



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Alex Katz, 1969
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Alex Katz on October 20, 1969. The interview was conducted at Alex Katz's studio in New York City by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PC: PAUL CUMMINGS

AK: ALEX KATZ

PC: Today is October 20. Paul Cummings talking to Alex Katz in his giant studio here. How many square feet is this? Five thousand or something like that?

AK: Yes, five thousand.

PC: Let's see, you're a New Yorker -- right?

AK: Yes.

PC: Born here in 1927. Whereabouts in New York?

AK: Sheepshead Bay.

PC: Which is out in Brooklyn?

AK: The end of Brooklyn.

PC: Did you live there for a long time?

AK: No, I lived there for a year and a half. Then we moved to St. Albans, Queens.

PC: And that's where you grew up?

AK: Yes.

PC: Did you like it?

AK: Queens? Yes. It was nice.

PC: Back in the Twenties, right at the start of the Depression?

AK: I guess it was the Depression.

PC: Did you go to primary schools?

AK: Yes, I went to a public school in Queens. I wanted to study art. The teachers in that school told my parents to send me to Music and Art or Industrial Arts. My parents didn't like the idea of my traveling that far and wanted me to go to an academic high school. Finally they chose a vocational high school because it had more art; they had art every day. So actually I went to a trade school.

PC: Which one?

AK: Jamaica Vocational High School. It later became Woodrow Wilson High School.

PC: Oh! That's the famous Woodrow Wilson High School.

AK: Oh, yes. That was a nefarious school. You've heard of it?

PC: Yes.

AK: Jamaica Vocational was more woolly.

PC: It's a big school, too, isn't it?

AK: It's a good-sized school. It was new. Hardly anyone was in it when I was there. It was half empty. I don't know what it's like now. It was wild. It had a cop's car _____ in front of the school every afternoon.

PC: Even in those days?

AK: Yes. From the beginning of time. Someone was always making the headlines.

PC: That's wild.

AK: It was a wild school.

PC: It sounds as if you got interested in art very early. Did you draw and make sketches in things?

AK: Yes, I started pretty early. I wanted to be I didn't know what kind of an artist.

PC: But that was just . . . ?

AK: Yes, just like doing it. Yes.

PC: Did your family encourage this? Or did they say, "Oh, no, no . . .?"

AK: No, they had artists who were friends. They had come from Russia and they had friends who were painters and we had lots of Russian Expressionist paintings at home.

PC: So you had pictures and things at home?

AK: There were pictures all over the house.

PC: So there was art interest in the home?

AK: Yes. When I was going to high school I'd spend weekends lettering. My father thought I was nuts. He could see me painting, but lettering he thought was just terrible. He thought to become an artist was pretty all right but to become a lawyer or a priest or a doctor was terrible.

PC: Really, That's extraordinary.

AK: Yes. He thought that like an architect was about the highest thing you could become.

PC: Design giant buildings.

AK: Yes. He thought that was like something. He had no respect for the other stuff. But an artist was all right. A fine artist particularly.

PC: That's very interesting. So you got encouragement then?

AK: Well, not entirely. My mother didn't want me to be a fine artist because she thought they lived a very hard life. So when I studied commercial art everything was all right. When I switched to fine art later on, she wasn't . . . I mean she said, "Well, that's the way it goes" but she felt there were better ways to lead a happier life than being a fine artist.

PC: Do you remember any of the painters whose paintings were around the house?

AK: There was a guy named Berkowitz who had these very nice I guess Russian Expressionist things out of Cezanne. There were a lot of paintings. I never liked them when I was a kid. It was after I had been painting for several years that I realized they were better than I was. When I was a kid I thought they were just crap.

PC: That's fascinating. Are there any other children in the family?

AK: Yes, I have a brother; he's younger.

PC: And he's not too interested in art?

AK: No, not at all.

PC: What does he do?

AK: He's a used car buyer.

PC: A used car buyer!

AK: Yes. My uncle sells them. He buys them.

PC: That's certainly a far cry from what you're doing, isn't it?

AK: Yes.

PC: Did you have any interest in music?

AK: Yes. I played the violin for, oh, four years or so. I was in the high school orchestra or what it was there. But I liked jazz a lot.

PC: Really?

AK: Yes. And at a certain point I realized that I should just forget about the violin and start all over on the saxophone. But I said, "To hell with it." And I think I was running track and the music finally conflicted with track -- they came at the same time -- so I let the violin go.

PC: What did you do? Run?

AK: Yes. And jump.

PC: How fast do you go?

AK: Oh, it was all right, you know, I ran a four-forty. We got a couple of city medals. I was interested in track, violin, you know, art was all But I like jazz. I used to go dancing a lot and stuff like that.

PC: Did you take up the sax then or not?

AK: No, no. I just let it go. I was too busy.

PC: You can't really do jazz on the violin.

AK: No. That was it. They had all those guys like who were terrific musicians and lot of them were playing pro; they'd have their jam sessions and I felt just like a turkey with a violin. They had great dances at our school, too. They used to come from all the other schools. It was like a real big party. Those four years were a big party at that school. We had a lot of fun.

PC: They didn't make zip guns in those days, did they?

AK: No. But the guys had knives and people were always getting arrested and stuff like that. But school was so much fun that people wouldn't cut classes to go any other place.

PC: Oh, really?

AK: Yes. It was a lot of fun. I had a great time. Didn't learn anything.

PC: You had lots of important teachers that stand out in your memory?

AK: Well, I had an English teacher who was kind of nice. When I left the school she said, "You've wasted four years here." I said, "Yes. But I had a great time."

PC: You were taking, what? One art class or so?

AK: Yes, every afternoon we had art. They had casts there. I saw some cast drawings that I thought were terrific. So, while a lot of the other kids were making war posters, I was copying these casts every day for about a year and a half.

PC: Do you remember any of the teachers you had?

AK: Yes. I had one teacher all the time. His name was Leo Richlin. He had studied at the National Academy and he was pretty good at drawing casts. He was kind of a moron.

PC: Old academic . . . ?

AK: I didn't know the difference. He was very good at what he could do. But there was nothing to do with fine art.

PC: It didn't really get off the ground.

AK: Yes. Even in the commercial art, it sort of never got into anything.

PC: He taught both?

AK: Well, it was all commercial art.

PC: Oh, the whole thing was commercial art?

AK: Yes. There were guys in the neighborhood who sort of had similar interests. There was one friend who quit Pratt and became a designer. His name was Ken Fleischner. He took me to New York and we went to look at the Museum of Modern Art. He was hot on Mondrian. [inaudible] But I liked *Broadway Boogie Woogie* very much. I thought it was absurd when I first saw it because it was like jazz to me, And there was another guy, a friend of mine, who was maybe a year older, who quit school and had gone into big-time advertising when he was sixteen. He told the teacher, "You have nothing more to teach me." And at nineteen he was knocking down five or six thousand dollars a year. In those days that was a lot of money. I don't know -- that had more to do with it, I guess, than the teachers really.

PC: Did you come into New York and visit the museums very much?

AK: Not very much. I wasn't interested much.

PC: You were busy out there working away and dancing?

AK: Yes. I was having a very nice time.

PC: What happened when you finished high school? Where did you decide to go?

AK: Well, people were getting drafted. It was 1940. I got out early, I guess in December 1940, before there was any war on. I decided to work commercially for a while. So I got a job in an offset house in New York City at Eleventh Avenue and 48th Street pasting up movie brochures. There was a guy there, Jimmie Stevenson, who had studied at Cooper Union. He was about ten years older than I. He was quite sophisticated. And he used to be kidding me all the time. We became pretty good friends. He was a real interesting guy. He had been a professional boxer.

PC: Really?

AK: Yes. His mother made him stop. He had like thirty straight wins. He went to Cooper Union. He was a kind of strange guy. He was very intellectual. I don't think you could force him into a fight. I don't think he had two street fights in his life. He was intellectual about everything. Anyway, I guess he started a lot of things going for me. I worked for about six months and then I decided to join the Navy because it looked like there weren't very many ships going down. Then I got drafted on V-J Day. There was a great big party for me. I really got a lucky break. I was in the Navy for a year. And I got the GI Bill, \$300 mustering out pay, and the 52-20 Club. I was just towed right in. I was overseas for six or nine months or something like that. I had a great time all over the world.

PC: Where were you?

AK: Marseilles, Panama, Japan, all up and down the West coast a lot of times. I don't remember where else. But it was a lot of fun; I had a great time. I had been up for a scholarship to Pratt from the high school and I didn't get it. So when I came back I thought I could get in there. I called them up. It was right after the War and they were crowded.

PC: Thousands of people.

AK: Right. Then I heard about Cooper Union. I called them up. They were having a test the next day. So I went down and took the test. And I'll be Goddamned if I didn't get in! That was like a real shock to me. And a shock to everybody else. I intended to go to another school any old way. But I didn't want to go to college. I wanted to go to art school.

PC: What were you in the Navy? What did you do?

AK: Just a seaman.

PC: Who did you study with at Cooper then? What kind of program did you have?

AK: They had that sort of rough Bauhaus program. I had art history with Paul Zucker, you know. I was at a fantastic disadvantage after coming from the trade school because most of -- one-third -- of the guys there had been going to night school or else had come from Music and Art.

PC: Oh, so they'd been at it for five years.

AK: Yes. Well, they were oriented. I didn't know what was going on there at all. It was like a joke. I didn't know how to write a book report. My idea about a book report would be that Well, the guy who gave you the assignment has read the book so don't bore him with the plot or anything about it.

PC: Tell him what you think of it.

AK: Yes. And it wasn't appreciated. So I just found out who had an "A" book report and found out what a book report was like. But that was a hell of a way to be there. It was like a very high pressure place at that time. Zucker, the art history teacher, got me interested.

PC: That's Paul Zucker, right?

AK: Yes. I used to call him "Cock."

PC: Oh, really? That's a great name for him.

AK: Yes. He was very stimulating. Our drawing teacher was Gwathmey. And he was kind of terrific.

PC: How is he as a teacher?

AK: He was terrific for me. For two weeks he never said anything to me. Finally he came over to me and said, "Get a larger pad." I didn't know what the hell was going on. Then he started saying that all these drawings looked like my instructor's in high school. I said, "Shit."

PC: That's intriguing.

AK: But he sort of gave one of these . . . actually Well, it was like the idea of art based on progressivism, you know, which is very common now. But that was the way he started it. "You don't do this anymore; it's old-fashioned." But I admit this guy Jimmie Stevenson was much more sophisticated about things. So I never took it too seriously. But the whole thing with his point of orientation into stuff he was terrific because he was involved with a lot of things all at once which were an exciting experience.

PC: Well, Stevenson became a friend then?

AK: Yes. He was a friend. One day years later I was asking him about Matisse. He was saying that Matisse was not a very solid painter and I realized that we could never get together. That was the line. Because I was building everything on that and he can't see it. Well, that's it. He didn't know anything about Primitivism, which was like one of things in the air at the time. You know, there was a big sophisticated Primitive idea at the time . I don't know, I was moving in a different direction from him. But I had known him for quite some time. I think Gwathmey was pretty good. He had a nice thing about calling me an artist. Which I thought was silly. You know, I mean you're an art student and he calls you an artist. He was very lively. Oh, I don't know, I just started learning how to draw and I was drawing around the clock. I'd eat my lunch in seven or eight minutes and spend the rest of the time drawing. And he was like very encouraging. He was kind of terrific. In fact, he even asked me to send some stuff to the A.C.A. Gallery.

PC: That was pretty good.

AK: Yes. He said, "Katz, you're doing terrific stuff. They're having a show at the A.C.A. Why don't you send some stuff down." But it was all political and I just couldn't stand anything political. It really hurt, not about not showing anything but to have I mean, I'm not going to take the stuff. And it hurt to tell him, "Gee, I'm just not interested in that stuff." I remember saying it to him. I was very flattered. Then we had a lettering teacher, Daniel Farmer, who was fabulous.

PC: I don't know him.

AK: He's a kind of weird guy. He does funny books. But he sort of got right at one of my weaknesses. And it was like an insurmountable thing. I had him in the first year. And I had done commercial stuff. When he first saw me he said, "You're going to have a terrible time in this class because you're going to have to unlearn everything you've learned." I thought he was kidding. But he wasn't. I caught him for the second year. I wanted to have my program changed. It was just awful. But somehow it worked out. I don't know -- it was really a terrific accomplishment. I don't know, it led you into an area of like finished lettering that's very abstract; just related to itself. It was quite fascinating, the whole idea of weights and what things are.

PC: Oh, yes. Like typophiles.

AK: Well he would explain that. He would explain that it's something you can't even get into. We were just dealing with finished lettering. And it was very interesting. Then we had a good design teacher. And I guess it was very lively. People went to shows a lot. It was primarily a great design school.

PC: Well, they had a big industrial tradition behind them, too.

AK: Right. Right. Fine art was like a stimulation.

PC: But you started a fine arts program?

AK: No. Everyone takes the same stuff. The second year I started advertising. And we had so many advertising designers. We had this guy Merang who was just terrific. I mean he had a terrifically analytical mind about things. He was a barbarian and couldn't understand fine art but his thinking was very exciting and interesting. I mean he said, "I can't see why Rembrandt made another one after he made one." We had this guy like Mangravita, the painting teacher. He gave a demonstration the first day. I knew I couldn't paint as good as he could then. But I said, "Shit! If I can't paint better than that I'll eat my paintbox!" I knew I didn't know anything but I knew I was going to be better than that or a lot worse. That was all there was to it. I learned a little bit about painting but not all that much. Then I had Carol Harrison for design. She was like the backbone of the school. We had a lot of fun. She was a lot of fun. It was primarily Cubism that they were about. It was really interesting. The conceptions were very easy for me. And the thing really didn't interest me, maybe it was because it was so easy. But it led into all kinds of other things. Cezanne, Poussin, Picasso, Matisse.

PC: This really got you into the art thing for the first time?

AK: Yes. I was looking at things. I think the thing is I enjoyed doing it. Once I started to do it, to draw and paint, was just like a great big kick.

PC: The activity.

AK: Yes, it was just a big kick on the side. I liked it a lot. And I figured technically I didn't need any more advertising and I could use fine arts. Actually, I thought I'd become an illustrator and paint on the side. That was my plan. And so I switched to fine arts. I studied sculpture with Hebal and De Creeft. I found that interesting.

PC: How did you like De Creeft as a teacher?

AK: I had De Creeft at Skowhegan; that was later when I got out of school. I had Kantor in the third year painting. He was very good.

PC: How is he as a teacher?

AK: He was very good with me. I'd say, "Is this good?" And I'd point to this and I'd point to that and he'd say, "Yes," "no," "no," "yes," Or he'd come over and say something and I'd have to figure out why he said it. He was painting gray pictures and I was painting bright pictures. And I couldn't understand why he'd let me do it.

PC: Did you ever figure it out?

AK: Yes. He painted bright pictures afterwards.

PC: Well, they always say many teachers

AK: He was changing and interested at the time. Of course in design you can only use gray colors.

PC: So you were there -- what? Three years?

AK: I went there for three years. I got a scholarship to Skowhegan. I went there. There we painted every day. Once I started to paint every day, it was just a great big blast.

PC: That was -- what? About 1949?

AK: 1949, right. It was terrific to paint every day. They had Poor there and De Creeft. It was really strange coming from . . . I mean, you know, I studied with Peter Busa at Cooper and I was pretty much in touch with, not New York painting, because I wasn't around, but Busa was part of it. And we got along swell. He really got me into Miro. Got all the Miro books out. All they had. Which was about four. And they were talking about painting from nature. I thought I'd try it. So I painted outdoors directly from landscape. It was a terrific kick.

PC: This was in New York?

AK: No, In Maine. Of course in art school we never painted from models. Our model sat in the corner and read a book. In Maine we made creative paintings.

PC: Going to Skowhegan was a whole new kind of opening then?

AK: Yes. It was a big opening because you met guys who were from art schools. They'd been painting five days a week. Like coming from Cooper Union I was gauche about everything, really. I was a big joke. I was like the class clown to the guys. When I went to Skowhegan the guys could paint better than I could technically but they didn't have the intellectual sophistication really. It interested me.

PC: Who was teaching there besides De Creeft and Poor?

AK: Let's see. Poor, I guess Sid Simon, and Anne Poor. I don't know.

PC: Did you work with any specific teacher?

AK: No. I painted and they'd look at it. They used to scream at the stuff because it was real bright colors. Then I tried to do landscapes. I had a lot of fun with them. They were like . . . it was real interesting because I'd paint the landscapes and it was like having a terrific release painting direct. It was a real kick.

PC: This was doing landscapes outside?

AK: Outdoors, yes. A whole bunch of us would go some place in a car and just paint. It was a lot of fun. The paintings weren't very strong formally or they weren't very . . . I was interested in very natural things. When I'd go back and look at the stuff I did in art school, that stuff was very kind of mannered but it was like stronger in my color weights and things like that. I decided I wanted to put them together sort of and then I was painting a lot worse after that.

PC: But this was your first painting outside?

AK: Yes, the first direct painting. It was a real kick. I'd been selling spots to Seventeen. Like that was it; that was the top of it. And I figured in about three years I could be like a top illustrator in modern style. And she asked me to do something -- C. P. Penellis. And it was not right. And she said, "Change it." I couldn't change it. I mean I could change anything now, or I know what I could change. But then I didn't know what the hell I could change. And I said, "Shit! I'd just as soon become a fine artist. I like it more. And that'll take me seven years." It went like that.

PC: You spent a number of summers at Skowhegan?

AK: Well, I got a return scholarship I guess the next year. And that was it. We hung around in the next town, Lakewood, a whole bunch of us.

PC: Who were some of the people that were students there?

AK: At that time, well, Bill King who had been at Cooper; he was there the year before. And Lois Dodd; and Blackie Langlais was up there. He had just come out of the navy. He signed the wrong paper. He signed himself in for six years; he thought he was signing up for the duration. But he got out. There was a guy named Charlie Bruback and a guy named Stuart Frost. And a guy who used to paint nudes called Wayne Frank. A whole bunch of us. That was about the crowd. Anyway, then I wanted to move to New York. All those guys went to art school here. I went to Brooklyn. So I moved into New York and I became part of the crowd. We had wine parties and dances like we had in high school. Art school style was like another thing. You know, in high school it was like dancing the Lindy Hop stuff. It was all the zoot suit scene. I had eight zoot suits when I was eighteen years old.

PC: With the lapels and the shoulders . . . ?

AK: Yes. Well, it was like really a fugitive. But anyway, we started going to dance halls. We used to go to the Palladium. We were there when the Cha Cha Cha broke. We used to play Mickey Mouse music and Cuban. And that stuff took. We had a lot of fun. Anyway, the artists' parties were a lot of dancing and screaming. And people who went there thought we were a very fast crowd. We were just kind of nutty. But that went away and, I don't know, the guys just grew up and got married and settled down. And it all disappeared after a while. By then I was well into painting.

PC: Well, you got involved in the Tenth Street scene very early, didn't you?

AK: Yes. Well, the guys who formed it . . . I was at the cafeteria on Broadway. It used to be on Broadway and Eighth Street. I knew Bill King and Lois Dodd. Jean Cohen was in their class. They were all friends. When Bill King was in art school, he was like the best person in the school. That's all there was to it. He was fabulous. And he

wanted to swap with me. And I just thought he was absolutely out of his mind. I was very flattered. I didn't take him up on it. Years later I did but at that time I just thought he was insane. But anyway, he got a Fulbright to Italy. In Italy he met Angelo Ippolito. And he knew Cajori from Skowhegan. Bill had gone to Skowhegan the year before and he met Cajori there. And Fred Mitchell was on a Fulbright in Italy. So they all got together and decided to form their own gallery. Which was on fourth Street; it opened on Fourth Street. I was painting in like an open representational style then. And that was like abstract. So the first show I wasn't in. But I was around. But I think shortly after that it was okay to paint representationally if it was "open."

PC: That's very interesting. And then they moved to Tenth Street and that whole string of galleries opened eventually.

AK: Yes. Well, there was no place to show for any advanced painters. I thought it was a lot of crap when they first wanted to This guy . . . the Roko Gallery which used to be on Greenwich Avenue showed a painting of mine when I was just out of art school. It was mentioned in the paper and I thought it was going to be a real snap.

PC: Then look what happened.

AK: Then a year or two later he asked me to show there. Actually I had the first show; I had a two-man show with Lois Dodd at Tanager. The next year I had a show at Roko. It was a disaster.

PC: Really?

AK Yes. Well, a couple of friends of mine liked it. I didn't sell anything. The only thing I sold was I was working as a mural assistant for this guy Marigliotti and we were doing trompe l'oeil paintings.

PC: Who is he? I don't know him.

AK: He did all the Loew's theatres. He made half a million dollars twice in his life and he blew it and he was going after the third coup. I learned a lot working in his studio. He was a terrific guy. He was paying us like two-and-a-half bucks an hour.

PC: And he's getting paid about thirty for every hour.

AK: Right. Because he couldn't do the stuff. It was all fine painting.

PC: Oh, really?

AK: Yes. It was like trompe l'oeil stuff. He got the job with another man's samples and then split the partnership. So he got myself and some other guy and we learned how to do the stuff and were doing it.

PC: That's fantastic.

AK: He'd make us work Saturdays. He'd buy us great big dinners and a bottle of something. You knew he was conning you but you couldn't . . . his style was just fabulous. What he did to me was he ran down to my show and bought a beautiful painting. And so what could I do? It was like \$70. But I mean I really admired the man a great deal for his style.

PC: Obviously. Well, how did you like your first show?

AK: Oh, I was embarrassed.

PC: What did it feel like when you walked in and saw it?

AK: They had this other guy's stuff up front, Robert Andrew Parker's, and he was hot as a two-dollar pistol. And people would come in and buy those things. But then they'd come and they'd look in there

PC: You were in the back?

AK: No, I had the big gallery. He was sort of like in a little anteroom in the front, you know.

PC: Oh yes, I know.

AK: It was like a gallery but there was like a little thing in front.

PC: Right.

AK: And people would come in and they'd look. And I could see that they were like ready to throw up. Then

they'd say, "Are you the artist?" And, Jesus, I just wish I wasn't there. When I was there, anyhow, not much happened. And then he moved uptown. I still thought it was a better thing than fooling around with the Tenth Street thing. I had another show there when he moved uptown. It was sort of like the same thing. This time they were selling the Parkers on the coffee table. I figured I just can't go through one of those things again. It's just all so kind o tacky. And downtown you might not have any commercial possibilities but that wasn't necessary.

PC: You were always a figurative painter at this point, weren't you?

AK: Well, no, I started painting like in an "open" style figuratively, oh, after the Ninth Street show which was like in 1950, I think, wasn't it? I don't know when it was. 1949 or 1950. That show like opened up everything for me. Nell Blaine, Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher were painting that way. But I didn't know their work at all.

PC: You weren't in that show, were you? -- the Ninth Street show?

AK: No. I didn't know anybody. I was too conceited actually to talk to all the painters. But then I guess by the time I had my show I saw a lot of Larry Rivers' painting. But I was in it when I saw his. He was doing something that was sort of similar to what I was doing but not really.

PC: I'm just trying to remember his early work.

AK: Well, he was working like -- he had something like a monk. I remember seeing the George Washington shown whenever the hell that was. Maybe it was about 1953 or something like that. Or 1954. I don't know when it was.

PC: It was somewhere in there.

AK: Yes. I saw Jane's painting very early, too. But that was like four or five years after I'd been in that style, more or less.

PC: Well, how did you feel, painting like this? Because there was that huge sea of Abstract Expressionism going on out there.

AK: Yes. I felt pretty alone. I don't feel that way now. Nothing I do now seems to Oh, I think there's no comparison in the paintings but I think that There was a thing where I knew the idea of progressive art to me just seemed not suited to my temperament, the idea of styling, and I was looking for some kind of expression to some other thing.

PC: In what way? You mean through images?

AK: Through the painting just like personal expression more or less, you know. I don't know -- I think I sort of reversed it from painting so much more impersonally in intent and less intimate. That was like constructing an intimate thing. I really liked Matisse and Picasso paintings enormously. And I didn't like any American painting. But the new stuff seemed more exciting than anything else so all my friends were painting it.

PC: You mean the new stuff like Rivers's?

AK: Well, you know, the abstract stuff. It was very exciting.

PC: How about de Kooning?

AK: De Kooning is what everyone liked but I didn't like de Kooning at all then. He just seemed to cold for me. I admired the expertise but didn't have any feeling for it.

PC: How about Kline or Pollock?

AK: Kline really just started then. I liked Pollock right off the bat because it was like landscape painting. I just saw it that way. So I'd paint trees that way, you know. So it was like adapted. It was like a dumb idea. But it helped a lot. And I was working from the point of painting perception. So it was like if you read about Soutine, the way he painted, like compress everything into a single burst of energy. That's what I was about. So it was not that far from Pollock.

PC: So you were really like painting zip!

AK: Zip! All at once! Pow! Then I might fool around with it but basically it was a pow! kind of painting. And Pollock was fine. And Soutine was fine except that The idea of Soutine was fine; I mean I didn't like his painting, the way he painted. I don't like his painting.

PC: Right.

AK It's not far from the automatic. I felt the only way I could get a natural painting was to paint it wide open. Otherwise it would end up being kind of stylized-looking.

PC: That's interesting. So your paintings really were done like the Impressionists -- at one time?

AK: Quicker. They worked over theirs. Mine was just like real shots. I liked Motherwell's when I first saw them. The old Whitney had some black and white paintings that I thought were pretty nice. But Motherwell seemed more like a European. He was the easiest to grab of that crowd. I liked Guston when I first saw him, and Gorky. I liked them. They were like real related to my temperament.

PC: Well, did you get to know any of, you know, the older circle of painters? Or you just saw their pictures?

AK: I saw their pictures around. Oh, I did when I finally had a big show at the Tanager Gallery in 1959. And then I guess I got to know them all at once. They were terribly nice.

PC: Well, everybody was living in that whole area, too.

AK: Yes. I'd say "Hi!" but it didn't mean anything, you know, because it was just another guy saying "Hi!" And remember I was a very conceited young man. The second generation guys, I never felt part of the second generation at all.

PC: You mentioned you were very friendly with Charles Duback.

AK: Duback, yes. Charlie was from Skowhegan. We all lived in the same building -- Charlie Duback and Blackie Langlais. And I think we painted sort of with similar ideas actually.

PC: Was that because you spent time together? Or was it just kind of an osmosis kind of thing?

AK: I don't know. When Charlie first came he was painting like Gorky and de Kooning.

PC: Oh, really?

AK: Yes. He picked it up real quickly. Around 1949 he was doing things like Gorky and de Kooning. Blackie was painting . . . he went to like Matisse and then he went to Pop and was doing like crazy Pop stuff in 1950, 1951, or something like that. Then he went to Europe. He worked in a hard edge studio there, the Grande Chaumiere, where they did old-fashioned stuff. When he came back he was doing like a real sharp kind of new hard edge painting in 1954, 1955, a rough

PC: Isn't that incredible!

AK: Yes. We picked up on it immediately.

PC: That's very interesting. I didn't know that.

AK: Yes.

PC: And now he's doing little cutout things.

AK: He's doing birds. But he went there painting Pollocks and he came back painting these kind of big flat colors. They were kind of rough. And Charlie and I both picked up on it immediately.

PC: I thought it was out of Leger or something like that?

AK: I think he was out of Neo-plastics. He had a studio there at the Grande Chaumiere. He was working with those guys. Then he went into Expressionist stuff. He just left it.

PC: Yes. He charges through so many things.

AK: He went through a lot of different things.

PC: That's true. Let's see, where did we get to here? We've gone at such a clip year after year.

AK: We're getting very confused. But the other guys I guess I met, you know, sort of gradually when I had a show of those solitary figures on the ground like this one over here. That was like the first really adult show. It was in 1959. That was like dropping a lead balloon on Tenth Street. Jeez, the gallery was sort of like you'd think you'd dropped a lead balloon.

PC: Yes. Because it was so different.

AK: Yes. People sort of pounced on them, people screaming in the gallery. They called them illustrations. They had no idea what was in store for them. But anyway the older guys were really terrific. You know, de Kooning came in and he was terribly sweet. He said, "They're like photographs but they're paintings. Don't let them knock you out of it." Which was kind of terrific. And Philip Guston was just terribly nice to me. And Jack Tworokov and all the guys down there were very nice. They really had no reason to be.

PC: That was true. What about the other painters your own age who were doing something quite different?

AK: Well a lot of them . . . well, it was like a little bit of emulation at that point. Then other people were kind of interested in it.

PC: How did you join the Stable? How did you get involved up there?

AK: Well, there weren't very many galleries to show in in New York. And I'd be Goddamned if I'd ever go back to another gallery that didn't have a little bit of style to it. There was Leo Castelli and John Myers and the Stable as far as I was concerned. The rest of them I didn't like.

PC: Eleanore was in the Stable then?

AK: In the Stable. And the thing with her was she had a great room there. And if you controlled that room you had yourself a reputation right there. And she didn't have any figurative stuff. And she came down to look at the stuff. She said, "What do you want with me?" And then she said, "I'll give you a show next year if your work doesn't go fallow." But then she did something smart. She said, "Send these two paintings to the gallery and these two you keep." And she picked the two good paintings to keep so I knew that she had an eye for my work. She figured out the better ones. And I said, "Swell." And that sort of was that. And then someone dropped out. That was about the time that a lot of painters left for Kootz. So there was a hole there. So I got a show right away. I showed the next year.

PC: How did that one do?

AK: Well, that was a financial disaster. I guess Joe Fiori bought a painting. And she bought a painting, something like that. We didn't sell anything out of the show at all. But it got terrific critical attention and a lot of interest. It was like a very successful show from that standpoint.

PC: How do you like the paintings once you get them out of the studio into an exhibition like that? Do they change a great deal? Do you see them differently?

AK: I see them a little differently. I'm kind of used to it now. It used to be a big shock. The first time I had a painting shown I guess it was okay. The second time I showed a little landscape, a little picture in the Roko Gallery, and some guy blasted that off the wall. It never happened again. I mean it can happen chemically if you get stuck next to something. I learned a lesson there. Then out of the Stable show I was put in the Whitney New Talent show and pictures which I had that I thought were large, which were like four by six, or six by six, or something, were like postage stamps.

PC: Next to those huge things.

AK: Right. And that was something that never happened again. You know, I learned a lot about scale.

PC: It's interesting. So really the exhibitions did have a very direct effect?

AK: Yes, they had a lot of effect. I think when I had my second show at Roko the paintings I thought were beautiful but it was like a question of I couldn't make them any nicer; they were all very finished in that open technique but I just felt it didn't have enough me. And generally when you have an exhibition you always say what you like and what you don't like about it.

PC: I'm curious about Tenth Street. You were -- what? You were a founder of the Tanager Gallery?

AK: No.

PC: You were an early member, though, weren't you?

AK: I was a member -- I wasn't really a member at first -- I was connected with it because all my friends were there and I showed there in a two-man show. I showed there quite a bit. I showed there more than I did any other place. But I wasn't a member of it until the late 1950's. I was . . . like I started with them in 1952 and broke up in 1962. I was showing all along. I used to help out and keep the store open on Thursday nights, things like

that. But I think it was after that Roko show that I just said to hell with it. It was later when I became a member. I couldn't afford it in the beginning anyway. It was very hard.

PC: Well, you were living away from your family. You were living in Manhattan?

AK: Yes, in Manhattan.

PC: What do you think of the whole Tenth Street thing now after a few years? What purpose do you think it served?

AK: I think it had a lot to do with setting the style of New York as a painting city. They had more good painters down there than they had in any place. They had a lot of terrific painters there.

PC: Do you think the fact that there were so many people concentrated there . . . ?

AK: Well, there wasn't any room uptown. Down there you couldn't complete with a good uptown gallery. But they set a standard somehow. They used to say all kinds of funny things about it. But it served its purpose for the time, I think. It was terrific for all of us. It was a terrific education for me.

PC: I always found it interesting because it was like a commune or something. So many people lived upstairs; there was a gallery downstairs; they all went to the same bars and coffeehouses and places like that and you were always in it.

AK: Yes. Well, I think everyone's social life was public. That's what John Button said to me. He was kind of shocked at the way people lived -- the older guys that started it more or less.

PC: Well, did you get involved with The Club ever?

AK: Yes, I was involved with The Club. It was kind of interesting. I was real interested in dialectics. I liked a lot listening to those guys talk, listening to dialectics. And from the point of like not being able to talk in front of more than one person, I got so that finally I got up enough nerve when I was asked to talk there. But also it hardened the thinking a great deal hanging around all those guys. There were an awful lot of bright guys. Someone would say something and someone would look at him and they'd jump on it. You know, it was like you were sloppy. And you weren't sloppy again that way. So it was a terrific ten years or so -- or twelve years actually, around there. It was just a fantastic education for me.

PC: That's very close to the way I saw it, too, because you had so many generations from real young people to . . .

AK: Yes. You'd talk to guys where you'd get information and stuff. It was quite interesting. A lot of content, you know. And the Tanager was like a real education because those guys were a little older than I was and they'd been around a little more.

PC: Did you show at any of the other galleries there? The Tanager was really . . . ?

AK: The Tanager was my base.

PC: That was the one, yes.

AK: Yes. We were sort of social security. Well, the Tanager was different from all the others anyway. They were all slightly different. But the Tanager And there was the Hansa Gallery. The Hansa was sort of like German Expressionists. The Tanager group was all more contained and collegiate and slightly more conceited in style. Wasn't it, somehow?

PC: It's interesting to see it that way.

AK: It seemed that way.

PC: But I think they were very independent too at that time.

AK: The Tanager?

PC: Yes.

AK: It was very independent, yes. You know, we had the advantage for a good number of years of not having to worry about selling the pictures. So it started with that. So we'd say what kind of show can we put on that somebody who has to sell pictures can't? So you can show anything you feel like showing as long as it's fun. It

gave us a tremendous advantage over the other galleries. We didn't care whether we sold anything or not.

PC: You did your own thing and that was it.

AK: The thing was paying for itself more or less. The rent was forty dollars. It was like no problem to anybody. So we just had an awful lot of fun with the place.

PC: That's terrific. You know, it's amazing when you look back -- I was looking through some papers from there the other day. Wesselmann had his first show there.

AK: Yes. Henry Geldzahler actually told me to go see this guy Wesselmann's work. He said it was influenced by my collages. He had done some little collages that might have been, But then he was doing bigger ones.

PC: Yes. The Great American Dream.

AK: Yes, the still-lives and stuff. Yes. That was the first show. I saw them and I thought they were fabulous. I got the Tanager members down there and they all thought they were just fabulous.

PC: That's terrific. Well, when did you start doing collages?

AK: 1955.

PC: How did that come about?

AK: I liked Matisse's collages. And I was interested in Marca-Pelli's. And I wanted to do something else. I'd been wanting to do collages I guess for a whole bunch of reasons. I was painting all-over paintings more or less and I wanted to put an edge on it or stop it, you know. But suddenly one day I made one. And when I made it I knew I had it. That was it. The first year I didn't do too many. That was about 1956. I showed them in 1957, a wall of them, in that Roko show. Then it just exploded and I kept doing them through 1960. That was the end of them. I thought I was getting trapped by the line. And they had the element of nostalgia; they were like past tense. I wanted to make something more present tense. I figured they were just getting in my way so I just cut them out. And it was awful because they were like real art. It was kind of rough. And, you know, three years later, two years later, you couldn't go back into it if you tried.

PC: Yes. But you did some sets and things with the cutout figures?

AK: Well, then I went to cutout figures a year or a couple of years later.

PC: Which is like a collage without background.

AK: Well, it's just that the line kept moving. But at the time the little collages were so small I had to stop it. I felt I wanted to get into present tense. When I did the cutout it was like I cut up a painting.

PC: Oh, really?

AK: I was working with painting two people. I cut the figure out. I couldn't get the background to work. I spent a winter on it. I had a hard time anyway working on a painting after the first time, you know.

PC: It really had to happen.

AK: It had to happen and I could refine it. But if I had something to really make a change, it was like I just couldn't do it. The guys who painted like de Kooning who'd work all day on a painting . . . it was so alien to my temperament . . . Also a lot of the guys thought it had a built-in virtue.

PC: Work! Work! Work!

AK: Yes. I felt guilty about it because it wasn't my temperament. But anyway I worked on this one all winter. And sure as hell it didn't come out. The figures looked real good. So I cut them out. I didn't know what the hell to do with them. I had them laying around. One day Bob Rauschenberg came by. He saw them and thought they were terrific. He said, "Just keep them the way they are." So I mounted them on plywood. They were weird because they were only four feet high; you know, They were lifesize in an eight-foot picture but four feet high in real life. I kept them around for about a year. There was something about them that wasn't art, that illusionary thing, you know. They were really like things. And I decided that the painting didn't go past the edge much so it had a feeling more like the old things where the photos didn't have real life energy. That became the idea, like making the energy of the stroke go past the edges. Then I went into it really hard and did every sculptural idea I could think of, you know. I had a show at Tanager in 1962. And right after that Kenneth Koch and Arthur Storch came by and asked me to do Kenneth's play George Washington Crossing the Delaware. I went right into that.

PC: I'm very curious because you've always been involved with poets, it seems, a group of poets or writers. Or does it just seem that way?

AK: That's true. I don't know. I met Denby and Burkhardt I guess in the middle Fifties or something like that. I met Jane and Frank O'Hara. And Jimmy Schuyler was a friend of Edwin's. And it was just like one thing led to another. I guess we just were interested in each other, in a way, somehow.

PC: You've also painted the people around you?

AK: Yes. I started with that early. It wasn't autobiographical but it was personal in a sense. I think the big change came in 1957 when I started to paint Ada over and over again. I'd splash around with paint and see if I could get the expression in the eyes right and that kind of thing. It always seemed a big gag to me. When I started doing it, I couldn't get a likeness and I couldn't get the expression in the eyes right. I had to break down the whole open style of painting at that point. And I figured . . . well, if I get Ada right, if you only get one person right -- if you get a woman or a man right -- it's universal. So what the hell.

PC: How do you define your term "open" painting?

AK: Well, "open" strokes would be like Titian or Pollock, like an open form that way. And when I started to close it down . . . well, I got interested in . . . where you go from the big stroke to the small stroke, still open -- fluid painting rather than all over is what it was. Is that clear?

PC: Yes -- it still has a . . . ?

AK: Fluid. It's very fluid. Everything is fluid. Like every stroke should be controlled and different changes in the scale of the strokes.

PC: It's tighter in a way.

AK: It's much tighter, because they go from real tight to more open in all of the fluid style. Manet's brushwork is all very controlled, as an example. It's not spontaneous; it's not natural, you know. It's fluid. And that was like the big thing to get off this natural painting. Because natural painting worked for a lot of people. But for me I could paint it naturally but then I'd have to want to refine it a little bit and it would look natural. Most people thought my paintings looked unfinished because they were spontaneous-looking. So there was a change there where I wanted to make something that was like fluid rather than natural.

PC: Just to go back for a second, how did you like doing George Washington Crossing the Delaware?

AK: Well, I had a lot of fun. It was a lot of hard work but it was a lot of fun. The whole thing was just a big fiasco. To begin with, they gave me the play. I went into this room with the producer and the director and Kenneth. I said, "I have wonderful ideas. I think the play is essentially two-dimensional. We should have the backdrop three feet away from the actors and it all should be flat and we'll have different colors for different moods for the three scenes. We'll have one set at three feet from the actors, and the other one six feet." And everyone said, "That's absolutely marvelous. We'll go along with you." Then I started to work. Arthur Storch said, "I want a big ramp." I said, "Ramp! You're out of your fucking mind! You can't put a ramp on the stage. It's a two-dimensional play, you idiot. And besides you'll be stuck with that turkey of a ramp for the whole play. And Kenneth, the friend, said, "Alex, just relax and do the cutouts." I didn't know what to do. So it became like the producer was just about broke. And I said, "I think his idea of a ramp isn't so bad after all. It won't cost you more than four hundred bucks and if it doesn't work, the hell with it." So then he went back to the director and said, "I think Mr. Katz's aesthetic decision is correct." So I got rid of the ramp. But that's the way it went. It was all crazy. So we sort of like battled. I didn't know anything about plays. I had done a dance set for Paul Taylor where you just make something and the guy uses it or throws it away. But the director is sort of like a god -- the guy who directs a play. He tells you what to do. You know, I'd give him an idea and he has these magic words "exit" and "entrance." And that's the thing that confounded me completely. I didn't know how to cope with those two words. Well, we finished it. Eleanor Ward was And the guy wanted to sell the pieces. His name was John Wolpe. I said, "You can't do this to me. You'll undercut my market." (Which was a big joke; there wasn't any market!) But I couldn't see selling these things for fifty bucks when I was trying to sell them for three hundred at the gallery. So he said, "I'll tell you what, Alex." (They were paying the designer's fee for this, which was \$220.) But I was making the stuff besides. So he said, "We'll cut \$20 off the designer's fee and if the show folds you'll get the pieces." So I said, "Great!" Because that show just had to fold. I mean it was a great play; the sets were great. Did you see it?

PC: No.

AK: It was great; it was spectacular. We had the Delaware River cut out and that popped up. We had a boat with everybody in it and flags. It was fabulous. He had people running through the audience. You know, if you tried to

walk out on that one you'd get stomped to death. It was a terrific play. But it was on a program with an Elaine May thing that wasn't much. And an play which was doomed, I'm afraid. He still could carry it but he didn't have any money to carry it. You see, it got bad reviews in the dailies. It got fabulous reviews in like the Commonweal and in The Nation. It got a lot of really terrific reviews. And if he could have held it, he could have used the reviews or something.

PC: Who was the producer?

AK: John Wolpe I guess.

PC: He's painting now.

AK: I guess it's the same guy. But at the time he thought television was black and white.

PC: Did you see that show of his?

AK: No. He was a very funny guy,

PC: It's strange painting.

AK: Yes. So Martha Jackson was looking for a show. Eleanor Ward gave a hundred dollars to them for their performance and didn't go. But John Gruen I guess told Martha Jackson so she came around and said, "I'll buy that."

PC: Really?

AK: That was when she went to the Claes Oldenburg Happening looking for the Alex Katz cutouts. And in the middle of the Happening she said, "This isn't Alex Katz. What am I doing here?" And she walked out with her entourage. And later came down to the other place and we dragged the things out. We haggled about the price. Finally she got this glint in her eye. There was one with three British soldiers. She said, "Okay. Your price if you sign this piece three times." Isn't that funny? You could just see the saw in her mind. So she had the show. It made Newsweek and it was like a real sensation.

PC: I remember it was downstairs. Things were standing all over the place.

AK: She had the show of the stuff. There was a lot of publicity. It was like the first time I was thought of as being a jazzy number. And it was so funny because we hung the show - it was like two years' work -- life and death -- on the wall. Then I had a guy from Newsweek chasing me all over Maine. It was wild. He was asking me questions because they said I was a semi-beat. And he was looking mostly for wild life. He was asking me questions about semi-beat and I'd say, "Don't you know that's unfashionable?"

PC: Well, you taught at Skowhegan, didn't you?

AK: Right. I taught there I guess in 1960, then years after I went there as an art student.

PC: You had taught before at Yale -- right?

AK: Yale was really the first. That was about ten years after I got out of art school.

PC: How did that come about?

AK: Well, Welliver needed someone in the class there. My first job was visiting critic at Yale University. It paid real well. I was working then in a frame shop. So I quit.

PC: What frame shop?

AK: I worked at Kleist's.

PC: I didn't know that -- the drawing place?

AK: That was a drawing place. I spent almost ten years there.

PC: I didn't know that. It's amazing everybody worked in a frame shop or they

AK: They did house painting; all kinds of crap.

PC: Speaking of framing to make a living, what were you doing in the first years after school besides teaching?

AK: Well, I worked in a frame shop for four days a week. I had all kinds of jobs. I delivered mail. I did odd jobs. At one time I was a bill collector in Harlem. It was a wild job, you know these quarter installment things; running through with sixty dollars in quarters in your pockets going through back halls.

PC: Click. Click. Click.

AK: Yes. Right. They never sent you on the same route twice. That was a kind of crazy job. It didn't pay so good. The first job I had was delivering newspapers someplace up in the West End. It was a part-time job. That lasted a little . . . And then I got a job cutting mats. I cut my hand and walked out on that. Fred got a job in a frame shop. So the whole bunch of us that had been in Skowhegan, the whole crowd, ended up working in this crazy frame shop -- Lewinson's. He was sort of like . . . he was a guy who went to City College and he had a lot of theories.

PC: Ended up selling frames.

AK: Making frames. He didn't manufacture frames. He just didn't have the, I don't know, the thing to do it. And I worked for muralists. I worked for Marioliotti and I worked for a guy named Ross and I worked for Allyn Cox, the son of Kenyon Cox.

PC: Oh, really?

AK: They were very interesting experiences. I learned an awful lot working for those guys.

PC: That was very different from working with the trompe l'oeil guy, though, wasn't it?

AK: Marioliotti was like a Venetian painter. He knew what things looked like in places. The style was rough. Ross was like real tight; it was abstract or realistic, but it was very tight. And with Ross I learned what a line was. He had me making forms and he said, "It stinks." And I got my job with him with paintings that looked like Pollock's. Brought him these wild paintings. And Ross said, "Oh, I see you have some control." He could understand the very sophisticated word "control." There wasn't any imagery. But he could look at it and see that my temperament was like a controlled temperament or something -- I don't know how he could see it. He gave me a job. I stretched frames. He had these big canvases 18 x 20 feet and I stretched them for him at first. Later on I got to pounce them. Then later on -- what the hell else did I do there? Oh, I enlarged them for him by art. There's a proper way of doing it. I think by the time I ended he had painted a decorative mural in an apartment on 72nd Street. And twenty years later someone else was getting the apartment and they were going from French blue to Biedermeier green. They wanted the background changed. By this time I had been painting seven or eight years out of art school. And there were violin strings that you had to paint around . . . And I did it in just one stroke. And his teeth almost fell on the floor. I'd been doing it, you know. I don't know . . . when he found out a little about art history -- knew a little about art history, he sort of warmed up a bit.

PC: Well, you really had kind of a studio training that came along in various lumps and pieces?

PC: Yes. Between that and Skowhegan and tenth Street, it was kind of like a great deal of education.

PC: How long did you work with Cox?

AK: Oh, several years. He had work several months at a time, something like that; sometimes I'd just work for a week. But I think that was the end at that point. It was in 1957. I remember because the woman for whom the mural was being done was Mrs. Dana of the family of the author of *Two Years Before the Mast*. And I didn't get any paint on the floor at all; it was a real neat job. And I think she thought it wasn't right to tip an artist. She found out I had a show and she went down and bought a collage. I really think that's what happened.

PC: That's marvelous. So you got the idea that you'd do some teaching?

AK: I didn't get the idea.

PC: The job came along.

AK: Well, the first one was at the Brooklyn Museum. That was like the same year I was . . . I was making \$35 a week or so for two days in the frame shop. I could get by on that. And they offered me a class for that much for one night or something. I took it. It was a bunch of amateurs. It was awful.

PC: This was your first real teaching?

AK: My first real teaching. Oh, I'd gone up to Camp Green to talk to kids and stuff like that but it wasn't really teaching. I had kind of fun doing it, but, gee, I lost most of that class. Then they offered me a beginner's class and I said, "I'm not going to teach beginners." I had gotten quite snotty by then. In the beginning when I got out

of art school I would have liked to have had a job for \$3,000 a year in Wyoming. But by that time I could get by college training. I wasn't going to go any place. Then I got the Yale thing. It paid well. So I took it. It was interesting; it was a challenge. And I got a lot out of it actually.

PC: What did you teach up there?

AK: Painting.

PC: But what levels?

AK: Damned if I know. I mean it ended up being a lot of graduate students as well as undergraduates. They were quite developed intellectually anyway. They were learning how to paint.

PC: Did you find it an interesting experience to carry on with?

AK: Oh, that was interesting for me then. I went up there for almost three years. And I had a very nice time.

PC: Do you still teach?

AK: No. I was supposed to do a seminar at The Studio School this year. I don't know whether I'll do it or not.

PC: . . . group of visiting people . . . ?

AK: Group of something -- I don't know. I just don't know what's going on.

PC: I see your name on that list every once in a while.

AK: Yes. Well, I taught a class there last year. I had a nice time. I had a lot of fun. I hadn't taught a great deal I guess for three or four years.

PC: It's very different from Yale?

AK: Yes, it's quite different.

PC: How do you like their idea of sort of old atelier . . . ?

AK: Well, I think it's kind of nice to have a fine arts painting school, you know, I think it's just absolutely fabulous the adult education that the universities are taking care of. And they do have very fine programs, etc. But I do think it's kind of terrific to have a school for some people who don't give a shit about a degree and want to paint. But I do think there should be professional art schools.

PC: I haven't been to their new building. I saw it when they were on Broadway.

AK: It's gorgeous. It's the old Whitney.

PC: Yes. I'll go and take a look.

AK: Well, it's

PC: How are their students? Do you find them . . . ?

AK: They're kind of nice. They're a little refined. They're very nice. They're serious as hell. They paint all day. Some of them paint all day and all night five nights a week. They're really serious about painting. That's kind of nice.

PC: It's very interesting that what was once a museum now becomes a place that produces art.

AK: Well, they always used to make art there, too. They had a studio in the back. They had an actual studio there where they did sculpture. You know, the Clay Club. I think that was stuck in the back of the Whitney. And Gertrude Whitney was sort of involved in making it herself.

PC: Right. Do you do much reading? Or did you read books?

AK: Yes. I read more than most painters do,

PC: What kind of things do you read? What areas interest you? What authors?

AK: I've always liked cybernetics books, things like that. If they're on a lay level I can get through them. And I

like poetry. I've been reading a lot of poetry in the last ten years. People around me. I find it very exciting. And contemporary literature. That's where most of it is as far as I'm concerned. And I read funny biographies and things. I've read a lot of novels.

PC: What kind of poets do you like?

AK: Oh, the New York crowd. You know, Jimmy Schuyler and John Ashbery. I just did this book with John, you know, Fragments.

PC: I haven't seen it yet. I just got something in the mail about it.

AK: [not clear what he said]

PC: The California Press, isn't it?

AK: Yes.

PC: Right. That's what I got in the mail. But you've done a number of books, illustrated them?

AK: I've done book covers. I've done a little book with Kenneth Koch, cartoons and stuff. And I did covers for Bill Berkson, for Kenneth Koch and for Jimmy Schuyler. But actually this is the first . . .

PC: Are these done specifically for the book?

AK: Right. The whole form is made for the book.

PC: It's a lovely book. I haven't seen it yet.

AK: They've got a three-dollar one and a fifteen-dollar one. This is the fifteen-dollar one.

PC: It's a nice cover. Signed by the artist and the author.

AK: They gave us 250 pieces of paper to sign.

PC: That's a nice book. I love their books. I have quite a number of them.

AK: Well, anyway, John Ashbery's like ice skaters, you know, is one of these really like major stylistic events in literature. It's like very, very exciting to see it.

PC: I haven't read very much of him for some reason.

AK: He's a pretty fabulous stylist. I don't know -- those guys are about as good as poetry gets as far as I'm concerned. It's been very exciting reading.

PC: But did you never get involved with Allen Ginsberg's course on that . . . ?

AK: They all seem like cornballs to me. You know, really, I never thought . . . Ginsberg I guess isn't bad; his course wasn't bad. Ginsberg I always think of like Frank O'Hara. Frank O'Hara was sort of like high art, though. Ginsberg is sort of Barbara, probably Dylan, or something like that.

PC: That's true. They're very close in certain ways.

AK: Barbara, probably; Dylan is pretty good, too. But it isn't really like high art.

PC: Well, it's a lot of show biz.

AK: A lot of show biz, yes. It's all watered down.

PC: You knew O'Hara, didn't you?

AK: Yes.

PC: To get back to reading -- what other kinds of things do you read? Do you read art literature much, the magazines and books?

AK: At one point I was kind of informed. I read the magazines. Now I don't read them as much. I've read a lot of critical writings. I find them interesting.

PC: Is there anybody in particular who interests you?

AK: You mean contemporary? Or old?

PC: Yes, contemporary things.

AK: I liked . . . I think Scott Burden writes lively stuff now. And I think Peter Schjeldahl has a great journalistic style. It's kind of fun.

PC: Yes. His poetry is something.

AK: Yes.

PC: It's so flat-footed sometimes.

AK: Yes. The declarative statement which he uses in his poetry is kind of really sensational.

PC: Yes. Clump. Clump.

AK: Yes. The sentences. There's that whole crowd with Ted Berrigan and Ron Pajet; like the second generation poets that have made something else. He's part of that.

PC: That's interesting. I find the young poets very interesting. Much more so than the fiction writers and the novelists.

AK: Oh, yes. The older guys I guess like Jimmy and Frank and Kenneth and John Ashbery are close to being totally literate. And with a lot of the young guys you don't get the feeling that they are. But they're who they are. And the work seems in a sense more kind of almost American in a way. It's another style, another kind of American

PC: But they're all -- Schjeldahl is from Minnesota -- but the other guys are from different areas.

AK: Well, he picked up on stuff here and started making the book out there. And all the other guys came from Oklahoma.

PC: Yes. There's that whole Oklahoma school. It's very strange.

AK: But these other guys all went to Harvard. Ken went there, too. They all were at Harvard at the same time. It's kind of crazy.

PC: I didn't know they were Harvard people.

AK: Yes. If you think about it, it makes sense.

PC: That's marvelous. Let me just get back to one art school question.

AK: I like Fairfield Porter's art criticism very much.

PC: Yes.

AK: I think it's terrific.

PC: Did you know him as a painter when he was around?

AK: Yes. We met in the late 1950's. He saw my work in the first show I had. He was interested in my work then. And I'd seen one of his paintings in the Stable Annual. I couldn't believe it.

PC: In what way?

AK: I didn't know what the hell to make of it. It looked like a Coca Cola advertisement, you know. And it wasn't. It seemed to be painted good. Then I saw a show of his and got interested. Then he was a friend of Denby's. I met him on the street once. He was again, you know, kind of embarrassed, like a jerky kid. And I said something. (He goes to Maine and I went to Maine.) I said, "Are you going north?" He said, "East." He corrected me. And I was mad as hell over being so stupid and being corrected. We met years later.

PC: He's very precise.

AK: Very precise. And he remembers everything you say. And I never paid any attention to anything I say let alone what anyone else said. Then we became friends I guess in the late 1950's. He was like very excited about my work. I found his things kind of real interesting.

PC: His paintings I find very difficult sometimes.

AK: Yes.

PC: The way he paints. Sometimes it looks like a sloppy way but it's not really.

AK: The paint is never sloppy. the paint is very controlled. They had that show of Vuillard paintings here in the early 1950's. They had The Dentist and stuff like that. And everyone I knew thought they were shit, particularly the late ones. But I didn't think they were shit. They were like open -- they were open end -- particularly The dentist, the late things. I couldn't get over a guy putting a lifeboat down in the middle of a picture, you know?

PC: Yes. Clunk!

AK: Clunk. And it was all painted beautifully. And then I found out like Fairfield was crazy about him. Jack Tworokov was crazy bout him. Denby was crazy about it. And somehow there was like an open end there. Fairfield was sort of fooling around with that.

PC: Yes. I spent a day with him, not this summer, a year ago. It was very exhausting.

AK: Well, he's very rigorous. He's Harvard, too.

PC: Yes. Out of Chicago.

AK: Yes. I saw him this summer swimming a mile a day.

PC: Really!

AK: Yes. He comes to it like this indecent radiant health.

PC: I know. It's incredible, isn't it?

AK: And he tells me he's swimming a mile a day. I don't know how he stands it and painting. And then he says crawl, you know, so I wouldn't get the idea he was using the breast stroke or anything.

PC: Boy! Yes. He's very much like a lot of people I used to know in the Midwest. Healthy and tough about life and things; not soft.

AK: Yes. He's a very rigorous intellectual, too. Literary.

PC: Yes. Right. Are there other artists that you are very good friends with or have been over the years whose ideas interest you?

AK: Well, I guess I've been friends with Al Held since the late . . . as I was with Langlais and Bruback and that crowd. i met Jane and Fairfield and Larry Rivers. The Tanager crowd was Cajori, Ippolito, Philip Pearlstein and George Ortman. And I'm still friends with Philip Perlstein. I find him kind of interesting.

PC: Do you discuss art with these people? Or not?

AK: Sometimes. It depends on who I'm talking with. With someone like Jane Freilicher it's more on a taste level, or how you do it, or something like that. With Al Held and Philip Pearlstein it's all about theories.

PC: Oh, really?

AK: Yes.

PC: That's interesting.

AK: With Fairfield it's something else. It's taste gain.

PC: Oh, really!

AK: Yes. "Why you like Motherwell; why you don't like Motherwell."

PC: Oh, I see.

AK: You know?

PC: But Pearlstein has ideas on -- what? His own theories in his own work? Or generally?

AK: Yes. What art should be. A doctrine is pretty important; that kind of formalist thinking.

PC: How about somebody like Sidney Tillim who is all involved with things?

AK: Well, he's not a friend actually. He got interested in my paintings and gave me a lot of bad reviews. He claims he's a friend.

PC: He's got lots of bad reviews to prove it.

AK: Yes. So I don't know. But he's a lot enthused but like most of them came after the pictures were painted. A lot of them, you know. I mean when he first painted it was like painting sort of Matisse

PC: Geometric.

AK: Yes. Geometric and Matisse and Fairfield and, you know, he picked up on Philip somehow. You know, I'm not putting him down as

PC: I just find it difficult to place him.

AK: He's always been interested in hip ideas. He's sort of a zootsuiter type; I mean that in the est sense. Like he's interested in hip stuff. Wherever it's hip he's there. And he's been involved with figurative stuff, which is kind of strange. But he's never around anything once it's over the hill stylewise.

PC: That's too bad.

AK: Well, he comes on like he's kind of puritan, you know, Old Testament But it's not true.

PC: I don't know him. I've seen his pictures here and there.

AK: He's a kind of interesting guy. He's wild.

PC: One other question here: Who do you think amongst the teachers you had in art school were important to you? Or were interesting?

AK: I found Henry Varnum Poor quite interesting. I disagreed with most of what he said, I guess. He was kind of interesting because he spoke of painting more on a philosophical level than on a craft level. I found Kantor interesting I guess mostly because it was on a very high craft level.

PC: Kind of a contrast to Poor.

AK: Yes. Poor would talk about art more on a philosophical level, more or less, and I found that a more interesting way to think about painting even though I didn't really agree with most of his ideas.

PC: How did you like Skowhegan when you went back to teach there after a period of time?

AK: I had a great time.

PC: Everybody seems to love it up there.

AK: It's a great place.

PC: Healthy out of doors, running around.

AK: Healthy, out of doors. It's like Arcadia. You have nothing on your mind except painting and bringing in meals.

PC: Are there many abstract painters who are up there?

AK: Not really because mostly -- more so now -- because Poor believed in a return to nature and basic truths and stuff like that.

PC: I haven't really got a picture of who the entrenched people were there.

AK: Poor was the founder. And Bill Cummings. And Sidney Simon, And Anne Poor. And there was a sculptor called Kuppa. Poor, he was sort of the philosopher, you know. He was older. He was the one who developed it in those areas intellectually.

PC: That makes a lot of sense with some of the other things.

AK: Once you get that clear that gives everything, the whole picture. And you read a little bit about it. You might have two or three paragraphs of small stuff sometimes on what they're about. That's what it is.

PC: I see. Well, who do you think is important to you in the development of your painting as far as the realization of it in the sense that -- I mean excluding yourself -- but I mean outside people?

AK: My dealers!

PC: Some dealers!

AK: Till they get the stuff moving! No -- I don't know -- when I was on tenth Street, it was like the Tanager.

PC: It was really the groups.

AK: Yes, the groups where I went. I got more directly from the guys.

PC: I never really learn how to phrase this question properly. What's the quality that makes you paint? In the sense of . . . is it a drive to communicate? Or to make things? Or . . . ?

AK: Well, it varies; it changes. It has changed. It started out just as a kick.

PC: Something that was fun?

AK: Yes. It was more than fun; it was a big kick. And then it got to be like a desire to change everyone's idea of what a painting is or what the world looks like. You know, it's going to insanity.

PC: So that it's kind of a messianic point at this stage?

AK: Yes. It's got quite out of hand.

PC: Well, the Flowers -- look what's happened!

AK: Yes. That's the way a flower looks and that's the way a painting is supposed to look. That's kind of, you know I hardly drew them -- even after I'd been painting for several years. I mean that kind of presumptuous ego just seemed very distasteful to me.

PC: But I think the artist has to have an ego in a sense.

AK: Well, mine was late in coming.

PC: Is it making up for lost time?

AK: It sure has I think.

PC: We talked about making a living and stuff, didn't we? Have you done any traveling since? Have you been in Europe? or have you gone any place besides Maine?

AK: Yes, I've just started to move around. I went to Europe for fourteen days to look at the work at Spoleto for ten. I spent six day in Paris which was kind of interesting.

PC: When was this?

AK: Four or five years ago. It was really terrific to see the Louvre and to see the old pictures and to see the new scenery.

PC: Do you like traveling? Do you want to do some more?

AK: Not for any length of time. I like to go some place for a couple of days. I wouldn't mind going back to Europe for a week or two, but not an extensive trip.

PC: Did you have any particular heroes when you were young, you know, an art student, like art heroes or culture heroes?

AK: Well, culture heroes were like Lester Young and Billie Holliday, I guess, were real big culture heroes. They were all in jazz pretty much. Then when I became a painter, after a while, you know, they would be people who were painters. I thought Matisse was a great painter; I thought of him as a culture hero. I thought of Bill de Kooning as a culture hero. And Frank Kline.

PC: But not Matisse?

AK: Not really; he was like something else. But after a while, you know, you get him as that.

PC: That's fascinating. How did you see de Kooning as a culture hero then?

AK: Well, it's like a transfer from the jazz hero, you know, more or less.

PC: Do you go to all the jazz spots?

AK: Before the college kids came into it. Which was very early.

PC: Now they're everywhere.

AK: Yes. We used to follow Dixieland in art school. Then we followed the progressive stuff for a while. Then we followed the Afro-Cuban stuff. Then it just got like boring.

PC: Do you have an interest in politics?

AK: No.

PC: Nothing?

AK: Nothing.

PC: You don't design posters? Or do all those things?

AK: I'll give away a painting or something like that. But I really don't care about it much.

PC: Do you have any other interests like hobbies or things besides reading poetry?

AK: No.

PC: Nothing additional like that. Have you done any . . . ? You paint in oils? You don't use acrylics?

AK: No. I still use oils.

PC: You haven't gone into any of the new materials?

AK: Well, I cut out of aluminum. That's about as far as it goes.

PC: Yes. But you haven't tried the acrylics? Or . . . ?

AK: Well, they wouldn't be any good for me because I use blended toner. I like the oil colors better.

PC: You're still doing cutouts, aren't you?

AK: Yes. I'm having a big show in about two years, you know, the tables.

PC: Standing . . . ?

AK: And I'm doing a whole bunch more. I'm going to be doing them all winter.

PC: What's the name of the large painting, do you know?

AK: Private Domain. It's the name of a dance. I get a big kick out of dance. Paul Taylor. And I like Merce Cunningham.

PC: Have you done other things for the dance besides the Paul Taylor thing?

AK: I did about seven or eight costumes and sets for Paul Taylor.

PC: That's terrific. I haven't seen any of those in years and years and years.

AK: Well, we did one new one where I put the stage in front of the dancers and you could peep at them through these rectangulars; they were behind them. We got away with it. It was terrific.

PC: How did it work?

AK: It worked out fine. They were all surprised.

PC: Great! Well, you've gotten very involved in designing sets.

AK: Yes. Well, they're like sort of very great artists. And somehow like the poets and things it's something that really rings bells or just don't follow it.

PC: Yes. That's true. Are you interested in any other dance? Or just those particular people? I mean do you go to ballet?

AK: No. I go to it occasionally. Denby will tell me what to go see at city Center. That would be terrific. But I'm not a real dance fan.

PC: You don't go to the Hamptons either in the summers?

AK: No, I go to Maine.

PC: Where do you go up there?

AK: We have a place out in Lincolnville.

PC: Where is that?

AK: Well, no place. It's halfway between Portland and Bar Harbor up in the mountains. We're on a lake. We've been going there for fifteen years or something like that. I originally wanted to paint landscapes so that was the reason for staying in the country summers. I like painting outdoors. That was like a big thing. And I like being out of seeing a lot of people part of the year.

PC: Get out and breathe a little.

AK: Yes. They say it's civilized to retreat.

PC: Let's get back to some of the exhibitions. When did you get involved with Thibaut -- or it was Fischbach?

AK: In 1962. They came down to my studio I guess; well, Marilyn had seen my show at the Tanager and couldn't make up her mind about it. She knew it was something that she was interested in. Then they came down to my studio. I had that big of cutouts and advertising stuff. And I did a whole bunch of windows. And I was also doing a man drinking beer. This was in 1962, I guess - 1961 or 1962. And they wanted to buy the whole studio out. I told them to forget about it. I sold them a painting. Then I had that altercation, you know, after I had that show and Martha Jackson bought the stuff and Eleanor Ward who I had two shows with was furious.

PC: Yes. She would be.

AK: And she asked me to leave the gallery. Her parting words were something: "Whoever gets you is going to clean up. but I can't help it."

PC: She's really incredible. She makes her mind up and that's it.

AK: That was it. And she was right. Because we never sold anything there. And about that time I started to sell like crazy. And there was just something very interesting about Marilyn and Yvonne. It was the thing like they were people who were committed to new things and were open. Most of the stuff they had was tachieste stuff which you knew they wouldn't have long.

PC: They got rid of it quickly.

AK: Right. It was like open. It seemed like there was a lot of energy there. And they seemed to really dig my work. That was the big thing. That's what I wanted. It worked out very well.

PC: That's terrific. I remember the windows. How did they get started?

AK: Well, I'd always painted like . . . see this painting here has windows in the back.

PC: Right.

AK: One day I just looked out the window and just decided I was going to paint a window. And it was like dealing with a person as an abstraction. So it became a window as an abstraction. The idea of the window, you see. And I painted like from the landscapes I'd paint the same minute. You know, at twelve-thirty I'd paint a picture. And what I'd do is paint small pictures. And when I made a clear image I'd paint a large one. I wanted to see how

long I could sustain it. I did it with the figure. Then I wanted to try one with the window. I did it for a whole year. Just painted windows. And they all ended up being different colors. It was a very interesting year.

PC: How do you mean when you got a clear image you'd do a large one?

AK: Well, you'd do one. Or if you do three or four of them sometimes the image would be clearer of what you're about. Or it would start out sort of like not clear.

PC: So they were -- what? Like studies? Or . . . ?

AK: Yes, studies. Right.

PC: But you don't do drawings or studies for the paintings usually, do you?

AK: No. Those come from life sketches. Still it's the same idea of life. But with these large flowers and large people I have to draw them on the canvas. And that takes a lot of time. The way I work now is very fluid. It's much more preparation than I used to have. I used to just take a six-by-eight canvas and paint it.

PC: I mean like that was very

AK: Direct. I just took it out in the field and painted it.

PC: Zap!

AK: Zap! And it worked out.

PC: But how about the roses then? Which are huge.

AK: Well, the roses I did a whole bunch of sketches and finally got an image that looked good and then carefully blew it up. It took about maybe a week to work up the drawing and very carefully mixed the colors and painted it. Zap! It was painted in the same way. The painting took longer but not that much longer. And I can control it much more.

PC: Do you make a lot of drawings?

AK: No. If I'm stuck or something, if I can't get it right, I'll go make some drawings. But I don't make drawings for the hell of it.

PC: They're really working drawings then?

AK: Yes. Working drawings. They're usually not much. Every so often I get something that looks a little like a drawing. But I think I drew so much at art school that I filled up a whole closetful of drawings.

PC: That was enough.

AK: One day I said, "I'm not going to draw any more. It just gets in the way of my painting." I just didn't draw again.

PC: That's interesting. You know, the whole thing breaks down into people who draw a lot, people who draw a little bit, and then there are people who drew and don't except once in a while.

AK: Yes. I like to have a very rigorous drawing background, you know, and found like a weakness in my painting. Well, they were kind of linear and held the line. So I got rid of my drawing for seven or eight years. You see, these things have a lot of drawing in them now. But it's all buried underneath the paint.

PC: Oh, I see. How would you start a large canvas like The Roses?

AK: Well, I'd make the sketches and try to get an image that I like. I'd very carefully enlarge it. And every line is questioned and moved and altered and stuff like that; it's done very slowly. And then when the drawing, the linear thing, looks pretty good, I mix up the colors, you know, like the colors are mixed and mixed into other colors. It's quite complicated. But it's done very slowly.

PC: I always think of your paintings as like you have to look to see some of the strokes.

AK: Well, the idea is a fluid surface. I can't stand laying a donkey leg on the canvas. It just drives me crazy to see labor exposed. I always try for an instantaneous

PC: Ease.

AK: Yes. Well, the whole image is supposed to come off real quickly. And I think my brushwork has gotten more contained for the image, you know.

PC: How many shows . . . ? You've had - what? A couple of shows at Fischbach, haven't you?

AK: I don't know how many shows I've had. I've had two in the new place and like four in the old place. I've had six shows with them.

PC: The paintings keep getting larger and larger.

AK: Yes. I'll get myself out of that place.

PC: What do you do with a canvas the size of that?

AK: Danged if I know. It's not my problem.

PC: That's how big?

AK: It's ten by twenty-two. But you couldn't decorate a synagogue with it.

PC: Have you done any other commissions like that? important commissions?

AK: That's not a commission.

PC: No, but I mean . . . I don't know why I said that.

AK: It's a little speculation.

PC: Have you done any commissions?

AK: I've done some portrait commissions. I manage to get one a year or so.

PC: Do you like them?

AK: Yes.

PC: Are they people you know? Or not?

AK: Generally it's someone I know casually.

PC: Have you done anybody cold?

AK: I did two kids cold.

PC: How did it work?

AK: It turned out to be pretty good. It was like a little hairy.

PC: But you like doing one very so often?

AK: Yes. My technique now is like . . . in the formal working my technique is quite proficient. So portrait like a likeness is absolutely no problem, you know. And the people commissioning them are happy -- they want it in my form. So it's generally no problem. I won't do it in like something like a new form. I'll do it in a form that I've worked out. You know, like it took about two years to work out the flower form. If I start on a figurative, say, where I'm doing something that I haven't done before, it might take that long to work out. It would be nuts to try to do a portrait.

PC: Yes. What would you say is your main interest or the central interest or idea that you're driving at or developing?

AK: Well, it's changed and altered over a period of time. I've been painting direct sensations. Now at this point they're quite indirect sensations. I guess it's an idea of, as I said before, what things look like, what a painting should look like. My means are what color is it, you know, it's like the means have to do with the proportion, the scale, or getting the right kind of color in the edges. But those are technical things really.

PC: But I mean have you developed a theory behind your paintings? Or not?

AK: Well, that's sort of the theory.

PC: But that's come after the pictures, hasn't it?

AK: No. It's that you sort of get forced out of things into other things.

PC: You do something and you change it?

AK: Well, you paint this kind of picture and you want to paint . . . it seems like why can't you paint a figurative picture that's as big as like a big abstract picture. Then it becomes like, well, if you paint it life-size, it's like little figures on a big canvas, you know. So I decided the hell with it; let's try something else. Like those old ones. At one point I said . . . well, basically the idea of the scale is Velasquez, the proportion of the figure to the outside perimeter. I say I don't want to do anything like that anymore. I'm tired of it. So you just like go on to something else.

PC: The one with the dancers is a whole new kind of thing going on.

AK: Yes. It's a whole other thing, sort of like

PC: front back

AK: Right. Well, you find a lot of pictures that are just sort of . . . you look at a lot of pictures that look real good and they're all using kind of like a flat impressionist space. So you wonder what the possibilities are of going into space with volumes.

PC: It's a reaction against that shallow . . . ?

AK: Yes. That kind of impression space. And it's a thing that occurs not only to me but also to other painters. And people do it in different ways. It's almost like a medical thing, you know, where there's a problem and a solution, you know. There are different people working toward a solution at the same time. That's like a part of what I'm involved in; it certainly isn't the whole thing. Part of it is a sort of biographical form too, you know.

PC: In what way?

AK: Well, I paint friends. So it's autobiographical. So it's a whole other thing.

PC: So it's like a diary or something?

AK: It's sort of a diary, I guess.

PC: Things that happened to people.

AK: Yes. To people five years apart, you know. Things like that.

PC: Do you have friends that you've painted two or three times over the years?

AK: Yes. Some of them go back ten years. Some go back five years.

PC: I mean you've painted them three or four times?

AK: Yes. I like to do them over again.

PC: That's interesting. Do they change a great deal?

AK: Well, they're always being painted in a different form, you know, so it always changes, and they change.

PC: That's very interesting. Are you interested in them on the psychological point of view? Or . . . ?

AK: Well, I think when you're dealing with people, you can't avoid a psychological thing. But the thing of appearances to me, what a thing appears to be, is like always a mystery and it's like a brand new situation. That's always been very exciting whether you can come up to this new situation and face it, you know?

PC: Yes. Even if it's something you know, it changes?

AK: Yes. Well, it's like you look at yourself in the mirror and you have to adapt to that new face you see.

PC: Every morning.

AK: Every morning, right. Or you can just forget about it and catch up with it every ten years. Or you can forget about it entirely.

PC: That's marvelous. What kind of projects do you have set for yourself? Or are you just working away?

AK: Well, no. I'm working on these cutouts. It's very sensitive the way I work. You have a project and work on it for a couple of years. These cutout things I started ten years ago. I decided to go into them again several years ago. They've opened up new areas and I'm just going into them.

PC: How do you do them? Do you make drawings and paint? Or do you paint them afterwards?

AK: The old ones were done . . . I painted them and cut them out. They were rough and ready. These things are drawn first. You've seen them?

PC: Yes. I saw

AK: And then I paint them afterwards, after they're cut out; they're cut out and the edges are finished.

PC: So you make a drawing first?

AK: Right on the metal.

PC: Oh, I see. And then you cut it out and then paint it?

AK: Yes.

PC: Is that going to be a group of people? Or what kind of . . . ?

AK: I'm going to show a bunch of stuff in Milwaukee in an illusionistic, figurative, environmental show more or less; I don't know what it's about. Anyway, I'll have a room and I'm going to show maybe a lot of old stuff and maybe a new table and maybe some of this stuff. I don't know how it'll work in.

PC: How did the idea of the table develop?

AK: Well, I did these little things. When I first thought of those things in reverse scale -- went down to about twelve inches small cutouts. And I wanted to show them and to put each one of them on a stand seemed absurd. And they looked real good sitting on the floor but you couldn't see the painting. So I figured where you could see the painting was four feet high. And four feet high they looked terrific. But when I saw them at that height -- I had been working on The Cocktail Party that's down there, the great big one -- I wanted to do an environmental piece out of that. The only idea I had was to cut them out and bring them into the room. And it was like a klutzy idea. But I was looking for something. And then about four or five months after that show it just went click! And I saw it. I saw that was the height. And that that was The Cocktail Party again.

PC: Right. How did that painting come about? The Cocktail Party?

AK: I wanted to paint a composition. Of course people don't paint compositions in the 20th Century much. And I wanted to use overlapping forms because people don't. And I had to use something that was part of my life. I mean I couldn't paint angels or people in Vietnam, stuff like that. So a cocktail party is a place where there are gestures, you know. And I did groups. It took about two or three years to get to it. The first was a dance group -- Paul Taylor. Then it was an outdoor group with Marie Burkhardt and Red Grooms and that crowd outdoors. Then I did an indoor cocktail party, you know. I compressed the figures and overlapped them and then I did the big one. The Lawn Party painting.

PC: The big painting is the next step?

AK: Yes. The big painting is the next step in that idea. You see, the flowers are an extension of that. They're all overlapping volumes. With everything you do, like The Cocktail Party, what I found was slightly weak about it was each face was very different and didn't have the fluidity.

PC: You mean the total . . . ?

AK: Fluid quality that I wanted. Now I saw The Lawn Party out west this summer. I don't apologize for that painting, you know. It's got terrific light. And it controls more than those paintings outdoor and indoor and it has terrific light. But the proportions are as developed as this and it has more stops in it. So I did the Flowers for a couple of years and got I think a little more proficient in doing an all-over kind of thing.

PC: How did they start, the Flowers? Because I remember . . . ?

AK: Well, I quit the Flowers for a long time. In the 1950's I did Flowers. And I quit them because you'd stick them in a vase and make an all-over pattern and that was it. I did a painting of flowers, a bunch of flowers and you

can see a farmhouse through the flowers; sort of about the worst idea you could think of. Just for the hell of it. It was a lousy painting that I threw away. Then the next summer I found it and I figured there was something there I wanted. And I did the flowers and closed the space down, just did the space around it like in these flowers which eventually I was able to blow up to about 32 x 48. And I figured I'm going to see what I can do with flowers. It took maybe about a year after that before I got the first pictures.

PC: It's interesting how one looks at things differently after a period of time.

AK: What do you mean?

PC: Well, you know, like the old paintings you picked out.

AK: Well, yes. Well, there was a reason for doing that painting; I knew that. And, you know, you should work out of your own work. Even out of your own bad pictures. Sometimes it doesn't do you any good to look at any good pictures.

PC: In what sense?

AK: Well, after you've done enough; after I've painted a figure for three or four years, you just want to do something else, try something else.

PC: Variety.

AK: Yes.

PC: Let's see, you've been in all kinds of museum shows and stuff like that. Have any of them been important to you or interested you particularly?

AK: The collage show at The Museum of Modern Art was the real big show for me. Because my work was put up with the best light it was the first time anybody took me seriously as a collage artist. It was a terrific break to get my work up on the same wall with the other guys. That was the biggest thing. And I think they always show just a couple of pictures of mine at the Whitney. They were a big deal for me, too.

PC: That was that "Young?"

AK: No, that wasn't. Later they bought one They didn't buy it; it was given to them. It was like a big helmet. They put that out last year. And there was one in the Annual, too. Those have been things that have meant something to me.

PC: It's interesting that sometimes a museum show more than a one-man show because it will do something.

AK: Well, it puts your pictures in another context.

PC: Yes. We have a few minutes left. Are there any things you think we should talk about that I haven't brought up?

AK: I can't think of any.

PC: We've been going on here for over two hours, I guess. But you liked doing Fragments -- right?

AK: It's a challenge. There was some guy from France who was doing publicity. He brought us together actually. He sort of like thought of it. John brought me this poem. And it was a fantastic challenge. The poem is like disconnected pieces and it has no narrative line.

PC: Oh, it's just these . . . ?

AK: Yes. It has like clashing images. So I decided . . . my idea was to make just a lot of images that just flashed. And then I didn't know in what style to do it because I don't make stuff like that. It took quite a while to work it out.

PC: How did you like working with the Black Sparrow people?

AK: Well, they're okay. The correspondence is all kind of very peculiar, or casual or something -- I don't know.

PC: That's interesting. They really make very nice books though.

AK: Yes. I think they're very serious about it. They did a good job on it. I like the type very much that they selected.

PC: Yes.

AK: Have you ever worked with them? You're a poet, aren't you?

PC: No, no. But I read a lot of poets. It's one of my great interests. Okay. Let's see, I don't think there's anything else. You haven't had any exhibitions in Europe or anything like that?

AK: Yes. Well, no, that one work has been there. The collage show was there in Spoleto. I've been in other shows there.

PC: How have you been received there? Do you know?

AK: I have no idea. I think they usually abide by intellectual programs and my stuff is like out in left field compared to the programs.

PC: It doesn't follow Okay. Well, let's stop.

END OF INTERVIEW

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