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Interview with Ilya Bolotowsky

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Transcript

Preface

An interview with Ilya Bolotowsky conducted by Adelaide Freer, ca. 1967, for a seminar taught by Irving Sandler at New York University.

This interview is part of the *Irving Harry Sandler papers, circa 1944-2007, bulk 1944-1980*. The following verbatim transcription was produced in 2008.

Interview

ADELAIDE FREER: Maybe we could talk about how your style developed first.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Um-hm. All right. We are recording now. My beginnings were different from that of most of the artists who paint modern nowadays. I went to the National Academy of Design; a very conservative school. It's extremely conservative. All the good students were in the position to the faculty. And so this was a normal thing. Let's see. In other words, when I began to work slightly impressionistically, this was a great rebellion, the fact that I was interested in color while in school.

When I left school, I went through a stage of more or less realistic expressionism, which is a subjective way of distorting what you see. And then I went through a cubist period. I left the Academy in 1910 in the spring, and I went to Europe in 1932, just before New Year's in 1932. I came back in the late fall. And while I studied the Old Masters I was influenced by cubism while in Europe. So this was the next stage away from realism and from the Academy, even though I was never totally an academical student.

In other words, by little, gradual steps, I got into the modern movement. And finally, I began experimenting in abstraction around 1933. And it started with landscape and still life, which was somewhat cubistic and gradually became—my style gradually became quite abstract.

Anyhow, some of that was considered abstract in those days. Now we might consider some of those paintings closer to semi-abstract. But the definitions change, or at least the ideas behind the definitions change.

I joined a group called the The Ten when I came back from Europe, and this must have been—I'm not very sure about the dates— I think around 1934 or '35. And we sent an exhibition to Paris. It was shown in Gallerie Bonaparte. I think it was in 1935. It was sponsored by Brommer who had the fanciest gallery in New York and in Paris, Brommer Galleries. Now he's quite forgotten. But it was—it corresponded to the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery nowadays. And I guess this was a sort of a trial run for the group of The Ten, but since we didn't sell, he dropped us then.

The original members of The Ten, I can mention them. They were—let's see, Joseph Solman, Nahum Tschacbasov, Markus Rothkowitz who became Mark Rothko, and Adolf Gottlieb who remained Adolf Gottlieb, also Louis Schanker who is still Louis Schanker, and a number of others.

ADELAIDE FREER: Was John Graham a member?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: John Graham was a member much later.

ADELAIDE FREER: Later, uh-huh.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: In the same group of The Ten. And also for awhile, Byron Brown much later was a member, and Balkam Green much later was a member of The Ten. Kerkham and Lee Gatch was a member much later. And a number of others, some who are pretty much forgotten now, like Yankl Kirfeld was a member for a while. And there must be a number of others.

The group never had more than eight members at a time. And half of that, let's say about five were permanent members and the other would join and leave. I was at that time the only abstract member of the group. All the others were either modern realistic or expressionists. At that time, Adolf Gottlieb was a realist. He painted in the open style, somewhat influenced by Avery. And as to Mark Rothko, who showed under the name Markus Rothkowitz, he was very much influenced by Avery and, to some extent, by Max Weber. Joseph Solman was influenced by the German expressionists. In other words, they were all modern, but they really were all surrealists. And I was the only wild one. Even Lee Gatch at that time was not quite abstract.

Now, this was the group of The Ten, or the Group of Ten, which was the second group. There was such a group before our time also called The Ten. Personally, I think it was a group of some very good painters. And here is the chance for various research to rediscover them. You can get in contact with the names I mentioned; most of them are alive, to get more information.

MS FREER: Did John Graham contribute a great deal to this group, or did he only stay with it a short period of time? And what was his style of painting? What did he contribute?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: John Graham contributed—I think he used to do drawings— he was an excellent draftsman— which were rather Piccasoid. But I wouldn't call him an imitationist. He got the spirit of Picasso very well, and he applied those drawings in his own way. In other words, Piccasoid without being an imitator—but let's say in very complete empathy with Picasso, a perfect understanding, but different in spirit, quite. And he didn't exhibit our group too much, no.

ADELAIDE FREER: You can't seem to find much about him or any of his work. Why is this?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Let's see. His last show was in the Mayers Gallery. And Mayers Gallery closed down. Mayers went to Europe. And then the last I heard of Mayers, he was a sort of a technical advisor to Martha Jackson's son. I think his name is Anderson. So if you want to trace Mayers, you should ask Martha Jackson or her son. And you might be able to trace Mayers, and through him, about John Graham.

John Graham had a very varied career. He was an officer of the Palace Guards of the Russian Czar. And his original name, I think, was Dombrowski. Graham was his mother's name. And he was a very colorful individual who simply refused to age. When at the age of 81, people thought he was in his early 60s. A very romantic figure, his last wife was Marianne Strate, whom he met through Castelli's former mother-in-law and Leo Castelli.

ADELAIDE FREER: Yes.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: You can trace him through that, too.

As to Adolf Gottlieb, I don't have to tell you much because he is sufficiently well known now on his own, and so is Rothko. Solman exhibits and is quite well known. Ben-Zion was one of the early members of the group, as I said, Ben-Zion. And he's still active in New York, although maybe not quite as well known. But he's still a very active painter. And so the group can be traced easily enough.

Now, while in this group, I also joined the American Abstract Artists, or rather, the first discussion group. That was started by Harry Holtzman, in his loft. If I'm not mistaken, it was on West 17th Street or around about there. And Holtzman was one of the students of Hans Hofmann. And he was very much interested in Mondrian's work. Another member who was a follower of Mondrian was Burgoyne Diller, who was following a plastic movement since 1934, quite steadily.

Even Diller also was a Hofmann student. And Hofmann actually taught a combination of cubism and expressionism. But these two students of his became followers of Mondrian, quite closely. In other words, they showed more independence; they were also friends.

And Diller never came to the Holtzman group. But a number of other people came. And finally, they decided to start a group, and to exhibit, and the name of it was made to be American Abstract Artists. I think the first meetings of the group must have been around 1936, if I'm not mistaken. And the first exhibition was, if I'm not mistaken, 1938, in the Scribb Gallery.

In the group, you could see the differences right away. I at that time was painting geometric and, occasionally, biomorphic form. But it was not pure neoplastic style yet, because occasionally I would have curves and, very often, diagonal movement. The only pure neoplastic painter at that time was Burgoyne Diller.

But there were artists [inaudible]; he was the only one at that time. Harry Holtzman, who was an eager follower of Mondrian, contributed only several charcoal drawings, which were very gifted, but they looked more like the very beginnings of Mondrian when he made drawings of fronts of buildings. And those drawings by Mondrian and also by Holtzman had a number of diagonals. In other words, Holtzman's work that he showed was not in the beginning neoplastic, although in spirit he was already.

Holtzman ended painting soon afterwards, although he contributed a two-dimensional column to one of the shows of the American Abstract Artists, and I've done a number since. But the first such column in this country was painted, actually, by Holtzman. And he had a neoplastic column where primary colors are used, and the economy of colors, a lot of white, and the right-angle relationship and a very simple rectangular shape. Two-dimensionary is called the parallel packets.

ADELAIDE FREER: What influenced you to paint in this style or this manner?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: I saw, I think around 1933, if I'm not mistaken—or maybe it was a year later—I saw some of the Mondrians in the Gallatin Collection at New York University in a reading room in the Village. At that time, it was open to the public, and the Gallatin Collection was hanging there, and that's when I saw my first Mondrians. Before I saw them later on in the Valentine Dudensing Gallery in New York. And he had a strong effect on me. I guess it must have been quite magnetic.

The Gallatin Collection did not stay in New York University because the trustees, the board of trustees, wanted Gallatin to pay rent on the place. And—you must know the story—and they also wanted him to pay the salaries of the guards. And so he took his collection and gave it to the Philadelphia Museum. And right now, New York University, many years later, some 35 years later, is still trying to recuperate and start another collection, for which nobody will have to pay if they're in that paintings. At that time, art was not considered so important, as you can see.

Anyhow, this was one place where you could see modern art, more than the Museum of Modern Art, because the Museum of Modern Art, it first stressed people like Cezanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. And then the Modern Museum, in its beginnings, had a show of Max Weber— all these very

fine people, but they are not the most extreme modernists or abstractionists. In other words, the Modern Museum started in a very cautious fashion in those years in a phase. And it was the Gallatin collection that provided the interest, you know, gave you a chance to see the more—the latest developments, and not the Modern Museum.

I hope people realize it. Historically it is important. I remember Alfred Byers preface to the first publication of his in the Modern Museum. It had to deal—it dealt with a Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Gauguin, and he mentioned that people of such caliber do not exist today anymore. In other words, this was the peak the high renaissance. Some take the genetic element of Cezanne, and some take his color, and some take more or less expressionist distortions, and they handle them separately. But nobody can integrate.

And of course, since then Byers had to correct himself, that somehow the Modern Museum was never very friendly to the neoplastic movement at all.

ADELAIDE FREER: Is it today?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: The Modern Museum never published any large monograph on Mondrian. They had a very, very pretty little thing on Mondrian. But very minor people had regular books about him published by the Modern Museum, but not Mondrian. The book you see here is published by Abrams. And this was published many years after he died. And the text is by Sefore [ph]. And it's got a study behind it where there was a lot of interference, for various reasons. Maybe even with the best of wishes, it's a very strange study.

In other words, Mondrian was at that time a rather extreme person, and people who followed him had to resign themselves to being ignored or to being accused of not following the right trend or not the major trend, or whatever is the reason.

There was also something else in the air in the 1930s. It was a period of the Depression. And artists, of course, many of them painted social-scenes stuff. Many would paint a social scene which was a form of realism, with a difference. Instead of painting still lives or portraits or whatever or things they knew, they might paint [inaudible] coal miners in Pennsylvania without ever having gone there or even having studied exactly the technique of coal mining or any of the actual locations. And so I would say they were illustrations with the best of wishes for our imagination, without much background. This is what I have against the social-scene realism.

Regular realism would mean a lot of study of your subject matter. In social-scene realism, your sympathy with the starving, unemployed possibly was enough, and it certainly wasn't enough for a painter.

The Modern Museum was very much afraid to go into the extremes in art in those days. And somehow, if it concerned Europeans, the Modern Museum was much more receptive to the latest developments. But when it was the Americans, they preferred to be more or less regional or social-scene.

At one time, the Museum of Modern Art, just before the Second World War, had a show in which people like Eugene Speicher were included, while the American abstract artists were totally ignored, once and for all. There was never an exhibition given by the Modern Museum to that whole group of the American abstract artists or to The Ten. They preferred to discover their own people.

And so there is quite a gap in American art history in the '30s. One explanation is that those people

were not very talented, and when some of them reached the 1940s, they suddenly became brilliant. But in that case, you must believe in some mystique of numbers, which is to my mind total nonsense. And that historical period was such. But when the country was more or less ready for modern art, younger people were promoted.

Evidently the older ones, who might have had a chip on their shoulder—some of the older people also were promoted. But by that time, their style was different, too. And for example, Arthur Gottlieb is now considered as one of the 1940s great artists; actually, his beginnings were in the 1930s and even earlier. The same goes for many others.

But now the American abstract artists then had a fight on their hands. They had to fight the establishment in the arts, and so of course in a small way had to do with The Ten. And when finally modern art was accepted, it was purely for the action painters, the surrealists, and expressionists were the ones who inherited the field, where the American abstract artists had to prepare the ground.

ADELAIDE FREER: [Inaudible.] Did Peggy Guggenheim support the surrealists at that time in her gallery?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Peggy Guggenheim in her gallery had examples of everything. She had Mondrians, and she had a special room for the surrealists. But she also was actually helping the young action-painters-to-be. People like Pollock were helped by her a great deal, and many others. In other words, she was promoting in every direction. But the one she really put across was Pollock, even though she had a special room for the surrealists. And she exhibited them constantly.

Her main achievement was in promoting Jackson Pollock, who of course came much later than the American abstract artists or The Ten. He was a younger man, and he was a student of Benton, and he became abstract at a much later period. I would say his attempts at abstraction already dates from the Second World War, much later than the American abstract artists in the book here.

Jackson Pollock, of course, he worked his abstract expressionist style before many other people, even though he is not a newcomer in the field, because when he began to paint in this style, Hans Hofmann was still teaching his own version of cubism to his students. And so, while people would like for the sake of neatness—and they would like to believe that Pollock is a follower of Hofmann, it's not really so at all.

I would say rather that Hofmann became purely abstract expressionist after Jackson Pollock showed the way. Even though before Jackson Pollock, you had of course Kandinsky, and you had experiments by Hartung in Europe, and also certain experiments by Stanley William Hayter, who was in this country at the time.

But it was Pollock who actually made the most use of it. And even in the later years, you would find elements of cubism in the middle of an expressionist painting by Hans Hofmann. In other words, his past was to show itself. While of course, in Pollock, you find a greater consistency. When he went totally abstract expressionist, he was totally so and no other elements interfered. I'm not discussing the quality of work, but a certain unity in the work and a certain dedication.

Of course, Pollock was a newcomer in the field of abstract art, so far as people are concerned who come from the early '30s. Now, let's see, what else can we say? I can say now one more thing, that right now there is a reaction against abstraction. And of course, there are too many directions. And I think, personally, that op art is more or less played out.

But pop art has shown itself quite to be aggressive, to return to the object. And also, pop art has another advantage. It's easier to write on pop art because it has many literary elements. Pop art also has still another advantage: You can enjoy low-brow things through the humor of pop art. Pop art is not destructive like Dadaism was. It allows you to enjoy the commonplace, the common objects, and still feel slightly superior. And pop art has another advantage: It can apply quite easily to the theater, to the dance, to happenings, and so forth.

In this respect, pure abstraction, like neoclassicism, of course, is a much more severe discipline and it cannot carry such an appeal. Neoplastic art is much more difficult to write about because it has military connotations. And if you again connect it with neoplatonic ideas, some philosophical ideas, or the absolutes, this is very fine, but it's not as popular a way of writing in art as what you can do with pop art. And so I do not feel that neoplastic art will ever have the popular appeal of some of the other styles.

In the case of action painting, of course, we can see immediately that the emotional appeal of a swinging brush that creates interesting calligraphies and rhythms—this emotional thing has a feeling of a catharsis or a certain purge and their appeal, of course, is very strong. No wonder action painting lasted for some 17-18 years until finally people were bored with it. I do not think pop art will last that long, but still you can see why it does have this appeal.

On the other hand, neoplastic painting, like any purely classical feeling, doesn't have this appeal at all. And so it's a different sort of thing. Now, how come some people have stayed with it all their lives, like—let's say—Diller and myself? And in Europe it's Vontangelo [ph] and also Goren [ph], Domela [ph], and a very few others. It's simply that we find this is the most exciting thing we can think.

People who have training as realists— and after all, Mondrian was a very good academical realist. He was a very fine impressionist. He was a romantic painter. He was an expressionist. And he finally became a cubist. And finally, he discovered neoplastic painting for him, which was—this was the most exciting style. But he could have painted in any other style he wished.

I myself went through an academical training, and Diller, of course, did the same. It's not a matter of our limitations, but our desire to paint what is the most significant to us. In other words, if you reduce painting to a pure relationship of proportions and rhythms, utilizing the rectangular relationship, you avoid all associations of a literary or psychological nature.

If let's say you have irregular shapes in your work, you right away begin to see images. And you have mythological things coming and psychological and so on. If you have a shape that is rounded and it has, let's say, five points to it, you think of a leaf, oak leaf, a profile, a hand, a cloud, and you go off into surrealism. In that case, you may as well accept it and be a surrealist.

If on the other hand, you want to be a realist, you may as well do the best you can with realism. If you want to depend on fewer relationships, where the images do not count, and the neutral elements, which are straight lines, which depict strictly tensions and nothing else, and colors, which are simply color planes that react against each other, like weights and balances— if you can get a certain effect, which you might call musical, if you like, or architectural, this becomes an extremely exciting experience, and you hate to give it up for anything else.

Now, this will be done in the neoplastic movement. Now, what is the difference between the hard-edge painters, the geometric painters, and the neoplastic painters? The Ricci [ph] Museum had a show called Hard Edge, and they put everybody in from op artists to all the others. Hard edge

painting simply means that you have a very definite, clear edge. I would say even that Botticelli was a hard edge painter. Sometimes he even outlined it with a pencil, I mean his images. And that's a hard edge. Titian certainly was not a hard edge painter.

I think this is not such an important distinction, you see. Anything might be hard edge painting. I think what they meant was geometric art. Now of course, neoplastic painting is a branch of the geometric painting. If you think of geometric art, you might think of the French painter Hervin, H-e-r-v-i-n. He would use different geometric shapes. And before him, Kandinsky would use various geometric shapes.

The trouble with the geometric painting is this: that when you contrast too many geometric shapes, you begin to get images. Kandinsky has a painting where he has several curved lines. On top of them is a triangle with several rectangles over them. And the whole thing looks like a little Walt Disney steamship going over the waves.

And I know a certain eminent professor—came from Germany—here. And he had an abstraction that people thought was very nice. It had one grey triangle on top of another, smaller grey triangle, and a little dash somewhere, and then a thin rectangle on the bottom of the double triangle. And so I looked at it, and I realized that, unconscious, he had amended a self-portrait. There was his profile with a rather thin neck, and a long nose like Dante Alighieri, and a long chin. You can imagine it very easily.

In other words, the combination of several geometric shapes gives you associations with images. And if this happens intentionally, it's fine and it's surrealism. If it happens against your wish, the picture seems to be funny and the artist is in a very funny spot.

I mentioned the little steamship by Kandinsky, Alice, and called for a self-portrait by someone else as those examples.

If you reduce your paintings to neutral elements—in other words, not to any shapes, but purely to tensions and more stressful relationships, then of course, you go into neoplastic movement. Because the most perfect tension gives you a straight line, which is artificial—they say in the universe, all movement and everything else proceeds on curves. So this is artificial. This is human-made. This is abstract.

The rectangle is merely a byproduct of the rectangular relationships. And of course, the right angle is the most stressful relationship because, if you accept an angle of, let's say, 70 degrees, the human eye is not quite sure whether it's a 70 or 65 or 73. And it begins to waver, the whole thing. But if it's a right angle relationship, it's steady and it's final, as final as a straight line. And let's say the straight line is an angle of 180 degrees. Half of it is 90 degrees, and nothing is more final, and so nothing is more restful.

The result of this is, you get rectangles, which again are final, and so they're restful. And no associations are possible with such rectangles, if you are careful. Of course, if you are not careful and if you throw too many things around, you might have a big rectangle and one small one inside of it, slightly overlapping it coming out, and a tiny one someplace again, and you have a funny face all over again.

Faces can come into things and cause a lot of damage. The moment you see an image where it's not supposed to be, you lose the abstract feeling. And the thing becomes a cartoon, which is a very poor quality sort of realism. In other words, images in a style where they are not called for should not

be at all.

On the other hand, in surrealism, the more images, the more associations, the better it is. What is right for one style is wrong for the other. And what, let's say, would a man do who accepts such a very severe style as a limitation? Wouldn't you sometime desire to do something else? Well, say, it's possible. And if he does, let him do it.

I know that Mondrian used to write a lot, and he always dreamt of being an architect. As a matter of fact, he very much was an amateur architect, but he never had a chance to be one. I'm sure he would have been one of the top architects, maybe the best one. On the other hand, in my case, I also do films and creative writing. Whatever I feel doesn't belong in my type of painting can go into my motion pictures. In other words, this discipline is not a matter of a military discipline where you get rid of things willy-nilly. You only put down what you feel is important. The rest, you can still keep it, and it goes into something else, into another medium.

But as I mentioned before, in geometric painting, you can have associations, which may be successful, maybe funny. In geometric paintings by Urban [ph], sometimes the various shapes give you a feeling of a lot of hammers hanging on a wall, and you think you're looking at a window display in the hardware shop. The various triangles look like geometric things, maybe for ruling, pens, and so forth. You have hammers, you have other shapes, and it's no longer a pure abstraction.

In neoplastic painting, you achieve a pure abstraction. The space is flat. And if some colors insist on going back slightly or forward, you still are supposed to feel flat space. And what you feel is not the depth or the bulging, but a certain tension back and forth and a flat membrane, which is the painting. And this, again, creates more interest.

This is entirely different from cubism, where you had the flatness, and you also had overlapping space, plane on top of plane giving you depth; or realism, where you have your depth; or certain experiments in abstraction, where a shape can go forward and goes back again, back and forth and forth and back [inaudible] down effect. In neoplastic art, you utilize flatness, under-tension, which creates a greater excitement.

Now, would you like to ask any questions?

ADELAIDE FREER: Yes. Now, I saw a painting of yours at NYU, Mr. Bolotowsky. And it was like an assemblage. You had added wood to it. What was the purpose of this? How did it factor in?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: This was exhibited in San Francisco in the Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1938. So it was made, I think, either in '38 or '37. It's a very early thing, and I was not neoplastic at the time.

ADELAIDE FREER: I see.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: It was geometric construction—it had a contrast of textures. It had curved movement. It had different material, cork, wood, and so forth, zinc, natural color of the metal. And that was an abstraction, but it was not neoplastic. In other words, it does not fit my definition of what is neoplastic art. It's simply an earlier development.

I still rather like it. But I feel that compared with my neoplastic work, it hasn't got a scale. It seems to more or less pucker up. And this is the trouble with many paintings which are not neoplastic. It may be very attractive in many ways, but the space in there very often is either very crowded or loose or seems to pucker up or it seems to create holes. And a good neoplastic painting is supposed to give

you a feeling of free space, and yet organized.

And the space being the main thing in these relationships, it has to be good. You can never get away with just, let's say, poetic associations, like in a landscape or in a nude. This particular relief is much earlier—not much, as I began to go more geometric that same year. But still, it's an earlier construction.

ADELAIDE FREER: What do you think is really a sort of a decline for this neoplasticism type of painting? Do you think it's the times or—

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: No, neoplastic painting did not decline. It's simply never had its popular renaissance and it never will because it's not a popular type of art. In other words, while many movements would go very high and achieve a tremendous publicity and then decline, this one never rose as high in publicity and it never went down either. It keeps its own place quite steadily, and never very popular, but influential.

For example, neoplastic movement has influenced architecture, typographic layouts, even a certain amount of general taste, and so forth. But this is indirect. As to actual, personal success in neoplastic painting, it can never be as great as that where painting is combined with either psychology—let's say, like in surrealism, or where painting permits you to go literally and accept things that are low taste, like in pop art, or where, let's say, painting can be combined with other media and become part of a stage set or a dance.

In this respect, of course, neoplastic painting will never move into such directions, if it remains neoplastic.

ADELAIDE FREER: Do you think in any degree it has influenced the sidewalk sculpture that we have now displayed in New York, some of the pieces?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Well, the sidewalk sculpture, a lot of it is closer to minimal art or geometric art. In other words, generally, they avoid right-angle relationships. And some of them, I think are very nice. But I wouldn't say they're really neoplastic. They're really more geometric. They depend on more variety of geometric combinations and not so much on the particular tension, but more on variations. So it's not entirely the same, which are like, to my mind, a more Baroque in more variations, less intense discipline.

But I think it's a very nice development, of course. And I think such things might be a little bit more popular, even though I think the reason they are being exhibited is not because this type of art is very popular, but because the mayor, I think, and his commissioners try to be more progressive and try to improve the taste in New York City. If you get another mayor, the whole business will be finished. We got us a style, I think.

Besides, the geometric constructions, which are terribly oversized, are very well suited for such displays. They are too big to be stolen, and they are not made of any expensive material. And also, while they are very often well designed, the craftsmanship in them is not particularly good. And it's not even meant to be.

And most of these look like mockups for some sculpture that will be made eventually out of metal. And very often, they are made of plywood and hammered together. Even so, for the size they are, they must be expensive to make. But if they were made, let's say, on a tiny scale and in stainless steel, they most likely would have been stolen on the very first day.

In other words, not only is their style, but their size, which makes it possible to exhibit them in this fashion. And I think it's a very nice development, of course.

Now, in a sense, they are architectural, but of course, neoplastic painting is more architectural because it's closer to the idea of architecture, but it depends strictly on proportions. And Mondrian dreamt of having a state of architecture so perfect that painting would be unnecessary, where the various walls in the rooms and the proportions between them would be such that you would enter a room and just enjoy something as good as a painting.

This, I think, is not possible. He was an idealist, of course, and that was fine, but architects have to consider a customer's need, and to be financed, they have to consider the customer's taste. And so architecture, by its very nature, is a commercial art, egalitarian, and it cannot be otherwise. Painting, on the other hand, may be quite free. An architect may be very free on blueprints, you know, in his sketches, but no place else. And so Mondrian's dream is still only a dream, and it's a good thing he stuck to painting, or he would have been just doing projects of buildings that could never be built.

In general, architecture is not a very perfect art. But painting comes in very nicely. If, let's say, a room has to be made in bad proportions because another space is needed for some utilities or what-not, something else, a painter can improve the proportions in a room by designing the division of space on the walls in a certain way, using certain colors. And so in this respect, I would say painting can go very well, and especially, neoplastic painting can go very well with architecture, but not exactly the way Mondrian thought of it.

He thought of a very perfect, an absolute relationship. I feel it's more of a way of improving architecture that cannot achieve perfection for very many reasons, many of which are perfectly valid, because as I mentioned, architecture is not really a poor medium and it really cannot be. If an architect totally ignores his customers and designs something without any regard for use, he becomes a constructionist. And then he is really a sculptor and a perfect artist. But he is no longer an architect. It's no longer a building; it's a piece of sculpture. And it may be much better than his buildings could ever be. But so far, I haven't seen any architects outside of Tony Smith who are willing to do this.

Tony Smith, by the way, is an architect. And he does constructions, where he is absolutely free, the way he could not be in his buildings. Okay. Now, any other questions?

ADELAIDE FREER: Would you think that the Whitney, perhaps, would ever consider a one-man showing of certain people that they feel would be outstanding in neoplasticism? For instance, yourself or someone else who was dedicated to—

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: The Whitney might very well, yeah.

ADELAIDE FREER: Because they seem to be in sympathy with many of the American print art.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Well, the Whitney Museum, I think, understood [inaudible] better than many other museums. And right now, I think the Guggenheim does very similarly. Maybe the Modern Museum will also start doing it.

The Whitney was not trying to push any style. And the Whitney Museum was attacked for not promoting any style. The Modern Museum would promote various styles. The Modern Museum tried to improve the public tastes. The Modern Museum was the first to show the Europeans. And the Modern Museum was directed behind action painters at the expense of many other movements.

The Whitney would show examples of everything, including even Benton. And the Whitney people were accused of bad taste because they showed samplings of everything, and yet this is exactly the relevant museum. It's the private collector who has to exercise his own personal, subjective taste. And since you have many private collectors, if they have guts enough, they will all be collecting different things. And then, of course, eventually the best in art can survive.

But a museum should be of a catholic approach. A museum should exhibit the best or the significant in every direction. And if some of these directions are not valid, they eventually will die out. But at least you'll know where to go to look for things which were not very popular in their day, but a museum is the institution that saved them for posterity.

In this respect, I think the Whitney was doing quite well. And for this the Whitney, of course, was attacked for being wishy-washy, for not knowing its place. And yet, I think they were doing exactly very well. They were collecting samples in every possible direction. And it started their attacks on them. They continued doing it. And in this fashion, they served the duty of a museum.

Some of the other museums actually acted more like private collectors. And this is where I feel the Museum of Modern Art, while doing a good job, acted more like a private collector on the big scale. Because the Modern Museum was setting the trends, whether they wanted to or not. And then might say they never meant to do it that way. But that's what it happened to be, in effect.

I think the Guggenheim Museum, at present, again has a better idea of what a museum should be because they also pick different things, and they try to collect examples of different trends. And even if, as a result, they are less consistent, they are much closer to what a museum should be than a museum that stresses certain styles at expense of other styles.

So I would say the Whitney is very likely to do this. It's possible. I have never heard of any such thing yet, but this does not mean it is not possible.

Besides, you know, when a person has been painting for very many years—and I have been painting now since 1924—I'm 60—eventually, some institution will have to come across. Because, merely by enduring while you're contemporaries are dropping dead on all sides of you—and very many of them did—you cannot be ignored for too long. And of course, my being ignored was not uncomfortable. I've sold to very many collections, and I'm represented at very many museums.

But when it comes to being considered in a sort of a top place, it's still more or less in the air of, the better artists came in the '40s, and not in the '30s. And this mystique of the numbers, to me is the most ridiculous thing, and of course, this cannot keep, cannot last.

There's one advantage, at my age, of not having been discovered on a big scale yet. It means I still may be so discovered. My worst thing for now is just to be discovered when he is very young and then to be dropped. And this happened to the Italian futurists, who had great names when they were young fellows in their 20s. And then in their 60s, they were totally forgotten. Some of them, I'm told, are still alive. And they are very unsuccessful, academic painters. They have no use for their own experiments in futurism anymore. They hate their own youthful talent. They are jealous of their youth. And they are their own ghosts. This is true of the many of the futurists who are still alive.

This to some extent was the life of Chirico, the surrealist, who did his best work in his early 20s. And then in his late 50s, he was copying his work and painting academical pictures. And he just hated surrealism. And he was still alive. And the young fellow who was Chirico was very much hated by the old fellow who was Chirico himself, which would be an interesting subject for a play.

And at least, this is one danger neoplastic painters do not face because they were not ever famous in their 20s. And so they might be appreciated later on in their 60s or 70s. [Laughs.]

ADELAIDE FREER: [Laughs.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: And that reminds me that Mondrian's name went suddenly up immediately after his death. He was very much respected in Europe and when he came to this country. But he never had any personal success. And financially, he was always extremely broke. But his name certainly is something that cannot be ignored, even though I'm told that in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, he's still pretty much snubbed. And in Holland, the work of Mondrian by his old early work—and not just typical, mature work—still, I mean, Mondrian undoubtedly is totally safe.

There is a lot of mix-up concerning what is neoplastic art. I know that Herbert Reed once, in one of his books—a very serious critic and a poet—he wrote that in America it's very strange why the person doesn't believe in a national art, but it seems that in America there is a national style. And that's action painting. He said there's only one man in this country who does neoplastic art, and he said he seems to be the only one. And he mentioned Jorge K. Morris [ph].

Now, this was odd because Morris is not a neoplastic painter at all. And Herbert Reed should know better than that. And so I found Herbert Reed's address, and I got a bunch of photographs with names and so on, and I sent the stuff to Herbert Reed. And then many years have passed, and I once saw him at an opening at Marlborough-Gerson Gallery. And I came to him, and I said, "I'm Such-and-such, and do you remember the stuff I sent you?" And the poor old fellow evidently got frightened of me, because he ran off and really doubling off. He had nothing to say. But that was one little bummer that he pulled on neoplastic art in America, because there were quite a few people.

Let's see. Of course, Diller, Grossman [ph], myself, to some extent, Glanner [ph], although Glanner's work is based on certain diagonal movements, which are not really neoplastic, but still he's close. And there are several others, who at one time or another worked in a style, like Michael Lowe, and a few more. But Reed should have done a little research before writing on the subject. But I guess he just didn't find it necessary.

Now, any other questions?

ADELAIDE FREER: No. But I think the fact that Professor Sandler feels that you have much to offer in the field of art—

[SIDE CONVERSATION.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: He happens to be one man who does his research. [Laughs.]

ADELAIDE FREER: [Laughs.] Yes, he does. And he is a delightful man.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: And as a matter of fact, he—and at Diller's funeral in a speech, he said this. He said, "If you were"—he was studying art history. He was always told that the artists in the '30s were poor and the artists of the '40s were great. And he said, "He seriously is beginning to doubt this sort of business." Now, when he said this, this was still very much like sticking his neck out. So I would say that Mr. Sandler has integrity and courage.

ADELAIDE FREER: Yes.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: And in later years, it won't feel like anything much. But what he as doing was really a very special thing in his day. You showed independence, too.

ADELAIDE FREER: And I want to thank you so much for [inaudible].

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: You're welcome.

[SIDE CONVERSATION.]

ADELAIDE FREER: Could you tell us something about your background, Mr. Bolotowsky, about where you were born and how you become interested in art?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Well, I was born on July 1st, 1907. As a matter of fact, I was born on two different dates.

ADELAIDE FREER: [Laughs.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Which is hard to explain to Americans, because my birth on the Julian calendar in Russia was on June 18th, 1907. And then, after the Revolution, when the country switched to the Gregorian calendar, the dates were changed, and my birthday became July 1st. So I can give honestly two dates of my birth, June 18th and July 1st.

ADELAIDE FREER: [Laughs.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: It's a minor thing, but very few people are conscious that Russia was under the Julian calendar. It was different from the West. That was in, again, in the city that has two names, or three. Two different dates of birth and three different cities. And I was born in St. Petersburg, which was renamed during the First World War. It was renamed into Petrograd, a more Slavic name, and that's the Germanic. And then it was renamed by the Communists into Leningrad.

In some biographies, it's mentioned that I was born in Leningrad, which I claim is not possible because to have been born in Leningrad, I should be approximately—let's see now—11 years or 12 years younger than I am, because it was renamed into Leningrad around 1918 or 1919. And I was born way before that. So there are two different dates and three different city names.

Now, my family moved to the city of Baku when I was three years old. My father was practicing law there. And that's where I went to school until the Revolution, when we fled to Constantinople, Turkey, which is now known as Istanbul. At that time, it was under French occupation, and it was Constantinople. I went to the French school there called Kalir Saint Josef [ph] in the Asiatic part of the city.

There wasn't much art there. It was a good school, but there wasn't either art or music, nothing much. And the French monks who were teaching there had an idea of art that should consist of very neat drawings, geometric shapes. And this was a funny thing, that in doing this, I felt it was kind of silly. And I preferred to draw from nature on my own. I made drawings on my own, actually from the age of one, which doesn't make me into a genius. It just seems that I happened to do it.

My first drawings in my early childhood consisted of drawings of people's heads and horses' heads without any bodies. And these were saved until they were taken by the Turkish armies with with our other belongings in 1918 during the end of the First World War, because the Turks seized the city of Baku and sacked the whole city.

Well, I still remember those drawings. The horses' heads were not too bad. They were chinless. And my human beings also had heads and necks, and their heads were also chinless. But for a child between one and four, it wasn't too bad. At the age of four, I added bodies to people; rather naïve. And then I went through the proper stages of drawing, which consisted of dots, dashes and scribbles, which are taught to children nowadays, and making sure the children should draw according to their psychological and age group level, properly. Anyways, my drawings were not quite right, according to the latest theories in draftsmanship.

In the academy, then, art was very much neglected. And it's strange that afterwards, I came back to the geometric side of art, which I felt was very dull stuff— I mean, in the French college. When I came to the United States in 1923, I went to the National Academy of Design in 1924.

By the way, just before, I called the French College "Academy." That was a mistake; it was a college, not an academy.

In 1924, I started going to the National Academy of Design in the evenings; in 1926, in the daytime. And again, the instruction there was nothing too exciting. But this is nothing new. People know all about it. And in general, whether a teacher is good or bad, they're inclined to rebel against our teachers, which I would say is a healthy sign.

I felt my teachers didn't know much. And years later I could look back and feel that I was right. And that was my studies—sort of a rebellion. And years later I read what Rayfield said about his art instruction. He said, since he couldn't find any intelligent art instruction, he had to go back to the antique for inspiration, which sounds quite convincing. But one of his teachers was Pirogina [ph], who was an excellent artist. And so Rayfield wasn't quite as nice about it as I am. I rebelled against weak instructors, and he against some masters.

ADELAIDE FREER: [Laughs.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: But still in our time, I'll say this about the art instruction. Maybe students do not rebel sufficiently against the teachers. And this may not be quite as good. There is a certain process of rebellion, which is essentially an art—and maybe even in science. And we don't seem to have it too much anymore. Nowadays, students learn how to be modern and how to be individual and extreme. And they just follow on. And there are many doubtful points to this.

I have had ready-made bogeyman, the Academy, to rebel against, and so my work gradually worked towards more or less impressionist style and then more expressionist. And then I tried cubism on my own. And finally I went into complete abstraction.

My beginnings in complete abstraction were a little before 1933, and finally in 1933 it became quite pronounced, although some of my work at that time that were considered extreme abstractions nowadays would be considered semi-abstractions. The idea of styles changes. Cubism is no longer considered abstract. But still, this is the story of my art education.

In other words, I had the advantage of having studied in a very traditional and mediocre school, which provided me with a very nice object of rebellion. And I would say that my art instruction, I feel was quite satisfactory. We had skylights, proper light for our classes. We had models whenever necessary, or rather, all the time. And we had an instruction that would make us rebel and again, force us to do some thinking on our own.

Among the bad examples of art we had that—names mentioned like Cezanne and so we learned

about him. And so while I'm humorous about it, still I feel that this was not the worst school when it came to the final effect. Some people who entered a national academy, but weren't too likely to mention it were Shil Gorky, another one was Carl Holsoe [ph]. And so I can say that this school can boast of a couple of names.

ADELAIDE FREER: Do you still draw as much as you used to?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: I still draw from nature whenever I have a chance. As a matter of fact, last summer I made a whole series of drawings from a model, except I prefer drawing very quickly with a single incline, without corrections. In other words, it's more like a musical performance. You are not drawing a race. You just sketch it in, and the line has to tell the whole story about form, and include design, too.

And it seems that through the years I haven't lost the skill I got in the Academy, and some of the ideas I started developing then are developing still while I am doing abstract work. I cannot, say, stop drawing for a couple of years, come back to the sketching again, and something, meanwhile, in a strange way, was developing all along.

I don't have any examples of recent drawings here. They are in Sag Havalangard [ph], and a few are in my gallery. But I suppose she would rather not show them because nowadays it's almost questionable to have an abstract artist able to draw classically. Now, among people who drew well were people like de Kooning and Shil Gorky. And it seems it hasn't done them any harm at all.

As a matter of fact, de Kooning is rather proud of the fact that he went to a very tough commercial art school. But he had to learn in all sorts of things about art, including even experiments with media, the use of brushes, and so forth. And this again, he found very useful later on because his personality was strong enough to rebel against anything else that he didn't like.

ADELAIDE FREER: You're using an oval canvas now. Do you like to work with it as well as you do the round and the square? And why are you using the oval canvas?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Well, this shape is supposed to be an ellipse. Whether it really is or not, I haven't checked. An oval is any egg shape. An ellipse is a regular geometric shape. It's made by doing a sort of circular form, but built on two centers and a gradation from the two extremely opposed small curves to the much larger curves on the sides. It's a very gradual change. And there's a certain regularity to it.

I like the oval because it's a new shape to handle, for me. It's a shape that generally [inaudible] modern art. I feel that in modern art there are a lot of commotion sometimes or older happening inside the picture format. The picture format itself is very traditional. And generally is in a very traditional proportion of three to four or two to three.

To such an extent, it's almost like in France, where you buy your stretchers nailed together already, and you simply order certain sizes, and they come in certain proportions. The proportions in France are called the portrait, figure, and landscape. If you want the rather squarish proportion, you buy the portrait proportion. If you want it to be longer, you buy the longer, or the taller if you like, set of figure —figure. And then if you like the very long one, or if you like very horizontal one, you can buy what they call a landscape proportion. And this is all there is.

In this country, we assemble our stretchers ourselves. And so we have more varieties of proportions. But still, most of the painters use rather safe proportions and shapes in canvasses,

while the Old Masters would paint within any shapes at all, since they painted many mural commissions. They would paint in irregular shapes. And this to me is a very interesting proposition.

Now, with the oval shape—or if you like, if it's a mathematically correct shape, the ellipse—any straight lines or areas which are, let's say, close to a larger size will be affected in a certain way because as your eyes see shape, which is almost rectangular, but on one side, it's a very large curve. The straight sides also get affected by the tension. And the human eye tries to compensate for it by making what is a straight line or edge into—let's see—a convex line.

In other words, if one side is curved, we are inclined to see the other side as a little bit curved, too, so to even it out. And since, as you look again, you notice it's really straight, we feel a certain tension, as if they were plucking a string.

Now, any such effect on the size of the ellipse, which are much smaller curves, is more violent. And on the bigger curves, the effect is less violent. And so you have elements which might be called almost musical. The straight lines are inclined to twist in the opposite directions to the edges. And then they really remain the same. And there is an element, as I said, like the plucking of a string—makes the effect if you have lines which are parallel to the small sides, they are strong. And if it's parallel to the big sides, it's less strong. And so you have two elements then, and so forth.

Now, in the circle, again, you have the same effect. Straight lines, of course, get affected by the roundness of the circle of the tunda [ph] shape. The tunda is just the area inside a circle. And so that every line is somewhat affected, and there is almost, again, an attempt on a part of the line optically to twist away from the edge. But then again, as you look towards the other edge of the circle, it's inclined to twist again the opposite way. And so there is the effect of almost the plucking of a string.

This you do not get in the rectangular canvas at all. In other words, you do not merely get the shape, which is, to my mind, all right because it's regular, in any case. But you also have the effect of this format on the geometric lines inside. And this is something you do not get in any of the rectangular paintings.

Now, if you're painting an expressionist canvas, where everything moves as if in a sort of record of natural twisting the wrist and arm, I don't think it matters too much. I mean, the shape of the picture does not matter as much. But for a straight-line element and a rectangle relationship, any little change in the format of the picture has a very strong effect. And so you obtain a brand-new element that was not used very much before, or at least it wasn't used consciously.

ADELAIDE FREER: You're very interested in color. And in some of your neoplastic paintings, I noticed you have used the primaries as Mondrian did, and in others you have gone away from them. Why?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Well, I feel that, while neoplastic painters do not stress the personal touch at all, like artists of the other styles. Especially, let's say, an action painter, the personal touch, the personal handwriting is extremely important, the twist of the brush or the way the paint is either over-full and drips or it's scratchy and not full enough—all this contributes to the personal touch.

In neoplastic painting, all this is of no importance at all because you strive towards a certain absolute perfection. And luckily, you can never achieve it; otherwise, you would simply paint one picture and stop. And since you're only human, and the absolute is a neoplatonic idea, we can keep on painting in a substantive direction over our lifetime and still be able to go on and on.

If you like, very much like Sisyphus who can push this truck to the top of the hill and keep on striving. And as Camus said, Sisyphus is happy, because otherwise, he would push it up to the top of the hill, and that would be the end of Sisyphus. This is the story of an artist.

Now then, the personal touch is really not important, even though you don't have to deny it. The personality, let's say, of Mondrian and Diller, while there you would have extreme contrasts; Mondrian's work had a certain richness, which is almost peasant, and Diller's work had a certain dry, precise quality, which is almost puritanical. I will say Diller was a Protestant; that's something I won't.

In my case, the use of color is my personal element. It simply comes through, although I don't say that it's so important that it should be strictly my own. But this is my contribution. It's not developed deliberately as if I were, let's say, an expressionist. But it's something that's so far much a part of me, I just let it appear.

In other words, freer use of colors than Mondrian would allow himself—with Mondrian, there are three chromatic colors and three achromatic colors, three and three, and this is all there is to it. The chromatic colors, of course, colorful colors, red, blue, and yellow. The achromatic colors, the noncolorful colors, are white, gray, and black. And this is your perfect combination.

Certain neo-catholic poets before even suggested this is the idea of the religionist trinities. By the way, Mondrian was not religious. He was a philosophically inclined man. He was a theosophist. But he was not religious in a conventional way. So I don't think he meant it that way. But then he had [inaudible] explain it.

In my case, you will not find the element of the threes, of the trinities. If I need certain colors, I'll use them. If I need two different blues, then I'll just use them. In other words, I'll let my painting dictate to me. I do not paint, necessarily, to illustrate a theory; but this particular theory which develops and which is close to Mondrian, I happen to use according to my own life.

In other words, in some cases, I'll use two of one color in variation, two different reds, maybe. Sometimes, I might have no color at all, just all white, with two different whites. And the difference is not even in the whites, but purely in the texture with which the paint is applied.

Now, in neoplastic painting, you try not to have differences in textures, because this ends up in associations, in realism. But if your brushstrokes go in two different directions, then the light is called differently, and you feel as if you have two different-color areas, merely because of the brushstrokes, without having any difference in texture, but merely in the direction of the texture of the brushstroke.

In other words, some of my paintings will have a minimum of color, and some will have more. And this is a particular attempt to approach this absolute idea, which is never reached, but you can always continue attempting it. Some paintings, let's say, are balanced in such a way that they are luminous. In other cases, I might stress blacks or very deep colors. They are all in front of us. The smallest area is the whites. But Mondrian, the lines would have been black. In this case, with me, it's the white. This, again, I permit myself.

Again with Mondrian, the biggest color areas would be white. In my paintings, most of the time, the biggest color areas are the chromatic color areas. For example, in a painting on the other side, it's the blues which are the biggest, and the whites are the smallest. And so again, here I go away from Mondrian, and also away from Lon Desbert [ph] and from Vontanangelo [ph] and from Diller. This is my own contribution, which is a little more personal in nature.

In other words, while in neoplastic art, you do not stress the personal—it feels very, very secondary. But if it's strong enough, it shows through. And definitely, Mondrian's work has his personality, which cannot be denied, even though he would have been the first to say that this is really not so important.

Now, the personal element, maybe denied even by artists, or not necessarily, in neoplastic—for example, when Matisse was doing his gigantic collages, before he died, he was in the last stages of cancer, and the collages are some of the most beautiful colors and also the happiest color combinations. And even the ribbon in those collages is extremely happy.

So people asked him, "How can you do work which is so happy?" And he said, "Because this is my work. And after I'm gone, the work will remain." In the beginning of his career, Matisse painted the portrait of a woman. And somebody asked him, "Why—you are an excellent draftsman, yet no likeness at all to the woman?" And also, "Why do you paint her face green?" He said because he wants the picture to be beautiful. And as to the woman, "She will be dead and I'll be dead and nobody will remember her likeness. But a picture has to be beautiful."

In other words, right through his career, he stuck to this viewpoint, which is Olympian outlook, which is beyond the personal, which makes him, in this respect, parallel to Mondrian, even though with Mondrian, any images and associations are absolutely dropped. With Matisse, they remain to the end, but on a very Olympian and abstract level.

In this case, then you see my idea of color, to some extent, is also Matisse-like. If the painting needs certain colors, I'll use them, even if it's not totally within the realm of neoplastic art, as it was at its very purist. In the same sense, of course, Mondrian, too, allowed himself a lot of leeway. In his last paintings, he was actually allowing himself a certain amount of color vibration.

In the two Boogie-Woogie paintings, there is the shimmering of Broadway lights, which is a certain amount of very controlled vibration. It's still very controlled, as someone is. The movements from area to area of color become curved, and the Baroque elements begin to enter. And it would have been very interesting if he had lived, let's say, another 10 years, there would have been an entirely new development of neoplastic art under Mondrian.

ADELAIDE FREER: Has your interest changed from painting to sculpture, or why have you done neoplastic type of sculpture forms?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: No, I wouldn't say this is quite inconsistent because, after all, in neoplastic art, there is a real interest in architecture. Of course, again, architecture in this sense is almost like constructivism because, let's say, Mondrian had a very good interest in architecture, but he never was interested in, let's say, the opinions of any customer. And architects, or real architects, have to consider the customers or else their work will remain in blueprints and nothing else.

In other words, no matter how excellent an architect is, he has to be a commercial artist because, without his respect for the customers—

[END OF REEL 1, SIDE A.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: I have a lot of blueprints. But Mondrian's idea of architecture was very constructivist. If you like, strictly neoplastic. He felt that if a building were very properly designed and the various walls were to be painted in different-color panels, you would need no paintings in such a building at all. Even the furniture and all would have been designed to fit in the perfect unity, and

painting, as such, would be no longer necessary. The rooms themselves would be paintings.

Such rooms would be three-dimensional paintings. And so my interest in painted constructivism is, after all, very much in line with Mondrian's ideas, except that Mondrian waited for the proper architects and buildings to come to him. And I was willing to make small models of such constructions, three-dimensional, which—I very much am interested in the architects. In fact, architects are very much interested in my constructions.

But this is true within three-dimensional—within the neoplastic art, not three-dimensional. Now, people might tell me that neoplastic art—and I said, myself, earlier that the neoplastic artist's space is absolutely flat, which is not easy to achieve. In other words, any illusion of deep space in other styles is not permitted in neoplastic art. And even the colors, which tend to come forward and backward, are kept in a flatness, and their attempts to come forward and meet to create a new tension, but not depth as such.

Then how come, you might say, you can make constructions which are three-dimensional? But after all, if neoplastic art is always in line with architecture –

[OFF THE RECORD]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: We'll continue now. Well, then, you mentioned that flatness is so essential in neoplastic painting. And here I'm making three-dimensional constructions. But you mentioned also that architecture was always a very great interest to a neoplastic painter, that Mondrian really always wanted to work with architects, and he really could have been a very excellent architect himself. And he felt that the room designed by a painter like himself and an architect would have colored panels in such proportions that art or paintings in such a room would be unnecessary. The room itself would be a work of art.

In other words, even though Mondrian stressed the flatness of painting, he also was a potentially great architect, although he never did architecture. And so he also thought three-dimensionally. And since Mondrian never could get the architects to work with him, which is a great pity—I myself, instead of waiting, I just started making constructions, which are not buildings, because, again, buildings in architecture—it's something else.

In the case of buildings, you have to consider the needs of the customer, whether things are [inaudible] or whether you're designing an apartment house, certain proportions due to rentals and residential requirements and what-not, but strictly as constructions, which is the ideal state of architecture, and it's totally free, which architecture can never be.

In other words, my constructions are an extension, I would feel, a natural extension of neoplastic painting. Into the architectural field, worldly connection is very important. So that was the point. But I feel there is no discrepancy there. My going in a three-dimensional field. I do not carve those constructions. The shapes are as simple as possible. It's the construction of simple planes. They consist of either parallelepipeds, which is four sides, or trialons [ph], three sides, or open—what I call open columns, which consist of eight sides. And that's all there is to it. The rest is done through neoplastic design.

And as you look, each side makes a complete unity. The two sides combining make another complete unity. The next two sides combining make another complete. And in the case of the eighth side of the column, two L-shapes join together—will give you eight sides going in and out. Again, you get endless combinations of design. And each—in each case, they have to rhyme and

form a unity. In other words, you get many more possible arrangements out of this, which is still structural. And so it's still neoplastic.

All right.

ADELAIDE FREER: What caused you to become involved in stage design and writing?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: The stage design—actually, I didn't have much experience. But I would be interested. The writing, of course, is something else. As a matter of fact, I write short stories, plays. I also do films. In painting, I do what I feel is essentially most important to painting. In the process, you have to get rid of many elements, which are still important. But I feel they are very, very secondary to painting.

In other words, if you paint representational stuff, you can express many things, which may be—to my mind, make your painting much weaker and less pure, but it can express many things. Otherwise, when you paint neoplastic, you get rid of all the images, associations. And undoubtedly, you feel that you miss something. This belongs, to my mind, in literature and motion-picture making.

In other words, that which doesn't belong in my idea of painting, I feel belongs in playwriting and literature and, on another level, in movie-making. This particular use of continuity of time, I'll use it in the motion pictures. But no spoken lines are used in my movies. On the other hand, I still like language. And use of language, I use in my playwriting and my stories.

In other words, I am able to stay within the strict discipline of neoplastic painting because I can allow myself freedom and discipline of a different type in my other pursuits. And you might say, then, I scatter myself in many different media, or I trespass in many disciplines. And that's the way I like to be. I feel that it's worth it because I like to do creative work, no matter what it is. And so while I do, let's say, neoplastic painting in the visual arts, which is flat, the next moment I'll be doing three-dimensional constructions, which are not flat. And then I might go off into literature and playwriting.

And my playwriting is not a continuation of my painting. In my playwriting, I use elements which do not belong in painting at all. In other words, instead of being consistent at all costs and trying to write neoplastic plays or neoplastic short stories, I feel this simply doesn't belong and I will not force the discipline of one medium into another. I simply extend it to something else.

ADELAIDE FREER: You talked about The Ten. How was the group formed? And since so many of them are still living, why doesn't it exist at the present time?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Well, The Ten, I think, was the second such group. There was another group before us. And I think the first Ten had people like, possibly, Robert Henri, was it, and maybe Sloan? But this you'd better ask Sandler, who I'm sure knows better.

ADELAIDE FREER: [Laughs.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: Our group The Ten was started by people like Tschacbasov, Adolf Gottlieb, and Markus Rothkowitz, who later on cut his name down to Mark Rothko, and Josef Solman, and another one who dropped out of painting, Yankl Kerfeld, and Louis Harris. They were the originators of The Ten.

They were a group who exhibited in a gallery called Gallery Secession. It was started by a man whose name, last name was Godsoe. And Godsoe wanted to have a group of artists exhibiting in protest against the tastes of the museums of the day. Since most of the museums were anti-

modern at the time, including the Modern Museum, which accepted modern French, but not modern Americans, the Gallery Secession made some sense. And so the Godsoe group wanted to have its own group not domineered by Godsoe.

And so in a sense, without breaking away from Godsoe, they also formed a group of The Ten, and I was asked to join them. They already had it formed, and I was asked to come in and join the group.

The group got into trouble, possibly because of its success. It was a very active group. It never had ten members; it generally had eight. Some people would drop out, and some would be invited in. And it exhibited very actively and had endless write-ups for quite a while.

The biggest gallery in New York at the time in the early '30s was the Brommer Gallery. It also had its headquarters in Paris. And Brommer wanted to test us. He invited the group of The Ten to exhibit with him in Paris, not in his gallery, but he rented Gallery Bonaparte for us. And he sent our work, free of charges, there to test the reaction of the French to us. He was going to invite us to join his gallery.

But the reaction was very strange. First of all, the critic, I think, who is also a poet—was it Andreas Armand [ph]?—a very French name indeed—noticed that some of the names of the artists in the group were something like Joe Solman and Markus Rothkowitz, Adolf Gottlieb, Yankl Kirfeld, and he felt they were not very Anglo-Saxon names. And so a lot of the article was spent on mentioning that those names were not Anglo-Saxon.

Louis Harris was accepted as Anglo-Saxon. Even though Harris told me that his name originally was Herskovits. And Harris never meant to change his name, except he wanted to abbreviate it. And so the reception was not very nice. Joseph Solman, which really means Solomon—at that, the group in a really strange racist fashion, for possibly belonging to his own tribe—and it wasn't a very successful experiment.

We had some good write-ups besides, and some people still remember us from there. The paintings came back. The painting on the wall here was in Paris in 1935, I think, in the spring. It came back, I think, early in '36.

As a matter of fact, I lost the date on this painting. I marked it was '34-'35, but it might have been painted even earlier, because it was sent to Paris, I think in '34. I got into this slightly before it was painted. It's a very early abstraction of mine.

Gottlieb at that time sent a realistic painting over, and so did Rothko, or Rothkowitz, who painted in the style of Weber and Avery. Some of the members of the group later on were Byron Brown, Balkham Green, and Earl Kerkham. Most of the members—Ben-Zion was one of the original members. Most of the members became relatively successful and began getting their own dealers and exhibiting elsewhere. And so they broke away from the group, and the group dissolved because of the members appearing to be not standing on their own feet. I would say, then, the success of the group is what killed this group.

ADELAIDE FREER: Is there any message that you can give young artists in the field today?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: No. Well, I mean, it's—

ADELAIDE FREER: From your experience?

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: I cannot prophecy like the director of some top museum. And some of our

museum directors nowadays wouldn't dare to prophecy anymore. It's a rather dangerous situation. I think for the young people, maybe the best thing is not to be too reverent to authorities, and to do the experiments you want to do. And to do them whether they are in any popular trend or not.

The danger for the young people now is entirely different from what danger we had to face in our time, in the '20s and '30s. In our time, modern art was absolutely taboo. And if you insisted on being a modern artist, you had no chance of exhibiting at first at all. And certainly, no museum would exhibit your work in those days, and you expected never to exhibit in any official circles.

And nowadays, the trouble is that anything that smacks of any originality or impact or any possible publicity value, or anything that gives a museum the aura of discovering new talent, will be grabbed and promoted. And very often, a young artist will be promoted according to his style, which he maybe is about ready to shed and drop and go into something else. And so I would say over-promotion is now the risk of a younger generation, the danger of joining the bandwagon too easily and then being stuck in it.

And another danger is that the bandwagons change. And many of the followers might be stranded on a sinking, let's say, bandwagon. I don't know whether bandwagons sink or not, but in this case, they do.

ADELAIDE FREER: [Laughs.]

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: For example, when some of the vague expressionists were dropped, and suddenly the art world turned against action painting—and this happened very suddenly, because the world now was ready to discover op art and pop art, and so the great names were suddenly dropped—many of their followers were stranded and didn't know where to go.

Now, those people who still believed in themselves, like de Kooning just went on as if nothing happened. And they showed a lot of guts. But the younger people, who were not really such believers, but merely traveled as fellow travelers, were stuck in a funny position.

In other words, I would say for a younger artist, the best thing is to absolutely insist on their independence, whether they are right or wrong, and to continue experimenting and to beware of any bandwagons, and certainly not to shy away from any promotion from any collectors and museums, but to take all this with a grain of salt and to use it to their best advantage, but not to hold on very tight, and to be still independent, to grab any such help, but irreverently, and to proceed with their experiments, whether they are popular or not.

Anything else, I don't think would be valid and wise.

ADELAIDE FREER: Thank you for being so informative and so gracious.

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY: You're welcome.

[END OF REEL 1, SIDE B.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]