his total naivete with the New York Police and the Widow Nickers who opened her heart. We wondered if there was anything she needed from the shack, but she said no. There was a trunk in there and we opened it. And we looked at it and it seemed to that her lover, the guy she was engaged to, there were pictures of her with him. He was a sailor, a fisherman, and he died at sea. Is she a widow if her fiancé dies? That was the mystery of the Widow Nickerson and of course we stayed there that year and the year after. And she knew that we were all staying there and it cost it five dollars a month or something like that.