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Interview with William S. Wilson, 2012

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following transcript is the result of a recorded interview with William S. Wilson in 2012 conducted by Jonathan D. Katz.

Interview

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JONATHAN D. KATZ: So now we're recording, Bill.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And I am speaking with Bill Wilson, and I thought we'd begin, if it's okay with you, with just, sort of, your memories of your mother.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [They laugh.] Jonathan.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Order it as ever you—however you want.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: My mother was from the earliest days determined to cover surfaces. That is we lived in a bungalow in a, sort of, working-class community, and she painted the outside of the house, she painted the inside of the house, she painted me for comic purposes. And she had been born into an extremely poor family, her father died when she was only four or five years old, and there was a family, a Roman Catholic family, working-class when they had employment with no thought about art. But she said that from the age of five, she wanted to be an artist, but there was no way economically or educationally to do that. She dropped out of high school in the third year when she was ninth—whatever ninth grade is, that may not be third year. She dropped out of high school because she had to go to work to make to make money, and she never went back to an institutional school but—and so poor, what was she to do?

What she did, age 20, she used to go to a public swimming pool. My father, uh, a little bit older, maybe half a year older than her, was a lifeguard in the swimming pool. She was determined to excel and so she tried to become a champion swimmer, and at least she made herself—she always made herself known. And she made herself known to this young man who was of a family, which was probably poorer, but in the background just his mother and father, that situation because of a divorce, there was no money, but there was a larger, prosperous family, and she—he was planning to become a lawyer. She wisely, as a way out of several predicaments, married him, age 20, he was 21, and the first thing they did was buy a house. She had saved money and had a down payment on an actual house on some lot, not real land, which in that social-economic class, you either lived in a row house or you lived in a—you could live in a house, a cottage on its own property. And so this was part of the upward aspirations socially, economically, which were understood by other people as her attempt to rise in the middle class.

And so she did rise in the middle class, had a daughter, six years later had me, April 7, 1932. Hoover was the president, and, um, the Depression did not debilitate my father. That is when he went to—after high school, he went to law school at night, he didn't go to college, and after the law school, he was taken into his uncle's law firm, and the uncle appropriately was avuncular and kept him going through the Depression until he established his own practice. And so my mother is living not a normal bourgeoisie [ph] life because she was extraordinary always and nonconformist.

When I would go to school, the boys would yell at me, "Your mother is a nudist." I didn't know what a nudist was, but I fought for the honor of the family, an honor about which she would not have cared. Now, my mother did not—this is working class, she did not do her own laundry, and on the street that we lived on, she might as well have been a flaming whore because women did the laundry. And there were other—she didn't—she had given up the Roman Catholic Church at the age of 15, taken her mother and her sister out of the church, and so there she was, secular becoming pretty prosperous, which was—she was so

dissociated from other women in that neighborhood. And she would be seen in her shorts and halter painting the house. That's something was not done.

[00:05:24]

Now within all of that, there's aesthetic expression except that we had a—still have a cousin, Robert Wilson [ph] who introduced her to Stravinsky, so when I was child, there was Stravinsky records in the house. And he introduced her to books, which were, uh, the mode at that time so that she was getting an instruction to a higher level of aesthetics than the working class—just I won't describe the pictures that my grandmother had, sentimental reconstructions of prince and princess in a garden kind of things.

After 10 years, that is when I was 10 years old, we moved to a much higher social class, economic class development where my mother—and I can only see this in retrospect. My sister was getting older, and at 17 or 18, leaves home to go into nurse's training, that is she lived in Baltimore at the hospital. My mother took that to mean empty nest and that she could do what she had wanted to do. Now, we all think that she's not content with, but we think that her aspirations are American middle-class operations to become upper middle class. But my sister leaving home and I'm younger, but I will go to college someday, so she kind of moved that ahead and said, "Oh, the children are gone, I have to fill my life with something, what am I going to do? Oh—" And from—literally from matchbook covers or from advertisements in magazines, she began the study of the history of art, that is the academic history of art by correspondence courses at the University of Chicago, and she began correspondence courses in studio art.

I have the archives, which are extraordinary because I both sides of them, and in the history of feminism, it should be noted that she had, by mail, teachers especially in the studio course who would dictate a two-page letter about her exercises. And in terms of Chicago and the history of art where she, by the way, was working with, sort of, a three-by-four-inch reproduction of the *Assumption of the Virgin* by Raphael, and she didn't like it, she didn't approve of it, [they laugh] and so. It was in sepia by the way. And so fortunate was she that—and I have the letter—she got a letter from the—it's a graduate student reading lessons for, what, five dollars or something. And she got a letter, and it said, "If you cannot afford the second semester, send your lessons anyway, and I will handle them, signed Peter Selz."

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, my God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And so she was studying the history of art, she was study—doing studio classes, and there in that suburban development, with had—which had deed to the house—I'm shocked that my father would buy there. The deed of course precluded sale to a Jew or a black or anything.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sure.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: That was all they could—they didn't know what was coming along. So she's taking those classes, but the only—first the painting—the work that she's doing is painting trays. You could buy in a craft shop a tray, sometimes they had pattern on them, and sometimes you bought the pattern. She was painting the trays and selling them to these neighboring women for $5, $10 dollars so that she paid for the paint because she always wanted her work to be self-supporting. Then we went to Provincetown one summer, oh, and now, it seems providential that we went to—well, we were touring New England and we went—the whole family and my future brother-in-law, and somehow, we stayed in Provincetown. And from wherever, I don't know, she produced the kind of commercial board—I don't think what's it's called—it's not canvas, it's canvas board, and she somehow painted a view of Provincetown, which was painted by 5000 other people. And that was the first time I was aware that she put paint on canvas as an aesthetic object, and it's as crude as one might—as one imagined.

[00:10:35]

But she continued with those lessons, and the advantage for me, to bring me into my own story, is that from—my mother was a very difficult person, and certainly, no mother in any standard book of how to be a mother to put that mildly. My sister simply never had a mother and in terms of emotions, and I was a neglected child and have all kinds of entertaining grievances about my early days. However, when I was about 15, the books that are into coming the house are books about art, and I'm reading the same books that she's reading,

and therefore, we had something to talk about and could talk about that. And then we—so we had a relation mediated by visual art, and that worked better than most mediations like that.

When in—after living in that house for—I—from 1942 to 1948, and the war had been going on, we moved to a 10-acre kind of gentleman's farm out in Dulaney Valley on a hill with an eight-mile view of the valley with lakes, which were the reservoir for Baltimore. And when we got out there—and there was a swimming pool, 30 feet x 60 feet that in those days were Olympic size. When we moved out there, by the time, my mother was painting a lot and has completed her studies, has read and continues to read everything that she can get by books by mail, and she began to teach local women, many of them farm women, the wife of our plumber, and she taught quite wisely. She brought these women who were from 50, somewhere, and they were filling their—their empty nest. They were filling their lives after the children had left, and she brought them in, I would say, as folds [ph]. Pretty simple, red, yellow, blue, green, not worrying about a lot of subtlety, not worrying about drawing, splash and impact. And the women who had the courage for that did some pretty sensational paintings. Red, yellow, blue, what can go wrong with that?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And one of them won a prize in the Baltimore Museum of Art, which they had an annual local painter's, Maryland painters' show. And she was teaching and as life throws such curves, her mother, as a widow with three children and one of them died—as a window was supported**.** In the morning a man with a car came along with fabric, and he picked up what she had sewn the day before in her house. He picked up—they were, what I was told was, shoulder pads. My mother would sit under the sewing machine, cutting apart these sewing pads—the shoulder pads and putting them into a box. He would pick up his boxes, he would leave the fabric for the next day, and this was from the Graif [ph] clothing manufacturing company. Forty years passed and down in the valley in the big, old estate house lives Irving Graif [ph] Jr., the son of the Irving Graif of the Graif clothing manufacturing company. And he and his wife came to my mother for painting lessons in some strange novelistic continuity.

And to confess my sins, when I—the chauffer, by the way, used to pick up my mother. She—they paid her five dollars a lesson, that's what she—all she would take, and their chauffer would—they're only two 2 miles away—would pick her up and then would take her home. But one night I went down to get her, and with all the tact of a smart college student walked in, looked at the paintings on one side, the painting on the other side, and I said, "It's clear to see that these paintings are by Mrs. Graif and these things are by Mr. Graif." And, of course, I had it exactly opposite. The timid, pale paintings with the—no confidence in the handling were by Mr. Graif and the strong paintings were by his wife, second wife, former secretary, who had pizazz and all kinds of marvelous courage. My mother continued with her—I'm taking a swallow of coffee—continued working on her painting, which at that point was representational.

[00:15:56]

In the autumn of 1956, and we all later thought it was 1955. In the autumn of 1956 in New York, my great teacher said, "Oh—" took me on a bus, I think two buses and up six or seven flights for me to meet someone. He never said much, so I didn't know where we were, what we were doing, who this person was. And he took me into something I have never seen, a cold-water flat, a tiny apartment with enamel over the bathtub, which was the dining room table, and the toilet was down the hall. I had not known—I knew people lived in other ways; I did not know that at that time, that anybody lived under those circumstances. It was all very neat.

And this turned out to be Ray Johnson. I told my mother about this meeting, and within two to three weeks, she had seen in the *Village Voice*, a paper that he had printed with an image of a chair, and she sent him something like $10 and said, "If this is enough, please send me one of those prints." And Ray did that and so began an independent friendship with Ray Johnson, so independent that for instance, he visited and stayed with my mother and father many times. He and Richard Lippold, he and Suzi Gablik, and I wouldn't don't even know. I would be at Yale or someplace; I wouldn't even know about those visits, and so. And for me, it's important that people understand that I had a friendship with Ray, separately my mother had a friendship with Ray, which sometimes overlapped, but they were independently

grounded in different experiences. And Ray regarded her as an artist and talked to her as an artist, and he took her seriously as a person, as an artist and thereby, helped her to come into focus.

I've described we all thought, oh, in the gradual—as the lower middle class rises into the middle class, we all thought that my mother's ambitions were within that range. No, she had been waiting to make her move in relation to art, to become an artist. And as it turns out, she was 20 when she married, 21 when she had my sister, so when my sister was leaving home at 17, whatever, I can't add things, but she was only about 40, 41 when she became a grandmother. And she had freed herself not to become—join the African violets ladies' club but to make her move independent of the family into the realms of art, which have ambivalent relations with family, children, and grandchildren. She performed later as a grandmother and was exciting as a grandmother and all that, but she was never the *Saturday Evening Post* cover of grandmother, Thanksgiving kind of theme. And she slowly—more than she realized, she withdrew from—she withdrew from her marriage. I've written an essay, I think it's online at Warholstars, oh, that my mother left my father for art. Art is a jealous mistress or a jealous lover I should say, and she more and more yielded to her demon lover art and so often didn't dress, put on a house coat and went to her studio. The compulsions and obsessions about the studio took place over everything.

[00:20:06]

Oh dear, now see, you're making me remember things. She so wanted, kind of, clear of mind. She still felt obliged to provide dinner for my father when he came home from work, but what she would do, which was beyond absurd, she would get up and maybe cooked peas then and cooked a piece of chicken then so that she had taken care of that. And when my father came home, she reheated, she reheated these poor, old peas and things, but she had to do that so that she could think and feel and have a clear mind. She never knew the extent to which she neglected her husband. She had been obliged by the conventions of the time of her marriage and, God knows, in her family where none of the women worked. An in-law woman had—as a young woman had worked at Macy's, and that was regarded as eccentric. It was just the wildest thing in the world that she had worked in a—in a store or had a job and a salary and all of that.

My mother didn't know how far she withdrew from the obligations that she had signed on to, and as time went along, a couple things were happening: Through Ray Johnson, she became associated with the people that Ray knew. Ray would send his friends and he would—he connected her with people in New York, and he got her into shows in New York. And in the process, she seized—she had been painting from her understanding of Cézanne, which was a perfectly rational kind of Alfred Barr or conventional understanding of Cézanne, but she did it in her own intense, berserk way. That is when she was still gardening in order to keep my father happy, she gardened according to what she understood reading Loran and other people on Cézanne. She gardened in huge chrysanthemum beds, which people would drive 20 miles to see. She would she plant orange or yellow in the front and—I never get this right. No, she'd plant blue in the front and orange and yellow in the back because in her Cézanne mode, the blue—help me here—the blue receded and the yellow and orange advanced—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Advanced—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —and so they approached one plane. So you're looking at this flatbed of chrysanthemums. But when she looked at it, she saw the dynamism, the push and the pull of planes, which she thought were like the planes in Cézanne. I don't know about that part of it, but the point is she that was trying to apply rules, laws, styles from the visual arts in her—in her daily life. But that daily life was retracting as she just lost interest and couldn't even fake—couldn't even fake the interest. She became so—she was so intense in ways that it's hard to convey because I don't meet people like her. When she got—the principles of design became for her principles of life with a moral force, so it was wrong to do certain things, which bad design was immoral design. When she would visit Lowell Nesbitt's house, and Lowell's mother was somewhere past. She invented the conventions that the middle class—that the middle class one conforms to. And so where is a bureau? I'm trying to say the word. May I say this in my behalf? That June 10, 1993, I had a major stroke, and I get words confused, and I have lost a lot of words.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Of course.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And this is not fair to take advantage of a senile, old man.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Who is remarkably articulate.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: My—anyway, this thing in the dining room that holds plates and all that, it's got a top and so symmetrically, there are candlesticks—there's a vase in the middle, candlestick at both ends. Now that is wrong according to my mother, and by wrong, she meant wrong. And so visiting poor Mrs. Nesbitt, she would move the candlesticks, put them together as a pair, and move the vase to the other end and go on her way feeling that truth and justice had prevailed, so—Now, I'm not sure where I am in the years except that we're living there seven or eight miles above Towson. She has these complicated New York connections through Ray Johnson.

[00:25:46]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And let me just ask, Ray was the first then professional artist that she had known?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Well she had—she knew a couple of—from Maryland, she knew three interesting—one of them a man named Norman Pearl was—would have resurrected Ang [ph] or—oh, he—his—he was retro in every possible way and opposed to the prior hundred years of art. So Norman was—had great enthusiasm and he was a robust, a great, big guy wandering around with his poor, frail wife. I mean she's—anybody seemed frail next to Norman. And he would come, and at least it was a discussion with Norman because Cézanne was not the hero, Cézanne was the villain of his story.

There was a framer in Baltimore and much collected by a man who thought that he was the new van Gogh because he had—it's so awful. He was born with some kind of deformed ear, and this wealthy man literally felt that this guy was going to be the next great painter. He was rather timid, but he would visit my mother who paid him, and he would do a crit, and these were perfectly conventional. What it amounted to was conversation about art. She lived alone in the country, my father was not about to talk about the painting much and so when Ralph [ph] would come out, it was stimulating to her. And he—this man who's a long story, which I would go to jail for telling probably. [They laugh.] I knew truths about that man, which the family did not want to know. Let me get back on my track. He bought something like 250 of Ralph's paintings, which is a wonderful thing to do, kept this guy going. He made his living framing and doing these timid little paintings, and then he tried to leave them to the Baltimore museum, and I haven't found out how that turned out because Adelyn Breeskin was the head of the museum. She had enough sense, she didn't get anything after 1850, but she had enough sense to know that other people did.

Anyway, there was a complicated scene in Baltimore—I'll come back that in a moment—because there was a wonderful, wonderful man who lived in Pennsylvania. He had a designer or commercial artist who invented Bessie at the Borden Decal knows—somebody at the Borden Decal—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, Bessie I think.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Whatever it is.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And annually, he brought a van load. In his old age, or older years, he was teaching local guys how to paint to fill their retirement, and he would fill his van with these wonderful people and bring them down to visit my mother. And they would go out down to our other house on Tilghman Island. And he was—he had pizzaz, he was extremely funny, his name was Charlie Carlson, he had invented a kind of sculptural, whimsical bird that he did. It was not Brancusi's bird; it was a silly kind of very amusing bird. He didn't regard that as his art. It was better than his art because he didn't regard it as his art. His art was old, watercolor technique, perfectly competent, and useful to learn to do. He was very stimulating to my mother and so there were these three.

In the meantime, so she's out of Baltimore and doesn't drive because when I was about four, there was an automobile accident with her driving and so being an absolutist, she absolutely never drove again, instead of working that out.

Baltimore had many, many painters in it.

[00:30:01]

I think Joan Snyder at some point moved to Baltimore, but there were many, many local artists. The Baltimore Museum of Art seem to have assumed the defensive posture against local art. They wanted to be international and not local, so they did a once-a-year Maryland artist show to show up the Maryland artists who were always trying to donate their own paintings to the museum. So they loudly proclaimed they couldn't accept art from the—[laughs] I'm laughing—from the artists. The Baltimore Museum was a mess because of Adelyn Breeskin. She did not like the Cone Collection, she didn't want the Cone Collection, but the directors and there were people around who were wiser. Adelaide was lovely, but lovely was not the point, and there were advisors who directed the people, smarter than she was. However, she did add to the museum the ugliest addition. It was to hold the Cone Collection, and strangely, it had—the wall came up from the bottom, down from the top and then there was a gap, and the gap was where you were supposed to put the hangers for a painting. And so this vertical line, emphatic black vertical line, went through, made a subjective black line through every painting. I went to the opening of that and didn't think but was horrified, and of course, the local newspaper wrote about it very politely. Eventually, they got rid of that arrangement.

Adelaide by the way, a—providentially a collection of primitive art was given to the Baltimore Museum, and there was a Polynesian anyway, Southeast Asian Island, a male figure with an erection. And Adelyn Breeskin had a grass skirt made and put on—and put on that figure. And that will give you some idea of the Baltimore Museum of Art at that time before wiser heads prevailed and before the brilliant Brenda Richardson came in as a curator. The—let me get off on that—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Well, let me ask you—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: I'm curious about when your mother moved away from Provincetown landscapes to what would become—and by the way, we should say because we have not yet named your mother that your mother is May Wilson.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, okay, well, you fill in.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And—[coughs] excuse me—at what point did she move from competent Provincetown to her characteristic style?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes. I think meeting Ray Johnson and some of his friends and some others of my friends, I think was the catalyst that there's a real world out there different from what she had learned in her correspondence classes, which were wonderfully conservative because they were quite correct in everything they—in almost everything that they taught.

I would say that in 1958 began a transition. As she told the story, which took on a little bit mythic dimensions, she had very long hair, she never cut her hair, so every morning, there was a combing of the hair. She would stand in front of the easel—there were easels in those days—and comb long this long hair and up with a handful of hair. And so according to the legend, one morning, she stood there with a handful of hair, looked at the wet painting on the easel in front of her, and reached forward, and smashed the hair into the wet paint. And the boldness of that gesture seems exactly what she would have done. She was not—I don't know where she got her courage of gesture. I think in a parallel, I think [inaudible] the time not having had a book education from the beginning when she began on her own reading, and she read Marx and she read George Bernard Shaw's sexualism and women, all those things. She from the beginning underlined and gouged and wrote in the books in a way that I still am timid about because it's a book. And I don't know where she got that she didn't have the kind of mystical sense of sacred, holy, anything else. I'm not very clear about that, but that was typical of her gestures. And she didn't always stop to find out what she was doing.

[00:35:00]

When we were about to remove from the house in Baltimore, Stanwood Avenue, she decided to paint the kitchen to make the house more saleable. And it said something about boiled

linseed oil, so she got linseed oil, and she put it on the stove to boil it, and set the house on fire. [They laugh.] And there's—if you're not thinking art, there's a problem, but if you're thinking art, she's got the person—she's got what it takes. And so by in—somewhere in '58, and we have documents and archives, she smashes the hair on to—and it would've been a smash—on to that canvas and then gradually, she is adding things that just happened to be around in the studio, and it's a big place, and we've got outbuildings filled with junk. And so she's doing that informally and trying to figure out what she's doing and writing desperately to me about—I'm usually at Yale in those days—about that. And then—I just lost the thread.

She's—oh, for I don't know how long, she is adding objects to canvas, what would've been a painting. Then, those objects come down off the wall and become freestanding, three-dimensional, quasi-sculptural objects. As she develops this and becomes obsessed because she only understood or practiced obsessions, the painting just entirely falls away. And so there she is for instance using an old shoe, doing something to the old shoe. Then wonderfully, friends, visitors, family saw that she was using discarded objects and so a woman friend instead of throwing away a pair of shoes, which she had been sentimental about and had paid too much for, would bring the shoes to May Wilson and lightbulbs and anything that someone was throwing out.

Lowell Nesbit who's very important in her story sympathized and helped her, and he would bring her objects. He brought her dozens of his friends and what happened became—and she's in the meantime very seriously studying Buddhism, studying and practicing Zen. That is in her own way which beyond suburban, provincial, out in the country with no actual teacher but in her own way, which she's entitled to do, and it's an American Zen, which is sort of easy—easier than—it's Suzuki Zen which Berlin Zen, it's Chicago Zen, it's not Tokyo Zen.

In any event, gradually over some period of months, she is working with objects, which are gifts to her, of disused objects, which her friends have saved. People would keep a shopping bag, instead of throwing that old toaster away, put it in the shopping bag, and then a visit to May Wilson seemed indicated and so the studio was filling up with stuff that people brought to her. This brought to her—and it's consistent with what she was studying in Zen. All of its own, without planning it, her art became the use of gifts from friends, nothing was bought, and this for me is a profound dimension, with a problem for some people that the gift—the fact of the gift is not a visual fact. You have to know that, but—and here I would do 10 pages of we know so much more about a painting that we don't have to remember that we know. Hello, we know that's a painting on the wall, we know a lot, we've learned a lot before we look at that and then we don't have to count that. And as I—and with me at some period more humorlessly formalist than I choose to confess, of course, the gift part would not have been a visual fact of a painting. I was wrong, and I regretted that and I'm—oh, I paid for my sins. What I'm trying to say is that her harmony arose with—of the materials, and she had not wanted to spend money, my father's money, on art materials. Well, the materials were flowing into her life with the goodwill of friends and the meaning that these were not commodities with price tags on them. And all she had to buy was polyvinyl acetate, which she bought by five gallons and—anyway.

[00:40:19]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Help me.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —yeah. Well, this is great. Lowell Nesbitt came into her life through Ray?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, okay. I went to Stoneleigh Elementary School. In Stoneleigh community, and I've mentioned Lowell's mother, Lowell lived with his mother and father, those poor people. I went to elementary school with Lowell Nesbitt one year behind me. However, Lowell was way ahead of me in many, many ways, and he was already—I'm not sure about elementary school because I didn't see anything, but he probably was already wanting to become an artist. Then high school, we didn't—this—Maryland, Baltimore County, cheap, there was no eighth grade, and what they don't know about separate and equal is it was a disaster. We went from elementary school to high school skipping a year, which put everybody young in college and all of that.

Anyway, I go on to the high school, Towson High School, Lowell a year later comes to Towson High School. In that high school, which I think was in many ways was an—of course in my high school, extraordinary school, all the teachers had MAs. They were—these were not—it wasn't Georgia or Alabama. This was a very sophisticated—Towson was as very rich community, a very sophisticated high school with social complexities, which didn't make the art world look like simple country people. So, okay, I—so I knew Lowell, however in high school, there was—oh dear Lord—in Towson, there's a courthouse, there's an iron fence around the courthouse. Annually, there's an outdoor art show and sale, and the poor local artists would hang their paintings on—I had photographs—on the iron fence, and people would walk around and perhaps buy a painting. And my mother met Lowell Nesbitt at the Towson art fair and then I already—I knew—I didn't know Lowell well, but I got to know him then.

I'm going to insert immediately a problem. Lowell had many, many great qualities. However, he had when—if you went to Provincetown, you could study with Hans Hofmann and have your hand on the beating heart of art or you could study with Brackman and work your back toward 1846 . I don't have anybody in mind with that, but I mean hello.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Now he studied with Brackman, and here is what I regard as a tragedy of the imagination. Lowell never got Cubism, and my mother and I who were relentless people and always teaching that uninvited pedagogy, we tried in various ways sympathetically to get Lowell to experience Cubism. I regard Cubism as an—one of the branches of expressionism and we tried from various angles to get Lowell—it wouldn't be real if he didn't feel it, experience it. He didn't get it, and therefore, I'm going to go ahead now, let—therefore his paintings are peculiar. And the only thing that is—he saved, saved them for mention is that in Postmodernism, who cares? Because my history of art, which of course comes as blessed by Barr and the Museum of Modern Art. My history of art, which was quite conventional in its way, I just followed the path of the Museum of Modern Art, you could hardly go off the path there. It was kind of this forced march, and it was quite a good, forced march from Cézanne on. Lowell didn't do that March, but nowadays who cares? And the people—and the—and MoMA doesn't do its—I don't think they do that.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And let me ask you this. I mean one of the striking things about May's social life at this point is that it seems that a lot of the key figures in her life are gay men, Lowell Nesbitt, Ray Johnson. Did she ever articulate anything about this?

[00:45:13]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, and Lowell had a problem about his family. I don't know any private conversations. My mother, I would say, pretended to—she talked the right talk and the attitude and—which was Ray Johnson—Ray would travel with his longtime spouse or companion Richard Lippold, and when the route possibly took them anywhere, then they spent the night in my bed, double bed in Maryland. What my father thought, I don't know. My father was an extremely discreet man who was so ironic that he kept his wisdom [they laugh] to himself. My mother never said anything to me about Lowell, Ray. Now, Lowell would bring his friends like Dr. William Wit [ph], a psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins Hospital, hello, to visit, and a lot of Lowell's friends. Lowell felt—he brought to visit my mother men he would not have brought to his—visit his mother and father. Some of them were pretty extravagant, and of course, talented, and wonderful, but that—I don't think of any themes there.

My mother had a from—I'll say—let me—my mother enjoyed long, pseudo-analytic conversations with a person separate, alone, so I don't know about those. It began, in my experience, my sister had endless boyfriends and when the boy—when the romance broke up, the boyfriends would still come to visit my mother and talk with her for an hour, and what was that about, I don't know. And so she must have been good at that and given—what she was good at in part was to correct [inaudible] some minor faults in somebody but also permissions that the family was not giving to the person in those days when people tried to conform to their families. That was a dig I don't know at what.

Let me come back, okay. Now my father, we got this wonderful coffee table, which has become—the style is now visible to me, I love it, broken—a coffee table with all the magazines the way one spread out like the monthly magazines. And my father subscribed to

Playboy, and my mother found this offensive, but my father was the captain of the ship, and there was—there was *Playboy* with that centerfold. And somewhere in this—we're moving ahead now, somewhere in the '60s, and I would say from '64, maybe '65, she began—when the new *Playboy* came in taking the old *Playboy* and taking scissors or a razor to it—that's important to me, a sharp metal object—cutting out pictures and making collages out of the—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Centerfold?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Hmm?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Of the centerfold?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Out of the centerfold or out of any other pictures, and that gradually became a specific technique of folding, folding a page, cutting it in what she called a snowflake with the symmetrical pattern, and gluing one of those over an intact photograph so that you saw bits and pieces through the holes in the picture, which is on top. And it became—I think it became very interesting and profound in its own way. Now, she was doing those in Maryland, and she asked me one time if I would buy gay magazines and bring them to her, which I was not about to do, but Ray sent her and brought her magazines. And so she had access to—and this is 1965, and so I think—and so it's soft male pornography.

[00:50:04]

Although some of them in the convolutions of time, there is—oh dear, there's one which in the recent show curated by Scott Hug, the gallery didn't want to show one of those 1965 collages because it looked like child pornography. And I'm not commenting on that, just the time has changed, the magazine cover, but time has changed and I leave it to wiser heads to judge that.

Now, she's using soft male pornography sympathetically in Maryland but in—on—in 1966, my father announces to her that the marriage is over, and she immediately, in her absolutist way, "Take me to New York." And I'm not going to go into the full, sordid family history, my father—she packed suitcases. Now, she owns two houses and two cars and a swimming pool, and some women told by the husband the marriage is over would say, "Get me a lawyer on the phone;" she said, "Take me to New York." She thought that she would live with me and help me. That would be like having General Rommel come in to help in Egypt because she was so absolutist as her mother was dying, she rearranged her mother's kitchen, and so I was not about—she said, "I will sleep on the pallet on the floor," and I took her to the Chelsea Hotel. She said, "I can't work an electric elevator, I don't know how to do this," and I said, "Mother, you do plumbing and you do wiring, and hello, you can push a button on an elevator."

So May 3, 1966, if I have the year right, she—I come home from work, and she's on my doorstep with two suitcases. I take her to the Chelsea Hotel, and within hours practically, the room is crowded with Ray Johnson, Ray Johnson's friends. People have come in—anybody came in from out of town came to the Chelsea Hotel, well, hell, there's May Wilson up there. And with a difference, which I think is—here's a difference with my mother. Most people in my life have looked for how they're superior to other people; she looked for how she was equal to other people. And so living in this room in a hotel and she's never lived in anything—lived in a hotel, of course, there's a cleaning maid. She had instamatic cameras, and she photographed the maid, I have the photographs, and knew her name and talked with her.

Now, we go ahead 40 or whatever years, and there are people who are doing a blog about the Chelsea Hotel, and they communicate with me, and I say, "Look, miracle of miracles, I have photographs of the black maid from 1965, [19]'66, whatever. They don't even hear that as a statement. It's not fame, it's not money, no, no. It's cool, well, you just—and I—those people were very nice to me and friendly and all that, but they're interested in—they came to New York to experience the famous people who lived in the Chelsea Hotel and so they didn't get what I was trying to tell them.

That in the—the summer goes on, a rather difficult summer, but hell, she's meeting all these people because the Chelsea was a bustling center. And then she or I found an apartment in the building, very next door building, a floor-through studio apartment. She—oh, I'm going to get into a terrible theme in a moment. And with a little terrace, which we couldn't sit on people threw things out the windows—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: My God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —above. It was only on the second and third floor. And so she moved into that studio apartment and stayed there until I took her out and put her a nursing home in the village, the village nursing home. I throw myself off things. Now, okay, now such was the events. On moving day, just moving from hotel to next door, but nevertheless, and I brought lots and lots of the cutouts, the snowflakes collages up from Maryland.

[00:55:13]

Carl Wirsum from Chicago and his wonderful wife Lorri and another friend Chicago happen to be visiting in New York at that moment, and so moving day was moving with Ray Johnson, Carl Wirsum, Lorri Wirsum and so it turned into a festive event far beyond the grim problem of trying to remove from one place to another in New York. I can tell you the stories about that because I always had a station wagon, and I was the designated moving man for more people, more ungrateful people [they laugh] than I choose to remember including—should I tell that? Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien who defined the AIDS syndrome, long before asked Lowell Nesbitt and me to help him remove to a new apartment because I had a station wagon. And so Lowell Nesbitt and I went at a reasonable early evening hour to help remove Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien's collection, which I'm going to shut my mouth about, anyway—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Art collection.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Art collection, everything, everything, everything he owned. Alvin has not packed one cup in a box. Lowell and I had to pack up all his things, and had his chair with—antique chair which he said had been in the White House. It had the head of George Washington—where you put your hands was the head of George Washington instead of a lion or something, and a nose had been repaired many, many times, but somehow Lowell and I getting this goddamn, big thing down the stairs, the nose came off again. And Alvin—Alvin was wonderful, but Alvin threw one of his little Alvin fits because here we are the unpaid, exploited moving men—Dr. William S. Wilson III of Yale University, PhD, and Lowell Nesbitt this famous artist, moving men, and we're criticized for knocking off this nose, which had been knocked off many, many times, but, "Oh, the White House wants that chair." Well, I don't know where that chair went, anyway. Alvin is—went brackets—and I shouldn't be talking—went just brackets and out as—he had to be Alvin to do what he did. He could keep human cells alive longer in a petri dish than anybody in history and that contributed to all the—to all these things. Now, I'm thrown off—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Now, let me ask you something.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Ask me something, keep me in focus.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: One of the things—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: [Cross talk.]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —that's striking about your mother's relationship with Ray Johnson is that in the most immediately formal or visible way, there isn't very much alliance between their two works except at the logic of the gift. And I wanted to know if you feel that that's the —

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, I didn't think about that, keep going.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, I wanted to know if you felt that that—if that was really the connection between the two of them because otherwise it seemed so fundamentally unlikely. You know, Ray is so involved with popular culture, so involved with modes of reference, your mother is not.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Except using *Playboy* magazine.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Except using *Playboy* magazine but—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, but those things by the way were never made for show or for sale. They were entirely made to be given to guests. It's an accident that it just got old and I have some of them, but they wandered around the world.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And the gay material, who is that—?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Vincent Levy had several of those gifts.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Huh.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, and that what?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And the stuff from the gay magazines was also intended as gifts?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh yeah, only as gifts, what else would she have done with it?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Right, to people that she identified as gay?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I don't know what kind of criterion there was, who would've—who might have been interested. And she mailed—because of Ray's correspondence and mail and things, she mailed objects, collages, and I don't know the details of that, although there may be details in my—in the archives that are here. I lost track there. I haven't thought about the gifts, but let me back up for moment.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sure.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I'm saying that my mother somehow in Maryland began her study and practice of an American Zen Buddhism, which was in the *New Yorker* in the Salinger stories. Ray at Black Mountain College had become, in his own way, a serious Buddhist after Lutheran—after Finnish Lutheranism, after Christian Science, an important progression.

[01:00:06]

And so his interest in Buddhism overlapped her interest in Buddhism and their values. Their values overlapped I think more closely than my values and Ray's and my mother's and Ray's. And so it's maybe unlikely—ah, this may be unlikely that Ray develops his friendship and a helpful friendship with a woman who's much older and the mother of a friend of his. Except that Ray had, and this is an important theme which I can only sketch, Ray had many older women friends. I can give a long list from Charmion von Wiegand, Jeanne Miles, Alice Mason just to start that, and it would go on and on. And these were women he befriended and in the case of—and this is current events, Sari Dienes, the marvelous Sari had done body rubbings of naked Ray Johnson and those are now kind of floating somewhere near that I might be able to acquire one of those. And that it's a large motif, not a minor motif in Ray's life that he had—I'm making it a category like there's a set of older women artists, but there it was and, um—I need to go to the bathroom.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sure.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: [Laughs.] Is that—?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: We will edit that out.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, I don't care. What can—I'm 80 years old, what can they do to me?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Exactly, okay.

[END OF TRACK katzjona_1of4_sd_track02_a.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It doesn't matter. My mother did a lot of the glit—the glitter works. Yeah, you could tie around and my tongue doesn't work—a lot of the glitter works, she did. Also there's the guy—the guy on the right?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yes.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Why she gave him nipples like that, I don't know, but why God gave men nipples.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: It was on—similarly, right, right, absolutely.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, poor evolution if one wishes to go so—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yes, exactly.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Is that on now?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: It's on now.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay, okay. In the later '60s, so I'll just say around 1970, my mother met because so many people were—came to her apartment, were brought to her apartment, anybody from Europe visiting New York to see the Statue of Liberty and see May Wilson, a kind—an informal salaam developed. In the late afternoon, anyone felt free to drop in. In the first few years, she always had two different dishes on the stove, so she could feed people, and in those days remarkably, a lot of guys were going around pretty hungry. And she would—in the early days, she gave people drinks and then later she cut that out.

Now, among the people that she met in the late '60s, hovering around 1970, there was, I'll definite, a set of young men who were becoming Scientologists because they were promised to cure homosexuality. And these young men, very—they were—first, there was six, one of them was, sort of, not prominent, so I'll say five, and five whom I met because I would drop in with my children in the late afternoon. Other people who visited in the morning, it's a different story, anyway. These five guys, of course, varied. One of them became so regular that he had a sense that he was May Wilson's good son, and my mother complained about me of course, and so he looked at me, and for the next 40 years, with horror as this terrible, terrible monster son who didn't appreciate his mother. And he still is wandering around, and I saw him last week at an art show, Richard Tuttle.

In any event and—okay, and here's my mother at work. That one whom I just mentioned and won't say his name because he writes for the *New Yorker* had stains on his teeth from smoking. He had the most incredibly bad skin, she scrubbed his teeth with powdered pumice, somehow she cleared up his complexion, and she more importantly said, "Okay, so you're Italian Catholic, so what's the matter with a little cock sucking? Why you—?" And she gave him permission, talked with him intensely and at length across a long period of time as he's becoming the good son and I'm becoming the bad son. [They laugh.] She never said that, but it was in his eyes, I mean the loathing with which he looked. He recoiled if he saw me in public; he like he saw the devil. He didn't ask anything; he didn't know anything. So she's working with him, and he's trying to become a Scientologist for a cure of something which is not a disease and therefore can't be cured.

Now the other—I've said five, I kept leaving him out. Now then, there's one of them who has become a distinguished, famous painter, married and who shall be nameless, and who has worked things out for himself dropped the Scientology. And then there's another one who did marry, children, grandfather now who didn't—he was never quite cured of homosexuality. [They laugh.] I'll just put it that way. His wife was a very understanding woman. Most important historically and in terms of what has been published, he's a marvelous, marvelous person, John Dowd, D-O-W-D, Dowd, not to be confused with John Dodd [ph], and there was much confusion.

[00:05:03]

John Dowd—I'm trying to figure out how to say this. John Dowd became a serious Scientologist. Through Scientology, he was married, and he was the most robust, cheerful, laughing, good-looking guy, picture of health—of strength and health to be imagined. And somehow through Scientology, he was married to Nancy [ph] who could've been a statue representing depression and misery. To look at Nancy was to have one's spirits fall, but John always lifted spirits, and John and Nancy tried vehemently to convert my mother to Scientology. I have letters from—I don't have those, but I have letters from her to him, to John and Nancy saying, "Please leave me alone, I have my own thoughts and feelings, and I'm not interested in becoming a Scientologist." She handled that very tactfully. They had first a son named Luke [ph] and then a year or two later, a son named Noel [ph]. Now, this is deliberate, and it's part of the era John Dowd, four letters, four letters. John is concerned with four, so the sons are Luke, four letters, Noel, four letters.

When Noel is about nine—I don't know nine, he's an infant, Nancy leaves for the sanctum sanctorum of Scientology in Florida. The iron gates closed behind her, and she is never seen again and has refused all communication with her sons from that time forward. So Nancy has left John who has contrived a—with all goodwill and with intentions, which are intelligible. He has made a valiant effort to become a husband and a father, but Nancy's out of the picture. And just to continue with John because he's a totally minor artist, you can't even measure how. He did fanzines and wonderful things that—and he helped other people. He got other people doing projects, but he didn't become the cover of *Artforum*, and the

Museum of Modern Art would not have acknowledged him. He was part of a down—marvelous downtown scene.

But there he is now, in effect, a widower because Nancy is dead, as she's died to everyone, with these two little boys and given the need to support them. Then, in a few years, he must—he makes his living designing greeting cards. He must remove to someplace like Kansas with the boys, but somehow or other—oh, I'm going to continue with John because I don't care about this archive—I mean coherence. Because John is a wonder—is—it's an important story for me. John has removed to someplace like Kansas City, and the blond boyfriend has appeared, so he's—and this is after lots of talk and encouragement from my mother about him.

What's the problem here? I mean these boys would tell my mother extraordinary things, a lot of them out of repressive backgrounds where they were inhibited, and they felt such guilt and such shame. And so this one—not one of the Scientology people, this other man who told my mother in unscrupulous detail what he was planning to do the next night, but he [inaudible], but he would feel this or that. Now my mother would say, "Okay, so he's going to rim you, what's the problem with that?" And—but she didn't talk that way to me, believe me; I just knew this from—she would tell me what she had been telling these people.

Okay, now we've got John in Kansas City with two, tiny boys, and the blond boyfriend. And in the tragedy of our era, John develops AIDS, and John dies now leaving the, like, 10, 12 years old, high school, two boys with the blond boyfriend. What do blond boyfriends do? And here at this point, I cry. The blonde boyfriend recently came to the—Noel came—Luke came from England to celebrate his 70th birthday—the boy, the man's 70th birthday. He stayed, he put them through college.

[00:10:27]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Wow.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And he is—there he is in their lives. And now, they both are married with—they've got problems, but who doesn't? They had issues and—but their lives go on. I don't—there's some more point to this perhaps, except that this tragic story and the loss of John. I don't know what to say when I look back to the birth of Luke and the birth of Noel under—this is under such odd circumstances. The gay father, we don't know about the sexuality of the mother but took her into the sanctum sanctorum thing. The boys write to her and say, "If you would would—we will stay in a motel, if you would walk to the"—they know the place physically—"if you would walk down the road to the fence, we could see you." No, she won't do that, she communicates with her brother, that's the only communication.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Wow.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: This is a mother, I mean hello, I mean hello, there. I don't—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Let me ask you—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, ask me something because I'm confused by my own thought of what do you do when we're looking in 2012 and we see Luke and Noel and their families and the children. We take that back to the source, whoa. Who is judge touch that?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It's providence.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Let me ask you thought, you've made it very clear that your mother was remarkable at giving permission, and I want to know if she gave permission to you?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Can you explain that contradiction?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Well, actually, see, I don't want to go—I still have some sense in my indiscreet, voluble, garrulous old age, I still have some sense of decorum. As tomorrow I go to celebrate grandson's 10th birthday, one of the grandson's, and I think about the story of my life, I have to be verry careful here. My mother never said a word to me about—she never complained about my wife, and she would have had much to complain about. She was

very patient there, unusually, improbably patient. She never said anything to me.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Bill's wife is Ann Wilson, the artist.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Ann Wilson. I don't really want to get into it because she used facts, which came to her attention to hurt my father, and I really don't want to go further with that.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It was her worst moment, and you've already got that on tape.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: You are—we're going to do a whole tape about you after we—after this —

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Fair enough—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —Warhol show—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —fair enough, fair enough.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —yeah, yeah, yeah.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Now let me ask you—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Take me off something else.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sure, sure, let me ask you about—going all the way back to your first meeting with Ray, what he was like then, if there was a change in Ray's character or the texture of your relationship over the course of the years that you knew each other

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, I remember every moment from my first meeting when Norman Solomon had taken me on the bus down there to meet Ray, and we climbed all those stairs and saw him in this tiny, tiny apartment. There's a story there because the tiny apartment, and there's no bed or anything else like that, but this is absolutely typical of Ray. There was another apartment across the hall. Later he referred to as Richard's apartment, meaning Richard Lippold, suggesting that was Richard paid rent on that apartment, which was a larger floor space but had nothing much in it. It was an empty studio that Ray kept and worked, and Richard would be there but not that much. And so from the first time I meet him, there is the withholding of key information. First, I don't know anything about Richard Lippold. I know Rich Lippold has done the moon I think it was or *The Sun* at the Metropolitan Museum. I know Richard as I read the little art reviews in *ARTnews* religiously. I practically memorized them, and they were totally incoherent pseudo-poetry, but I knew Richard Lippold from that. I didn't know if Ray knew Richard. In fact, for a long time, I didn't know Ray knew Richard.

[00:15:26]

But the important point here is that I'm being introduced to Ray Johnson by his—one of the few people he ever absolutely experienced as an equal. That is he didn't say this and he didn't make categories like that, but I could tell from the tone in the conversation, I could tell the way his voice and all of that, he respected Norman. And I was Norman's, in effect, a student, pupil, a disciple, and I had put myself in an inferior position, I wasn't aspiring to equality.

Now, there's so much about that first visit because I was a graduate student at Yale University. Ray did not want to meet graduate students; he disapproved of anybody being a graduate student. His attitude was very clear, explicit, and he stated it in one way or another. Why would you study other people's poetry when you can write your own poetry and take a job two dollars an hour and starve in a cold-water flat with no kitchen, no bed, anything? I mean he thought everyone should live—could live the way that he lived, and not to be doing your own art was offensive to him. He had no interest in meeting me.

Now in that, Norman sat quietly, which Norman was good at. Norman was a master of silences. Ray had a kind of counter table, which folded up because everything was in—made in this efficiency-apartment way that things folded into things. And on this, on one side, he's

on—he's standing on one side, I'm on one side, to my left, to his right is a pile of—probably it was a hundred, but I didn't count, collages. And they were all done on shirt [phonetic] boards, cardboard guaranteed filled with acid, certain to adhere, right? And he would move one from the top of the pile, put it in front of me facing me, and then move it over, and then he repeated this. I was overwhelmed, I understood that God had created that there should be Abstract Expressionism, and while I was polite about anything else in the world, I knew what was real and only resolutely, humorously only Abstract Expressionism was real, and I do not exaggerate.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And there's still a plane in me which thinks, holy, huh, [inaudible]. So I'm looking through these, I'm overwhelmed by them, and fortunately, I said, "I've never seen, I've never seen design, I've never seen design like this before," and whatever else I said was what was at least correct, it was not offensive, and this rounded out politely. There was no what's your address, would you call me, there was no—nothing about any kind of a sequel. Norman and I get on the cold bus, they weren't heated in those days, to get back up towards civilization because this way down on Dover Street. And Norman said, "Oh, if you send him something, he'll write—he'll send you something." So I got his address from Norman, and unusually, uncharacteristically for me, I sent Ray something. I don't know what and send him something else and something else, completely atypical that I held in there determined that I get to know him. I had touched a live wire, one of those live wires of my life, and I was not going to lose it as one loses—one does not always have the courage to follow through. Now, it became clear in various ways that I had to pass tests that being a graduate student did not qualify me for anything but rejection.

[00:20:02]

And looking back recently, I see what happened that gradually made me of interest. I'll try to state this clearly. If Ray—and Ray was sending things to all kinds of people, usually to solicit commissions for design work. If he sent an image of Mickey Mouse, if anybody responded, and not many people do respond to stuff like that, but if they responded, it might be responding to Mickey Mouse. I responded to the method of thinking, to the method of visual thinking that I saw. And so if Ray was juxtaposing identical images from two different sources or the same image in two different formats or two different sizes or something, I was responding to the identity and difference between those two images. So I did not—I might not respond about Mickey Mouse—and I'm also going ahead a bit here because it was so tentative. I'm in New Haven and under extremely horrible circumstances of Yale Graduate School in the 1950s—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Pursuing a degree in?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Pursuing a degree in English literature, miserably, miserably unhappy.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And specializing notably not in the modern period?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I ended up—I got stuck—I got forced by circumstances into writing a dissertation on Geoffrey Chaucer whom I revered, a medieval dissertation. I didn't know that that stuck me as a medievalist in perpetuity. I didn't realize that when Queens College eventually later hired me, they had designated me the departmental Catholic intellectual. I wasn't Catholic and I was—as an [inaudible].

Oh, I need to go back to Ray was very tentative in the beginning, which is a few months and then I felt okay, something's clicking here, he sent his phone number, call me sometime. I called him and met him in his—I guess I met in his apartment. He was very precise in who was allowed into the apartment and who wasn't. Norman had [inaudible] that he had pass. Norman could've gone anytime. And I don't know quite how, I would come in from New Haven, I would see Ray, meet him someplace, or go to the—to see his most recent work. And once I was invited to spend the night, and that's when I discovered that the other apartment, which he called Richard's apartment where there were two mattresses on the floor. And this was—it was clear to me, it was clear to Ray, lots of things were clear, and one was that there was not an erotic anything, just wasn't. And I'm not going to develop that because it would sound negative; it would just be a reflection of my peculiarities. [Laughs.]

I was so very—I was so—25, 26 years old, you can't not believe and I'm not going to talk to a tape recorder about how naïve I was in what I did not know and I still down know, people are

still filling me in, so we're leaving that out. And Ray understood, and across the years, he'd explain things to me. He understood my ignorance. I have never seen pornography if you don't count *Playboy*, I've never seen a moment of pornography, I had never read anything pornographic. And this comes out of determinations, which I made as a young man, to keep the quality of experience intact in the way that I wanted. And that's why art but no, never art and money, never art and fame. That's why I was severe in several areas of life, and I'm talking about them in old age because there were misunderstandings along the way, and I didn't explain that when you look at that painting, you're seeing a price along with the painting, and I don't see that. I did not read—the *New York Times* only wrote about art on the front page if there were an extraordinary auction price. I saw that, I didn't read those essays.

[00:25:14]

It was not easy not to know about art and money, and of course, I picked up things along the way. You can't remain pure, and I—but Norman would quote—Norman Solomon and Ray both could quote—I think it's the Book of Titus—"To the pure, all things are pure." Well, Norman could do that, Norman knew everything and nothing—he was not sullied by things except he went—I was trying to preserve the quality of experience not perfectly, but I did. I satisfied myself that I was doing okay with that. But it meant I was really dumb, and what everybody else knew, I mean hello, a gay bar? I didn't know such things existed. I mean, hello, it's a long list, and that's a different tape. [Laughs].

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And at the same time that you're developing this relationship and passing these minor tests that Ray is proffering—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: A lot of them, a lot of tests, yeah.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —he is also, right, having a relationship with your mother separately?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Well, that begins really two or three weeks after I have met him, and I don't know that date, autumn '56, and that's by correspondence. And then—and it's in her notebooks I think when she came to New York when she met Ray, but she would've been with my father. There would've been a certain formality, awkwardness there. He always called my father Mr. Wilson all the way through. But Ray became—when he would visit my parents' house, and my sister's house was on the same property, he got to know my sister, my brother-in-law, my sister's three children, and he became an annex of the family. I don't have the right image for it, but he was a figure in the Wilson family. This—and family, which is a theme so huge that I'm restudying Hegel and family, and I have new respect for Hegel. Ray came to Thanksgiving dinners at my house, which were as [inaudible]. They weren't sadly imposed what's his name, [inaudible] who is it?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Um, I know exactly who you're talking about, Norman Rockwell.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Norman Rockwell, thank you. I block on his name because of other Rockwells. But, of course, I have that photograph of Ray wearing a shirt which—a T—an underwear shirt, which exposes. It must be to be worn on beaches in California. It's Christmas dinner with my mother-in-law from Pittsburgh and Ray Johnson and the children, and Ray's wearing—he's come to a family dinner but wearing an extraordinary shirt, which no one east of California would possibly even imagine wearing in my experience. Marie Tavroges [ph], now that's a long story, she insists that that shirt was a shirt for a nursing mother, and no, no, no, I'm sure—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: It revealed his nipples.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Everything, yes. It's kind of—it's California dreaming shirt, and so. But what I'm saying is that he threw something—he put an English on events and made them consistent with—he got his values and his meanings into—into any event, sometimes gracelessly in later years but—

And he—and this—but this is important if I can figure out how to say it. I'll do an analogy, okay. Suppose—imagine any—not about Ray but imagine a party, and it's going along, and there it is, there's partying, and everything is kind of ho-hum, and Iddy Cedric Andrews [ph], and with her, everyone snaps into a plane that says party. You don't have to be authentic, you don't have to be who your essence requires for your truth and goodness, it's party time and so the drabbest nerd is galvanized. And I saw her enter, and I believe in her because she

did something to a room. Now, shifting planes [laughs], when Freddie Herko entered a party, *choo-choo* [ph], the—an erotic plane snapped in. That is nobody is paying attention to anything erotic, but suddenly, that's the subtext of everything. He did that, he did that to events, and Ray maybe more manipulatively and more deliberately.

[00:30:28]

Anyway, where Ray went became a Johnsonian event. [Inaudible] has described very well walking down the street with Ray that the fireplug didn't look like other fire—every—like this car over here, this is the doorway that things changed with him, and that's—there's no way to preserve that. There's not a document exactly that preserves that. What I have to try to do in writing about Ray is to catch something of that—that he put his characteristic twist that he restylized events that they conform, they became closer to his values without him imposing. It wasn't like the preacher enters and, oh my God, we better be on our good behavior. It wasn't that suddenly people are going to go on a lark and be naughty because—or do something eccentric because Ray has entered or like some Salvador Dali entering, but it happened. It was with him, and I don't know how those things—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And what—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —how it worked.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —what was it—when you first saw those collages that you found so electric, what was it that spoke to you, what did you see, and did you get a sense of his work immediately that you continued to have or has he grown gradually?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: There was an immediate—I'm not sure I quite understand about the term *gradually*. There was immediate impact of these. And in my—in terms of my experience, now part of that was an emancipation. You are—I'm regarding you as so young that therefore I can put you in generations, which don't understand the intensity and the moral dimension of formalist qualities like the difference between single [ph] centre composition and all-over composition, which people I knew were willing to kill or die for, and this is simply gone as far as I can tell because people don't seem to know or care about that dimension of things and after Jeff Koons, anything—anyway.

I think I what I was feeling for myself was an alleviation of my own humorless quasi-religious absorption in Abstract Expressionism. This was real and vivid and had his impact, and I'm not sure what to say about the composition. There was something in the composition, which maybe I have not defined except—I can't go for that right now. These—apart from whatever else that somebody might have been doing proto-Pop art and all of that, this was the—my first experience of an alternative to Abstract Expressionism, which was emancipating, and that's how I experienced it. And it was different—okay, it was a different way of thinking, and so. And here in my own—on my own behalf, I'm going to go back to my theme because I'm just starting to appreciate it. Ray and I, and we talked a lot, and when I came to live in New York in 1961, telephoned constantly, him calling me, I don't—I doubt if I called him five times, but he called sometimes five times, five times a day. And out of our conversations, maybe two days later, loping along [ph] in the mail would come a visual collage, which was a continuation of our conversation by other means. I didn't write that down, and from the beginning, I made a strange decision like don't take phone calls and not to write down—Ray was willing to interpret his collages, but I felt that his interpretations were so—[phone rings] —oh, take it.

[00:35:12]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, no, no.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: They were so odd. Well, it's part of 2012, no, it's part of—all my mother's that are yesterday that they—the bells and whistles go off. Now, I lost my sentence. I think I was about to praise myself that our conversation continued in the visual mode, and if I responded to a collage, I responded again to the logic, to the visual logic, and that's what I think preserved the friendship. I think it's what held Ray's interest. He had no interest in my writing; he disliked stuff that I wrote about him. He never—I mean he took—my first book, he took to the library and reproduced in the back to show that no one had ever taken it out of the—[they laugh] out of the library. And he never made—well, he did actually—it's why I don't—I like Franz Kafka and needed to work why I don't make sculpture like Alexander Calder conversationally. That came up, and he did some formal, some of his

work, which was why I don't do this like Pablo Picasso so that did get established there. But he never said, "Oh, I read your story." In fact, in my novel, which I have a copy of for you right there, I mentioned Ray Johnson because I was determined to get his name in everywhere even an unreadable—unreadable, overwrought, overcomplicated, intellectually pretentious novel, which fortunately no one will read. But I'll mark the page, which mentions Ray, Rauschenberg comes in in the description of a great—I don't name him, but I described a graveyard as though it's Rauschenberg combines.

What preserved my friendship with Ray is obscure, is a mystery to me, but he was fascinated by my life, and lots of things happened. In September 1959, I married Ann Marie Ubinger who had been married before, who had been brought up Catholic under the circumstances in Pittsburgh, in a wealthy suburban—steel-executive kind of suburban community outside of Pittsburgh. Robert Bucher [ph] the artist was a neighborhood in the suburbs, he escaped also. So that September—has that just passed, September the tenth? I must have been married 52 or [5]3 years, something like that, we're still married, and I'm not telling the machine thing too much about that.

Anyway, Ray treated Ann—Ray, I think Ann—I thought Ann was a genius. He certainly respected her extraordinary mind. I—she wrote notes about visiting him, and I typed them up and sent them to collage or they collaged, they're in print. She was writing a novel, I don't know what happened to that, but I—the part of it is preserved in what I got published. She objected because I corrected her spelling. Like Robert Rauschenberg, like Andy Warhol, she had a problem—she has a problem with language. Dyslexic, I don't know a diagnosis, but that problem was a resource because it brought her to a language not quite like the language of anyone else. Ray demonstrated no symptoms of anything about language, but he early took on the obligation for himself to work out a language adequate to his life because the conventional language in Detroit didn't allow for him. And so from the beginning, and I have the scrapbooks and the evidence, from the beginning, he's looking at other—at—at escapes from conventional language, which would've imposed forms on him. And there's so much there that I won't go on—I may need to move my leg.

[00:40:05]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Of course.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: What were we talking about?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Well, I have just one more question because we're almost out of time.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, you have to go.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: But I wanted to find out specifically in your early relationship with Ray, was he your entrée into a broader New York avant-garde, or was it coterminous with meeting Ray?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: My God. Well, because of Norman Solomon who was a painter and who's painting is lost, but he's a long story, my [inaudible] was through Ray because—and this is a large part of my life—Ray would not say where we were going. I would be a mystery guest being taken to visit a mystery person who some of them became—who we visited a lot. And so one night following Ray, I followed him and very early to position in relation to him socially, which I think of as the propman in the Japanese theater where the propman is wearing black and he's useful, helpful, but he is not to be seen and not to speak in his person. When John Walter made the film about Ray Johnson and interviewed people like Malka Saffro, they said, "Oh, Solomon [ph], Billy Wilson, Solomon, Billy Wilson," and John Walter said, "What it means Solomon, Billy Wilson?" he doesn't shut up. Well I didn't speak, I just—I mean why would I—? Hello, look, here we are with Ad Reinhardt, I'm a graduate student, I don't have anything interesting to say. I mean I revered Ad Reinhardt before I knew that Ray had been his assistant and, oh yeah. So, ah, I couldn't have spoken if I wanted to, well I said a few things.

Anyway, okay, here's typical: We go into an apartment building, Ray knocks on the door, the door opens and Ray says, "Oh, Bill, I want you to meet Jeanne Miles." I said, "The Jeanne Miles?" and she said, "Oh no, I don't think so." [They laugh.] But it was Jeanne Miles who was marvelous and told stories, which—oh, [inaudible] the Archives of American Art had—she had been in New York in the '30s as a—trying to become a painter and meeting gentlemen of means, and she told thrilling stories. One night a door opens, and there's a woman in a

Japanese kimono and it's—the name is Okada? Now, it's—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okada.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It's Okada. He lived in New York?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yes.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay, and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Ken—Kenzo Okada, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —we visited them—we visited them many, many times. And one of the themes there was the language, of course, because Ray's—the first publication about Ray was in a Japanese magazine, and he kept up and he should—in Japan for many reasons, obviously, the art, but also the relations between the Japanese language and the English language. And there the—I'm realizing now that eventually from the experience with Okada who spoke English and Mrs. Okada, who—what—I'm not sure what the word is, which wouldn't sound condescending. She rarely, rarely encroached on the English language but she was—there she was, and she was a perfectly eloquent presence, and we—she expressed in gesture and form everything that she needed to express. Now, weirdly outside of this, and it may seem to me some defense, Ray in his art made fun of the Japanese accent, and that's politically incorrect I suppose because political incorrectness for me is one principle—you don't humiliate anybody for anything that's not their stupid fault. Ray could imitate the Japanese accent because he didn't judge it as ignorant or anything else like that. It was another variation in what can be done with language. And so obviously I defend Ray and explained Ray, but I want to do that because Ray is a larger figure than has ever come across with any of the shows, any of the publications including mine and the dimensions of that figure, which had me rereading Hagel, are such that I can only aspire to conveying those when the dimensions were most manifest in Ray's presence. That is the most real, that's it, the mood, the atmosphere, the feeling that that's exactly what can't be preserved in any documentary or kind of archival way. And if you talked—if anybody talked to other people that way—I know you need to go.

[00:45:45]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, no, no.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Anyone would say this, it's Dick Higgins' birthday, huh, Dick Higgins, I'll tell you some—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Good.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —at Dick Higgins' birthday, the door opens, Ray Johnson walks in, not a word. There's a ladder, he mounts the ladder, he drops torn paper, a snowstorm, and he descends the ladder and he leaves. Now, we don't have readymade vocabulary for that and for what that does to a birthday. And at that point, he's not a famous artist, and he has already been quoted in the *New York Times*, saying "I lead a life of deliberate poverty." He later repeated that line, sometimes he did it to different words from the word *deliberate*, but I think that's what the *Times* says. And I said, definitely [ph] from the suburbs, I think sometimes I pretended to be a simpleton, but I could do that very well because I was really a simpleton. And once I said, "Oh Ray, you're in the *New York Times*, are you going to send that to your parents?" He said, "You don't send your mother and father an article that says, 'I live a life of deliberate poverty.'"

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —deliberate poverty. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And that's—and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: So let me ask you as just as a closing teaser—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: You have to be frank [ph]—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —through Ray, you met—correct me if I'm wrong, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Andy Warhol, yeah. I'll explain what Rauschenberg—that's a separate

case. In spring of 1958, Ray officially ended his friendship with Robert Rauschenberg. Now, the way that he told me about that and he wrote me about it, and he told me about it again, it was 10 years, Robert Rauschenberg already is of such heroic dimensions that no one would deliberately end the friendship with Rauschenberg, so Rauschenberg, in my mind, must have ended the friendship with Ray. No, Ray had ended the friendship with Rauschenberg. We'll go not about, I don't know, about why the moment. And therefore, I was—I met Bob under those circumstances, Coenties Slip where I conceived two children, Pearl Street. He was there down—the downtown scene, but with an aura already, and Ann Marie Wilson Ubinger worked for him for a while taking stitches out of parachutes. So Bob was around, and in fact, Apollo 15 I think it was where I stood on a truck roof with Red Grooms and Mimi Gross. I think it was Apollo 15 where Rauschenberg was—I don't know, I'm going to say this on this machine—where Rauschenberg was. He was artist in residence, and I was with him a little bit deliberately to watch him with the men at Cape [ph] Kennedy wear pens in their pocket shirt, I mean they're engineers and they—they're fully self-stylized as engineer. I think they know the ugly—no bring me uglier glasses [ph]. [They laugh.] These are two [inaudible]. And I wanted to watch, and I did watch Bob with these guys who were perfectly correct. Well, he was—there he was, anyway. So it was not Bob, but it was other people, and if I say Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman, then am I—is that good enough?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: That's great.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Good.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I'm tired.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: You've been great.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: You're exhausting.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: This was—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I have more—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay, you can come back sometime—

[END OF TRACK katzjona_1of4_sd_track03_a.]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: This is Jonathan Katz, and I'm interviewing Bill Wilson. It is October 17th, this is the second tape.

[END OF TRACK katzjona_2of4_sd_track01_a.]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oops. If this is an intelligence test, and I'm quickly failing.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And incidentally, Valerie probably that morning went on to visit Ti-Grace Atkinson. I know nothing about that, but it was a full and rich day for Valerie. And if I make one more point about Ray Johnson and audiences, and this is a great question for me of the extent to which artists in the '60s—in the late '50s and '60s were aware of performances such as dance. I think Yvonne Rainer was influential beyond all reckoning, and I said that in—at a meeting in London and she pooh-poohed me and she was—and graciously declined to accept that, but I think it's true.

I want to say one thing about Ray and audiences, okay. And I don't know the year, but a Broadway show has been announced in which Paul Newman will appear, and Paul Newman is going to kiss a man. This is shocking before the opening, and there's been Arthur Miller, *A View From the Bridge* in which a man kisses a man on the stage. And so with the announcement of this Paul Newman appearance, taking my heart in my mouth or whatever the expression is, I ordered two tickets, and I invited Ray Johnson, and I said, "You don't have to stay." He was obsessed with Paul Newman and many other obsessions, and that's not free to go back to my conversation with Eva [ph]. And so I prepared him, "Okay, you'll be sitting in a seat in the theater, in an auditorium with other people, and you'll be with Bill Wilson,

and there's a certain demeanor which [they laugh] is called for." In my memory, he had on a coat and tie. I mean he had been so instructive.

In any event, when we got the point, Paul Newman—I mean this play was desperate, they had a big, funny dog, and that tells you that something is wrong with the play. And so at the end of act one, and I think Joanne Woodward is standing far in the background, Paul Newman comes down stage toward the audience, the man comes down stage toward the audience, and for whatever motive, they kiss, and I said, "Okay, Ray we're going, we can go." He's, "No, no, no," and so we sat through the whole thing. And as far as I know, he's the only person in the art world who saw maybe want a kiss [ph], a play which otherwise—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Was in no way memorable.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, I don't remember that, anyway.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Those are footnotes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —and when Ray would show up at a performance given what you've described, were—were the artists quaking in their boots at the idea that Ray was watching?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I can't answer for those artists because—and—but also, there weren't many events. He did not go to many happenings. There might be—sometimes if I was involved in something, he might go, but it was extremely rare. I went to Joseph [ph] Church all the time and some performances I saw three times. I knew they were so important, Robert Morris three times to try to take in—oh. And by the way, that was for my understanding and experience, and therefore, I wouldn't even want Ray there because I would be confused, I'd be seeing it as he saw it. And as he saw it would not be in accord with any objective or consensual criteria. He saw things in his own way and was simply not interested in that which had been rehearsed. And if you make that fundamental in performances, then you are in trouble, and in fact, I don't know the extent to which he rehearsed his piece at the Maidman Playhouse. The year before at the AG Gallery under the care of George Maciunas, he had done what he called a *Nothing,* therefore the Playman [ph] Playhouse play—the—hmm, the Maidman Playhouse become the set of *Nothing* after the—by that.

[00:05:03]

That only was—nobody knew what was going to happen, and I now know that I was there, that I saw the performance, but I didn't realize it was the performance. [They laugh.] It was Ray tossing the—what he called spools down the stairs, and I was sitting—it was not—it was a miserable space under reconstruction. And where I was sitting, I saw that, but I didn't think it was anything. Well, he was doing throwaway gestures, and that gesture was thrown away on me—on me as the audience. I can't think of other places. I can think of him a couple of times standing in the back but sitting in a seat like a regular, conventional audience. I can't think of much.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: How did James Lee Myer—Byars respond when he got hit by a shoe?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I think I effectively blacked out. I have—I bring, which I keep calling, a southern etiquette no the matter how wild or how vanguard or how bohemian or anything else aspects of my life became, underneath was the fundamental false, southern ideas of courtesy and hospitality and etiquette and all of that. And I was—my mind just wouldn't yield on some—there's some things you just don't do. And I saw what was going on, but collecting an anecdote for the history of art is different from Bill Wilson embarrassed by the person he's with.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Absolutely.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And actually I have eight or so photographs once when I went to the photographing Ray's studio. The phone rang, and it was James Lee Byars, and I photographed Ray eight times talking with James Lee Byars on the phone, but we don't have the record of that.

James Lee Byars went way back in Ray's life; I don't know any details. His sensibility was

toward the ephemeral and the delicate, and it was insubstantial. And this is quite—the experiences are quite real, I think, I don't know, I can't develop that thought at the moment, but so insubstantial that they didn't register on the art world as I knew it. No one but Ray ever mentioned James Lee Byars to me. However when the Stilt Walk was done for the New York Correspondence School of Art in Central Park, Peter Moore went because next to that in a kind of annex was James Lee Byars doing his performance. Peter went to photograph James Lee Buyers, not Ray Johnson, but by happy coincidence, he photographed both of the events.

Now, James Lee Byars all by himself, he was [inaudible], he was in Central Park unfurling, unfurling, unfurling rolls of delicate Japanese silk, I guess they were Japanese silk. And so his sensibility was not a Manhattan, tough art world sensibility. The guys at Max's Kansas City just—well, they didn't—he didn't exist—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: You're right, right.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —in their world.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And he was—I'm assuming despite the fact that he rehearsed, he was generally closer to Ray because of that ineffable, nonsubstantial, right or no?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, yes. There was an overlap of the values of the meanings that both did, and the divergence would come, and very important divergence where Ray wants immediacy and indeterminism of any kind of a meaning. And I'm going back pretentiously from Hegel bouncing off Martin Heidegger with the phrase indeterminate immediacy or immediate indeterminacy, I vary it for my purposes. And the lack of rehearsal, the lack of planning was for—was a large part of that for Ray. Now because Yoko Ono and James Lee Byars in the old Chambers Street days had planned, what Ray did was break into what was planned and required them to respond.

[00:10:04]

There were no rules for how to respond to a rude interference with a performance. They had to improvise what they did according to a rule, which they had to make up on the spot. And Ray moved toward areas for which there are no conventional rules or instructions or where he could go against instructions or suspend instructions. He did not obey. [They laugh.] For him, and it happened in his house one time, I had blocked the doorway downstairs with chairs, tables. There were two doors. One was open. If you turned right, you went through the door. If you went straight ahead, you were blocked. Everything said do not enter. Ray typically read do not enter as welcome, come on in. And when I arrived home, he was in the process of dismantling the blockade and let that stand for what he did where his—the free expression of his impulses was blocked by something or other, what the heck is this doing here, and so he removed the obstacles. And he found those in many places, and I'm shifting planes here, that if he met—if he met a priest or a religious figure whose theology or whose practices might say no to Ray's practices, that person was a special challenge or opportunity to him to get beyond the prohibitions and to be allowed to do what he would've done otherwise. And he got some people behaving very strange, and I didn't know how to read those things. I remember a great Orthodox priest, and I of course don't know what was going on except that I didn't get a sense of puritanical Christianity denouncing or renouncing sexualities of race. So I didn't ask questions, oi [ph].

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I'm going to blame all of this on you but—what else?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: So talk to me about two—well, let's first talk about John Cage, how did you meet him and how well did you know him?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, and that how-did-you-meet question turns up with me frequently as unanswerable as with friends who ask me or I ask them. Like few people remember how they met Ray Johnson. How did I meet John Cage? Well, he was around, and I don't know how that got sorted out. A large part of what happened was that in 1964, Dick Higgins phoned and without explaining everything, he just said, "Oh, Nam June Paik is in America, and he has no place to live. He's putting—being put out, you got a big house." I said, "Oh, sure, there's room on the fourth floor, he can stay there" or live there as it turned out.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: You knew who he was at this point or no?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I think maybe in a mention of obscure artist working in Germany, but no, I would not have—I don't think I knew who he was in any concrete sense, but I was—because of one thing, in 1964, from my overgeneralizing perspective, I was just not interested in what was going on in Europe at all. And without knowing anything, I still—I tend to believe everything—all the impulses are coming from the United States, I'm in Manhattan, and that's where they're coming from. What do I care about what they're doing in Europe except for Dubuffet, and he remains for me an exception. And otherwise of Bernard Buffet—I mean the Museum of Modern Art was promoting—I'm not sure how you say his name, hello. And I—and by—in the mood of the time, I and some people in my then circle blamed MoMA and then they blamed the Rockefellers that the Rockefellers were using Japanese art and German and European art, French art, German art were using that in some way, which we didn't understand, but it was going to have to do with the uses of the Museum of Modern Art to favor something that was not Manhattan.

[00:15:17]

They did not—I don't know the dates of when they turned about Abstract Expressionism, but they were not there in the early days as far as I know. And so it was derivate Japanese stuff and German stuff, which in theory for me would always be secondhand or a derivative. I regarded—I'm still rebelling European history of World War II, that's still in me, and European history about, which I've known a great deal, seemed to me a nightmare. I was not emphasizing the reconstruction and the upspringing of the various arts. In me was still the memory of pointless wars, my favorite, the Franco-Prussian War, hello? And so I saw Europe in my generalization as a kind of a nightmare in a dummy [ph] behind a slaughterhouse. And I couldn't get away from terrors about—this before the European Union and all kinds of things and—have changed and before MoMA changes. I owe everything to MoMA. However, there are moments when they seem to me to have lost their way and then when my friends brought in external motives of galleries, which were influential, the Rockefellers were much more international in their view than anybody I knew in the arts, and the internationalism which was quite right in terms of politics and governance and all of that, they also manifested as internationalism in the arts. Again they're probably right in theory but Bernard Buffet—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, it's hard to—yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And there were other insults to visual intelligence, although by the way, Sol Ostrow in [inaudible] I will say being a little arch is a great defender and proponent of the paintings of Bernard Buffet. And now that we've landed foursquarely [ph] in Arthur Danto's Postmodernism in which anything goes, well, I guess anything goes. In which case if they're free to have anything goes, I'm free to have judgments, and I'm still making aesthetic judgments, which it's a responsibility of MoMA to make. But I think they've largely lost their way, and that's all for the good, I'm sure. My narrow taste isn't as narrow as it used to be.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: So you got the phone call that Nam June Paik—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh I got the phone call—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —Dick Higgins, yes, thank you. And now Dick didn't say, "Oh, Paik has been here for a month living with Alison Knowles', Higgins' father in his house in Greenwich Village. But things were so easygoing, what the hell, sure, I got a—nobody was using the fourth floor, at that point. My wife was beginning to use it at one end for painting and so Paik moved—Nam June Paik moved in. Now when Paik moved in, and that's—was a slow process because eventually he moved in 16 television sets, chained them together. He built two robots, and upstairs is where the robot, the first robot that could walk was invented here, and I didn't have the wit to understand here are in my life Ray Johnson and Nam June Paik, both of them concerned with international networks not like the Rockefellers' networks. But that—use of the television internationally and Paik's networking, which dovetailed with, overlapped Ray Johnson's networking. Although parenthetically, the—Ray did not—well, Paik interviewed Ray three times by writing down questions. I would then type the questions and give the questions to Ray. In some cases, I have what Paik wrote, I have my typing and then

Ray's responses, and it's important to know where Paik wrote 10 questions, Ray answered 13. That is he's not going to follow those instructions.

[00:20:12]

Now, when Paik began to live here, a couple of things happened: One was most European artists knew to stay in the Chelsea Hotel. Therefore after my mother moved here in '66, typically they went to the Statue of Liberty and May Wilson, they met her, but also, many of them knew to communicate with Ray, and he would bring them here. And so with Ray came Diderot [ph] and—and I don't—oh, a dozen other names, a variety of people, most of them marvelous. I think it was Diderot who brought a long-legged, American-beauty girlfriend who knew she wasn't anywhere important, and she was the best staged—stagey performance. It was like an actress doesn't exercise and demonstrating boredom and lack of interest and frustration. She was charming, I—she was vivid. But also would've come along with Paik, people like Cunningham and Cage. And so when—I think—I'm not sure of the date except that it's probably '65 almost certainly, Charlotte Moorman was preparing to perform a 20-minute composition by Paik and so there was John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Morris Graves standing within seven feet of where Charlotte was performing.

Now at some point in her—in Paik's composition—in Cage's composition I'm sorry, she was to smash a window. Well in this dump of a house, I had the basement filled with old windows, which had been replaced and so I was thrilled that a piece of junk in my life was brought upstairs one flight—two flights and smashed as part of what was one Charlotte's finest performances of a John Cage piece, and Cage was very pleased with that. On that subject, and I'm still trying to find documentation, I was—at Queens College, I was on a committee. At the end of the sophomore year in those days, a student had to take a test in liberal arts to qualify to go on to the third year—I think that was abandoned later—and they had to experience all kinds of things. And so there had to be something in music, there had to be something in the fine arts, and I was on this committee and given a $500 budget to arrange a musical program, something individual, I don't know, it was a lot of stuff. Five hundred dollars even then wouldn't cover it, and I got Paik and Charlotte to perform on the stage at Queens College. Now Charlotte two months before had been arrested for public nudity because she exposed her breasts while performing a Paik piece. And so the set—the—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: The bra piece I assume?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: The bra piece.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: The president of Queens College sent his secretary, a woman in a pillbox hat and a [inaudible] notebook to record everything that happened and a photographer, and there was audience of undergraduates. And as we learned in that period, the audience is a large—are participants, they're a large part of what—of the tone, the feeling, the reality of what occurs. And so when Charlotte did a *Cut Piece*, Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* where as a woman sits on stage in a gown of some sort, the audiences have invited to come up and take scissors and cut off a piece, then the question becomes who's going to cut the gown so that she's rendered nude. So the students shyly came up and cut at the gown very timidly, and Charlotte later said it was the sweetest audience that she had done the performance for. Something like atomic physicists in Philadelphia and she thought these men with scissors in their hands—it's a great theme there metal and flesh—men with scissors in their hands were going to stab her, and at Queens, she felt that it was a lovely experience. And I remember it because I saw lots of Paik and Charlotte performances, and it had a different quality from some of the other performances—

[00:25:11]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And did Charlotte perform it as Yoko Ono's piece?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes. She performed the *Cut Piece*, which she performed lots and lots of places, I'm assuming, with Yoko Ono's permission. But also in that time, things like copyrights and all of that, that was—there wasn't—I don't remember anxiety about lots of things like that. It was—it's almost there to be—it was there to be used.

Now, with Paik living in this house, many people came to see Paik, not to see me. Importantly, a figure who I'm sure will be covered in the history of art is Billy Klüver at Bell

Lab. And he—while he never saw me in the same room with himself, and that was fine, that worked for me, but I could be with Paik and Billy in the room on the fourth floor. Billy might have brought from Bell Lab either the largest magnet in the world or the third largest magnet in the world or something—some uniquely Bell Lab magnet, and Bell Lab had put up all this money and offered all these facilities because they knew—on a major theme, they knew they needed the novelty of working with materials that artists would bring ideas, which the engineers could not have because they were within the systems of engineers. And so I was—I had the privilege of good fortune of standing with two fairly innocent people, Billy Klüver and Nam June Paik. While Billy Klüver moved the magnet around demonstrating to Paik what a more highly powered magnet did. Paik already had the house full of magnets, and Billy and Paik both seem to think that in American households all the way to Nebraska, people sit in front of television sets and move the magnets thereby becoming participants in the television. And nowadays, they have all these pseudo-interview-question things on television asking people to vote for this and that. That is false sense of participation given to people, express your ignorant opinion about things. Well this was for people to alter their visual experience, and the idea remains I think a valid idea. Billy of course was much behind the E.A.T., Experiments in Art and Technology, and by the way since I mentioned Ray, Ray Johnson, of course, had nothing to do with such a program, he was not invited. And it was strangely disappointing series of events in which brilliant people were fluxed by technology and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: You found the Rauschenberg events disappointing as well?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, I was about to—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, sorry.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —I was about to say that now in terms of my experience in an audience, no, in the Rauschenberg and the tennis game and all of those things individually. But I've been—as a kind of hobby, the philosophy of technology, I've—there—I've—to think about technology, I followed in an amateurish way in a distance, and I had, hello, the confluence of art and technology. A lot can happen here, and in the tragedy of events, for instance Yvonne Rainer's piece used a walkie-talkie, which I don't know when—how far back that went, but that was not new technology, and it was—and it had tragic effects. Yvonne, as far as I could understand, became very sick in the sequel to that. I don't know causalities here except that it was very damaging to her work, although it may have freed her from some people who were overwhelming her, so maybe it served purposes—it served inadvertent purposes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Can you be more specific about that?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, no.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay. I'm reading Robert Morris, but I'll leave it that.

[00:30:04]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Robert Morris has been a fascinating figure in my life, and I wrote a brilliant essay about him. But in 1968 perhaps, and I interviewed him many times and many, many Sunday mornings, I went, and we chatted for an hour or two. When I met him in 1962 and I knew then, lightly acquainted with the massively, massively important Oldenburg. For me, because of—I'll quickly call—comedy, as this this point to the complexity of tone, I saw them as so close, back-to-back may be, but nevertheless back-to-back. That is I—with what I talked with Bob about and what he showed me in the studio, the kind of wit, which was brilliant, hello, I see the same—I see related with in Oldenburg. And to me, only later when classifications were made and categorizations were imposed when something like minimal art was defined. Whereupon young people knew how to become minimal artists, and they could get into a show called minimal art, but before those categories, and I'll say something in—also the moment and discrete. Before those categories, before somebody said Pop art, and that's so badly misrepresented in the history of art that only last week I got an email Pop art begins in England, No, I don't think so based on my experience. Are we out?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, no, just checking, we're fine.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay, with all goodwill, Gary [ph] is still writing that Pop art begins in England. Well, neither Pop art nor minimal was prescribed as a classification and so I was

free to see, oh, I know Oldenburg and I know Robert Morris, and then of course, the classifications came in. And while—and Bob moved in different directions, which maybe, I don't know, I'm not saying cause and effect here, except that later he was more easily categorized as minimal after the work with plywood. And some of his wit became unavailable, visually, it was not—I didn't see it in his art. That—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And did you see that art in the early '60s, the stuff that was very Johnzian [ph] that he was doing '63–'64, sculpt metal pieces with right rulers and things like that?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, oh yes, yes, yes. And I saw—but I think the last studio visit except for one, the last important studio visit, it—it's important—it's misleading because I sat, and I talked and—but it's typical and informative about Bob. Okay, so last interview, I've talked with him many, many times, and I've seen him shows and, oh, I know about Morris, okay. And as I'm leaving and I'm at the door and he's standing there, he points across the room to what looked like rolled-up rugs that go into rugs, whatever they're called, and they're rolled up, and he says, "That's my next show." Now, I see these rolled-up sub rugs, totally indifferent with no material pleasures at that point, and I go home and I think about those not knowing that Bob did not mean he was going to display them rolled up on the floor like that. [Laughs.] Oh, not having the imagination to know that it was going to make these very strange—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Felt pieces.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —hanging, cut felt pieces. So I'm there adding the rolled up—the sort of nothings of these rugs, which for me are consistent with directions in his work, which I perceived. And I'm faulting him for the misleading, pointing to that—to those things and faulting me for misunderstanding because I should've understood that central to Bob's life and art at that time was frustrating order, comprehension, understanding so that he—where there was a form of order, okay, I had a ruler, what else do I need? Oh, all right, here's another ruler, but it's a little bit different. How do I arrive then at order?

[00:35:29]

And I've played back over our conversations, which I didn't tape because I thought that would distort our conversation, and Yvonne was usually there. I played back over those, and I've decided that central to his work was the frustration of the accepted orders in things. Although people kept trying to assimilate him and his work to the emerging order defined as minimal and putting even shows and then scholars were coming from Europe. And I won't say straitjacket but they were bringing definitions of his art and that kind of wandered away. Now, I just spoke—remembering my essay. I think it's the best thing I've ever read about Robert Morris. However at the time of the—this must be on the record—at the time of the Guggenheim retrospective, a young friend, Kim [ph] was doing the bibliography, and we had spoken on the phone, and I said, "Oh, by the way, I'll send you my essay on Bob," which no one had given to her, and she recorded that essay in the scholarly bibliography of a major museum, of a major retrospective. And when Rosalind Krauss came to her desk and she saw that entry, Rosalind Krauss crossed it out so that there's no reference—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, my God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —Guggenheim catalogue for Robert Morris of my essay on Robert Morris, and that's enough to say because that disqualifies her and their other—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, there are plenty of reasons to—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —disqualify her.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: In the time, she did—and she's done, obviously, interesting work that's separable from my self-interest in preserving the essay.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Wow.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And Bob—by the way, I knew Bob because I persisted. I knew his work was important. I first went to a studio with Ray Johnson, and with Ray, I may have seen a

different Bob Morris from what other people were seeing, I don't know that, but it was a very attractive person and very agreeable. And I felt like I knew him, I felt like we were friends.

But increasingly, he became difficult to talk to, and I shouldn't tell this but I will. He called me years later that he was teaching a graduate course at Hunter, he was going to Europe with three weeks or so would I take his class. And so I agreed to that, it'd be interesting, I never taught—never took an art class, never really taught an art class. And so I went and I walked into a course of complaints that they weren't learning anything. And then—and I realized that what he was doing was—came under the heading of frustrating people's ideas more than just encouraging them. That is—that's not to fault him—that is to say he is being Bob Morris. They weren't in the position to appreciate the sensibility that was unfurling in front of them. They weren't there for the experience; they were there to learn something they didn't think they were learning. And I got to work very quickly, and a very pleasing three weeks in which I was trying to catch them up on some things they thought they should be caught up on. And I took that to be yet another expression, valid in its own way, of an extremely important sensibility. That is taking Bob as an artist not just a teacher of graduate students, take him as an artist, and every detail of what he does is significant, and we may someday want to know now that. Now he did—he changed as a person marvelously with his marriage and the birth of a daughter. Our conversations changed, he felt some more rapport with my life and—as a father of children, and I thought, oh my God, his art is going to—[they laugh]. I thought this can't be good for his art.

[00:40:25]

And I'd have no comment there except that wonderfully, he picked up a major essay by the philosopher Donald Davidson. The essay is called "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" and then—and that's an extremely important essay for me. Independently with no communication about it really, Bob started to work with Davidson who wrote an essay about Bob in maybe *Critical Review* [ph], whatever it's called, and all good fortune to him. I think he's been a major witness to the eras through which we have lived, and that's enough to say about him.

At the same time, he's been a very frustrating person to know, and it was weird to me that the minimal artists I knew, the ones so identified didn't feel so far [ph] feeling rapport with Bob could be quite nasty about him and repeatedly thinking that he was using other people's ideas. And that's why I wrote about him in the development of a continuous expressive sensibility. Instead of formalism, I made the work personal to him in order to show that it all came from the same sensibility, that he wasn't stealing ideas from someone, which is the accusation that I heard made by artists at that time. And I think maybe it became a critical comment too.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: How did you understand the Castelli—the famous Castelli poster?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, I would you put in [inaudible]?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yes, I do.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I didn't understand. I—and again, that's why Bob—I took Bob to be instructive for me in a way as to what my—what I should be learning that he already knows. In parentheses, the bond that he—the commercial corporate bond that he exhibited, I had okay stop and think and work on this. And that was for me a huge experience of thinking about art and money and the variations and financial value in relation to variations in aesthetic value. And marvelously assuming that that bond still exists, its value is still changing both aesthetically and as money, as a representation of money. So I thought this was a brilliant work, and I credited Bob with knowledge that maybe went way beyond that into the financial, the predicaments about money, which we suffer within, when it comes to that poster, which stopped me in my tracks. I thought then, I don't know what this is about, and until I read what you wrote, I thought it's—I still think for me, I don't know quite what this is about. I don't know what he's saying with this.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No connection to Gene Swenson's ideas?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I never put that—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: I mean the two don't seem to belong together but—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, okay. I'm in a restaurant with Gene Swenson; the waiter comes up and says, "What will you have?" I pass the restaurant all the time on Greenwich Street, "What do you want?" And Gene reaches his arm out pointing close to him and says, "You!" I, of course, die a thousand deaths sitting there, and I just effectively black out. This would've been, I can date it early '66. And I—the world was ready probably, but I wasn't, and here we get into my recital of my bad faith, false consciousness, inauthenticity, and other vices, which are well chronicled in the dialectic of enlightenment and other Frankfurt—the Frankfurt School, it's all in that [inaudible] of Bill Wilson and—

[00:45:11]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, they nailed you, huh?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And they're quite—they're quite valid, they're quite valid, although I think also they, sort of, looked in the mirror. And when I see photographs of them with cigars [ph] in their mouth, I say, "Aha, aha, aha."

Now back to this, I'm stalling on this question, I never talked with Bob Morris. Now, I pick up with the interviews, this is after several years of acquaintance, he's living with Yvonne. She's such a powerful figure in my life. I have gone three times see Yvonne and Bob in *Waterman Switch*, if that's the title—we don't trust me on titles—literally three times. So I can—what is this saying? I knew I needed to know what Yvonne knew, I knew I needed to know much of what he knew, and to that end, I would say that the way I took the '60s was as an education, which was an emancipation so that if I saw a show at one gallery, next month—what's the gallery across the hall—my brain, anyway. The show seem to me to speak to each other, to respond to each other. Okay, this is an excursion farther into materiality than you can really get, and this is a criticism of aesthetic illusion. And then the month later and it can't—biographically it can't have been that the artist is getting a show that quickly. But it seemed to me a conversation, and Marjorie Willis [ph] has agreed with me that it was like this for someone—for a spectator that, oh, well, Donald Judd had said this, but look, Robert Smith said—has said this, and, oh my God, look what Serra just said, and then in comes Carl Andre, oh my God. And they're not on paper responding to each other, but in sensibility, they certainly are responding to each other. And by the way, I think that their actual responses to each other in a place like Max's bar on the east—west side, that's a [inaudible] line, on the west side of Park Avenue, I think they were there literally, actually, socially responding to each other in ways that reflected their commitments. All of their commitments were something I needed to know both in the qualitative commitment and in the content of the commitment. The quality of the commitment, these guys were ready to kill for the artist closest to them of course, who were the dangerous to them, they were ready to kill on behalf of their art.

And on that—in that vein, okay, there was a bar at one—a couple of bars, but anyway, I'm sitting at the—all those guys are down there in the booth, and those are heavy hitters, and I don't know they don't want somebody who's not of—in their—not—not playing in their league. They don't want anybody down there but heavy hitters. I think Mel Bochner was even a little hesitant, but he qualified. So I'm sitting at the other end at the bar and looking ahead because I don't want to be even looking at those guys. Though I would give a finger from my hand to hear what they're saying because this was the sanctum sanctorum—that's not the right expression. This was the school of art, the only school that I wanted to hear. And while I knew these people individually and so I knew something of what they were talking about, no, this was the sanctum sanctorum. And that I was shut out of that was hurtful to my—to me. I knew I didn't know what the priests—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Were—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —were discussing among themselves. Now a friend of mine said, "Oh, the most mysterious people were—" during Berlin in the 1920s said that "The people who were known to have the knowledge beyond anybody else were the transvestites in Berlin in the 1920s. And so that is all anecdotal allegory of course and so someone works his way into this group to hear the raw, unblinking truth, and they're talking about the price of cabbage. [They laugh.] And, of course, that's in—in accord with the Zen and beyond Zen.

[00:50:37]

Okay, we—I'm back at that barstool not characteristic of me to simply be in a bar on a

barstool but—so I must have been turning away from something. In any event, I'm sitting there, and up comes Carl Andre to talk to me, and we begin talking. And we're talking—I don't have a lot of small talk [laughs], Marjorie [ph] said Bill has no small talk. We're right in a conversation about Carl's work in relation to, I'll say, myth and meaning. And Carl, of course, is saying that his work has no meaning, and that would undercut the materiality, that would haunt him with ideas. And I'm saying he can't escape that, that he's in a predicament. He can fight against certain qualities and Serra can hurl metal into a corner and they can do these different—but I just—you can't escape this. And—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: But the hurling metal into a corner was clearly, right, referencing Pollock, was it not? You didn't strike you as such?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, but that's another theme in that work. It's—it wasn't making a painting, a painting is—as a whole is a visual illusion. This never achieved that wholeness and singleness, which went with, hello, a masterpiece, a Pollock painting. They were masterpieces until Lee [ph] sign—signed them. Yeah. That's her [inaudible] that says Jackson Pollock. Nevertheless, I—if I get off of my conversation with Andre, I'll just—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Please go on.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —I've lost my thread. Now, I've lost the word here. What is the word? I'm sorry, I should have rehearsed. Um, I—I can't think of the word. I say you are not strong enough to frustrate, meaning myth, allegory in some way or other. You can't get the ideas out of the work. And then what is the word and maybe it'll come to me—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Connotation and [inaudible], no?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, there's one—no, no, no, there's one word, but it's not flat—maybe it's metal, a word for metal. In any event, Andre is looking at me, and he says, the same word 128 times, I started to count after a while. And then I see something which is a blank, but otherwise, I see the same pretty closely, and Carl puts both his fists up in my face and says something to me like he's about to fight for—fight for nonmeaning. And his hands are trembling and his fists are in my face, and I said, "Carl, never speak to me again," and I—actually, I didn't leave the stool because then Mel Bochner who had been hovering—Carl left and Mel came over but—so a few years later by chance, we're next to each other in some protest out, I think, at the Guggenheim, not a word. Going ahead until maybe four years ago, I'm invited to be on a panel about Eva Hesse by one of the Richard Myers [ph], I'm not sure who, what his name is this minimal art person. And—

[00:55:12]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, James Meyer.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Janes Meyer.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And there's Nancy Holt and Mel Bochner, and as he tells me in the telephone not knowing that he's warning me, "There's Carl Andre," and I thought, well, we haven't spoken since 1968. This is not trivial in my life for me to say to someone, "Never speak to me again," is beyond me—from the etiquette and a deprivation because Carl is obviously a genius in his own way, but a genius with his fists in my face is not quite my style. And so I thought, this is huge, and I prepare my soul, my spirit to be in the presence of this. And Carl is already sitting on the stage, and I go in, and he has no memory of me, who I am, or anything pertaining to me, and I'm almost disappointed because I've expected—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sure.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —this was not trivial in my life. And then I—but I had to get out of there, and I've just composed myself, and so I go out and then I come back. In the meantime clearly, Mr. Meyer has spoken, and he leans back in his chair and he points at me and says, "Oh, Bill Wilson, you were important." I thought, well, there's all kinds of important, Carl. And then the whole—then the thing started in which—it was not a great—Mel was marvelous, and I don't know what has happened to Carl's brain since 1968, but he seemed like a reconstituted person or somebody who needed reconstitution. There was something just seemed missing in him as a person; I don't know how to say that. Some—he was—he

seemed less than he had seem to me and that's—he's probably—that's just my impression and Nancy Holt talking about the influence of Eva Hesse on herself just—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And did—when you mentioned Smithson earlier in Holt's account of his nighttime activities, so she knew about this?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: But she says no, she said, "Oh," she said, "I never—" She says, "I never asked him where he was going, he just got dressed and he went out." And she has—talking with other people has testified that she knew nothing about any other possible life that he had. And I don't know in detail except that I had an informant who informed on Smithson.

He's one of the people I wish I had known. Our few conversations, and when people found out that I was a professor, that often put a chill in those conversations. Although there's another side to that, and that should be said to disqualify me from this interview because I met two, I think, extremely important artists, had lunch with them, and in my diseased imagination at the end of the lunch, each of them separately—one was John Farren and the other one James Brooks. Farren had gone off the rails in the most powerful, possible way. I remember the chair I was sitting in at Yale in the library, in the graduate center when I read in the *New York Times*, he has made bilateral—bilaterally symmetric image in his painting. I got on the next train to Manhattan because if he's got bilateral symmetry in a painting, the world has changed. And I don't mean—this sounds like an exaggeration; it's not. This was of the utmost seriousness to me, and I've never recovered from it. Then, it's a few years later that there I am lunching with him, and he really made a marvelous statement that he would like to know me, and in my diseased imagination, I thought he can't possibly want to know me, and I didn't follow up. James Brooks was marvelous, so, to talk with. I think I would like to edit a James Brook show, but I think he can be shown as—like Sam Francis, he can be shown when he's not working against himself and all of that. And thoroughly admirable as a man, as a thinker, and he—again, this is Billy Wilson's bad experiences of his own doing, I didn't follow up on that because I thought he can—this man had just said he'd like to know me, he can't possibly—

[01:00:34]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Mean it, huh?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —want to know me. That's my holding back, and that's also why at Queens when Serra, who's a different person by the time he's teaching in Queens, and he clearly—there's no more of the rudeness, which I had suffered when he was with Nancy, and I mean suffered. And that's gone, but too late for me, I'm not taking a chance on being treated the way he was capable of being—of treating people, and anyone who knew him and a more delicate person like Chuck Close, anyone who knew Richard could tell you. And then because people do change, in spite of what the TV says, people change, and Richard in a later marriage, I guess marriage with Clara, became a different person. Too late for me and so that I—oh—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: So talk to us about—[coughs]—sorry, Nam June Paik was here how long?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, and that question is more com—okay, he was here about two years, and I don't know because with 16 televisions sets and two robots, at some point he took a loft on Canal Street and—but he would move things back and forth, and it was busy. There's my—

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WILLIAM S. WILSON: —wife and she's—and by the way, upstairs, we had Mary Baumeister and Sagi—Saki—Saki Ito [ph] and many women artists. And sometimes it's a coven of witches, and sometimes it's people gluing down stones, it was busy, a lot of people. A couple of Ann's friends from art school are sleeping in my study in sleeping bags and things like that. Downstairs is Mrs. Timmons [ph] taking care of the three children at some—you know, because at the time we're talking about, my son has been born in '65. So Paik is still here but in and out, and I know the studio because I take Dr. Friedman-Kien's who discovered this syndrome of AIDS, and I take Ray Johnson, although that's not the reason. And I take Ray John who, as we're leaving, Nam June Paik at the door says, "And what do you think of my art?" And Ray Johnson, says, "I find it entirely uninteresting," and since I've taken Ray there, of course I'm—I die—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, my God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —a thousand deaths, but they later communicate and bond, collaborate, and Paik does the marvelous statements, first information artist Ray Johnson, and he's aligned himself as the TV information network on that with Ray. Now, what happened is that Paik moved things. One day, he did bring a group of Bowery homeless people, at the time still called Bowery Bums, and for your history by the way, probably 80 percent of the homeless people who were on the Bowery were gay.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Really, huh?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And the word *gay* itself goes back to homeless people along railroad tracks who use—who seem the first to have used the expression because the men already there gay, preyed on new arrivals who probably were thrown out of their houses, families, and all that, and there they were. And that's for you and the history of words except that probably the word *gay* in its use as homosexuality, and I'm working on that language at the moment, probably goes back to a place like the Bowery where, of course, Rauschenberg opened a loft and where I tripped along—among the bodies with Elaine Varian [ph] who always with—in high heels and stockings and always dressed for—in the Upper Easter Side where she lived, and we went to hellholes in our pursuit of artists. And Robert Indiana was on —after a certain point was on the Bowery.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Johns too.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And who?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Jasper Johns too.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, but I was never in his studio. I photographed Bob in the Bowery studio and associate that. So Paik moved out somewhere. He was very upset by events in my family and so that—and I'm not sure, I'd have to write down month by month. At some point, he hired these from the Bowery who turned out—one of them I had known, who complained to Paik that I had not said hello. Well, it was six or seven guys, all of them wrecks, and I had not looked out for an old friend and turned out—and this is actually—it's important because it's part of my attitude about problems about drugs. This person who was beyond, somewhere beyond brilliant, Freddie was on heroin, and he can maintain that a little while in the art world and intellectual world where he held his own intellectually, only he descended to the Bowery destroyed. And—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: This is not Freddie Herko?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, no, no, no, no, no Freddie went out the window of course unrecognizable. Freddie is in the news because there's a man who started out—to write [ph] about [inaudible] of Freddie. His name is Gerard Forde, Irish, born in London with Irish parents, and he at the moment is working on the archives of Sari Dienes, his pursuit of Freddie Herko—

[00:05:08]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: The archives of—I'm sorry.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Sari Dienes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sari Dienes.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: His pursuit of Freddie Herko brought him to the period, and he's doing remarkable research in the farther corners of the world, and I don't know. And there he is capable—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: To talk about Sari Dienes because she was everywhere, and nobody talks about her anymore.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And I know her as a spirit who would go along with anything. I didn't know her in her 57th Street days. I don't know when I knew her. Stanley VanDerBeek is a hugely important figure way beyond anything that's been recorded as far as I can see and because there was a radical change in Stanley's mode of making pictures. But it was through him—okay, Stanley, Ray meets him 1951 in Black Mountain College. Do you want that story?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM S. WILSON: All right, Ray Johnson has left Black Mountain College in '48. He returns in '51, and we never have large details of how, why, what. He returns in '51 and being Ray arriving at a place, he—and I see the movie, which I saw when he told me about this. I'm not sure my movie, but he walks down the hill to the men's bathhouse. Okay, in the bathhouse across the room, there's an open shower with an overhead light and the water, no cubicle. Ray walks in and standing under the light, under the shower is naked Stanley VanDerBeek, blond, Dutch, who strides forward wet and naked with his hand outstretched and says to Ray Johnson, "Hello, welcome to Black Mountain College, I'm Stanley VanDerBeek." Ray Johnson said and I quote, "It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my life." Part of the beauty of that may have been that in northern Michigan, his aunt managed a sauna that she owned for Finnish miners. Underneath his grandparents farm is a copper mine, so his grandparents owned the product of their labor, fruits and vegetables, which maybe Andy Warhol was selling, who knows? [Laughs.]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Who knows? In Billy Wilson's world, they probably were selling the produce from the—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Warhol—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —from the Johnson grandparents. So they're the grandparents, they own the farm, they own the products of their labors. Here are the blond, beautiful, Finnish miners who were paid by the hour or the week or whatever, there's wage, [inaudible]. They don't own anything, they probably don't even own a cup or a lantern. And Ray's parents who have removed to Detroit and work there, they would come up to visit the family. And that for me is all Ray Johnson needed to learn about economics and explains a lot of the problems that he had.

Now, when he meets Stanley VanDerBeek, and I don't know because there are lost years, which Michael Vanotrop [ph] is valiantly working to fill in, and we are aware of lots of people, but the memories are going and the documentation is, all that stuff. So those are being filled in as quick as we can. So we pick up in the late—in the mid-1950s, it's Manhattan, the art world is so small, everybody meets everybody. And Black Mountain College, although it's rarely mentioned, nevertheless is unifying in that people who went to Black Mountain College have friends who went there. They meet other people and so Nick Senovich [ph] and Ermie Charlap [ph] and Ray Johnson and Stanley VanDerBeek, they all—and Dorothea Rockburne all have—even though they weren't there at the same time, they all have that college to fortify themselves in the background and mostly some association with—I'm losing names. I'm going senile in front of your microphone.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Albers?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Albers, yeah, ridiculous. And parenthetically, it's not on the record. Emotionally, intellectually, I think Anni Albers was more important for Ray Johnson than her husband. And while that doesn't get mentioned, it's things like that that don't get mentioned where the wife who made the casserole and took out the bottle of cheap red wine at midnight and put—and those glasses just appeared out of some—nowhere on the table where the guys were talking. But that woman often was a more important figure, a more instructive figure, and of course, her work with fabrics was directly influential on Ray.

[00:10:34]

In the meantime, okay with Stanley VanDerBeek and this is something that has to be on the record somewhere or other because by the—by I'll say 1955, my—the influences from Surrealism well recorded because Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in America*, which I wrote a brilliant review of, okay, they're all there, they're wide array, one genius after another. I mean marvelous, marvelous stories because [inaudible] is on the same ship with Lévi-Strauss, hello, how did that—? You know, who—what providence arranged that?

In the meantime, I'm not—I would not pick one influence. However Max Ernst is a figure of special regard and if I take Max Ernst and then look at Stanley and Ray, both of them are concerned as artists to put images in motion. They both must set in motion images. With both of them—both of them, the impulse, it doesn't originate with Max Ernst, but it's

illustrated by Max Ernst, which doesn't mean that Ray talked about him and recorded anything especially except that Jimmy Ernst, the son, had a weird position that Ray had a special regard for Jimmy I think because of special regard for Max Ernst. And while Stanley never told his wife why he named his son Max VanDerBeek, who's alive and well and teaching drum, he's a professor of drum in a high school in Maryland, Stanley didn't say, "Oh, he's named for Max Ernst." Well, hello, what else could it be?

Now, what happened is this—it's one of the great divisions for me because I'm as concerned with setting in motion as they were. Stanley VanDerBeek had a darkroom, now my parents always had a darkroom, this was different because Stanley had a conveyor belt. Now, we're already with implications, we've got [inaudible] elsewhere about supermarkets and things like that. But he has a conveyor belt, and he has a movie camera over the conveyor belt. And so he has cut from magazines any—anything. These guys would've chopped up the *Gutenberg Bible* if it had an image. He arranges on the conveyor belt the images that he's clipped, the same images that Ray might have clipped, arranges those images, click, one snap, moves them infinitesimally, another snap and until two o'clock in the morning. And Stanley—you know, "Stanley, can I go home now? I think I get the point, can I go home now?" And Stanley—it's Johanna who has to get up and find all the sneakers for the children, and Stanley moving these things with the patience not all of us have, click, click, click. And the result of his methodology can be seen on television commercials all the time, and a little bit of wit that one sees is often traceable to Stanley who is so traceable to Max Ernst, but I'm—if I had time, I would write about that, but I don't have it, I don't have the time.

Now, the analogy I'm making is not me imposing an analogy on Stan and Ray. Ray revered Stanley. I could tell from his tone when I was with Ray and the artist Ray was treating everyone like an equal but they're not all equal, and I could tell when somebody meant more to Ray than the ordinary people, which he was capable of finding anywhere. And there was a resonance with Stanley. And neither—I don't know if Ray ever wrote or spoke about Stanley, but then in his collages, what I saw from the beginning was that the still collage inspired the movement of the mind from image to image. And so where Stanley set the images in motion, in an illusion, which is entirely mental, you see the projected movie, and nothing of that is objectively, physically, materially real. It's entirely an experience of consciousness.

[00:15:33]

So Ray arranges collages for an analogous experience of consciousness of a movement, which occurred only in the mind of the spectator. And there's a problem, of course, for the history of art of what people experience and what they value because what Ray was valuing was so much a—his experience of the movements among images that may—if people don't have those movements, then they're not getting the Ray Johnson experience as it was first available. At the same time, it must be said, so I say it, that by—and I'm trying to work from evidence that I know from early '60s, certainly mid-'60s, that Ray did series. That he might do five works with very similar images where you wonder, how come he decided this or that other thing, but the point is not that. The point is that where Stanley had his conveyor belt, Ray had an assembly line. His father worked on an assembly line in a Ford assembly plant in Detroit. Ray did not work on a mechanical assembly line, but he would line up five collages, sometimes looking unrelated, but typically five interrelated collages where there's the same but different images, image of James Dean in all five collages. And another motif maybe repeated among the five collages but then what he, in my experience, invariably did was subtract maybe two of those. That is no one saw the complete series. And so I'm not sure what this means about what I'm calling an assembly line working because it's a demonic assembly line. It's not like the one his father worked on but it's—you can map one on to the other one if you allow for the comedy of Ray's assembly line because this is Buster Keaton who's turning up but—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And would he destroy the works out of this?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And again, the—we hit the unknown very quickly. That is Ray answered lots and lots of questions, but there were many that I wouldn't even dare ask because I knew that I wasn't supposed to, and I don't know. And until there's a catalogue in his name, which is impossible with him, I don't know the answer to that. I bought at one point after he died I—maybe three interrelated collages to make it easier to show that. I don't have all those anymore; I don't know where they've gone. He typically would've scattered those. Now he did in a show at the Willard Gallery, Marian Willard is a long story, whoa, and her daughter Miani Johnson is still alive now, she's a lot younger than I am, is alive and ought to be

interviewed.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Hmm.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: In an installation, Ray showed three almost when I—okay, almost identical collages. I don't remember another installation like that. Installation is an important image because he could do something in installation, which was ephemeral, which was the way he wanted it. Because these colleges were in motion for the show, they came together and glide, except Bill Wilson took a picture, and the picture shows a theme central to Ray's thinking. I can compare collage A to collage B, okay, and then I can compare B to C, but I can't compare A and B to C. That is chaos theory comes in more clearly than I can state anything at the moment of the impossi—

[00:20:15]

The reason, that is the mental capacity, rationality, the ratio between A and B, how do you map that on to the ratio between B and—? If you see an element in A was identical with C, how do you—? Oh, I can't think that, and I think that Ray was determined to make it impossible to think rationally, which takes me back to the frustrations of Robert Morris. I'm tired.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Laughs.] I bet you are. One last question, then we'll close it down. I just want to go back to Cage for a second.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't do much there.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, but yeah, first thing, in the art world at the time was Cage's relationship to Cunningham known?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, I would say so, but see if you knew—yeah, okay, a difference here is that Merce didn't seem to have much to do with Stony Point. At The Land, as it was called, Stony Point, I played poker in his series—I mean a contest with John Cage, and I found out after Cage died that John did not know that he'd ever played poker. Now, that's strange to the point of weird, but anybody can talk to Johanna VanDerBeek who was in those games, and Johanna speaks better than I about how John played because he played a random John Cage event, and he won, and he sat there blissfully not calculating, blissfully not using his reason, and the rest of us are strategizing, okay, I'll draw two. And John sat there looking like a Zen master in total bliss and reeling in the—we all were aware that we were in a room with John Cage. We know, we're New Yorkers, we know how not—how to handle that. But nevertheless, hello, right, I can reach out and touch him, he's John Cage.

And I'm definitely allergic to stings from wasps and bees like that. And one night when we were playing, there was an overhead light, I heard something in the corner of the room, and I was about to say what is that noise, what is—what's that? And before I could, John said, "What's that beautiful sound?" It was all part of his symphony, but it could've killed me. [They laugh.] Oh, there—I knew John Cage separately from other people, I'm not saying that well, just we had our own conversations. I had in maybe—I'm not again dates. Well, there's a lot to say, there's so much there. But he was gathering documents for an archive, which he planned to sell for the benefit—we all assumed for the benefit of John Cage, fine. And I had a 10- or 12-page letter from George Antheil to a woman, "Dear Madame, this is the story of my life." Hello, George Antheil was laying out his aesthetic and his—and the developments of that. I didn't know that John Cage loathed George Antheil.

Well, I gave that letter to John Cage for his archive, and we met in an apartment, which I don't know. Anyway, it doesn't seem to be part of the record, but it was where he was. And we had a strange conversation in that we had no backlog of—no—we had no long experience of friendship. It was two people together in the same events. But he talked very intimately and said to me that the moment his mother died, that he was going to commit suicide. And we talked about—whoa, we talked about—we talked about that, his mother and suicide. And there was no sequel to that, and he didn't—his mother died, and he didn't commit suicide, but it was a moment of intimacy with his mind. It was beyond the performances of the chance. That is when we were playing poker with him, he was being John Cage, he was perfectly aware. I cannot—I'm not saying it was not real or sincere or authentic, but it was John Cage, it was John—it was John Cage.

[00:25:09]

When he was here with Morris Louis [ph], and he and Merce—and that was a power couple. When they made an entrance, that was so—it changed the register of events when they were both there. I was only together with them once dinner in McMuffins [ph], or whatever it was, restaurant called. I was too shy, you may not believe this, and not garrulous and I—with Ray there, I probably didn't say a word, I revered both of them. John was one person—there were John Cage performances of John Cage spreading bliss. I mean he was so—he blessed everybody; he made everybody feel stronger in themselves. Now when they weren't there when he was not doing that, he might be more frank and say, "Wasn't that the worst painting you ever saw in your life?" but that was just him relieving things. Now I have on other John Cage story, which is—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Wait, before you—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: What?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —tell the story, you dropped that Morris Louis and John Cage—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Or no, no—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —I'm confused.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —Morris Graves I mean to say.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Morris Graves.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Did I say Morris Louis?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yes, okay, that—now, that makes perfect sense.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, I say that all the time.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, okay, Morris Graves yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh Morris Louis used to have sex under his painting table with a woman I went to high school with. That gets very [inaudible]. [They laugh.] Liz" Whitney Quisgard, she had studied under Morris Louis not—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —not Morris Graves. Morris Graves designated Ann Ubinger Wilson, my wife, as one of the three or four great painters of the 20th century and began to send her monthly checks. And after about six months, wrote a letter, which is here, that there was a redwood forest that he had to buy, and he wouldn't be ablet to send any more checks, but he was very helpful and enthusiastic about her paintings. But I'll tell one story because it's absolutely John. Okay, I had been given tickets to—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Wait, before you do the story, we're out, so let me—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, dear, dear.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —let me just do one more—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I talk too much.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, you don't, you talk brilliantly. My—

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JONATHAN D. KATZ: There we go. This is—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: When will I get to read this paper?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: What?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: When will I got to read this paper?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: I'll send you a copy, not a problem.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: This is Jonathan Katz and—interviewing Bill Wilson on the second day of interviewing. And first thing, thank you, Bill, and—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —what we were just talking about this piece that I'm finishing on the idea of the body in common in the 1960s. And that before our contemporary mania to differentiate ourselves from one another through evermore particular structures of sexual, gendered class, and race difference. The '60s tended towards understanding instead or prioritizing instead what we had in common, and, Billy, you were going to say something about that.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And I wanted you—I wanted to hear you developing your idea. I think my brain is not quite—is just array [ph]—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay, well—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —there. It's—there's a—there are questions in my mind about the history of philosophy, and if you—if the topic is love, then I want to know, it was logical positivism, was the analytic tradition in philosophy, able to say anything. But you make a statement and then I'll—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, I mean I think that what—at least what I'm reading, and of course I didn't experience it the way you did, but what I'm reading is that at the sort of early moment [laughs]—at this early moment rather than understanding one another as effectively stepping on one another's rights rather than understanding majority and minority structures. That there was a moment since lost in which we tended to emphasize instead what we all had in common. And I look at the work of some of the '60s artists as very much—especially those sort of body-based work as very much invested in that idea of what we had in common. And I see here people like, you know—you know, everybody from, you know, Carolee Schneemann or Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama to other artists like Paul Thek who seems to be early in his career un—I mean he's never not openly gay, but his sexuality doesn't seem to be problematic to him and then subsequently, it seems, became so. And I'm wondering if that was attendant upon the birth of this idea that we are instead marked by difference not by sameness. Am I making anything sense?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: You're making sense. I can't get a handle on any of that, in part because I was there and I think the complexities or the complications of that. So maybe something will come up and be more particular as we talk.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Or—well, if you could—you could then—just one of the questions that I wanted you to address was your relationship to Paul Thek.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Whew.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And if you could go to the beginnings and—?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Paul and I had, what I feel emotionally and intellectually, was intimacy, but he was very good at giving people he was with a feeling that he was being intellectually, emotionally intimate with them. And it was part of who Paul was and so I think he may have been misleading to some people who thought that there were dimensions to their acquaintance with Paul, which may not have happened. He seemed to me polymorphously perverse, whatever the expression is. And some—people fell in love with Paul very easily, it seemed to me, in my experience. And when I first knew him, he was in a very intense triangle with Joseph Raphael and Peter Hujar. I don't know any details of that; I know that Peter Hujar was blindly, madly in love or in desire or whatever the expression is with Paul. He seemed to orient himself according to where Paul was, not necessarily where he was.

[00:05:34]

When I was—I talked with Paul a lot in that period of the dead hippie, and at that time when I began to write about Paul and to think about a problem that he had of the work seeming so subjective that it might be irrelevant to anybody else. And I was trying to figure out the—Paul's relation to his—to his audience, his relation to, what I'll call, objectivities. I asked Peter

Hujar, "Do you have any photographs of Paul ?" I went to the studio, and if I say 2000, I mean, I don't know, the estate will know, except that there was an extraordinary number of photographs of Paul and in an intensity that Peter Hujar had in showing me and talking about these photographs, which was—had unusual proportions. Paul, I don't have a quotation from our conversations, I have a sense of the mood, of the feeling, and Paul easily agreed with what other people were saying, and it made it so easy to agree with what he was saying. S that as Paul and I conversed, and some of this was in the Stable Gallery in the presence of the dead hippie. As we conversed, we kind of flowed together, and I'm not sure that I was—I'm not sure that I was really presenting what my position would be. That didn't seem to matter given this friendliness, which went beyond formal friendliness into a feeling that our minds were flowing—flowing together. But—and this is what I saw Paul—Paul was able to achieve this feeling so easily that he even had rapport with Eleanor Ward who did not otherwise fit his world picture.

And I don't have—I can't remember words that Paul said. What I remember is the mood and the feeling of unity, oneness, harmony, and agreement with Paul. And I—in that process, I think I was giving up some of my own positions in order to participate in this feeling that Paul provided that we're all together and we understand each other. So that when he talked about, oh my Lord—when he talked about poems, and he did, I know that talking poems was his attempt to acknowledge my world, and everything we said seem to flow together in an unusual way. It was not like talking to Carl Andre or Mel Bochner or Serra who made blunt statements, which could be verified by them in some way or other. And so I'm trying to indicate that Paul was for me unusual in the period in that—in this—the flowing-ness and the sense of agreement and harmony. At the same time, he had—I know he had other thoughts. I'm sure there's a philosophy about the dead hippie which I may have not have acknowledged. I'm not sure I'm speaking to your—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, but it's great—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —I have your point in mind. I knew Paul from outside in the sense that I was always aware that he had these intense relations with Joseph Raphael and Peter Hujar. He didn't come as a single individual isolated in himself. He came as one angle of a triangle, the details of which I never knew, except that I was envious because Hujar, Raphael, and Thek seem to have such a—I don't have a word that doesn't—I don't want to exaggerate, but they just seem to flow into each other. And to have an idea that one of them had, the other ones would participate in, would agree with. I was envious of that outside because I felt like I was in some almost logical, passivist realm because I didn't have support for other thoughts and other ideas. I may lose my voice sometimes.

[00:10:47]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Ask me something else.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —sure. When did you first meet the triad or at least any individual members, do you have a rough sense?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It would be very rough. I would say from '65 that I was acquainted with them. I think it's not until—but then—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And you met all three together or separately?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: When you met one, you met the other two even if they weren't there. At least in my experience, one met a triangle, not a single corner. And it gets complicated because after my wife was no longer able to live us, she worked with Paul Thek, and Paul's work was being supported by the Gene Swenson as part of what he called the other tradition, coming out of Duchamp, and it was largely non-Greenberg and anti-Greenberg. And it didn't mean that these people had much in common among themselves except that they were in common at a distance from Greenberg's kind of formalism.

Gene in his interviews was trying—he'd ask questions, which went way beyond standard art historical questions. And in fact—and I think this is important for an archive to know—at one point, I had the literal transcripts of his interviews, and I also had those transcripts as they were edited by Thomas Hesse. And Thomas Hesse changed the words that were—that had been spoken by Gene and by the artist. He took out anything with—that had to do with

gender, and he took out anything that had to do with sexuality especially sadomasochism. Gene had a theory expressed to me that everyone was sadomasochist, they just didn't always know it yet. And it's an interesting moment for me in looking at the record of my own life that the official printed record published by Hesse in *Art News* was so different from the tone and the feeling of permissiveness, the oceanic feelings, which Gene was encouraging, although I had my own problems about those at the time. Speaking of those papers of Gene Swenson because he was killed when he went home and saw his mother, I had, through a series of accidents, a huge pile of Gene Swenson papers, which I did not know what to do with. And just to track archives, I gave a large part of those to Ray Johnson who gave a large part of them, I don't know all or part, to Henry Martin who at the moment says he has those under his bed in Bolzano, Italy.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, my God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Henry has been—he's promised to do an edition of Gene's essays, and I don't think I that has happened, although more and more people want to know what's underneath Henry's—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —Henry's bed. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —what's under Henry's bed. This—it comes up for many reasons, and while I'm on that subject, Christian Zatreck [ph] and Julia Robertson are doing a show, which pertains to George Brecht in large part and—I just lost my thought. Oh, and Gene Swenson in his essay "The Other Tradition," an essay written as a catalogue for ICA, ICI, what—?

[00:15:04]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: ICA.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: ICA in Philadelphia. Gene's essay, "The Other Tradition" is intellectually important for providing for something non-Greenberg looking toward a variety of art by a variety of artists, but especially in order to give permission for gay art. And that was Gene's motive, which he did not announce as such as far as I know, but he was opening because the door was closed by formalist ideas upheld by Greenberg. And those—not centrally, but those informally were opposed to gay artists as with the statement, which I keep quoting from Philip Pavia that the club of the abstract expressionists had no women, no homosexuals, and no communists because they start all the trouble. In fact, the club had some men who were gay, so Philip Pavia may not have been very observant.

The point there is, and I'm not going to the subject of love directly, except that Gene wanted to open up formalism toward the other themes that formalism omitted. Among those would be sex and love that you have—that you've spoken of. Now, I'm—this is a new subject for me to talk about, so I'm not—I don't have all the ideas—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: But, Bill, this is—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —handy—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —this is extraordinary. I mean nobody has really addressed it in these terms. And I have to ask therefore if—at the time if you can put yourself back, you understood, is it in other words, a retrospective understanding of Gene's project that he was creating space or was that the way you understood it at the time?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It's the way I understood it at the time, and here's another reference I have to go into. Gene—oh dear, Gene was, I'll say, friends with Mario Amaya who published *Art and Artists*. It was Gene who then got me to write for *Art and Artists*. I didn't realize that there was a theme in what I was asked to do except that for artists—*Art and Artists* published in London, I was asked for an essay on Ray Johnson, an essay on Paul Thek, an essay on Joseph Raphael. For each of those, I was paid $25, which did not cover postage and photo—[they laugh] and photographs.

What Mario Amaya was doing was brilliant in my mind, and this is a little bit retrospective, not completely, Mario Amaya was able to publish a magazine in London with articles, which were not so explicit about the homosexuality, but it was there. And no one could object in England because if they objected, it meant they understood these mysterious, understated, puzzling statements. Anybody who got the point that Mario was making thereby revealed

something, which English gentlemen might prefer not to reveal, so. And this in the large retrospection, I think that *Art and Artists* was extremely important for what Mario was trying to do. Mario comes into the history of art. Unfortunately, it was he who was with Andy Warhol when Valerie Solanas turned up and shot her gun through the door. Mario had—was holding the door shut with his body and got shot in the buttocks. I had—and this is—and Mario said I was a barbarian, I had at one point, don't ask why, a shopping bag, which had both sides of correspondence between Gene Swenson and Mario Amaya. I read the letters, which were various specific and colorful about sadomasochistic practices. At that time, I did not see how they had any bearing on the history of art. They didn't seem to me to illuminate anything that was going on. Now, I was wrong, but at the time, I saw what I saw, I thought, these letters don't enhance the history of art as I've understood that history and so I destroyed them. I told Mario Amaya, and he said that I was a crude, primitive, barbarian American, and he was entirely right I suppose.

[00:20:30]

The details I could—I remember, and I still don't see how specific details would illuminate the work of an artist at the—in the background. They would have to do with overlaps between Gene and Mario whose publications were intended to open a door that had been shut. The door opened toward sexuality, perhaps it opened toward love but—and here is where—and I don't know why I studied Robert Smithson from the angle that I did, and it was not generally known that Robert Smithson seem to participate, at least he went to S&M clubs. According to Nancy Holt when she went to bed at around ten o'clock, he would dress in leather and such, and he would go out to a to a bar. I know nothing about that except that I had heard the general picture. And when I wrote about him, and in the air at the time with the great question of Robert Smithson, the plane crash, the extent to which that could be read as suicidal in some way. That would be horrible because it would they include the murder of the pilot. Nevertheless, there was a lot of confusing talk in the air. At that time, I was pretty close to Mel Bochner, and we talked about these matters and Dorothea at the same time. The little bit that I knew Robert Smithson—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Dorothea Rockburne, sorry.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah. The little that I knew at the time of Smithson, and I only had two conversations with him, which were—they were not fluent, easy-going conversations—I got a sense of him as particularly loveless. And that's what I—and I mentioned that in my essay, a special issue of *Arts*, I guess, devoted to Smithson, and I stand by 45 percent of my—of that essay. I feel like I'm wandering—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, you're—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —from—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —you're not, but let me ask—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I feel like I'm wandering from the subject. Smithson was in opposition because—and where I saw him and other artists mostly was in Max's other bar, not Max's Kansas City but on the west side of Park Avenue where I was comfortable. I didn't—I was not comfortable in Max's Kansas City. And in a booth there often together were Serra, maybe Chuck Close, Dorothea Rockburne, Mel Bochner, and a few other very tough at that time, hard-boiled minimal artists. Occasionally, Eva Hesse would try to join them, and she took an awful lot of abuse because she was so condescended to. And I only had the nerve to sit with them once or twice, and I felt totally unwelcome in that situation. And I'm losing the name—Nancy—what is the name—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Holt?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Do I mean that? No, no, no, no. Who did the Camels?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Graves.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Nancy Graves, yes. Oh, weirdly for me, getting to know these artists, whom I met separately when they were gracious and polite, but when they were together, they were rude to me in the—they put up a kind of iron shield of, hello, you're not welcome here. And it's weird because Nancy Graves was maybe the most severe of all of them even though her work didn't seem to me especially minimal. You have a question.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And the first thing I—you had mentioned that among this group was Serra, and I just wasn't clear who you were referring to?

[00:25:06]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Richard Serra.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, Richard Serra.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I'm not—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: I'm sorry, I heard Serra—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —I'm not really—oh, okay, no, no.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Richard Serra, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Richard Serra, and I have a—my history with him has no—nothing to do with anything. He was so rude, and I'm judging things by hypocritical southern courtesies. He was so rude and so abrupt talking with him that a few years later, he turned up teaching art at Queens College where I saw him and where he tried to be friendly, and I was not friendly in response because I remembered the rudeness. That's my loss, I was mistaken in that but—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And do you have a sense of—I mean you mentioned Dorothea Rockburne was at the table, but Eva Hesse was condescended to. What—can you help me understand why Eva was picked on?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: She was a short, beautiful woman, and I don't know beyond that. I don't—I can't swear that I was ever sitting in that booth. I'll tell you, I have a horrible reaction on it when I picture that booth. There was one—there was not—that bar was never full, and it wasn't very jolly. And that booth, it was like a statement that three or four or five of them gathered together in that booth and who dare approach that. And after the first once or twice that I thought, oh, no problem, I'll sit with them, oh, no, I never tried to sit with them again. I didn't want to, they didn't want me, I didn't want to be with them as a group of. And with Eva—and if I start talking about Eva, I don't stop. And just parenthetically, once Naomi Spector heard me talking with somebody and I said that "Of all the people of the '60s," I said, "Eva has not—she's not gone, she's—" I put up my arm behind me, and I said, "She's as close as this," and Naomi stepped a foot forward, and she said, "No Bill, she's closer than that." And I don't know how the history of art preserves the quality of a person that Eva had; that's beyond my powers of description at the moment.

I know from Eva that she felt that she was not accepted but then has to be said she had her great reservations about what was called minimalism. She thought that it was inhuman and the—the details would have to be documented from her thoughts or right from her writing. But for instance, with Sol LeWitt, the letter that she wrote to Sol LeWitt seems to me to get misread because some people can't understand that she could've been criticizing LeWitt for qualities of his art, which she did not share or approve of. Eva had—was autobiographical in the way that those artists were trying not to be. Self-expression was obvious to her, and there was no way that anyone who knew Eva or talked with Eva could forget her past and so the whole of Eva was present in the conversation with her way beyond. Mel Bochner never mentioned Pittsburgh, his father was a sign painter in Pittsburgh, well, hello, that that is not hard to move from that to—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —to Mel Bochner.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —to Mel Bochner. And the others, if any of these minimalists had gone to a boys' preparatory school or had come out of the upper-middle class, believe me, they wore overalls and blue jeans and such, and they—their past was not in them. Eva was for me larger as a person to know.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: You knew for example that she had escaped Germany and all of that, that was clear?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes. Eva, I don't know if it's on the tapes, Eva had some German locutions in her speech, and she was, for a few years, a presence in this house. There's no

record of this, and I find—I feel strange about that because I believe in documents, but she visited so much.

[00:30:13]

There was a corner down—I'm getting off from Eva now. There was a corner downstairs where she would often sit and for me this—so there's a presence there. But also what happened because in those days, I'm talking about the first half of the '60s, this house was in turmoil. Nam June Paik was living upstairs; all kinds of people were in and out. It was rarely just the family for dinner, there were other people, and some of Ann's friends, kind of, were living, who knows, in sleeping bags somewhere in the house. I never knew what was the count was. Eva siting in that corner and she was small, but like in—there are many actors who are shorter than anybody else, but somehow, their dimensions can change when they're performing. And when Eva was talking, and she was extremely funny, and as she was talking, and she seemed larger. As she became the focus of one's attention, she seemed larger, but as she got larger while she was from her face, expression being funny, the somberness would begin to show through. And so she was being funny, I think without knowing, that one saw more than the comedienne, and there were the somber undertones, arose—rose to the surface. So that a conversation with her had a melancholy, which is not what she wanted to induce.

What happened, and now I'm getting into, I don't know, the right territory, in the spring of 19—we met Eva in late 1961 through a marvelous accident that a friend of ours driving on the Merritt Parkway. There was a beautiful hitchhiker, and she picked up the hitchhiker in her car, drove her to Manhattan when the school year was over at Yale, and then in the autumn, guess what, there was the hitchhiker who became part of all our lives. She met through us Tom Doyle, they went off to Germany, they came back separated. Through us, through our friendship, she met Mike Todd, the sculptor now in California, not the film producer.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sure.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And Mike was a very good friend of ours doing work, which is not in the mode, very related to my mother's work in some ways, and therefore, we had that which is an overlap that made him interested in May Wilson and the Wilson family, and he was here a lot. When he went out—when he had an opening around New Year's, '65–'66 changeover, we sent Eva to the opening. The next step was that she and Mike Todd became lovers, and after five months or so—and here I'm reverting to that Eva thought she was being funny, and she was extremely funny, but there was the—there were the somber undertones. And by the late spring or early summer, Mike couldn't take the sorrow anymore and so he ended—according to him, he ended that relation. And here is where she meets this—it's only history I guess. This is where Eva meets Mel Bochner not through us, and she begins a romance with Mel Bochner. Eva was a very loving, romantic, kind of cuddly person, and she—I don't know how to say how she recovered from broken, failed romances except that she went on to the next romance and began an affair with Mel Bochner.

[00:35:02]

When Ann Wilson was no longer able to live with us, Eva took her into her loft, and after a little bit—I'm in terrible territory here—Mel Bochner gave Eva an ultimatum that either she get rid of Ann or the romance was over. Now during that three weeks or so, and I don't have the documents of the dates, during that three weeks, Mel put a work of [inaudible] in a show, and by the way, Mel made the work, which he put in the show as by Eva because she didn't work from sketches. And so that's a little—one of those little facts in the history of art that nobody is going to mention except indiscreet people like me. So he did that work and put Eva in that show.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And he—and I'm sorry, and even knew that he had fabricated it.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, yeah, yeah. He wrote a poem for her in a circle and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: The *Wrap*.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, the poem and he did some—and he did something else, so they became a kind of, if not hero, at least an admirable man to many feminists who were supporting the work of Eva Hesse. And I don't mean—I'm just delimiting, defining Mel saying that after their three weeks or so, he couldn't—he ended the romance and went. He was in

the meantime also involved with—we have no secrets—with Dorothea Rockburne. And there were other problems because Eva I think ultimately, she had, for me, a larger philosophy of life and then the men she was acquainted with who were called—being called minimal, and so they went their separate ways. I'm not sure, there's other themes in there that have more to do with the history of art.

It should be said by the way as long as I'm mentioning Eva that people writing in the last 20 years have written as though she didn't make much art. She was in many, many shows, and she was working as fast as anybody could work. It's a distortion. She was not with a gallery that demanded that she produce prints and commodities. She worked according to her own rhythms and she had her own truth, which was very difficult for her to make manifest in a physical work of art. Doug Irons [ph] who is a marvelous figure in her life for many, many reasons, Doug Irons even was not capable of understanding her instructions fully. So that while he certainly was indispensable for making the models and for beginning her work, nevertheless she had to teach him again and again that—to include the signs of sorrow and failure. There's much more—there's more to say about Eva always I think—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And was it the case that Sol LeWitt was in love with her?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Well, I said so on a stage in London, and Sol LeWitt was on the same stage, and he nodded and, you know, I can give testimony. I was embarrassed, I was reading—in talking about Eva in London, I was going to read a letter from Mike Todd in which he talked about Sol LeWitt, and he said that Sol was in love with Eva. And when I went to read that, I look up, and there on the stage is Sol LeWitt. And so I'm somehow spoke to my—the awkwardness of that, and Sol who was marvelous figure of course said, "No, no, no—yes I—yes I—yes, I was." And I don't know a thing about that; that was my only meeting ever with Sol LeWitt except shaking hands here and there. Sol had more theory than Eva had, but all those guys had more theory than Eva had. And she was working from her feelings and the practice and the truths, which came to her from her life. She had known suffering and sorrow in a different way from the way other people knew it. And there are many themes there, which I can't develop.

[00:40:21]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Do you think her—the suicide of her mother was a major—?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Um, the flight on the children's train, she's not yet three years old, she gets lost when they get to the Netherlands, is taken into a nunnery for a while, then she and her sister are found and they come to this—they miraculously get brought to the United States. And again, I was not there; obviously I can't speak to that except that to imagine a child between two or three years old without family, oh, the horrors are beyond my anything. And Eva did not—I'm trying to think. Eva's background was implicit in her facial expressions, in her demeanor, in her art but not explicated by her. She didn't say, "Oh my—" anything about the horrors of Nazi Germany. But it was—if you knew her, you knew someone whose past was present with her at every moment.

Now, when Eva—Eva asked me some—this is unusual with artists especially, but when Eva was sick, we had a conversation. She said, "The doctors have just given me a pill, which they said I have to take my—for the rest of my life, but—" she said, "And here's where she shrugged in a characteristic way and said, "But I guess that won't be very long" and did I think she ought to take that pill or not. And here I said to her—I don't know quite what my theory was, but I said, "Eva, a friend really can't advise you about life and death. I hope that you will communicate with your sister and see what people in your—" I don't know what I said, my words except that I knew that she was not—ooh, here we go again, I knew she was not in active communication with her sister at that point. In any event, my advice to her, obviously I thought she should take the medicine, but I didn't think I should—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —be the one—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —say that. And so I said, "I think you ought to talk to your sister," and I'm not taking credit for this, but she did talk with her sister, and the [inaudible], the rapport with her sister became very important to her. And it's a—in the weirdness of consolations as a consolation to know that she was then in touch with someone who went all the way back to the origins of her time. Her sister, by the way, has behaved so correctly in relation to Eva's work. And in London was a young woman—there's a terrible panel of young women artists

who would talk about the influence of Eva Hesse on themselves, and they talked themselves, themselves, themselves. And one of them asked a question, spoke to Eva's obsessions, and I, who've resolved not to speak at that conference, raised my hand and opened my big mouth, and I said, "Obsession implies that she was not free to do what she was doing. Actually she studied art in about five institutions; she knew what she was doing. While she repeated motifs, these were not obsessions in the sense that she was not free to do otherwise." And when—after that, her sister Helen came and sat beside me, and we talked, and I said about her that she didn't seem upset by anything said about Eva, and she said that she had resolved when Eva died that she would not try to interfere or correct that was not—and that she would try not to respond, that she would hear about Eva's romantic life and try not to blink an eye or otherwise censor that. And here I'm very grateful because she said to me that I said things that she would not herself say. She would not have—

[00:45:22]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —permitted herself—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —commented on what the old woman [ph] about the word *obsession*. I may have taken that too literally, but I don't let—there are things I don't want to let pass because while Eva was a victim of forces outside her control, in Germany for instance, she was a free, mature, adult woman who made her choices and took responsibility for them. Anyway, that's enough about that. There's so much about Eva and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Did you know her when she was friendly with Kusama?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, please, I can't talk about Kusama. I didn't know her with Kusama. I knew her with—because Doyle was a friend of the family and he was here a lot, they were here a lot together, Mike Todd, they were here a lot together. Kusama, I can't place her—she was kind of ubiquitous but—because I remember running into her. And there's no nice way to say that she was extremely erratic and would not—one didn't know which Kusama one was going to be talking to if you said hello to her. And I had—at that point, I had enough genius artists in my life whose genius overlapped being crazy that I was not about—I had as much to cope with as I could cope with. And I had made a commitment to study the life and heart of Ray Johnson. Ray was a full-time job, and the people he brought with him were also exhausting people, some of them stayed after he left. That Kusama was more—I had a mother and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Sure.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —I was interested in what she was doing. The—it had the authenticity but an authenticity of madness for me. I did not see in her work, I didn't experience in her work an alleviating emancipation. I think there's a lot—I follow a theme of freedom in works of art and went back to word *obsession* used in relation Eva, I didn't see—I saw more obsession than I cared about with her because—with Kusama because it became opaque for me. And the opaqueness, I mean I kind of deflected—the light deflected from it was not an illumination, a free illumination. I felt I would be drawn into madness, and I knew a lot of crazy artists and we've mentioned Paul Thek.

Paul was totally exhausting, and I could—the conversations with him were thrilling because I would begin to feel yes, yes, we are at one with Rothko in this poem, and yes, yes, yes, but that would last only as long as I was with Paul and then it didn't have a carryover or a sequel and then in terrible truth, he became so difficult to talk to. He called me up, and the date would be in the '60—I'm not sure. But he disappeared to Europe for a while, and he's back, and he called me up and said, "I'm going to give you the honor of writing an essay for a catalogue about me" and that sort of suspended my feelings for a moment. I said—and I just published a book of short stories. This must be later than I thought because I published a book of short stories and a novel I think by that time.

[00:50:02]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: So it's early '70s?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, and—or later, and I'm no good on dates. And then I—and I said, "Paul, do you have any idea what I'm doing? I haven't written anything about art for a while. Are you aware that I have my own life, my own work," I mean whatever. And he was not aware and didn't care, but it was conversation. I felt like I can say no to him, I can say

anything to him, somehow it was not going to matter, and I can't explain that except that I thought he was so in a cocoon of his own that what I said was not going to impinge on that. We hadn't spoken in a few years, and I thought, goodbye, that's Paul Thek.

Then a few years later, I was walking—I'm bad—walking on 10th Avenue, there's nobody around, but I hear from across the street, "Bill, Bill," and I thought, oh, God, I can't do this. And I just kept right on walking and then I heard running footsteps, and it was Paul who came up and said, "Oh, oh, oh," he said, "I understand you won't—you don't respond if somebody calls you on the street." I don't know if he knew why. And then we had characteristically enough, typically enough, an engaging conversation that, okay, here is the marvelous Paul Thek whom I have not succeed in conveying to this microphone. Here's this marvelous Paul Thek and everything one loves about him, and here is the impossibility of talking with him because at that point it becomes self, self-involved. It was all about him, and he was like a bubble boy just trapped. I would say trapped in his own bubble, and a little footnote has to go in here. The way that I—God, I'm just losing. The emotions, this is my life, feelings come in.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Of course.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And sometimes they block the names. Paul's great friend Susan *Against Interpretation*—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, Sontag.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —Sontag, well, that was really whoa, oh, my co-conscious doesn't want —

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —doesn't want to go there. And I'm not going to explain that I had a very distant acquaintance with Susan who lived right up here in this London—later in London Terrace Roof Garden [ph] overlooking this house; they could see in the window. So I was acquainted with her, she knew who I was, I knew who she was. I was once—twice actually going to meeting, PEN meetings and was so shocked because she was smoking in the elevator that I went up by chance, went up with her twice. And I found that—I'll let that stand for a distance between us. The [inaudible] for that is of no importance.

I was never a great fan of her work. I thought her essay on Kant was shallow and misleading in ways that I thought ultimately were destructive, but I just kept my mouth shut about it. With *Against Interpretation*, my theme in writing about Paul Thek was that he was going to a level of the body and of sexual experience that was uninterpretable and so I began that essay about Paul with a mention that *Against Interpretation* was dedicated to Paul Thek. Also, I wanted to establish, there are more links between literature, written criticism and people in the arts, more links between writers and visual artists than may appear in the record. Now, so I was dubious about Susan's work, although I assigned to students on photography, et cetera. I was no great fan.

However, at the memorial service for Paul Thek, I took my daughter Ara at the memorial service. Susan who had restored rapport with Paul after some coolness or some remoteness between them, she read a poem, which she had read to Paul on his deathbed. And somehow, the records say this, I've heard a lot of poetry in my lifetime, I've never heard a poem read the way she read that poem.

[00:55:12]

She read an elegy by Rilke, which she and Paul had shared, absolutely selflessly. There was not a trace of Susan Sontag in her reading. And only a person of her dimensions I think could've so—not renounced the self but so governed the self that she could be so selfless. Selflessness is a great big thing with me. Anyway, and that is owing to her—that could read a poem like that told me that I had missed the person whom under—in another lifetime I might have known. She knew who I was and so did her partner. and in a weird convolution—in a weird convolution, what's her partner's name?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: The photographer?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: The photographer.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh God, I'll think of it in just a second. I know exactly who you 're talking about.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: We both are losing—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, we're both very—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, Leibovitz.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Annie Leib—Annie Leibovitz—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay. She had rented the garden of Bottino's restaurant to photograph 30 photographers who had worked with—I think—if I say *Harper's Bazaar*, maybe I mean *Vogue* or something like that. In any event, it was one of those group memorial photographs. So she got to the garden of Bottino's, which she had rented, and she peered over the garden wall into my garden, and she said, "No, I want that garden." and so I thought, oh, what the hell, and allowed her to sort of, a very small fee, use my garden. And so 30 or so photographers tread through my wreck of a house, walked through the garden, sat and stood in the back, all except one who was too sick to turn up. And I didn't—Michael handled —Michael my assistant, Michael [inaudible] handled that, I didn't go out there. He warned these people that there's art in the house, please don't touch anything. He's talking to some of the great photographers of the 20th—[they laugh] of the 20th century.

And I didn't go downstairs because I just—I knew—I didn't know Annie Leibovitz, but I heard her saying, "Bill's house, Bill's garden, Bill's this, Bill's that," so she knew perfectly well where she was. And as with so much that happens in the art world, there are subtexts, and somehow or other, there was a meaning that she chose to photograph all those people in my neglected, overgrown yard rather than in the synthetic garden of the—of Bottino's restaurant there. But that's—see, part of what I'm interested in is the background that is not part of the documented foreground that—where I see things or I know things that happened.

And I'm going to say one—can I—one item? Okay. This goes back to the shooting—this is important to my life because I knew Mario Amaya very well, I knew Gene Swenson in a weird way, but I will say very well, and we had many, many intense conversations. In fact, it is extremely important neglected essay, "The Other Tradition," when he says that somebody said about what he says about George Brecht's chair piece at Maidman Playhouse. Well, it was I who said that, quoted without a name.

Now what happened on the day that Valerie Solanas shot Andy, early that morning, she lived in the Chelsea Hotel, my mother lived next door in an apartment building, and she turned up many mornings to ask May Wilson if she could borrow $10, $15, $20. And my mother knew perfectly well that the loan was in effect a gift and so she give—she would give her breakfast, she would give her coffee, talk with her, try to make her feel a little more stable and give her 10 bucks or 20 bucks to send her on her way. However, maybe I had said this in the machine the last time, did I? anyway—

[01:00:07]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, I've heard it. I think you—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah. Well, it's—it bears repeating because—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Please.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —it's part of the background, which is overlooked even in making a movie about Valerie. Valerie had asked my mother if she could keep her laundry under my mother's bed; my mother of course said yes. My mother always sensed where they might be in amusing, entertaining anecdote by the way. And so Valerie turned up with a flower-printed laundry bag, which didn't have any—wasn't big, and she shoved it under my mother's bed. Later when I visited with the children, we would go—my children would play with the junk that people had brought for my mother from making her assemblages, constructions. My mother would pull the gun out from under the bed, the bag and press the bag against the garment, you could see, hello, this is a gun and shove it back under the bed. Why any of us did not say to ourselves, uh-oh, where does a gun like Chekhov said if there's a gun on the wall in act one, it's got to be fired in act two. Well, I don't know, it was the '60s, and there's a lot to apologize for, a lot that somebody ought to explain, and that's what

you're here for—that's what you're here for.

In any event, what kind of a woman who claims to have a society to cut up men exploits an older woman, not ancient at that point, exploits an older woman not only in taking the money from her under the guise of a loan, but that she hides her gun under her bed? That doesn't seem to me a model for the relations among women where there's no frankness. Now, my mother knew what was going on and so on the other side one would have to look at May Wilson and what is she up to, allow—allowing this to happen—

[END OF TRACK katzjona_3of4_sd_track01_a.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: In the meantime, I knew Valerie. I used to see Valerie all the time on 23rd Street and we didn't—we had ordinary conversations. She never pulled any of the stuff on me, but while we were talking, she—she'd see a man in a suit, and she'd say, "Just a minute, just a minute," and she'd run. I can see this man, and she goes up to him and said, "Give me a dollar and I'll say a dirty word," and if the man gave her a dollar, she'd say what she thought of was a dirty word and then she'd come back to me and pick up the conversation, which we had been having. And on the—by the way, on the other—if I was walking on the other side of 23rd Street, there were miracles in those days, there would be Jackie Curtis dressed in men's clothing, looked like something from a dead guy or something in the thrift shop, but there he was in men's clothing, and we would talk. I was very careful what I said to Jackie because he was said to be keeping an elaborate diary, and I didn't want to go down in Jackie's diary, but I felt his spirit talking with him on 23rd Street, and he was marvelous. Tragically, his family buried him in a tuxedo and did not respect—his grandmother saved his dresses and otherwise provided clothing for him but his more immediate family—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: His grandmother did, huh.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, his more immediate family, yes, and who knows about that grandmother? On that theme, Ray Johnson went to the Frank E. Campbell Funeral home for the viewing of Candy Darling. He and Toby Spiselman went and presumably viewed cute Candy Darling made out in her approximation of Marilyn Monroe. And as they were leaving, somebody pointed toward the book, and Ray went to sign the book. And Candy's father came up to Ray and said, "Candy will be so glad that you were here," which is a rather different way to say goodbye to a son. Somebody ought to interview the Frank E. Campbell Funeral home—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —the home.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —because we've all fallen apart there in one way or another, and sometimes it has to do with art as with the funeral of Aladar, which by the way I thought was a memorial service, and I think we all thought memorial service. And then if my memory is holding, they wheeled in a coffin, and that changed the terms of where are we and what are we doing. At that point David Gormani [ph] who was sitting next to me, David Gormani just fell over onto my lap sobbing, sobbing, sobbing. But—and the other funeral so really they ought to be recorded because that's where there was again I thought a memorial service for Nam June Paik. And because Paik had lived in this house and we communicated across the years, I went to that, but it turned out not only was that the funeral—there was the open coffin with the very badly repaired face of Nam June Paik.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: They had the repair because of ?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Well they cosmeticized. I mean hello he was in the best tradition of American cosmetics on the corpse, it was quite—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: But there was nothing that happened to his face?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, nothing happened to his face except that, and many people—but that was a very complex event. People were invited to speak, now I was not invited to speak, thank goodness, but Paik's nephew took one whole half of the audience, the chairs, it was all Koreans and Paik's—I had such trouble getting into the place through the crowd, I kind of fell through and then I was pulled. Somebody pulled me through the great crowd of people, and, *boom*, there's a coffin, and I kind of, oh, reel from that realization, and Paik's nephew pulls me over and sits me down where all Koreans are sitting.

[00:05:13]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, that's lovely.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And then they keep trying to get rid of me and they—literally people trying—[laughs] Korean people trying to get me out of there, and they would look around and Paik's nephew would say, "No, no, no, no, no, he's fine" and so I just stayed where I was. But when Yoko Ono was called upon as the last speaker, suddenly many of the people standing in the back turned out to be press photographers from Germany and from Japan, and they rushed forward, and they—so the coffin was in this bank of flowers. And I don't know if anybody jumped on the coffin, as such, probably not, but they so pushed in to where the coffin was to get close enough to photograph Yoko Ono that the poor body started to vibrate and shake because the coffin started to—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: My God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —it started to move and pushed back in—and pushed back and forth. And I'm all for setting things in motion but not—[they laugh] but that was not what I was thinking about. Yoko Ono spoke very well, by the way, and then we have this—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, we've got a little bit more time.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I talk too much.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, no, not at all, not at all.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Then I will tell you something and I'm going to go and pee. This must be said on behalf of Yoko Ono by me because in the early '60s, she was a different person. She had a loft on Chambers Street, she generously allowed artists to perform in that loft, and that should be recorded minutely. So that one time James Lee Byars was doing one of his events, and he so repeated them that that became like a rehearsal. This was not new. He was delicately unfurling, slowly unrolling silk, slowly, slowly, slowly. Sitting next to me was Ray Johnson who took off a shoe and threw it at James Lee Byars to provoke spontaneity to bring some immediacy. Ray did not approve of rehearsed events, although he falsified a few, but—so he threw his shoe at James Lee Byars, and this is not the way that I'm used to people with me, sitting in a seat, very rarely did I go to an audience with Ray. However, Yoko Ono did a performance piece and there was—around the chairs, there was a space and the windows in all the sides, and Ray got up and began to run around and around and around the margins—the walls, the open space thereby paralyzing me with embarrassment. So I think I never went back, I don't think I ever went to another such event, and I can describe the one audience event that I took Ray to but—so those were extremely important events in the spirit.

But Yoko Ono was not a star alone in the sky. She was a star in a huge constellation of artists, all of whom regarded themselves as equal, on the same level, and the later stardom or the aspirations to stardom were fine in themselves going a later period with John and all that, but it falsified the early '60s. And the scholars and people who read about that, read about that as though she was this lone radiant star in the sky, and that is so far from—she was aspiring and just hanging in there, not accepted by lots and lots of people so that she was trying to make herself part of that constellation I'm speaking of by sharing her loft. I'm not faulting her for that; I'm just saying that it was so different in the tone and the feeling and her later feeling, which I'm calling stardom, made her uninteresting to me.

However, after Paik died, there was a memorial event at the Guggenheim Museum, and I was sitting in the front row with a young man who'd come to make—from Korea, knew nothing about the United States, nothing about Fluxus. But he wanted to make a videotape, and by being with me, somehow there he was in the middle of Fluxus.

[00:10:11]

And there was Yoko Ono who came in and sat on a kind of platform knitting. And what they did, they showed that she—10 years before, she had broken a vase, and on the premise that the people who had witnessed the breaking of the vase would take a piece, and they would come back someday together and reconstruct that vase. So she smashed the vase and then invited people in the audience to pick up a piece of the vase. And so from—miraculously, that is given the curvature of the Guggenheim, I could see all those people hanging over the

railings and see them as they came down to pick up a piece and therefore to participate with their bodies and all of themselves in this memorial event. And these—these people were passing—Yoko Ono sat there knitting, knitting, and one is aware of women knitting in various historic episodes, knitting and knitting. The people picking up a piece of ceramic were passing within a foot or two of her, and my heart was suspended because I was the one feeling the fear of her exposure. That is her vulnerability for me was beyond courageous and the poise, with which she sat there. And the good news, is I said to myself quite literally and to my Korean friend, the avant-garde is not dead, it's still capable of gestures, which—where other people would close a system down, the avant-garde can still get out in front and hold a system open or reopen it or start a new system. I thought it was of heroic proportions that she sat there. And then 10 feet away, I saw a bodyguard, and there were other parts of the tone, the mood, the atmosphere because people behave so strangely at memorial services. But what I'm trying to do is say she's been more real the whole time, I'm certain of that, I just was not—didn't participate.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Was she recognized?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, oh, she was announced as such, introduced as—oh, there was no questions who's—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —who is sitting there knitting.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —who was sitting there knitting, and it was well conducted. This is the Guggenheim Museum; it was well conducted. I can't think of his name, but also it was a space where Paik had done one of his very greatest works, the waterfall with the televisions. And one's history would—my history with the Guggenheim goes back before it was a building. One's history is—I can't—I can't separate myself from the history of the Guggenheim in good times and bad. And she, for me, really helped to redeem something about the institutionalization and terrible mistakes that the Guggenheim has made. She's probably been a better figure than I have known among my—anyway.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay, we'll—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I need to go and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —and I'll change the tape, thank you.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Whew, you didn't ask me about flatness.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Laughs.] We're going to—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It's another subject.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And I'm also going to ask you just—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: We're doing fine.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: We're doing totally fine. I'm going to ask you about how you came to meet Nam June Paik and—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, okay.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —I'm also going to ask you about what Coenties Slip when you get back.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, whew, yeah. Somewhere somebody should write down. It will be obvious if I did much of this that I misunderstood my own times almost totally because I was seeing Ray's perspective. And so if a person turned up—turn—if a person turned up, I was just interested in Ray's response, I was not living my own experience. Now that got separated because I knew John Cage separately from knowing Ray, but it's starkly true. And so there are terrible distortions in my memory and in the fact, next to—

[00:15:02]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I need to go.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Okay.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Cue off the machine.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: All right, the machine is now off.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: About slight—a predicament where again I have to forgive somebody on Ray's behalf before I can work and—

[END OF TRACK katzjona_3of4_sd_track02_a (1).]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: This is tape three.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay. This will be a story against me except that the story produces something, which transcends my problems. Okay, I've been given tickets by the amazing George Ashley whom should remembered to a Philip Glass retrospective. And in my life where I have to get babysitters and I'm always behind schedule, my mind says to me that it's in the Carnegie Hall in the concert venue, whatever it's called. And I had to go up—take—get up there, and there's a short flight of steps to the ticket box, and I start up the flight of steps and when I get on the top on the little landing, *blang*, it goes off in my head, uh-uh, it's not Carnegie Hall, it's town hall. I'm always behind schedule, it's already in the caulk [ph] I think, not knowing the avant-garde always starts late. And I turned swiftly, and as I turned swiftly, I knock—I not only knock a man down, I fall, it's only three or four little steps, I fall on to that man who says, "Oh, Bill, what did you think of something or other?" And I'm trying to summon my apologies, and John Cage has picked up on a conversation from sometime before. We both pick up ourselves, sort of brush ourselves off, and I have enough wit that I weave myself into this conversation, and no one has acknowledged the fact that I knocked—of all 20th-century figures to knock down a flight of steps, there's many them I would, you know, [inaudible] I'd love to push down. But the way that he—I mean I don't even know what to think of it because his aplomb, poise that, we don't have words for that except—and it was an accident. Somehow or other it just seemed to me a dreamy, dreamy experience of John Cage as John Cage.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And you read it as graciousness—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, please—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —that he—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —yes, unrehearsed, improvised, he was perfect. I mean he didn't even have time to think who is this fool who knocked me down the stairs but also that he recognized me. Hello, I didn't recognize myself as I passed that mirror, and there he was. [Laughs.] And then I went off to my seat, and of course, they began late, late, late, God I was not late for it. So I'm sitting in the balcony and then at the last minute, a woman comes in and sits and not to [ph] acknowledge my presence, sits leaning over, staring intently into the audience where I see Philip's wife and children enter to the far left.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Philip Glass?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, Philip Glass. JoAnne and the children enter, and they go down front, and they sit down, and I haven't seen JoAnne at that point for, I don't know, decades, and I'm gasping, I'm kind of overwhelmed. I knew Philip when he was about 18 years old, and there's a lot of history here, and I'm moved by seeing JoAnne with the children. And so I say to this woman, "Ah, that's Philip's wife" not recognizing that she is Philip's wife at that moment.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, dear. [They laugh.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Later, I had an evening with her in one of the, kind of, disco clubs where she did cocaine at the table where the four of us were seated, which I still found—it was not—I was not—what was this place called? It was—it had a funny kind of a name. But—and had horrible, it German rock and—it had German pseudo-rock-and-roll band, which they did everything except commit suicide onstage to prove how real and authentic and all these bloody things they were. And there she was and then someone said she was a surgeon, and I hope I'm not her patient and—anyway, I don't know that well, and I don't mean to be inviting her.

Philip, I knew in Baltimore. In Baltimore, the few Bohemians that there were found each other. There weren't many of us, and he was a marvelous as a young man, visiting me at Yale, and he's a whole story in his own right. Anyway, and Philip's work I think is very, very important to the—a lot of the people called minimal because in the music, they could hear the qualities that they thought they should be looking for in their art.

[00:05:31]

On that minimal business by the way, I have a copy of an unpublished interview, which I'm not sure of the date, I think '65, '66. In that interview, the entirely worthy [inaudible] is chatting with—interviewing Donald Judd, entirely worthy, and they don't know what the art that he does is to be called yet. That is, the term minimal doesn't seem to be available yet, and it hasn't done the damage that I think it did there. And I find that I'm tempted to work it into what I'm writing at the moment because for me it's a marvelous moment before the false classifications have come in and imposed ideas over clarified ideas and done away with some of the maybe ambiguities and unclarities that come in. That was an editorial from the management.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Well, it's appreciated, it's an interesting moment. Now listen real quick —

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, sure.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —talk just briefly, if you will, about whether you were acquainted with Johns, Rauschenberg, Twombly.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, that—the answer to that is—all right, the answer to that is sufficiently defined. Okay, I sat many times in Cy Twombly's loft with Ray—what—and had dinner sometimes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Knew—know—knew each other from Black Mountain I assume.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: They knew each other quite well, and what one says of guys, boys in that time, they knew each other quite well, one never knows quite what one was saying. So they knew each other quite well because we had dinner together sometimes, more often in the loft where there was a fire burning in a crude fireplace, a mantel had been stripped away but nothing else replacing it. And Cy, it was as though he couldn't keep it his hands still. That is he scribbled and sketched and just his hand was drawing the whole time, and he took these pieces of paper and just tossed them into the flames—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, my God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —which I realized was his setup. He knew what he was doing when he —when he did that; I didn't know what he was doing. The most memorable moment when he and I—when Ray and Cy and I, and I find—found him a very, very affable, charming person, though I can't say he ever addressed a word to me. And I was silent Billy Wilson, I had—what am I going to say in the presence of an artist of that stature? Ray Johnson didn't have stature, and he was no problem, but the other artist, I just—I mean with Ad Reinhardt whom we visited frequently, I just—my lips were sealed.

In any event, once we were walking up Third Avenue, there was a space between two buildings where a demolition had occurred, and Cy said to Ray, "Oh, come, come, come," and so he led Ray clambering across the rubble, which had fallen into the demolition. He climbs through that knowing where he's going, goes over to a wall, and there's torn wallpaper on the wall and the bricks. And I look at this, and he and Ray are looking, and this is between them. Cy is showing Ray something, I don't know what, but I got it, and by the it, I mean I got a lot of the sensibility of Cy and of Ray that torn wallpaper on an old brick wall was worth risking your life just climbing through a demolition area to share that experience. And I can't tell you how often my heart and mind are in that, climbing over that because it was one of those moments of experiencing, okay, this is what the—I'm making a big claim here and I don't mean to exaggerate it that way, but okay, I'm seeing something of what they—their experience because it's framed by this event there. There were not great statements about aesthetic theories.

[00:10:21]

Now because in the spring of 1958, Ray officially formally ended his friendship with Rauschenberg, we never visited Bob, never visited Jasper Johns. I got to see, to meet both of them separately, never to know them well. I dinner with Jasper Johns one time and a woman—he was so cruel to that woman during—she was writing a book about him. I really had—after that, I really didn't want to know—at that point, in that time, in that place, I didn't want to know a man who would speak to anyone the way he spoke to her. In the same period, somehow or other, and this is early—this is mid-'60s, at the event, Jasper Johns said, "Oh, I'm from the South, and in the South, we can just go to dime store and buy or eyeglasses. My work using eyeglasses has been stolen, *The Critic Sees*, and I need to make a new one and so I need a pair of heavy eyeglasses, do you have an old pair you could give me?" And I said, "Sure, what the hell." And so that Sunday afternoon, Jasper Johns came, and this is an isolated event, okay, it has no prequel, it has no sequel in friendship, but it was almost alarmingly charming event. Hello, I know who is here, and I know how to talk to him and so for me, it was a marvelous conversation. Off he went with my old-formula, prescription eyeglasses, and they became the reconstruction of *The Critic Sees*.

Now many years later, I discussed that episode with Arthur Danto, and Arthur said, "Well, do you see what he was doing?" I said, "What?" And he said, "Well, do you see why—? He could've gotten eyeglasses anywhere. Do you see he—why he wanted your eyeglasses?" And in case I didn't get it, Arthur explained to me that Jasper Johns had recognized a dry, desiccated attenuated intellectual who is the enemy of the visual arts and wanted such a pair of glasses—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —a critic's—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —a critic's eyeglass. I hadn't—I don't think I had published it. I'm not sure if I had published anything if at all, anyway. Danto took its part of the meaning of the work that I was being set up in a sense by Jasper Johns that I didn't know what was going on. But as anyone can tell you, I've never known what was going on, so I thought it was a charming tea party. [They laugh.]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And let me—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —and what was the—do you know what happened with Ray and Rauschenberg in '58?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No. I do know this. It will give more—be more about me except that Ray wrote to me in maybe March 1958 and said, "Bob said to me, friends are friendly, but I said—" no. "Bob said to me,"—I'm sorry I got that wrong—"Bob said to me, we are friends, and I said, 'No, friends are friendly.'" Now, I read that, and Ray repeated that anecdote about the end of the friendship, I would swear, at least three times in the next decade, so I continued misunderstanding it. Because Robert Rauschenberg was on such a level for me, and Ray had no public life at all. And I couldn't imagine that an unknown young artist would end a friendship with Robert Rauschenberg, so I assumed that Rauschenberg had ended the friendship. And it was only—and I noted at the time because this was so important, everything Rauschenberg did, every rumor was of such importance in resonance and vibration. And so when—it was I think the fourth time that he told me what he'd already written in a letter, which is downstairs in a binder, as Romney would say—[they laugh] a binder full of women—that somehow when he told me about it, I think the—at least the fourth time, he made it clear that he had ended the friendship.

[00:15:05]

Now, I still don't know, if he told me why I don't remember, I could've blacked out in a moment like that. And then weirdly when Ray died, and there was memorial show, by this time, Bob is not there. He never opened, I know as fact, and we know the way facts are, they get improved, but nevertheless, he—Ray continued sending him envelopes, and Bob did not open them, but he reserved them. David White, which I hope is the name of the archivist—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: It is.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —opened them and so some of them were displayed—this gets complicated. Some of them were displayed in the show at the Richard L. Feigen & Co. business on 69th Street. Now, I saw those, and I looked very closely because for many

reasons, the distance between Bob and Ray affected the tone, affected the events in my mind. And my wife had worked for Bob taking—stitching out of parachutes, and he was there in Pearl Street—in Coenties Slip, anyway.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Cross talk.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Anyway, I looked at those very carefully and then—what—10 years later, I saw envelopes of clippings, the things that Ray had sent to Bob, and they were different. It was different set, and I don't know what happened. Now what Ray said to him that I saw at Feigen was clearly on the theme of *Factum I, Factum II*. Ray saw that in about December '50—where are we in time—'55 and for me, *Factum I, Factum II* when I eventually saw it, of course changed a lot—a lot of things changed the world, but that, that changed the cosmos. And I meet young any artists who don't have a clue about that by the way.

So Ray was fully aware of *Factum I, Factum II*, and he wrote and said, I was in Bob's studio, he's done two paintings, which are almost identical. Now what Ray sent to Bob in the year after, which Bob never opened, was images of Doublemint chewing gum, double the flavor, double the fun, Doublemint, Doublemint, Doublemint gum, with images of twins. And of course twins are—even identical twins, there's always some kind of a difference there even as Ray had precisely written almost identical *Factum I, Factum II*. I was never with him and Bob, and that was a weird emptiness or vacancy, which I just have—I know nothing about it. Somebody ought to see everything that Ray sent to Bob or ask the Feigen—ask the estate which is managed by the Feigen people about that. Because there are themes I don't get into, and that's a theme, which I respond to with feelings, which is not part of my work there.

As far as Jasper goes, and Jasper owns some Ray Johnson collages. I don't know the history of that. I didn't dare ask Ray about Jasper. Now, I have some—very late in his life when he kept paper—scrap paper beside the telephone and scrawled and scribbled and doodled as he chatted on the phone, there's a lot about Jasper. He made the Jasper into Jasparagus, that is asparagus and Jasper, and Jasper Jones was on his mind and that will turn up. The problem now is that I've seen maybe 100,000th of Ray's work, and I know of resources beyond that, many of them are closed off to me, people have photographs that Ray took, which they will not show, people have bought collections, which they've dispersed, and I can't speak to that. I have to work with the available materials.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, yeah, and on Coenties Slip.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Do you have the stamina for this?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I can sketch. You didn't ask me about [inaudible]. Coenties Slip is not independent of Ray because Dover Street wasn't that far away. But it was a world unto itself and much larger than our history of art is going to record because there were so many painters around who did not become the cover of *ARTnews* as it was at that time, later *Artforum,* and just I'm thinking of Bob Mitchell who's died in the last year or so. And I don't know if he's preserved and—

[00:20:24]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Not well—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, not well.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And there were other people drifting in and out who lived in the area. And Lenore Tawney was around the corner, it was—it's weird because that in some way, that was sort of beyond where the atmosphere of Coenties Slip reached except that if you were in Lenore's loft, you were in Coenties Slip, when you got outside, you weren't. It was the atmosphere, the values, the meanings and [inaudible], but it wasn't—it was a little bit different because these physical realms, the construction of that place was so strong with—at 2-5 Coenties Slip living Bob, Robert Indiana who was a little bit different from other people in that he usually lived with another man in a quite outspoken way. I think I knew him before he lived with another man because he would come to have tea on his way to uptown where he was employed by a man on Park Avenue who had built a chicken coop in his floor-through

apartment, and Bob's task, and he was according to Bob Indiana, he did not—nobody touched anybody. According to him, the man naked on his hands and knees among chickens in the chicken coop, and Bob tossed chicken food, chicken grain, corn on to the floor, and the man ate the corn, and Bob said, "Here chickie, chickie, chickie, here chickie, chickie, chickie." And we all laughed of course at Bob's preview of what was going to happen on Park Avenue, and, of course, [inaudible] knows what happened on Park Avenue and stories that people tell—the stories in which everybody went home at 10:30, and nobody took their clothes off, we don't know.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: None of our—none of our business there. But then Bob moved Alvin Dickstein into that apartment, and in a great moment in the history of art, and Bob wrote sincerely about Alvin as a painter and invited me to comment on the paintings. And in those days, there was some idea of the crit where people visited each other and they do their crit, and I was used to that from when I was 18 years old in Baltimore. And we walked around and looked at—there were three walls with Alvin's paintings, and we looked at those paintings, and I had no comment. We came almost in the shadows reaching a storage area of the last painting, which I responded to enthusiastically, and Alvin with less enthusiasm said, "That's not finished, I just blocked in the—I just prepared the canvas this morning," and given my sensibility at that moment, that was what I saw as a painting as a work of art. But we have to say I was way behind a lot of things, and I hadn't fully taken a step into understanding the motives within Pop art such as Bob was doing. So is that all? Oh, you want Coenties Slip?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And was—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —and was Bob's work interesting to you or no?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It was so—again, I had a humorless, quasi-religious, earnest commitment so impassioned to Abstract Expressionism that Ray was the one exception that I allowed because we had—it was a different context with him, it had to do with Buddhism. And I was not ready, I'm retro something, retrograde, I was not ready for what was happening, I was way behind the scene. I sat with Jim Rosenquist in the loft the 2-5—2-3 Coenties Slip while he was working on a painting of the boys about to run a race.

[00:25:01]

And I had come there to get the wooden chest, which is downstairs, which belonged to me, and I'd lent it to Bob for a—two years. When I took it back, I wrecked—his whole life he had in the chest. Anyway, he was painting with that painting. I looked at that painting, and I saw a painter destroying paint quality as a component of oil painting. I saw the end of Rembrandt and Titian coming to a screeching halt as I was witnessing what was happening. I saw something else was happening and I will say, oh, no, I—I knew something was happening, and it was real. In some way, I was not ready for it. And so with Indiana, and I remember so well, I think it was parents getting out of a car or into a car—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, I know the work, *Mother and Father*—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —and I remember standing there feeling inadequate that I could not summon the enthusiasm, which an artist just invited people to the studio. And Bob was taking Ann and me—oh, how these things—oh dear. Bob was inviting Ann and me out to dinner at the Seamen's Church hall for a—one of his paranoid reasons. I had written a really stupid thing about media in art as it was a burlesque of something [inaudible]. I had five ways of—stupid thing, five ways of looking at the medium, and I had said and quoted in there, Back Home in Indiana, that's a song, it's got nothing to do with Rob Indiana, whose name was Bob Clark.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Right.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And he invited us for the studio visit, he invited us for—to dinner in this Seamen's Church hall, which was not le Chanterelle, I mean, because he wanted to build a conversation to asking me what did I meant when I wrote back home in Indiana. Well, it was simpler than he thought, I meant back home in Indiana, I had underestimated the extent to

which he was a little bit feeling persecuted . But in that era, Ellsworth Kelly would not open his mailbox. He hit the mailbox with a broom several times because if there were a bomb in a parcel, it would explode and so we're not talking about *Mister Rogers*' *Neighborhood* here. We're talking—when we get to 2-3 Coenties Slip, a building with Jack Youngerman would come in there for sometimes Delphine Seyrig. Oh, I never met her. I went out under [ph] when she came in there. Hello, the most beautiful woman in the world and—hello, hello. I mean the name, I dissolve with the name, never—never saw her. But Agnes, Jack Youngerman, Agnes Martin, Ann Wilson, then Ann Ubinger who had been married to John Osborn [ph], Terry Ahler [ph], my fiancée, Ralph Nelson who while I knew him became Rolf Nelson with [inaudible] or something as he was playing his Norwegian, Scandinavian card. And that was quite—that's was a huge—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: That's some of which—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —a huge cast with Bob Mitchell across but often coming over and all kinds of people, endless numbers of people from Carnegie Tech because of Ann's Pittsburgh connection. And there was a marvelous sense, and people write books and plays about we were young in Brooklyn, a tree grows in Brooklyn or something of what was to come to Manhattan. The world was in front of them, it looked like the world was an oyster, and in fact, because we were very near the Fulton Fish Market, and so late one night, Ann and Rolf —Christmas is coming, Ann and Rolf want to be a buy a dozen oysters. They go to the Fulton Fish Market, and they go up to where there are oysters, all these casks, and they said something like, "We want a dozen oysters," and these hardy working men who were no fools, look at them and they know what they've got there and they say, "We can't give you that, but we can give you a barrel of oysters." This is the lyricism of the young to whom miracles happen and so—and the oysterman says, "If you can carry it 'til you're around the corner," And Rolf Nelson picks up the barrel of oysters, hoist it on to his shoulder, and staggers, makes it around the corner, and as they used to say, in the old days, we were young and gay. Not knowing what everybody meant, some meant more by that than others.

[00:30:17]

Rolf was working his way. We were downtown people, and Rolf started to turn up at the Martha Jackson Gallery, very helpful to Martha, quite—he had great poise, manners, and after a while, Martha saw him. He'd become—he made himself indispensable, he had a great eye, he could hang a show, he was very, very good. He could go into somebody's living room and rearrange the furniture, it looked like something. And so he was hired by Martha, and that was a different world from—it was just different from other worlds that we knew. And so then brilliantly, he conceives the idea of a show, look these people are now using broken chairs, let's do *New Media, New Forms*. And so he scheduled—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: That was his show.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —he schedules for 1960, two shows, there's a summer show in the late summer and early autumn show, and I went with him around the studios. Now, he warned me, "Okay, whoa, look at out." We go into a cellar, which is a show—the ceiling is—the third floor, the ceiling is so low we can't stand up, and there using art supplies like used enema bags is Jim Dine, not the Jim Dine we would point to five years later. This is Jim Dine working in the best place he can find, which is a cellar where I'm too tall to stand up straight, I'm bent over looking at old ena bags—enema bags and—but I knew that Rolf had got the lightning bolt in his hand.

And it was a strange show for uptown because it had Stanley VanDerBeek as a sculptor, hello, this—this doesn't exist. Now, it had my mother, May Wilson from Baltimore, it's got so many women, it's a brilliant, amazing show. As you entered, there's a vitrine, and in the vitrine are, I don't know, I may exaggerate, 10, maybe more Kurt Schwitters's collages, each of which is surpassing the other. And in the—I think priced at $10,000 each, which we all thought was the silliest thing we'd ever heard in our lives. Dick Higgins had inherited in his family a Franz Kline painting, and that was sold for $10,000, and the absurdity of that, I think we rolled on the floor laughing—$10,000 for a painting wasn't going to happen.

Now, what happened with Rolf's show, and I have the price list, which for those who care would make them weep, it was a brilliant show, and it should've opened up a world. But two years later, the *New Realism* show at Sidney Janis reaches the journalists who can understand Europeans because they come with fame, and they just don't understand Rolf's

show, and so. Ray wasn't in that show by the way because collage was not new medium, new form, that's why I mentioned the Schwitters there. That show could've—I photographed lots and lots of people there, and by the way, I do often print, this is [inaudible]. Barnett Newman who was so courtly and such a gallant man, he's not in that show, but he turned up at the opening as he did for young artists. He knew where the future was, he knew where the audience was, and my thrill was that he remembered me or had the voice to speak to me as though he did. And I introduced him to my mother who almost fainted away because in Maryland—she didn't live here yet—the fame of artists like that, there were no proportions, they had no limits to that, that was—that was huge. And so it was a great opening, but my disappointment, it's not that Janis did anything wrong. It's that journalism, which so guided museums and collectors, went with the Europeans who each of them was great in their own way. That history, I don't think that history is ever going to be written right. Can I say one other thing about Martha Jackson?

[00:35:30]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Please.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay. The complications of *Gutai* aren't going to be unraveled in a few sentences. I knew about *Gutai* because the *Gutai* magazine was the first to publish anything about Ray Johnson. And so Ray's Japanese connection was prior to any American connection and so *Gutai* had—was an important theme in my life.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: We're talking '50s then?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, and so by '57, which I think—I think maybe '58 is the year of the *Gutai* show with Martha Jackson, and that show flopped not to put too kindly a word on it. And Billy Wilson maybe the only person who knows why—among the people I knew, why the paintings did not have the impact. Now in '58, the war has been over for a long time, but it's not—ah, there still is an atmosphere about Japan and therefore the valiant work of the Rockefeller family, Japan society and these things, all come in quite correctly, and we're grateful for them. But *Gutai,* I'm making this very specific, from the early 1950s, maybe other people but I know that Elaine de Kooning is teaching and preaching all over composition. Okay, Sir Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, there are many of the guys who instead of a figure-ground composition are working those corners. And I'm not tracing all this to one person, I'm saying that she's the one I'm aware of, and so, and other people have picked it up.

By the—by 1956, [19]'57, and there's Ad Reinhardt, this has become a cheap word, gospel. The people I know are willing to crush, kill, and destroy about all-over painting, which is the truth of painting and one still talked in model terms, truth and authenticity. That's truth in painting, and single center, excuse me, figure-ground composition is like a portrait of a dean in a college with all this background and then they could see that in an abstract paintings. So abstract paintings aren't the vanguard, and they aren't true unless they are all over. And here's where *Gutai* comes in with a few all-over works but primarily all what has become in a few minds old-time figure—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Cross talk.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —ground. And that figure-ground goes with an emphasis on personality and autobiography and the passions of the artist, which is also not quite come in faux of what's happening. So speaking only from what I knew at the time, I saw the *Gutai* show, but nobody—nobody wanted that show. And I'm afraid that the failure of *Gutai* in Manhattan, specifically here, well, had to do with a formalist quality in an era when formal qualities were moral qualities. That may turn out to have been a mistake of the era, but it's a mistake that we all lived through and didn't feel it was a mistake as with—and this matters in my life that when I came to New York, the photographers were willing to kill about New York school of photography, truth was the criterion. They didn't tell that out in the world. Truth was the criterion, that meant the available light, you don't bring in flood lights, that meant all the—found compositor or all-over composition, too, also that is no cutting. You didn't—you composed in the camera, you didn't compose in the darkroom. And of course that meant—literally meant the end of the single-lens reflex, which was square because they didn't make square, you know, it's very complicated and very rich.

[00:40:08]

But this is why we need—and we're getting it, with photography shows why we need the material history of the show and why it matters that Ray Johnson used disposable cameras, $10 cameras and took a—*An Autobiography* by Avedon out into the yard and took a picture of *An Autobiography* of Avedon with a $10 camera. And that's the only license we need and encouragement to think of the material construction of a photograph.

Now, there's so much more back in Coenties Slip that I hardly know what to say. Agnes Martin did—was helped financially by the Lenore Tawney, and she sold paintings. She had doctor collectors, and she had people whom she was very, very ambivalent about seeing. She felt she had to be—I've talked with Agnes a lot. She had to exploit work or otherwise be nice to the people from Westchester who were as—trying to get as collective as they were trying to get in early and to where the Steins [ph] had been or something. And I had—they had their motives, which I don't think one should be harsh about. They were—there the money was. And so Agnes was pained, she was a lot older than the rest of us, she was pained by what she had to do to sell her paintings to keep going, and what happened pertaining to that. One time, Agnes had no money, there was a telephone booth in those days and had quarters and dimes and she, if she's to be believed, took dynamite and she blew up the telephone booth and she got the quarters and nickels and dimes out of the telephone booth.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: My God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And she got the hell out of there. Now, in 1962, I lived on 92—no—yeah, '62. '61 or '62, the Whitney Annual is opening. For some reason, I'm there before it opens, I don't know, and—oh my heart skips, oh. Some of these things, they hit me when I remember them. Okay. So for some reason, maybe I—for some reason, I'm taken into this room, and I can't describe the double impact. Okay, there is an Agnes Martin in pencil created on canvas under an orange light, which the Whitney Museum has imposed in its wisdom because it's only gridlines in pencil on canvas and so the orange—a little bit of orange never hurt, it never hurt a painting, hello, hello, hello, hello. Next to it, is an Ad Reinhardt, and the bottom area of it obviously black. And the way they handled art in those days is different from nowadays usually. And there's a big, big scratch exposing—through the painting, exposing the wood. And I pulled my knees up and got myself out of there, I went home, and then I call Agnes who went up on her broomstick. [They laugh.] I don't think they've put any more orange lights over paintings. You can't know, in those days, Malevich *White on White* always, I'm, oh, thinking always had fingerprints—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, my God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —on it, always.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Wow.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Under surrealist work with sequins, the floor was always covered in sequins, that wasn't the people, that was a problem of conservation. It was very different. I was once in the conservation lab at MoMA with Alicia Legg looking at a Pollock, an early Pollock, and it had great lumps of—it had great lumps of paint on it. And she took it over, and she pressed down on the back to conserve something, and she mashed the painting. And so that's again Billy Wilson's long list of—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: My God.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —of works that, hello, you need to question what's going on here. Okay, so I called Ad Reinhardt and elsewhere, he didn't say it to me, I knew Ad through Ray. He's written a statement that I send out paintings, I get back happenings, which is why he wouldn't show after a certain point.

[00:45:20]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And did people know about Agnes' relationship with Lenore, that they were a couple?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: The people I knew spoke about that very, very carefully. I will say it was something that was known but not explicated, not expressed, not known, and not mentioned to anybody outside there. I don't know what anybody said. It was still—there were awkward. As I move into that period, I think back the relation between Diane Kelder

who's alive and well and can speak for herself and Suzy Block [ph] was known. Suzy wore tuxedoes and smoked cigars and such, but it was in many cases, a social embarrassment or awkwardness. If they entered as a couple, you felt a shift in planes in the whole room at the whole party as it were a consciousness had just chilled everything. Now in other parties in the apartment of Dr. Love, Dr. Strange Love. You know Dr. Iris Love? She's a Guggenheim—her name was Iris Love, she's the one who found the Venus in the basement and all this. She became quite famous; I don't know what happened to her. Dr. Love, that's her name, but she's called Dr. Strange Love. And at her parties, Suzy and—I adored Diane, and I had good relations with Suzy, but somebody else made trouble about that. It was a—going early days. This was—there was a problem—that was a problem.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: It was a social problem.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Their couple-ness and don't tell Diane this but their couple-ness, it's so—what—it doesn't matter the history, but at the moment, if—as it is for me, if the analogy of an event is the mood and the feeling, something that isn't palpable, you can't bottle it, but that's what's real, and that's what people are breathing within and responding to. That was altered and not just by me, though I knew zero about—that's [inaudible], I just knew nothing. I still don't but that was—that made a room self-conscious.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: More so than for gay men or was it the same?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: You know, a man takes a space differently from a woman, and you can measure this. If you're in a place and a transsexual enters, you can see if that person in college was a football player but is wearing a plaid skirt, the way the—of the—the way that former male takes possession of a space, a place differs. And I say that that's true—God forgive me—I'd say that's true of Holly Woodlawn who had access to an authority as a kind of resource power, which was not part of her—what she was presenting. And I'm not objecting to that, but I'm saying that it's a theme, although I can't think—I—I think—I can't think at the moment of anything. I would just say that it's something that I have noticed, and the truth is—oh, I feel like I'm betraying something. Candy—oh, Candy Darling, I feel really bad, Candy Darling had an attitude, a demeanor. She was trying—she was walking like a woman with another strength. I don't—like we take a great actor or actress to protect somebody to do that. It's so—I don't know.

[00:50:35]

There's a film with Ultra Violet in a small part, it's I think called *Dinah East*. It's about—before that film—it's about a man in Hollywood goes—a dancer goes to audition, isn't accepted, goes back the next day is when accepted, becomes a star, adopts a son, the whole thing, and then they killed in a car crash, oh my goodness, this is the police and the whole thing. I—somebody sent me that film, again I think I saw it in Washington—okay, I'm in Washington, DC, we're talking dumb here, I'm really, really don't know what's going on. I walk alone and I see Ultra on the marquee, Ultra Violet starring in *Dinah East*, [inaudible]—it's Ultra Violet and who insulted me twice, actually more. And so I go in, and it's this film *Dinah East*, and she's in it because she dresses the transexual, and she says [inaudible]—when was that? I'd have to see in that film if the actor can get anything, anything of what I'm trying to describe. And when I just thought about Candy Darling, I felt, God, what a betrayal, that is of what I picked up, but I remember a walk and the self-consciousness in that walk was I'm a Hollywood star who is drawing on a boyhood or—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and did—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —I'm a terrible person—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, not at all, this is really—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —terrible, terrible.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: [Laughs.] And did people know about Robert Indiana and Ellsworth or no—Ellsworth Kelly or no?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: At Coenties Slip when I come in there with—okay, my fiancée is living with the woman I married in the same loft with Rolf Nelson. When I slept there, I slept in the bed with Ann and Rolf, my fiancée slept at the other end because we came from the suburbs, and later I married the woman I've been sleeping with.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —sleeping with, yeah, you're right.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Okay. And I'm not going on in that except that—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: You slept with her before marriage.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It's complicated. Later, I conceived two children in that loft with Rolf knocking on the door saying, "Open the door, it's my loft, I know what you're doing, let me in." Anyway, that loft has—if that loft could talk. Nobody said anything about like Ellsworth and Indiana, but there was—everybody know everything or you just assumed, you knew not to make a mistake in any of those areas. I'm very flattered because Ellsworth very sensitively put the moves on me, I thought, oh my goodness. [They laugh.] But I got a—I learned a lot about Ellsworth from that. I think he's a brilliant, beyond brilliant painter. I've never known him except I held my ground outside, outside Coenties Slip. Bob Indiana was so frank about what he was doing, hello, I'll stop by for tea, I'm on my way to third [inaudible] to a naked man on Park Avenue, that, do you have any issues about that. And later, I found out that he had a daily—a weekly Thursday afternoon rendezvous with my cousin Robert A. Wilson [ph] and for years, and more than that. And one didn't ask, and I certainly didn't know because I wouldn't have known what took ask. After a certain point, there was a point at which Rauschenberg had been distributing commissions very generously, marvelously to people, and this, I don't know, probably late, but I knew that when I came in, I was entering a very complicated thicket of interrelations among the guys, and one didn't ask, and people had met under other circumstances. So I introduced A to B but they had met—

[00:55:13]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —previously.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —at the bathhouse [ph], yes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yes.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And when—and we just didn't ask, and there are always stories there. There's a horrible movie picture, pretty lady, *Pretty Woman* or something in which she's being introduced to a businessman whom clearly she—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: She's—yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —as a prostitute, dreadful movie. There's so much angst about these themes and I—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And was Agnes at the time that you first knew her already doing the grids or did you know her before the grid paintings?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I knew her before the grids when—and by the way, poor Ellsworth, why did he bang the mailbox? Because—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Oh, I wanted to get to that, yes thank you.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —because if he was—and they just said he's paranoid or something, no, I don't like that word, that's a horrible word, he apparently had some hope for prosecution or something, anyway, that was apparently on his mind. However, and I said at the time, if somebody said he's paranoid, I said, "Well, no wonder he's paranoid, you three are—you see his paintings one day, and you go home, and you do them that night" because Agnes and Rolf and somebody else were little Ellsworth Kellys.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Jack even.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yes, I didn't know him well. He was—he was kind of in his world as far I could see, but also Ann—not everybody—Rolf and Ann and Terry Ahler, my beloved fiancée, were in the second floor, and not everybody was crazy about that group. And the people they had attracted, like the people who came in from Pittsburgh, that was not everybody's taste. Youngerman had a European and Ellsworth had a European—there was a different sensibility there and different level of the art world. So that—I don't know how those people mixed and matched; you have to ask them.

Now, I saw a lot of Agnes, and I had a rapport with Agnes, the honesty of which I've been

questioning in myself lately because Agnes was given to a kind of older person's hard-earned—she always looked weather-beaten. She was like Ma Kettle after being—after a religious retreat because she would sit there and kind of rock and aspire to spiritually valid statements of wisdom that derived from or ran with the Bible. I mean she was going for cosmic and universal statements verbally and whatever the meanings of her visual art might be. She was focused on a different—with seemed a different plane, and she wanted people with her to focus beyond, beyond Agnes and Lenore that would include beyond money and dynamite to focus beyond on a marvelous, marvelous, quite real, spiritual plane consistent with the desert. And so she wanted you from Coenties Slip, which I think is in Melville, but she wanted you to be as though out in the desert where in the rawness of nature, sky, soil, sand, water, a little water where you're confronted with cosmic truths. She wasn't trivial; she wasn't saying, "Oh, I want fame and money."

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: It was much more serious than that, and I took it seriously, and I was able to converse with her, and I'm wondering—I question myself about my sincerity because in those days, I could quote as is, as good as anybody and I was—I knew a lot in those days. I came to the Christian part probably through poetry but I—but I—when you finished with Yale, which was a Christian graduate department when I was in it, I mean it was—hello. You come out of that and you know—

[01:00:01]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, you had to know what Milton was referring to, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And Milton, of course, becomes—I don't feel I was brainwashed, no, I was supreme [ph], hello. That's not on the subject of—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —Agnes. I was able to talk on Agnes's spiritual poetic level with her. I found that in that—the way that it was set up, rocking chair and Agnes, I was very moved by that, and I felt it was real and authentic. Now, there were some eyebrows being raised around that, and there was some people and probably Ray who had his own spiritual, really religious commitments who thought that Agnes was performing. They didn't—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Right.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I thought it was her life, and I think it was Agnes. I think it was Agnes who stood and she walked. She had planned to be build a house in the desert and so it's the desert what is—? And this is important for me in thinking there's no yardstick, there's no measure, there's not even a tree you can say, oh, I want it as big as that tree. And so she walks off the house that she wants, and she would have to tell it, but it was like 60 by 60 feet, whatever she's walked off given the scaleless-ness, it's so important that she had these experiences in which there was no human measure of a distance. And she walks that off and then somebody says, "Hello, this is 60 by 60 Agnes, we got to take—come down to human proportions," and she wanted to be on the human proportions and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: And do you have a sense of because she was so—

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JONATHAN D. KATZ: —with Ellsworth, and they seem so very different—one very spiritual, the other very material. Did you ever get a sense of—?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: No, and I would love to know about all these things you're going to discover because Ellsworth was one of the mind I wouldn't even have aspired to access to it because I just thought—I thought I can't do that. But also I was with Terry, my fiancée, it was complicated, and Ann was an issue for some of these people. And obviously, you take a building like that filled with brilliant, brilliant people, and well, maybe 50 years later you say, "Oh when we were young and gay," and you make a miserable comedy about it. On the other hand they could've pushed each other off the roof, I mean hello. This was no—this is the serious. And we were all aware—this is not written down I suppose, but there we were aware because people could point up to one of the skyscrapers and say, "Oh, well, David Rockefeller and whatever other Rockefellers are up there buying our paintings and about to

destroy Coenties Slip for the sake of real—making money on real estate."

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —real estate, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And there was that very peculiar tension between that aesthetic world and the money—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: The material—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —and the money world, which is not—I haven't sorted that out yet. There's so much about Coenties Slip, and I can't think at the moment. What was important to me was development of painting. I think I was in on some of the origins and changes in what was happening without knowing it, but I was observant, I took notes. I knew Jim Rosenquist was doing something, and I knew Indiana was doing—I knew all that. I remember the paintings, but I had no vocabulary for it and, thank goodness, nobody else really had the vocabulary. Now when they take it back like my beloved friend in London Gary [ph] whom I'll explain elsewhere, that when he takes the history of Pop art back to is it Hamilton in England and—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —and all of that? He takes the—even the class names, the categorizations, takes those back. No, it's part of the freedom of movement in the period that they weren't going to be classified in that way and that they couldn't say as five years later, that a young person would say, "I'm going to do a piece of Pop art," they couldn't say that. Indiana's struggle of which I think he—I don't know he's ever gotten credit, and it must be said that Indiana was persecuted. He had to live his own delusions of going to be murdered; he thought people were going to kill him. His story was his family was murdered by some kind of gangsters [inaudible]; therefore he changed his name to Indiana from Clark. You don't know that?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: I mean I knew that he changed his name, but I didn't know that he made that story.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh no, well, what he said, I'll take an oath—whoa, what he said was that his parents—he said his family was all murdered by criminals of some—by murderers; therefore, he changed his name to Clark and he was afraid—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: To Indiana.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —I'm sorry to Indiana, I'm getting tired. Therefore he was trying not to be recognized. He was afraid they were going to follow him from Indiana and kill him. And I didn't know anything but also he tied that—he tied his family story into the kind of Americana of gangsters, of violence, and all that. Now, in that same period a year—a few years before, there's Peter Ford Young obsessed with serial killers and so concerned with that and weaving in the Americana, I'm calling, serial—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: So killer is Americana. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I know only [ph] midwestern serial killers, hello. Such are quite real confusions. And when I met Peter Ford Young, who had the wisdom to leave Manhattan and become an artist out West, but he was obsessed with the serial killer and fascinated. Because there was a truth in the serial killer in the style of living, the recklessness and the danger that didn't exist elsewhere. These people were all silly maybe but serious thinkers, only the way they were thinking, I don't think, gets brought up.

[00:05:36]

But didn't finish about Indiana. I'm—not lost here, but I confused myself with an emotion. And that is that, and I don't know the record, Thomas B. Hess, editor of *ARTnews,* seem to have taken such a loathing to Robert Indiana, seem to have sworn that as long as he had breath in his body that there would not be—that museums would not, that he would not, that nobody would buy. I do not know the truth of that. I know that Bob responded because

we—these things we talked about. And Bob said, "My only hope is Berlin and Tokyo." And so he shows with Rolf Nelson in Los Angeles, and again I'm not doing dates, it's later period. But he shows with Rolf in Los Angeles but I—it was—sending out his paintings, it was like, I don't—it wasn't like sending paintings to a show. It was like exposing them to terrorism of some sort. I mean he was—his fear of his paintings was sort of different. At the same time, he was ready to send his paintings to Germany and Japan, which he thought would be his only possible markets because he—I took Bob seriously as thinking about America and everything, and we talked about those things. At the same time, boy, did he [ph] and I own the market.

And comically, I was with him one time after he had done a series in—of the word *die*. I was for some reason there to ask him to donate a painting to some good cause, I've forgotten, and he said, "Well," he said, "I can give a die, they didn't go," and I was so appalled by the—that I remember they didn't go. I mean it sounded like Seventh Avenue, Garment District painting, and I hadn't thought that he thought of the series of paintings, which he talked to me about his family, his mother and father and all that. I hadn't thought of them as come out of these, which he did, go or don't go. I'm not putting Indiana down, but he's obviously complex.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Did you ever talk poetry with him? Because, you know, he—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, yeah—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —yeah, he thought—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —well, yes.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —he thought he was—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Well because he had at hand—okay I've been in my day a concordance of—I come from a family—my—the difference between me and other people—most people are people of art, my family to my grandparents, have always used the arts. My grandparents quoted poetry; my father quoted poetry on his deathbed. We've used poems and I so assumed poems are useful, paintings are useful, all of this. I come from using it. My—so this head is—has been a concordance of lines that I found useful.

They overlapped in extraordinary degree Bob who had wonderful, immediate, not verbal knowledge of Melville and Hawthorne and Thoreau, and he knew the history of Coenties Slip, and he could refer you to—and maybe he still remembers the other slip he used to talk about because Melville wrote so much about it. We talked about that, but not like discussing analysis or something else like that. It was simply that, oh, we both trace our sensibilities to these characters like Hawthorne and Melville and Thoreau, all of whom we did—I did not know at the time, but all of whom are sexually ambiguous.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Or even less than ambiguous. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Well, I—all that I know about Hawthorne is that he seems to me so deep in the closet that he may not know.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: No, Hawthorne to be sure, Melville of course much less so, yeah.

[00:10:02]

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah I don't—that isn't an issue there. And Thoreau, I looked up on the internet only a week or two ago, and he's a very intelligent—that is uses the evidence quite circumspectly. And also a young man at a certain point, their family start asking, "Why aren't you married?" And Emerson, I've never known, he's a huge, huge figure, I don't know.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: I don't know.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And I don't think the evidence will appear. However, I do believe this, and I'm writing about this, and this Paul Livingston philosophers is helping me. I want to follow a theme in philosophy, and it will have Søren Kierkegaard, it will have Nietzsche. I'm forgetting things because I'm senile, but it will have Wittgenstein certainly. It will have a list of those who are explicitly in the 20th century and publicly gay back to some who did not say so but where I think there's no—and Dante where I think there's no question, there's just

no evidence, well what the hell. And I what I want to do, I won't live long enough to do it, I want to track something in the theories of the responses to standard language where these people can't be themselves in the conventional walls and reconstructions of language and so here's where they go out and in one way or another. And to come back toward Ray, his friend who had a name like—it wasn't Frank Thomas [ph] or Harris [ph], but his name like American name, English name like that.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I hope you like that American—I went from American—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —to English.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —name, hello?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I've got binders of names here, named himself Søren Kierkegaard, the Kierkegaard obviously is for the philosopher. We're not going to decide quite what Kierkegaard meant and the [inaudible]. Simultaneously Søren was quite sincere in his religiosity, I'm calling it, because I'm undercutting it. But I also knew he was also often on his knees and so he managed with calling himself Søren to cover the full complexity of himself because even in church, he was there—there he was.

There's a theme in language with Ray that—where I want to get at it, and of course it overlapped, he's not unique in any of this. And so what I'm looking for, is there a theme in common of the attitude toward lawful, conventional language, which can be taught to—given that these men having homosexually, which has no history. In none other times is there a written history, so there's a total discontinuity there from the laws governing written history, a kind of freedom but it's different. And then so what's their relation then to language, which has a history, it has rules, instructions, and laws, and what do they do in altering the language and fitting the language to themselves—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: That's very good.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: And I don't—I sound self-pitying. literally that would take 10 years, but what I'm doing now is working toward that. And what I often do in my own writing is sketch something, that's irresponsible or just for me, and then beyond that, where I've got the evidence, then I can pick up. Now as it happens, as of this morning, oh, Ludwig Wittgenstein, you know, I got you exactly where you said the right things about language. I've got him exactly where I want to, where I want to. Now what I'm doing, which is [inaudible] is I'm tracing the motivations of his philosophy into his personal history. And I just read today of somebody saying you must never do that. Well, that's what I do, and I don't care because—and this comes back to history of art—because I don't take my psychology from Lacan and the post-Freudians who got complicated in France. I take them from a German psychoanalyst, Ludwig Binswanger. Now here's a weird turn of these things because I can keep two subjects with epicycles.

In the beginning of a friendships with Stephen Koch, I gave him a copy of my essay on Andy Warhol, which is entirely me reading Binswanger but formulating a theme of passivity. And so when Stephen—and I gave Stephen a copy of that. When—soon afterwards he wrote a book about—

[00:15:22]

JONATHAN D. KATZ: *Stargazers*.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —Andy Warhol and passivity and what passivity and passivity. And I said to Stephen, and we were developing a friendship, I mentioned about Binswanger. I said, "Clearly, you've studied Binswanger," and he said, "No, but my psychoanalyst was analyzed by Ludwig Binswanger." I thought that was pretty good for me to recognize what I got out of Binswanger, hello. I'm like hello—I'm not sure who can answer the telephone in—[they laugh]. I don't know what's—who's—I don't know where everybody hands are, but in any event, Binswanger comes in there, and it goes back to the, still to me, one of the best books on Warhol by Stephen, and I consult it and look at it. I almost used the [inaudible]—I don't know—the [inaudible] chance, I almost [inaudible] and point my finger by chance because

wherever, we're going to do something—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: It's—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: —stimulating.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —it's smart, it's really smart, yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, it ended the friendship by way, but that's minor.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: It ended the friendship?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Yeah, I thought, thank you, hello, Bill, you know?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah. You're not—

WILLIAM S. WILSON: He said—

JONATHAN D. KATZ: —not mentioned in the book?

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Oh, no. He said, "Oh, oh, oh," he said, "Oh yeah," he said, "I read your essay, great, great essay. I didn't get back to you about that." Well, however—and what I did was just this $25 essay, and I'm not claiming more for it, but I planted in that essay some stuff, which it's only 1968, hells bells, he hasn't done the *Last Suppers*, et cetera. And I just felt, given—okay, in time, and maybe now, the time has come because I'm writing more about Andy at the moment than I'm about Ray.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Hmm.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: Is this machine—?

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah.

WILLIAM S. WILSON: I'm so tired.

JONATHAN D. KATZ: Yeah, sure, sure, I'll shut it off. You've been great. This is just—

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