Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, 1968 January 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne on January 29, February 11, and February 16, 1968. The was conducted by Irving Sandler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2023 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution.

Interview

[00:00:03.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Okay, now I think I got it. Walk all the way back.

[00:00:09.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What I really need is complete freedom of movement.

[00:00:12.34]

IRVING SANDLER: Now you're there. Watch this. You're there. I'm talking here.

[00:00:15.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right, and that's very important because of the questions. The questions, I leave my class entirely open to questions.

[00:00:24.06]

IRVING SANDLER: Right.

[00:00:24.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And that would be part of everything that goes on, because I answer every question, and that becomes part of the course.

[00:00:32.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, the question is—let's see if—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:00:37.11]

This is the first tape with Rosalind. We'll use your painting name in the '30s as Bengels—

[00:00:43.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Bengelsdorf.

[00:00:44.52]

IRVING SANDLER: Bengelsdorf Browne.

[00:00:46.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Rosalind Bengelsdorf.

[00:00:46.71]

IRVING SANDLER: At her home. What's the day today?

[00:00:49.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Uh, today is—

[00:00:50.31]

IRVING SANDLER: It's January—

[00:00:51.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —January 29.

[00:00:53.07]

IRVING SANDLER: —29th, 1968. This is the side two—the first side of the tape. Now, you have quite a bit of material there from the '30s. Just before we get started, I wondered what the nature of the material was.

[00:01:11.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it's Abstract—American Abstract Artists material from the inception of our organization. I mean, from the time that it was—oh, I'm sorry. The time that it was—became a big group, you see, it actually started before. But from the time that we published, we had officers, and published brochures, and had exhibitions. I had material like that. I have the brochures we put out. I have some exhibition lists of our initial shows. I have correspondence in connection with it. And some of this archive material in here does not relate directly to the American Abstract Artists. It has to do with the Federal Art Projects too. Now—

[00:02:00.73]

IRVING SANDLER: Go ahead. I'm sorry.

[00:02:01.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, now the latest piece, of which I had forgotten entirely about, I received from Francis O'Connor—

[00:02:10.15]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:02:10.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —where he enclosed a Xerox copy of a letter to the editors of *Art Front*, signed by myself, George McNeil, Byron Browne, Jan Matulka, Hananiah Harari, Herzl Emanuel, Leo Lances, and I think—

[00:02:32.83]

IRVING SANDLER: When did that—when was that—

[00:02:34.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That letter was—

[00:02:35.10]

IRVING SANDLER: Was it published in the *Art Front*?

[00:02:36.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, it was published in the *Art Front*, Volume III, Number 7, October 1937. Do you want me to read it out loud?

[00:02:45.70]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:02:46.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It's a long letter. You don't mind? All right.

[Reading]: *To the editor—to the editors—we, the undersigned Abstract artists, received with enthusiasm the news that the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation to be devoted mainly to the enlightenment of the public in Abstract art, has been established. We believe that the establishment of a foundation to provide for the promotion and encouragement of art and education in art, in quote, and specifically abstract art, holds promise of far-reaching cultural progress and improvement of public aesthetic taste. There are certain statements, however, made by Baroness Hilla Rebay, who will serve as Curator of Mr. Guggenheim's collection, which we feel tend to confuse rather than clarify the issue of Abstract art in the minds of many. We wish it understood that with the works of art themselves and with the artists who created the works in Mr. Guggenheim's collection, we will not disagree. But we cannot accept with approbation the opinions which Baroness Rebay seems to have that Abstract art has,* in quotes, "*no meaning and represents nothing*", unquote*, that it is the* "*prophet of spiritual life,*" also in quotes, "*something unearthly,*" also in quotes, *that abstractions are, quote,* "*worlds of their own,*" unquote, *achieved as their creators,* in quote, "*turned away from contemplation of earth,*" unquote. *The meaning implied in these phrases is that abstract artists preclude from their works, and lives too, and then in parentheses, for after all, an artist must live some super-worldly existence in order to create super-worldly works of art,* unquote—I mean, un-parentheses, quote*. Worldly realities*—wait a minute. I lost it now—*and devote themselves to making spiritual squares and triangles, perhaps less spiritual, which will exalt certain few souls who have managed or can afford to put aside materialism,* in quotes. *We Abstract artists are, of course, first to recognize that any good work of art has its own justification, that it has the effect of bringing joyful ecstasy to a sensitive spectator, that there is such a thing as an aesthetic emotion, which is a particular emotion caused by a particular created harmony of lines, colors, and forms. But the forms may not be so ghostly* dash *pure* dash *spirit* dash *suspended as Baroness Rebay would wish. Who knows whether the divorce of cosmic atmosphere and earthly air is so absolute? Who can tell us into what reaches the intuitive soul of an artist must extend? Perhaps there are some spectators who behold and enjoy a square, more or less of fine color, and go away refreshed, but not frozen into a state of sublime, non-intellectuality that Baroness Rebay described. It is our very definite belief that Abstract art forms are not separated from life but, on the contrary, are great realities, manifestations of a search into the world about oneself, having bases in living actuality, made by artists who walk the earth, who see colors which are realities, squares which are realities, not some spiritual mystery, tactile surfaces, resistant materials, movement. The abstract work of an artist who is not conscious of or is contemptuous of the world about him is different from the abstract work of an artist who identifies himself with life, and seeks generative force from its realities. Einstein is as pure a scientist as can be found. His work is applicable perhaps to no immediate practical end. He deals with cosmic space and ideas. In face, he is an Abstractionist, yet his theories are realities. They are based upon certain life forms, and they help us to understand the world we live in. They are themselves a new form which we can enjoy just as Abstract art. His theories are not valuable to us as an aid in escaping into purity trances. They renew and extend our contact with life, just as the work of a Realist Abstractionist, which is based upon manifestations of life, and is itself a manifestation of life, can be seen, enjoyed, and used by the greatest number of people. Abstract art does not end in a private chapel. Its positive identification with life has brought*—Boy, this is redundant. *—its positive identification with life has brought a profound change in our environment and in our lives. The modern aesthetic has accompanied modern science in a quest for knowledge, and recognition of materials in a search for a logical combination of art and life. In no other age has art functioned so ubiquitously as in our own. One has only to observe the life about him to see that Abstract art has been enormously fecund, and remains a vitally organic reality of this age.* Now—

[00:08:29.15]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember who wrote that?

[00:08:29.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Huh?

[00:08:30.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember who actually wrote the text?

[00:08:32.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Don't remember it at all. But I tell you what I do remember. Well, obviously, we worked on it together. I don't know who actually wrote it. Maybe I did, I mean, or maybe I—but I don't think so. I think it was a group enterprise. I don't really know. I can't remember. But what I do remember is what promoted a kind of thing like this, what gave it birth.

[00:09:00.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:09:01.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The Artists Union was very antagonistic to abstract art. And a number of us, the Abstract Artists—the American Abstract Artists had already been formed.

[00:09:14.29]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:09:15.68]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And we were all on the Project—you know, many of us were on the Project. And we were—those of us who were union members you know, Artists Union members. And Social Realism, the—what do you call them? What's the word I'm looking for?

[00:09:34.79]

IRVING SANDLER: Social Realist, Social Protest.

[00:09:36.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Social Protest, Social Realist art—you know, the American scene painting. Proletarian art was the big thing then. And nobody—I mean, everything around was very hostile to Abstract art. So those members of the Artists Union, who were more courageous than others, gave lectures to the Artists Union on abstract art. And Balcomb Greene gave one. I gave one. And Arshile Gorky gave one.

[00:10:14.51]

IRVING SANDLER: He wasn't a member of the American Abstract Artists, though.

[00:10:17.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, he was not a member. He did not belong to anything, but he did belong to the Union.

[00:10:23.18]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:23.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He did belong to the Artists Union, I guess because he was on the project. But I remember he belonged to the Artists Committee of Action of the Union, too. But he gave a wonderful lecture. I gave the lecture in between Balcomb's and Gorky's, and mine was March 25th? Oh, darn it. March 20—I have it here. Want me to look for it?

[00:10:56.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you have any of the speeches?

[00:10:57.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. It's in my hand—it's not typed. It's not typed. It's just—oh, God. Wait a minute. [Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:11:10.57]

IRVING SANDLER: You say it's March 26th—

[00:11:13.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: March 25th.

[00:11:14.53]

IRVING SANDLER: 1936.

[00:11:15.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '36.

[00:11:16.14]

IRVING SANDLER: What was your general thesis in that talk, as you look through—

[00:11:20.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I called it "A Basic Approach to the New Realism in Art." I had called my article in the American Abstract Artists brochure, "The New Realism."

[00:11:30.01]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:11:30.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And it's rather similar to this—I mean, it can be related to this structuralism that I just read about in the *Times* just—

[00:11:42.67]

IRVING SANDLER: But Léger was the first to use—

[00:11:45.70]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it isn't actually anybody's first. It's a philosophy of life. And it's related to—can be to anything, not just art. Except that in art, it's through the medium of form and color and the two-dimensional surfaces based on it.

[00:12:01.78]

IRVING SANDLER: What was your basic ideas in that? Do you remember?

[00:12:05.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:12:06.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Good.

[00:12:06.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, of course. I've had them—in other words, it was the origin of a concept of art that I spent my whole life developing and broadening. Perception is a funny thing. Nobody ever has their fingertips on art. But the wonderful thing about having a basic kind of set of values, or a syntax, or a vocabulary in relation to it, is that it only grows and your perception grows. And you find that you like things you never liked as you enter it more deeply. Imagine I'll be learning all my life as far as that goes.

[00:12:55.28]

I remember when I was young, I only liked things I could see very clearly of the masters, like Piero Della Francesca. I mean, once you go back from Cubism, you know. But it took me about fifteen years to appreciate Rembrandt. Just lately, I've begun to appreciate Bruegel. I'm very retarded, you know? [Laughs.] But to see the language extend itself, your own perception has to move with it. But what is actually of interest to you is the fact that we all shared this perception. It was not exclusively mine. Well, let me not say "all" because there were a number of movements involved in the American Abstract Artists. There were the people who stemmed from Cubism.

[00:13:46.34]

And those people—I really believe that the hub of the American Abstract Artists started in Hofmann's class. And we were a small group of artists who studied with Hofmann. As a matter of fact, he gave us—he kind of gave us scholarships where we paid about $10 a month and worked there all the time. And George McNeil was there, and John Opper, and Zogbaum, and Mercedes Carles—Mercedes Matter, sorry.

[00:14:14.66]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:14:15.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Byron was there, and I was there, and John—did I say John Opper? And Albert Swinden, or was he out already? He was a little older than we were. He was a very good painter. But you see, Hofmann gave us this insight.

[00:14:36.59]

IRVING SANDLER: How would you characterize that insight?

[00:14:39.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was a concept of—well, I don't like to use pretentious expressions, but let's say it's the concept of space architecture. You always worked from nature. We always worked from nature. He taught us what Analytical Cubism was. We worked from a model, or we worked from a still life, and he made us understand immediately that the space around an object was as important as the object, and that Cubism wasn't only the business of exploding the object, but also that every bit of the space around the object moved with it and entered it. And it's a kind of business where when you go back from the surface of a two-dimensional surface, perspective would not beat plasticity because that is only one action in depth. You have to return to the surface. In other words, there can be no holes in the picture. Your eye never stops. It's a continuous action. In other words, it's the language of life in form, just like what happens to the atom, just like this isn't empty. It's just different composition, the air between us, I mean, than we are.

[00:15:53.36]

IRVING SANDLER: How did you get to Hofmann?

[00:15:55.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: How did I get—yes. Yes, I can do that. I got to Hofmann because I studied at the Art Students League. I started there when I was 12 years old with Anne Goldthwaite on Saturdays. And I went there for four years all the time that I was going through high school. I also studied at the league when I went at night as I got a little older. And nobody ever taught me anything there—the teachers—that I suppose that's not good to put on tape—except George Bridgman, who taught anatomy. And the way he taught it, he reduced the body to cubes and rectangles, so later it was very easy for me to make the transition.

[00:16:36.48]

But otherwise, I studied with John Steuart Curry and Raphael Soyer, who just painted over my pictures and they didn't open their mouths. So at that time, Hofmann came to the League. The last year that I was studying there, which was 1934, he came to teach at the League. Well, I dated—when I was about 16, and I dated Harry Holtzman for a while. And,

oh, I just thought he was marvelous. And he spouted these ideas in a very, very complicated way at first. But it sort of met with something I was feeling. I was developing a philosophy about life. See, the two didn't come together at once. I remember, as a matter of fact, when certain things happened that made them come together.

Like, my folks lived in the Barbizon Plaza Hotel at the time, and they had an apartment on the 26th floor, and there was a blizzard. Oh, I hate to jump around. There was a blizzard. And the air was so thick with snow as I looked downtown, that the shapes between the buildings became as solid as the shapes of the buildings. And suddenly, like a flash of insight, I began to see what the problems in the painting were. And this happened when I was about 17, 18, something—about, between 17 and 18. Anyway, Gorky, I also met there. You see, I had an environment in the League. Even though I didn't study with Hofmann when I was in the League, I had an environment of the people who were working with these ideas. Don't forget Jan Matulka had been teaching there before.

[00:18:24.70]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:18:26.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And then Hofmann came in and Diller, who sold art supplies in the art store down there, and Harry Holtzman, and Wilkinson, which was a—but I hadn't seen him for years. But we used to call them the Three Musketeers. They used to hang around together. And everybody spent more time in the cafeteria than you did anyplace else. And we'd talk, you know. And Gorky used to wander—although he was teaching at Grand Central Art School, he used to always be at the League, wandering around the halls and in the—and he once followed me down Seventh Avenue. I was frightened to death of him because he was a very big man. He wore a big beard at the time. And he looked very dark and ominous to me. I didn't know who he was. And he introduced himself to me. He said, [in deep voice] "My name is Gorky. He says, do you mind if I walk with you?" And he says, "My name is Gorky; that means 'bitterness.'" [Laughs.] I'm scared stiff.

[00:19:24.40]

But he was the very first one ever to take me to the Museum of Modern Art when it was in the old brownstone. And it was through him that I saw the Picasso "Green Still Life," which is really the first time when I was about 16, 16 and a half, that I saw, came face-to-face with the challenge of trying to really understand it. And I didn't understand head or tail. I didn't understand anything about it. And I very timidly pointed to a very beautiful Renoir nude with Titian hair and said, "I like that." And he thought that was all right, but I was challenged. And so the soil, you see, the—I was fortunate in my environment, even though I didn't get anything directly from the people—

[00:20:08.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Who were teaching.

[00:20:09.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —who were teaching me.

[00:20:09.95]

IRVING SANDLER: But the students, you did.

[00:20:11.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right. Well, they were all a little older than I am, and they were more developed.

[00:20:15.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, let me ask you one thing. You suggested, or you implied that Hofmann taught pretty much a straight Analytic Cubist approach.

[00:20:25.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, you see, there's—what people don't seem to realize, who haven't been deeply involved in it, is that there's nothing mechanical about it. It's pure poetry. There's nothing dogmatic. There are no rigid laws about it. But unless you say there, that everything is, as this scientist said—and I forget his name now. But this scientist said—

[00:20:51.59]

IRVING SANDLER: Levi Strauss.

[00:20:52.40]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, that everything—there are no accidents in nature. Well, there are no really accidents, but there's a difference between the fact that we know there are no accidents, and you don't plan it that way. I mean, in the sense of working by intuition, if you want to call that an accident, you can, you know? I mean, the fact that your intuition and your conscious mind work hand-in-hand, you're not separating and taking a knife, and slicing them apart. They're working together. And the degree of each, I guess, makes for the strength of a whole conception.

[00:21:29.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, was Hofmann at the time also—I know he was teaching, but—

[00:21:34.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He wasn't painting that we knew of.

[00:21:36.38]

IRVING SANDLER: When would you remember him starting?

[00:21:38.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't remember him starting. At that time, we used to see drawings of his. And he did this fabulous article for the Art Students League magazine.

[00:21:47.79]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:21:48.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: An essay, and—which I must still have someplace tucked away.

[00:21:54.39]

IRVING SANDLER: I have a copy of it.

[00:21:55.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And, well, he opened my eyes. But before I went to him, you see, I went to study with Annot [Von Menzel's daughter –Ed.]. Annot had been his student in Munich for about nine years.

[00:22:10.56]

IRVING SANDLER: That's a name I don't know. How do you spell that?

[00:22:12.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: A-N-N-O-T.

[00:22:13.80]

IRVING SANDLER: I haven't heard that name before.

[00:22:14.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She came here with her husband, who was a sculptor, Rudolf Jacobi. She opened up an art school. And she taught—not—she didn't teach as well as Hofmann. She didn't make her ideas as clear. But she taught really the same concepts. It wasn't as easy to get them from her as it was from Hofmann. So that when I started with her, that was my first real teacher. Real teacher. I'd had a lot of experience painting and drawing by that time, but it was my first conceptual teacher in art, the concept of art, the concept of a separate language of art. And then when I went to Hofmann, I went with a definite problem. He had started a school on 57th Street and Third Avenue. It was over a Liggett drug store building. And he had music playing. He loved Matisse, I remember.

[00:23:13.31]

IRVING SANDLER: He did love Matisse?

[00:23:14.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yeah, he was crazy about him then. I don't know what happened later.

[00:23:17.22]

IRVING SANDLER: He still remained.

[00:23:18.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yeah.

[00:23:19.06]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:23:19.19]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he's—

[00:23:19.92]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, go ahead, because I have other questions about him.

[00:23:22.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And some people had trouble understanding him because he had a very heavy accent. He used to say "plon" instead of "plane" and "nihil" all the time, you know, stuff like that. But my parents always had accents, so it never bothered me. But I always understood. But I went for a problem—with a problem. I created holes in my pictures. And he showed—he used to use arrows. The first thing he made that I remember that he made a tremendous point of was the fact that the planes must move and move in all directions. And he would make arrows, this way, this way, this way, this way.

[00:24:05.40]

And of course, the way I have developed it to hint to my students, it's as though everything converges into the center of a picture and explodes, and it's always this constant. But, of course, he didn't put it quite that way. And, oh, I loved him. I idolized him. And even Holty, who is kind of mad at him on a personal basis, said to me too, he says he opened our eyes. You see, it wasn't that he opened our eyes to abstract art. He opened our eyes to the whole of art, all the centuries of the past.

[00:24:41.31]

IRVING SANDLER: What was his specific attitude to abstract art? What did he have to say about men like Kandinsky or Mondrian?

[00:24:48.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't remember. I wouldn't want to quote him.

[00:24:52.29]

IRVING SANDLER: No, well, I assume then it wouldn't have been central to his—

[00:24:55.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I would assume that his relationship was to Mondrian, and not to Kandinsky. There's a tremendous difference. Kandinsky didn't know anything about the language he taught, and Mondrian was the complete extension of it.

[00:25:09.45]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:25:10.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Mondrian is in the tradition of plasticity. Kandinsky has nothing to do with it.

[00:25:14.79]

IRVING SANDLER: It's curious that when Hofmann does make his own—

[00:25:18.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:25:18.93]

IRVING SANDLER: —move in art, he moves, I guess, if anything towards Kandinsky.

[00:25:22.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, because his work is completely—he never makes a line float. When he makes a line, you have so many multiple areas involved with that line. I mean, a line is just a margin of planes. It's not floating by itself. It's a plane in itself, but each edge, you can't stop the action, you see? Oh. [Laughs.]

[00:25:44.06]

IRVING SANDLER: Go ahead, go ahead.

[00:25:45.51]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I have—this is what I teach. [Laughs.]

[00:25:49.30]

IRVING SANDLER: No, that's—

[00:25:49.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But I do it with drawing.

[00:25:51.01]

IRVING SANDLER: That's good. So in other words, you're suggesting that there was a kind of non-plastic quality in Kandinsky?

[00:26:00.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I'm saying that it's a different intention and different point of view in what he did, yes. It had no relationship with Picasso, or Braque's Analytical Cubism. It had no relationship to what they evolved from, which is everything from Greco-Roman portraits, anything I could mention that I could think of that—Titian, Rembrandt, Ingres.

[00:26:28.36]

IRVING SANDLER: You started to say, because this is interesting to me, that the tendencies within the AAA, this is going to lead—

[00:26:34.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We're divergent, yeah.

[00:26:35.35]

IRVING SANDLER: —right to that. We're divergent.

[00:26:36.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:26:36.88]

IRVING SANDLER: You said one of the tendencies was the Cubist one. Now, what would—

[00:26:40.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Which—well, the Cubist speaking—now, this is the group that came from Hofmann, see? Now, actually, I believe, as I think about it, that we were the little core, the little hard core that made for the American Abstract Artists, because the original charter members, the original, which first met in Ibram Lassaw's studio on Wooster Street, were Diller—Burgoyne Diller, Harry Holtzman, Balcomb and Peter Greene, George McNeil, us, of course—Byron and myself—Albert Swinden, he was one of the originals. I think now Cavallon, you see, now Cavallon was one of the Hofmann people too. Now, I can't remember his image being sitting at that meeting, but it might very well be that he was there, because he was part of that initial little hub. If I looked at the list, it might help me remember.

[00:28:04.02]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Please do.

[00:28:05.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Wait a minute.

[00:28:05.94]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the original members who met at Ibram's?

[00:28:09.30]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Then we had another meeting at my house, at my studio. Where the heck is that list, now? Oh, here it is. Let's see. Now, Harry Bowden studied with the Hofmann group, but I don't remember him at that original meeting. Let's see now. I'm just going down the list to see. Swinden. No. No, he wasn't there originally. Now just a minute. Now, Alice Mason might have been there originally because she was Ibram's girlfriend at the time. So she might have been there because she was—or maybe she came in later. I don't think she was there at the first—that's it, that's it.

[00:28:56.45]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, tell me one thing before—

[00:28:57.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now—

[00:28:58.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, go ahead. I'm sorry.

[00:29:00.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Then this group, our little group, we tried to get John Baur, who was down at the Whitney.

[00:29:07.58]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:29:08.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He came to my studio, which was 63 West—63 East 11th. And we all met there—to give us a show at the Brooklyn Museum, and he wouldn't turn us down at all.

[00:29:21.26]

IRVING SANDLER: What year was that?

[00:29:22.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was before '35.

[00:29:25.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh.

[00:29:25.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This was 30—no, wait '38. '36, it might have been.

[00:29:29.66]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:29:30.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '36.

[00:29:31.25]

IRVING SANDLER: But let me ask you one thing.

[00:29:32.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What is it? 30—'36.

[00:29:34.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Before we go into the actual organization of the AAA, most of the people who came out of Hofmann's school—and I want to also ask you at one point—

[00:29:44.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But the Greenes were not in Hofmann's. They were not.

[00:29:47.82]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:29:48.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The Greenes, and Ibram wasn't.

[00:29:49.86]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:29:50.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I want to talk about them separate, yeah.

[00:29:51.96]

IRVING SANDLER: No, the point I'm making is that most of the people who came out of Hofmann or Matulka were not in their teaching, oriented to abstract art. How does that shift

take place? How do you turn on to abstract art?

[00:30:12.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well—

[00:30:12.68]

IRVING SANDLER: And how does that group turn on? About half of the AAA studied at one point or another with Hofmann. I want to know how abstraction—

[00:30:21.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, you went to Hofmann because you were interested.

[00:30:24.33]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, but how was the leap from—

[00:30:27.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, well, because—

[00:30:28.98]

IRVING SANDLER: —working from nature to abstraction take place? Hofmann doesn't make it until later.

[00:30:36.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, we were concerned with Analytical Cubism and what they termed Synthetic Cubism, which came after the—

[00:30:45.54]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:30:45.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Actually, we were more concerned with that, than we were with the Analytical Cubism except that when we studied, we studied in the form of Analytical Cubism. But we were very much concerned with what had just happened abroad in the '20s. You see, the Analytical stage, which was in, what, '11, '12, '13, '14, when we were much—I wasn't even born then. I wasn't born until '16. And even the older ones were too young. But we were very much responsive to the impact of Picasso's still lifes and Braque's still lifes of the '20s.

[00:31:27.66]

IRVING SANDLER: But they too were—

[00:31:28.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Mondrian.

[00:31:30.03]

IRVING SANDLER: How does he enter?

[00:31:31.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Mondrian, you see, intrigued us. And everybody did some Mondrian. I did, everybody did. Because he was the "n-th" degree of how far you could carry plasticity [carry Cubism –Ed.], and he did, you see. The most beautiful thing—and that's another thing. You see there's such a tremendous difference between Albers and Mondrian, distinct different intention. Albers has no connection with this language at all. But Mondrian, there are no two lines the same width. There are no two rectangles the same size. I mean, all right, you can say that it's so prophylactic, it's gone beyond painting. But, still, on that

very limited scale, it's like Reinhardt was in the tradition of plasticity too. Because within this cruciform, and within these very close relationships in the black paintings, he had a great deal of space volume going on.

[00:32:30.12]

Well, Mondrian always had this tremendous, what Hofmann called "the push and pull," this tremendous—the multiple implications that went on, of every single bit of space. So it's true, it didn't go this way [making diagonal gestures –Ed.], and it didn't go this way, and it didn't curve around. But just on the limited problem, he set himself of just working with rectangles or squares—I don't think he used squares, as a matter of fact. But, all right, just working with rectangles, he got so much activity. It was almost like a weaving loom. I mean, you know? [Laughs.] No, really, I mean, why should it make—why should it have that depth? Why doesn't it just look like crisscross flat lines, you know? And so we were quite intrigued by Mondrian. And everybody tried to do Mondrians at one point.

[00:33:21.18]

IRVING SANDLER: Where did you see them? At the Gallatin Collection?

[00:33:23.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, they—it was down at NYU, the Gallery of Living Art down at New York University. And we used to live there, practically. And they had Picasso's "Three Musicians" down there, which was heavily painted.

[00:33:36.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, I see, I see.

[00:33:36.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, Picasso's—

[00:33:37.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Was it Picasso's?

[00:33:38.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: They have a "Three Musicians," different one.

[00:33:43.18]

IRVING SANDLER: I know, the one that's now in Philadelphia.

[00:33:44.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The one that's in Philadelphia.

[00:33:45.66]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, yes.

[00:33:46.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And very heavily painted with rippling, and full of cracks.

[00:33:49.69]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, yeah, I know that one.

[00:33:50.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Full of cracks, we worried about it. We were afraid it would peel off. [Laughs.] I was always sure that Byron would go over and take his fingernail and lift it, because he used to do that with my pictures. He used to drive me crazy. If they started to peel, he'd take his fingernail—[Laughs.] But, yeah.

[00:34:11.35]

IRVING SANDLER: Why did the AAA organize itself? Why did these artists—

[00:34:18.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Because we had no place to show. Nobody was interested in Abstract art. The only—well, that was later, as a matter of fact. At that time, I was going to say Rose Fried, but that was '43, '44. She had the Pinacotheca, yeah. At that time, there was no place to show. I mean, we were fighting. We were really—you can say that there were pioneers before us, but—and I know there were, but not in this sense. There was absolutely no—first, there was the Depression. And we really had to plead our cause all the way down the line. Nobody had any money. Of course, we had the WPA. If we didn't have the WPA, I don't know what would have happened to Abstract art, really, because I don't know how we would have lived. Nowadays, artists can get teaching jobs and live.

[00:35:14.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Was there much prejudice against modern artists, or abstract artists, under the—

[00:35:19.19]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Tremendous. Tremendous. Oh, on the WPA, I wouldn't know that, because Diller was my supervisor. [Laughs.]

[00:35:25.19]

IRVING SANDLER: I see. So you were on the Mural project?

[00:35:28.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I'll show you the sketch of the mural I did.

[00:35:32.93]

IRVING SANDLER: Gorky was on the Mural Project too, then?

[00:35:35.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Yes. I didn't start on the mural. I spent my first year on WPA on a teaching project, and then I was transferred to the mural, and I did a mural under Diller.

[00:35:46.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Then Diller was able to put abstract artists to work?

[00:35:52.40]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes. Well, as a matter of fact, on the Easel Project, they did abstract art.

[00:35:59.12]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, I've seen—oh, they did two.

[00:36:01.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I mean, those who painted abstractly painted what they painted.

[00:36:05.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Because there occasionally is a remark made that the abstract artists were discriminated against on the project by the Social Realists and the Regionalists.

[00:36:15.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's true. In allocation, absolutely. In allocation.

[00:36:22.31]

IRVING SANDLER: By allocation, you mean—

[00:36:24.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: To place the work.

[00:36:25.67]

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

[00:36:26.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: For instance, Byron did a big mosaic, which was not truly abstract. It was kind of, well, semi-abstracted, but it was figurative, but flat, and decorative, and sort of influenced by Byzantine art, and early cultures. And 20 years after Francis Knight dug it out of the warehouses and placed it in Rockefeller Center at the Passport Office and asked him to come and fix some of the mosaics, 20 years later, at that time—and that wasn't even purely abstract.

[00:37:11.90]

IRVING SANDLER: Hmm. But insofar as the ability to work on the project, either in Easel or, well, I guess Mural—you would have—Diller would have had to go out of his—

[00:37:25.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, sure, you worked. Oh, sure, you worked. It wasn't like Hitler Germany. Sure, you worked. It's just that in placing the work, they had difficulty very often.

[00:37:36.75]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:37:37.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was it. It was not a thing where artists were chosen on the basis of their quality. There was no evaluation involved with jobs, except if you were allocated a mural, it had to pass a jury. Here. [Crinkling sound.] It had to pass a jury if you were allocated a mural. But in your easel painting, you see—I was never on the easel project, but you just submitted the paintings you've done. Now, whether they were placed someplace or not, that might have been difficult.

[00:38:12.03]

Now, there weren't too many people doing what you call Neoplasticism on the project. They did have many of them, some remnant of an image to the extent that Gorky, and Stuart Davis, and even Bill de Kooning had. I mean, when—both he and Byron did murals for the World's Fair for the Hall of Medicine. And I think that Bill's was in the Hall of Pharmacy. They both had murals within a room of each other. And, well, you could see the remnants of pharmaceutical instruments, as far as I can remember. It's so many years. It was quite a beautiful mural. They both were beautiful. And at that time, Bill was working in this outgrowth of Cubism, too.

[00:39:07.23]

IRVING SANDLER: De Kooning?

[00:39:08.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I mean Bill de Kooning, yeah. Now, Bill was a very close friend. Now, he was very plastic. Without, to my knowledge—of course, he got a lot from Gorky. He was very close to Gorky, and so was the—Byron was very close to Gorky too. But we were very friendly at that time.

[00:39:27.16]

IRVING SANDLER: How does Graham fit into it?

[00:39:28.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Graham, at that time, used to run—he had, was handling a collection of African art—

[00:39:36.79]

IRVING SANDLER: Crowninshield.

[00:39:37.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —Crowninshield Collection. And eventually he set up some kind of a place on Greenwich Avenue where he displayed it. Now, Graham, he had—he wrote Byron's first catalog a glowing thing. Yeah, he was another very close friend. He was also—he was older. He didn't belong to our group, but we always saw him. He was always—we were always exchanging ideas. And he was very encouraging to this group. His paintings at that time were very good. I remember they were largely red—I used to see them occasionally. He didn't do a lot of work—red—that I saw—red, black, and white. And they were very solid, very solid in their conception. It was also an outgrowth of Cubism, you know.

[00:40:39.28]

IRVING SANDLER: Right.

[00:40:39.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But he had a little bit of—I wouldn't even call it Surrealism. He began to veer that way more, but at that time, he wasn't, no. I guess he just liked what they were doing. And he was a very erudite man. And he was very cultivated. And, of course, he had marvelous taste. I would call him more of a supporter than actually an artist himself.

[00:41:08.50]

IRVING SANDLER: Was he looked up to because of his—

[00:41:10.30]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, they liked him. Yes, because he was a sensitive person who believed in their ideas, and who did—when he did paint, he painted very well. I mean, they were according to the way we all felt. And so we liked him. He was one of the people that—

[00:41:27.34]

IRVING SANDLER: Did you ever read the book he wrote, *System and Dialectics*?

[00:41:31.30]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. No, I never did.

[00:41:33.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Was the book read when it came out?

[00:41:35.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I suppose so. I don't remember that.

[00:41:38.26]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:41:38.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't remember that.

[00:41:40.36]

IRVING SANDLER: I'm curious, before we go again into the organization, why weren't people like Gorky, or Davis, or, I guess, Graham, too, members of the AAA?

[00:41:53.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Davis was much older. We were a young group.

[00:42:00.44]

IRVING SANDLER: Was Gorky also considered somewhat older?

[00:42:02.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Gorky was older, not as much older as Stuart Davis. But not really our generation. But Gorky was not a group-belonger.

[00:42:13.40]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:42:13.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I mean— [laughs]. He was—he came to a meeting and walked out. Oh, that's right, he came to one of our first—the first or second meeting and walked out. I think he became annoyed about something, probably Holtzman. Don't let him hear me say that. [Laughs.] I really—I mean, I'm quite fond of him. It's just that he used to be so irritating. [Laughs.]

[00:42:36.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, you haven't been saying that [inaudible].

[00:42:39.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, he used to he used to act—he was a very bright boy at that time. He was very young. When I first met Harry, he was about 19. I was about 16 and a half. And he was quite bright and very talented. But you know, he stopped painting, and he went —that's when he met Mondrian. He went off to Europe.

[00:43:02.67]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:43:03.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And but while he was here at the time that the American Abstract Artists were formed—oh, Jesus, I'm forgetting the sequence. No, he formed—they formed that when he came, didn't he?

[00:43:18.09]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:43:18.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:43:19.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Because he was instrumental in the formation of it.

[00:43:22.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Harry?

[00:43:23.52]

IRVING SANDLER: Was he?

[00:43:24.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, sure, he was one of the first members. I'm trying to remember his trip to Europe.

[00:43:28.29]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, that—

[00:43:28.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Was it before?

[00:43:29.55]

IRVING SANDLER: Before.

[00:43:30.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, okay. He went off—that's right, he was so young then, of course. Anyway, he stopped painting. He seemed to have come to an impasse at that time, and he went off to Europe. And he wasn't doing Neoplasticism when before he went to Europe. It was also an outgrowth of Cubism. But anyway, he was Hofmann's monitor when Hofmann taught at the League. And then Hofmann instituted his Provincetown school, and he was the monitor there. And for Harry, "monitor" is being the teacher—[laughs]—anyway, in the beginning of the organization, he wanted to create a workshop. The whole idea was first not necessarily an exhibiting group. We came to that. But Harry had the idea that we all needed to learn from him. [Laughs.] I mean, it didn't come out right away. [Laughs.] But the idea was a seminar and workshop.

[00:44:31.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:44:32.19]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he started collecting money for it. And then I guess he had kind of an arrogant way. And once you got all these people involved, you know, he was sort of—but it was just his way at the time. He was young and he was a little arrogant.

[00:44:51.12]

IRVING SANDLER: You indicate, Rosalind, that the people who later constituted the AAA pretty much met on the project— [Cross talk.]

[00:45:00.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no, no. I'm saying that those of us who started it, I would say —I was thinking about it before you came here. How do we really start even to get to Ibram's? And I thought, well, when you stop to think of the group, except for the Greenes and for Ibram, then I started to think, how the heck did I meet Ibram? And because I knew Ibram before I knew Byron. And, I don't know. You see, Ibram stems from an entirely different attitude towards that. Now, he's close to the Kandinsky and all the other way of approaching Abstract art than the Hofmann way. So he did not come from the Hofmann group, neither did the Greenes. Now, I think if I remember, I met the Greenes through Ibram.

[00:45:56.03]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, he was close to Peter.

[00:45:58.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, we were all close. I mean, we used to go and spend a lot of time up there. They used to have a house—before they built the house in Montauk, they used to have a house out in, oh, it was near Beacon, New York. Hmm. I forgot the name of

that little place. They used to have a little house that was on her sister's property. And I don't think I should put any more of this on tape because—

[00:46:26.63]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, that's—You don't have to, but—

[00:46:28.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's personal. It has nothing to do with art.

[00:46:31.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Peter Greene is Lucy— my wife's aunt.

[00:46:35.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right.

[00:46:36.29]

IRVING SANDLER: So if you want to talk about that family, I know it— [Cross talk.]

[00:46:39.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right, you know it. You know it, so we don't have to discuss it, what went on. But there's some awfully funny anecdotes, but I don't think it for the tape. But I was trying to remember how I first met Ibram, and I think it had nothing to do with any ideological—you see, we're all members of the Union. I might have met him through the Union.

[00:47:01.36]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:47:02.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I might have met him through a girlfriend.

[00:47:05.78]

IRVING SANDLER: But the other—

[00:47:06.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But I didn't meet him through the Hofmann.

[00:47:08.15]

IRVING SANDLER: The other people, you met through the Hofmanns.

[00:47:09.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, we worked together. We were students together. And Harry, I met at the League.

[00:47:13.48]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:47:14.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Diller, I knew at the League, you see. And so the association stems way, way back, you see? Now, so where do you want me to go now?

[00:47:25.58]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, let's—

[00:47:26.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: [Laughs.] I'm getting all mixed up.

[00:47:29.27]

IRVING SANDLER: No. Well, let's work up to the meeting at Ibram's, and then into the meeting. Like, do you remember anything about how the meeting was called, and what might have come up at the meeting?

[00:47:43.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, we were always hanging around together, you know. And incidentally, as far as Bill goes, Bill didn't want to—we asked him to be part of the group. And he wasn't exhibiting then at that time. He had some kind of a business where he, as I remember it, he couldn't finish a painting or something at the time, at that time. But we used to meet him after the meetings. All the time—there was a cafeteria. And he went around with a tall fellow. Jeff? Janet? No. Oh, god. Do you know—there was a tall fellow that he always hung around with. I know his name. I'm trying to remember. He was always there too.

[00:48:34.62]

IRVING SANDLER: Painter?

[00:48:36.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know if he's a painter. I haven't heard of him for years.

[00:48:42.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Not Pantuhoff?

[00:48:44.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. Pantuhoff?

[00:48:45.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Pantuhoff.

[00:48:46.62]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Pantuhoff was Lee Krasner's first boyfriend.

[00:48:49.17]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:48:49.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We all went out together to—well, that was in 1938. We all went out together to Provincetown. I took Gorky. Byron and I, we weren't married yet, but we went out.

[00:49:00.93]

IRVING SANDLER: The tall fellow wasn't Denby?

[00:49:02.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no, no. Bob—oh. No, it wasn't Denby. He was—oh, God, I know his name as well as—well, maybe then I'll remember it in another session.

[00:49:14.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, yeah.

[00:49:14.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Jonas! Jonas. His name was [Robert –Ed.] Jonas.

[00:49:18.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Is that his first or his last name?

[00:49:19.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Last name. Jonas.

[00:49:21.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Is he still around?

[00:49:22.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Huh?

[00:49:22.54]

IRVING SANDLER: Is he still around?

[00:49:24.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know. I haven't seen him for a long time. Well, maybe. And I don't get around as many places as I should. [Laughs.]

[00:49:31.78]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:49:32.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But I haven't even been down to that 23rd Street club yet.

[00:49:38.44]

IRVING SANDLER: It's now moved—

[00:49:40.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: From 23rd?

[00:49:41.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, to above the Rosenthal Paint Store. But go ahead.

[00:49:46.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Anyway—

[00:49:46.81]

IRVING SANDLER: You tried to get Bill into the organization? You were saying.

[00:49:50.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, well, we had asked him.

[00:49:51.91]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:49:52.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, that was one of her boo-boos. She had him as part—Barbara Rose.

[00:49:57.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:49:58.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She had everybody all mixed up. The people who came in first, she had them coming in '38, and '39. The people who came in much later, she had in first. Like, John Ferren wasn't part of the original group.

[00:50:08.75]

IRVING SANDLER: No, he was still in Paris.

[00:50:10.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. And, oh, she had a bunch of errors there. But anyway, I'll tell you what I can't remember, and you might be able to get it from somebody else. I can't remember who got all those other people in. [Laughs.]

[00:50:30.98]

IRVING SANDLER: Like who?

[00:50:31.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Who are all these people? [Laughs.]

[00:50:33.47]

IRVING SANDLER: Who do you mean?

[00:50:35.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The first meeting.

[00:50:36.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:50:38.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I know that once we got Holty in, and once we got Vytlacil in, and he said to me that he didn't come to the second, but he came to the third meeting. Now, David Smith was a pal. Now, I don't remember him at the charter meeting, at the first meeting at Ibram's, but he was somebody that Byron hung around with and—oh, let's see. Who else was he a close friend of who was in the group? I don't remember right now.

[00:51:12.86]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, it sounds as if Byron—one of the groups that Byron hung around with would have been Gorky?

[00:51:21.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, Gorky was—Byron idolized him. They liked each other very much.

[00:51:27.08]

IRVING SANDLER: Including Graham?

[00:51:28.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well, when you say, "hung around," Graham was a much older man. They'd drop in and talk with him.

[00:51:34.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Right. Then Smith would have been, I guess, close?

[00:51:38.30]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Smith and Gorky hated each other.

[00:51:40.49]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, they did?

[00:51:41.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, they used to have fights. He would call Gorky an "Armenian rug peddler." And he'd call David Smith a "German sausage butcher."

[00:51:49.70]

IRVING SANDLER: Were they friendly fights or unfriendly?

[00:51:52.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know. I can't remember.

[00:51:54.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Then would Byron have also been close to Davis?

[00:52:00.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He knew Davis. Now, you see, at that time, the Cedar Tavern, the Cedar Bar, when we were young, this was the stronghold of Niles Spencer and Stuart Davis. And Byron knew Stuart Davis, but it was like an older generation.

[00:52:19.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, where did these young guys hang around? The Jumble?

[00:52:22.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, we went around all over. We tried to find the cheapest place. We didn't hang around the Cedar Bar. We did go there occasionally. We used to be more likely to go to a cafeteria. We met at a loft, and it was up in the teens, 17th Street or something like that. And there was a cafeteria between 14th and 15th Street.

[00:52:48.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:52:48.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We used to meet there for a while. Then Holty directed us to some kind of a bar on 13th Street called the Greasy Spoon, or something like that. And we used to have beer. And you know beer used to be about five cents? And we did go to the Cedar occasionally, but it wasn't like it developed for the Abstract Expressionist group, for the first club.

[00:53:12.86]

IRVING SANDLER: No, that came—

[00:53:13.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, that came later. Stuart Davis and Niles Spencer were heavy drinkers. See, we weren't a drinking crowd. Beer, yeah. Coffee, too. But I don't know if it was the fact that it was a Depression and we had no money, but we weren't drinkers.

[00:53:31.19]

IRVING SANDLER: How do we get to the first meeting, though?

[00:53:35.51]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, all I can say is that after we met in Ibram's, it wasn't very much time before the big meeting took place in one of the lofts.

[00:53:47.21]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, then at Ibram's, it was the small meeting? That was sort of the organizing—

[00:53:50.51]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was just the initial group. And then I told you, it followed with—I remember this incident very clearly of John Baur coming to my studio on 11th Street, and this small group was there. I remember George McNeil was there. And there was a group there, probably most of the same group that came to Ibram's. And after that, I guess somebody who—might have been George McNeil. You can ask him about that. Whoever it was that got Carl—because I didn't know Carl at that time. See, Carl had studied with Hofmann—

[00:54:30.16]

IRVING SANDLER: That's [Carl –Ed.] Holty?

[00:54:30.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:54:31.09]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:54:31.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Carl had studied with Hofmann in Munich. Now, I'm quite sure Ibram brought in the Greenes. The Greenes were at the initial meeting. I'm trying to distinguish this from the Hofmann group, if you know what I mean.

[00:54:46.48]

IRVING SANDLER: This?

[00:54:46.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Now, I know that Holty brought in—Holty brought in this group. He brought in, at least to the best of my knowledge—you can verify it with him. But my memory, as it serves me, that he brought in George L.K. Morris. He brought in Turnbull, who died, and George L.K. Morris, and Gallatin. And, of course, Gallatin and Morris were very generous to the group. They paid our rent. They did things. I mean, it wasn't that they supported—we had to pay so much a month, each member. It was a cooperative thing. Well, I remember vaguely that there—at meetings, some came up with about $200. I don't remember what it was for. You know who should have all this, is Harry. Doesn't he have all the minutes? [of the meetings –Ed.]

[00:55:50.14]

IRVING SANDLER: I'm going to call him on that.

[00:55:52.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know if he kept that stuff or not.

[00:55:54.81]

IRVING SANDLER: I don't know either, because I called him about a year ago, and he told me he had thrown out some material. I've always been close to Harry.

[00:56:02.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Is Swinden still alive?

[00:56:04.71]

IRVING SANDLER: No. But Harry would know, and I've been close to him. He was very kind to me, very generous when I first came on the arts scene.

[00:56:15.83]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:56:16.43]

IRVING SANDLER: And I've remained close to him ever since.

[00:56:18.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:56:20.33]

IRVING SANDLER: I mean, if I thought you were saying anything nasty—

[00:56:22.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, I'm not. No, he was a very brilliant guy. It was just that—

[00:56:27.26]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I'm kidding you.

[00:56:28.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. He was a very—I have nothing—I was in love with Harry, as a matter of fact. But as a kid, he was practically probably the first guy I fell in love with. But he was at that time, difficult, you know?

[00:56:44.69]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, sure.

[00:56:45.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Only because he wanted to proselytize, something he believed in very much. And he didn't have the gift at that time of being simple and direct.

[00:56:57.26]

IRVING SANDLER: And by "proselytize—"

[00:56:58.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was wordy, he was wordy.

[00:57:00.26]

IRVING SANDLER: Proselytize—would have been Mondrian?

[00:57:03.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No—uh—

[00:57:05.66]

IRVING SANDLER: Or that comes later?

[00:57:07.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was all of one thing. I mean, I don't think he had any different views than we did, at least than I did. He might have had different views from other people in the group. Now, there were distinct divisions in the group. There were abstract artists who what you would call Biomorphic artists.

[00:57:32.15]

IRVING SANDLER: And the big influence there would have been what? Arp and Miró?

[00:57:36.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Miró, Arp, and Kandinsky.

[00:57:40.58]

IRVING SANDLER: But there were very few people who were painting Kandinsky's later abstractions. Not the improvisations.

[00:57:51.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You mean the geometric ones?

[00:57:53.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. They would have been—

[00:57:55.89]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I'm trying to—wait, where is that list? That's what I have to remember. Well, of course there are—[paging through papers]. Now, at the time that—at the time that I remember, way back, he was a very talented guy. You can't tell from this. You can't tell from this. This man, he just—it's just a photogram. That doesn't mean anything.

[00:58:22.41]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, the Leo Lances?

[00:58:22.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But as a painter, he had gotten an old Gorky canvas that was already heavy with paint. And every year for the American Abstract Artists show, he would paint over it. He'd paint a new picture. And he was very talented. But then he painted out—he painted another picture, and then he dropped out of the scene completely. But, you see, Bolotowsky, who went into Neoplasticism, at that time—at that time, he didn't have the same approach as he developed later. You know? Now, you can see how Ibram was oriented very organically.

[00:59:14.96]

Balcomb Greene was sort of a cross. He had kind of an intuition, or let's say a grasp of the same kind of thing. He wasn't part of the Hofmann group, yet he fit more into it than he fit into the other group. But there was something that wasn't quite the same at that time. Maybe it was a little too commercial. I don't want to say. That's a bad thing to say. I don't mean that, but I meant that it wasn't quite—Carles was very talented.

[00:59:52.85]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:59:53.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She was very good. She was one I remember. I admired her work. She was one of Hofmann's really good students.

[01:00:01.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Did you know much about her father? Was her father well-known?

[01:00:03.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Arthur B. Carles?

[01:00:04.23]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[01:00:04.68]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, he was well-known.

[01:00:06.07]

IRVING SANDLER: He was well-known in New York?

[01:00:07.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:00:08.28]

IRVING SANDLER: Did he have any influence?

[01:00:10.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, but no—abstract artists didn't have influence.

[01:00:13.86]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I mean not abstract artists. On, say, members of the American Abstract Artists.

[01:00:20.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, no. Not to my knowledge, no. As a matter of fact, I didn't become aware of him, really, until I knew Mercedes Carles.

[01:00:32.73]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[01:00:33.62]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Glarner. You see, now, Glarner became a very, very plastic painter. I mean, when you look at his—the work he's done, they're marvelous outgrowths of the Mondrian of Neoplasticism. But this doesn't have as much—

[01:00:51.17]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[01:00:51.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —insight or intuition as the later development. So this was not, let's say, in our group. Even though we didn't all paint like Mondrian, we weren't using straight lines. We had the same thinking. George McNeil may never have painted like Mondrian, but he had the same thinking—

[01:01:17.63]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, did you—

[01:01:18.51]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —which was different from this thinking (still talking about early Glarner –Ed.]. Now Glarner thinks the way we were thinking—we were always thinking way back then.

[01:01:28.19]

IRVING SANDLER: Then the big word was "plasticity."

[01:01:30.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right.

[01:01:30.99]

IRVING SANDLER: And by that, you really meant a sense of volume?

[01:01:34.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[01:01:35.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Forms had to be—

[01:01:36.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And constantly moving.

[01:01:37.47]

IRVING SANDLER: —heavy, and constantly moving.

[01:01:39.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[01:01:39.18]

IRVING SANDLER: What about Miró? Did you consider he had that?

[01:01:41.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Depends on which Miró you're talking about. Some Mirós are great. I remember at the time, we liked Hélion very much because during that particular period, Hélion was doing some very good things.

[01:01:54.52]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[01:01:55.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Later, he didn't. But at that time, he did some quite beautiful things. I think the Gallery of Living Art had one that I remember.

[01:02:05.45]

IRVING SANDLER: I have one in my office, which is just smashing.

[01:02:08.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: A beautiful thing. But later, it sort of dissipated.

[01:02:11.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Tell me a little bit more about Hélion. Was it on the basis of his painting? Because he was here quite a bit, too.

[01:02:15.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, I think he was invited to be a guest at one of the shows.

[01:02:18.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:02:19.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Xceron too.

[01:02:21.60]

IRVING SANDLER: He also lectured and talked?

[01:02:23.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I never—I think I met him. I think I met him, but I don't remember it very well.

[01:02:29.07]

IRVING SANDLER: What about Léger?

[01:02:30.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Léger—both Bill and Byron assisted Léger on a mural for the French dock.

[01:02:38.25]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[01:02:38.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know what happened.

[01:02:40.90]

IRVING SANDLER: It lasted a couple of weeks.

[01:02:42.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember the sketches and all that.

[01:02:43.92]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[01:02:44.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You know. But they both worked with him. I met him. But he didn't talk English, and my French wasn't too good. And we also met Miró here, but that was later. That was in the '40s.

[01:02:59.87]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[01:03:00.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And, no, I used to like Miró very much. As a matter of fact, I still do like the great Miró paintings. I don't like everything Miró does.

[01:03:09.72]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I was just wondering because you said that Mondrian was very much admired, and yet—

[01:03:16.56]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, now wait a minute. Now, wait a minute. Let me make clear that there's a lot of people in this group. I started with our little core, our nucleus—

[01:03:25.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:03:26.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —from that vantage point, talking from that vantage point. But if you stop to think of all these 44 people that are listed here, there were all kinds of grays, all kinds of valuations in—but we banded together for the purpose of showing. And we used to have terrible fights. Because within the group, we had elected officers, and we elected an exhibition committee—that's what I served on. I was chairman of that at one time. But we also had membership committees—who would be admitted. And I remember we turned down—we didn't. We fought for the acceptance.

[01:04:15.03]

Now, this wasn't on a basis that we thought she was such a wonderful painter or she wasn't a wonderful painter. This was just because the certain members of the group thought if it had any figurative content at all, she didn't belong in the American—a person didn't belong, and we said that was being too rigid, because—and I remember we had a fight about it because the picture she submitted for entrance—

[01:04:41.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Who was this?

[01:04:42.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Rice Pereira.

[01:04:42.86]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[01:04:43.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The picture she submitted for entrance had remnants of tugboats, steamboats, with pipes [laughs] or something. And on that basis, you wouldn't admit Léger; you wouldn't admit—except for the few beautiful—

[01:04:57.95]

IRVING SANDLER: Were there other people that you remember who tried to get in, but who were turned down because of this Figurative Abstract hassle?

[01:05:05.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, they weren't. She wasn't turned down.

[01:05:08.03]

IRVING SANDLER: No, she was—

[01:05:08.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, she was accepted.

[01:05:10.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Because I had heard in other places that this was one of the real controversies within the organization.

[01:05:14.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, we had groups there where we would divide on that. Now, I want to—I don't remember who fought for what. Oh, I'm failing you, huh?

[01:05:25.28]

IRVING SANDLER: No, not at all. This is absolutely marvelous, Rosalind.

[01:05:29.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You see, I don't remember everything.

[01:05:32.05]

IRVING SANDLER: But that was one of the issues?

[01:05:33.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: See, this kind of stuff isn't down in writing. [Laughs.]

[01:05:36.49]

IRVING SANDLER: No. But that was one of the issues?

[01:05:38.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes. We used to have fights about—it's funny, we didn't fight. We had a great deal of respect for each other's sensibilities, in the sense that we maintained—For a group of artists, it was remarkable, because artists usually can never keep an organization, because they're always fighting about aesthetics.

[01:05:58.87]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[01:06:00.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But in the aesthetic area, we didn't tread on each other's toes. I remember there was a man by the name of—oh, that's—

[END OF TRACK AAA_bengel68_8380_m]

[00:00:05.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That one thing—but I don't want it to go—I really shouldn't have said that for the Archives.

[00:00:09.82]

IRVING SANDLER: No, you said nothing. [Recorder stops; restarts.] All right, it's working. But you were talking about—

[00:00:15.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Oh, now, what was I going to—oh, I was going to say that one thing you have to remember is that we were very ardent young people. We were like—we felt as though we had to fight a battle. We were so—we lived it so much. Oh, the philosophy was so important to us. We weren't at all cynical. It wasn't a cynical age. Even though it was the Depression, we were all fighting to accomplish something. And we believed that Abstract art was going to improve or contribute something to man's ability to enjoy life more fully. We had nothing to gain. There was no money. There was no prestige. There were no museums interested.

[00:01:30.76]

IRVING SANDLER: You're suggesting that your interest in abstract art had a social dedication to it?

[00:01:37.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, everything was social then, because it was so—everybody was suffering so much for the lack of money. I mean, there were those artists who were concerned with the—well, I guess everybody was, to some extent, with—it's not exactly politics, but the world situation, you know?

[00:02:02.65]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:02:03.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And we were all a little pink for that reason, you know?

[00:02:06.42]

IRVING SANDLER: But why not Social Realist? Why not propagandistic?

[00:02:13.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, well, because you see, everything was so alive, the ideas of science, you know? At that time in '34, they had the World's Fair in Chicago with the Hall of Science, with Einstein's "Theory of the Fourth Dimension" being shown. Everything was alive. All these ideas were crackling. And we were responding to them and to what was happening abroad in painting. Now, some of these artists who were older than I had started this. I mean, Gorky had started it. Byron had started it in '30, you know? And de Kooning might have, too, because he's Byron's age exactly, you see.

[00:02:56.73]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:02:56.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And I mean, all these people were responding. They were sensitive people, alive to everything that was happening—all the transitions of their generation.

[00:03:06.49]

IRVING SANDLER: And Social Realism would have struck them in what way?

[00:03:10.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it wasn't that it was Social Realism. It was that it was dead, murky, muddy painting. It wasn't that so much but it was that there was—this was, first of all, an art form, an art form that expressed the philosophy of their time. Abstract art, Cubism, for us—let's say what Kandinsky was doing for others. Whatever it was, whatever avenue they took to express form purely, they were responding to discoveries of atomic energy. They were responding to Einstein's Theories of Relativity, his theories about the fourth dimension. They were responding to everything happening all over the world, because they were sensitive to all these things.

[00:04:03.64]

And the social situation helped them, in this sense, that if they hadn't been supported by the WPA, they might have been shattered by some miserable job where they couldn't paint, and they couldn't think, and they wouldn't have time to sit around in groups and argue, and discuss these philosophies for ten hours, you know? [Laughs.] And we had all that. We had all that. We'd sit around, drink coffee for hours, and talk about all these things. We talked art. There was no art market. There was no "in" establishment. If you want to call the fact that Social Realism had the prestige at the time, still, it wasn't a money-making thing, either. Nobody made much money. And only a few artists survived at all, I mean. But everybody was on a WPA because nobody ate. Nobody could do anything. Now, Gorky was an unusual man. Gee, I thought he was remarkable. I thought the world of Gorky. I thought the world of that man. There are very few people that I met that knew so much about art as Gorky.

[00:05:29.50]

IRVING SANDLER: Was he put down at all?

[00:05:30.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he was terribly put down. As a matter of fact, I was angry after he died when everybody suddenly made a god out of him, because when he was alive, he was not the most tactful man on Earth, you know? And whoever he was with, he would take issue with. Now for instance, if you were Jewish, he'd be anti-Semitic. If you were anti-Semitic, he'd be pro-Jewish. You know, he'd do this just for fun. But he was very—he never cracked a smile. Now, this man was very pure about art, very serious. And yet, he was a real villain. I mean, he was very theatrical in certain ways. And he was charming. But he could tear you to ribbons. He would have a habit of going to an exhibition where the artist was there, and talking very loud about how lousy the work was or something, you know? [Laughs.]

[00:06:31.75]

But you know, I sort of didn't care. I mentioned that incident where Lee Krasner and Igor Pantuhoff, who she was living with at that time, went with us—well, they didn't go with us [we met them in Provincetown –Ed.]. We met—we went—Gorky, Byron, and I went to Provincetown for the first time. We went there for two weeks. And of course, I felt sorry for Gorky. He sat in the park, in Washington Square Park, looking lonely. You know, nobody could look lonelier than Gorky with a little yarmulke on his head, you know, a little—these woolen hats he used to wear.

[00:07:06.64]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:07:07.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he looked very miserable. And I felt so he should come to Provincetown with us. [Laughs.] And he was responsible for Byron and I having a big fight. And he went home with Byron. [Laughs.] And I went home with another friend.

[00:07:20.12]

IRVING SANDLER: When was this, in '37?

[00:07:21.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '38.

[00:07:22.28]

IRVING SANDLER: '38?

[00:07:22.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think '38. Yeah.

[00:07:23.69]

IRVING SANDLER: When he was up there, he also got into an argument with Hofmann, I heard, at a speech.

[00:07:29.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Probably. I don't know. [Laughs.]

[00:07:31.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Yes, but do you remember, while we're on Gorky—you said that you, Gorky, and Balcomb Greene gave talks.

[00:07:42.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:07:42.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, you remember what the thrust of Gorky's talk was?

[00:07:46.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Gorky spoke entirely about plasticity. And one thing I remember is that he used the drawing of an apple cut in half. He cut an apple in half—something. And he spoke about the shape. I can't remember what he said, I'm sorry. But it was a marvelous talk and very clear.

[00:08:10.67]

IRVING SANDLER: Where were these talks?

[00:08:12.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Held in the Artists Union Hall. I think it was someplace around Sixth Avenue, near Eighth Street.

[00:08:19.40]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And do you remember anything about Greene's talk?

[00:08:24.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: [Clears throat]

[00:08:27.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Because this is the first time I've heard of these talks.

[00:08:29.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is going on archive. Now, Greene always was a little bit obscure to me, when he talked. So—but it didn't matter in the long-run, because we all had to hang together. We were very good friends.

[00:08:49.31]

IRVING SANDLER: One more thing—that thing you read at the very beginning of the talk, that was printed in *Art Front*, which—

[00:08:55.58]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, that was a defense. Yeah, that was a defense to Artists Union and their magazine for abstract art, because—oh, I must tell you also what that was connected with. When Baroness Hilla Rebay came to this country, we—the artists, American Abstract Artists—gave her a reception. And it was held in—Ian Woodner, who at that time called himself Ian Silverman—Beverly Silverman, her brother. It was held in his place on 67th Street. And in return for our graciousness and our hospitality, she sat there like a queen, real nasty, and she told us all that young artists should get up at six in the morning and paint 'til nine [a.m.] and get jobs and work for the rest of the day. [Laughs.] We all hated her.

[00:10:02.41]

IRVING SANDLER: But did—but was—

[00:10:04.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She was so ungracious.

[00:10:06.00]

IRVING SANDLER: But were works of the Americans—they weren't shown at the Whitney. Did she show them at the time? Well, they didn't have a museum, then. It was just—

[00:10:16.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You're going to have to get information about her. And she hired

a lot of artists as guards—

[00:10:24.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:10:24.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —from someone else, because I wouldn't go near the place. I hated her. I was emotional then. [Laughs.]

[00:10:30.92]

IRVING SANDLER: Was Graham her secretary?

[00:10:34.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: John Graham? Not that I know of, but then I may not know.

[00:10:38.27]

IRVING SANDLER: I'll check that out. Rose Fried would know it.

[00:10:41.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, she might know. Now, Rose Fried took on Byron in '43. But that was a little later. But she was one of the early galleries that showed the—and the Artists Gallery, of course, the Artists Gallery. Hugh Stix.

[00:10:58.58]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, I think—

[00:10:59.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Theodora Frederica Beer. I think that was her name, right?

[00:11:04.10]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:11:05.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But there were so few places. Now, we did have a show at the Museum of Modern Art. Not we, as a group—what happened there? I don't know. We were invited to something. I don't remember. I better not talk about that.

[00:11:28.71]

IRVING SANDLER: I don't know—

[00:11:29.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Wait a minute. There's something. Let me look in this material. Turn off the tape. [Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:11:35.04]

IRVING SANDLER: We're going back now.

[00:11:37.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What do you want me to go back to?

[00:11:39.11]

IRVING SANDLER: To the Whitney and their Annuals.

[00:11:40.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, the Whitney and their Annuals. Those artists that they selected to show, you know—I mean, they didn't—they would show Abstract art as time went on. It wasn't in the—now, they always showed Byron under Herman Moore. Until Herman Moore left, they showed Byron every year. So in the beginning—so whatever he did. But I remember that as the time went on, from '34 to '44, let's say, the rooms of the Abstract Artists would grow bigger and bigger. But of course, they never would include our group as a whole, or anything. But they would have more and more representatives of abstract art every year, when they were on Eighth Street, you know?

[00:12:29.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:12:30.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Herman Moore was a very tolerant man, as I remember. Now ask me questions, because—yeah.

[00:12:44.96]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, before we go through this material, I did have some questions I wanted to ask you, just concerning what we've already discussed. What would you assess the contribution of Hofmann at this time, Rosalind? I mean his school.

[00:13:10.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think Hofmann was one of the most important forces that ever hit American art. And I don't—I won't qualify that in any way. To use Hilton Kramer's word, he's "unexceptionable." [Laughs.]

[00:13:35.41]

IRVING SANDLER: What—but when we think in terms of the Americans who studied with him, and also who spread his reputation out—

[00:13:43.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I don't think everybody got as much out of him as the early people.

[00:13:47.96]

IRVING SANDLER: What specifically would you say it was that he—

[00:13:52.89]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He had more time, and fewer students.

[00:13:56.08]

IRVING SANDLER: That's part of it.

[00:13:56.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was younger.

[00:13:58.46]

IRVING SANDLER: How—

[00:13:58.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. He had fewer students. He began to get mobs later. How could he teach in the same way?

[00:14:03.67]

IRVING SANDLER: That's true. No, I'm not talking about the changes in his teaching. But

what in his teaching, or from the school, or from the atmosphere of the school—

[00:14:12.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He had the heart of every artist. You couldn't help but respond to a real language of painting. Now, it happened that abstract art expressed our time. But what he gave us was more than our time. He gave us the language of art, period. And he made it so clear. How many teachers can do that? He combined our time with the timeless language. Now, can you think of a greater achievement of a teacher to make than that?

[00:14:43.25]

IRVING SANDLER: Was it as much his teaching? Was there something about the atmosphere of the school, or—

[00:14:48.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, the fact that the students—well, I can only talk about when I was there.

[00:14:52.82]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:14:53.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And when I was there, I was very lucky. I must say, I've been a very fortunate girl, because the people that were working there when I was there were extremely receptive—most of them. And in other words, he became—he was a catalyst for what they might have reached anyhow on their own, because they were all artists on their own level. What I meant was that they were all young, and they were all learning, but they all had it within them to arrive at this eventually. But Hofmann gave it a big push. [Laughs.] You know?

[00:15:32.70]

IRVING SANDLER: This raises another question in my mind, because the whole orientation of the American Abstract Artists—was the geometric abstraction in one form or another—

[00:15:45.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no. We had just as many members. I started to tell you when that other tape ran out that we had a member by the name of Paul Kelpe.

[00:15:54.62]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah

[00:15:55.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Paul Kelpe painted like William Harnett would have painted violins, or an artist's postcard rack. He painted little cubes floating in space.

[00:16:09.83]

IRVING SANDLER: But they still would have been very cleanly—

[00:16:13.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, but there was a realistic—I mean, he wasn't using space. He was putting cubes like an illustration. He was illustrating little cubes in space.

[00:16:24.32]

IRVING SANDLER: No, but what I—

[00:16:25.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He wasn't involving the space into the cube.

[00:16:28.07]

IRVING SANDLER: Right. But when I look through that catalog, it would seem to me that the whole orientation of the organization was to geometric abstraction. For instance, there was no free form that would have become identified.

[00:16:42.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Sure. Lassaw did free form.

[00:16:44.15]

IRVING SANDLER: But not—but that would have been more Miró-esque rather than—

[00:16:47.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:16:48.25]

IRVING SANDLER: —what later became—

[00:16:49.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it wasn't Abstract Expressionism. No, no.

[00:16:51.56]

IRVING SANDLER: No, Abstract Surrealism.

[00:16:54.62]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Abstract Surrealism? No. It was not—it was not—

[00:16:59.54]

IRVING SANDLER: In other words, it was a fairly—

[00:17:00.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I'm trying to remember if there were any Surrealists. No, at that time—don't forget—

[00:17:05.30]

IRVING SANDLER: The only one who tended on this was somebody called "Lytle."

[00:17:11.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Agnes? No, she was a Hofmann student. And she was just like Mercedes Carles, more emotional. She had the same concept. It's like Hofmann's later paintings became.

[00:17:23.33]

IRVING SANDLER: But the question I'm asking—

[00:17:24.83]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Agnes Lyall.

[00:17:26.02]

IRVING SANDLER: Lyall! Lyall.

[00:17:27.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Agnes Lyall. Yes, she was a blonde girl, very sweet and gentle. And she did what I would call—she sort of anticipated Abstract Expressionism.

[00:17:39.83]

IRVING SANDLER: I know.

[00:17:40.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. But she was a Hofmann student. And she—yeah.

[00:17:44.39]

IRVING SANDLER: The point I'm still asking—

[00:17:45.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She was just a little more Expressionist.

[00:17:47.63]

IRVING SANDLER: —is, what was it about the time? Was it because of looking over to Paris?

[00:17:53.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Cavallon was more, too—what?

[00:17:55.68]

IRVING SANDLER: What was it about the time that—

[00:17:57.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was Paris. I tell you what used to send us, was Christian Zervos, and *Cahiers d'Art*, the *Verve* magazines. Everything that came out—it was, no. The Surrealist movement came later in the '40s with Peggy Guggenheim.

[00:18:17.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, there was the large, large Surrealist show in '37 at—

[00:18:22.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, but that didn't hit a group at that time. I'm talking about the impact on a group of Americans.

[00:18:29.87]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:18:30.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: With Peggy Guggenheim's "Art of This Century," you had a whole group of Americans tied there, were André Breton came over. And that had a big impact.

[00:18:39.90]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:18:40.19]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, Gorky was involved with Miró. He was involved—and you asked me if people were cruel to him. They were extremely cruel. You know, that article on fakes, frauds, and forgeries, which Hilton Kramer wrote, where he said he has much more sympathy for the forger because it takes a certain amount of perception and ability to do it, than all these people who say, "[gasps]," who would never even cross the street to look at a real work of art? You know, I mean, that was really a masterpiece.

[00:19:15.71]

Well, anyway, Gorky had such perception when he was very much influenced by Picasso, or when he was very much influenced by somebody, that he said as much as they were saying. It wasn't a copy, you see? It takes perception. Just to copy something, you don't get the plasticity. He got the plasticity, and it didn't even matter, because he was working toward a style. And originality counts for something, I suppose, today. But the most important thing is that it works as a picture. I mean, that it's important as a picture.

[00:19:56.09]

I mean, look, there are so many centuries of Greek art. Nobody knows who did the goddamn thing. And who cares? I mean, and a thousand years from now, maybe nobody will know either. Maybe some disaster will happen where all the names are wiped out. But who cares? It's what stands by itself. So they used to be very cruel to him. And he used to get very close to Picasso, very close to Miró, and later, very close to Matta. But then he evolved his way. And I always felt there was a lot—You know where he had—was very personal at that time? Even then, he was very personal. I have lots of cigarettes, so don't worry about it. He was very personal in his drawings. He used to make these marvelous big drawings. And he showed in some gallery on Madison Avenue on the second floor that had some French name that I forgot.

[00:20:49.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Vigneau?

[00:20:50.49]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Huh?

[00:20:51.27]

IRVING SANDLER: Is that Vigneau?

[00:20:52.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, I don't think. Maybe. Don't—I don't know. I'm not going to say. But he had this big—he had a lot of crosshatching, and bone forms. And they were so magnificent. Now, they were completely Gorky. He might have gotten the original idea from Miró, but they didn't look at all like Miró, you know. And he was working his way. He only died in his 40s, you know?

[00:21:20.22]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right, 44.

[00:21:22.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was a hard age of transition. Don't forget we had these tremendous masters working there. And we were—and you had the dead end of Mondrian, really. I mean, that's what happened. Why did you get Abstract Expressionism? Because you had to have a reaction against Neoplasticism.

[00:21:40.38]

IRVING SANDLER: That's the question that I started on before. What was it, as you see it, that so interested artists in—well, you used the word Neoplasticism. I broadened it a little to —

[00:21:52.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Purism?

[00:21:53.55]

IRVING SANDLER: —the more—well, I just called it "geometric art." What was there—

[00:21:57.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We have some.

[00:21:58.77]

IRVING SANDLER: —in the '30s. Yeah, but that, again, is still that very precise form. And it's Miró-esque.

[00:22:04.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It's hard edge.

[00:22:05.79]

IRVING SANDLER: Let's take the hard edge form. What was there about the hard edge form, the clean, flat—

[00:22:11.49]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Because they were trying to clarify their ideas. And you can't clarify—I told you it took me fifteen years to appreciate Rembrandt. I told you the first people I appreciated of the past, after understanding what Hofmann was saying, was Piero della Francesca, because it was clean. I could follow it. It's much harder to follow it into Romanticism. And it isn't that there isn't poetry in hard edge. Look at Vermeer. I mean, there's tremendous poetry. It's just that it's so much easier to see. And whereas Turner and Rembrandt and people like that—it takes a developed sensibility. We were young. We were groundbreakers. We were trying to make the idea work for us. And that's why—and let me tell you that not all the Abstract Expressionists were de Kooning's.

[00:23:15.45]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, no.

[00:23:16.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I mean, de Kooning understood it.

[00:23:18.54]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:23:19.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And when he did it, he did it with this understanding. But not everybody in that movement—I mean, a lot of them, you know, they were just having fun splashing around. And so that—but it's very hard to follow it through. You don't contrive anything. Each age, you mustn't—well, you mustn't. There are no "mustn'ts" in the world. But it isn't natural in genuine art for a genuine artist that he contrives anything. It happens because of a time and an evolution that he must release. It's like Delacroix and Gross and all these people, Prud'hon and all those people followed Neoclassicism, and David and all these. And you have, always through history, this—you must, you see? And it comes to a point where you've got to react. Every new generation—look, don't you—well, you don't know. Your kid's too little. They spit in your eye. They have to find their own way.

[00:24:27.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Yeah. About the AAA, at what point do spokesmen emerge?

[00:24:37.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:24:38.30]

IRVING SANDLER: I had been told by Greene and Holty.

[00:24:40.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:24:44.39]

IRVING SANDLER: Tell me a little about that, because I'm just curious about the—

[00:24:50.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember Morris being—he wasn't so much a spokesman as the—

[00:24:58.52]

IRVING SANDLER: He was writing for *Partisan Review* at one point.

[00:25:00.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —as the, well, he was—what did we have? A President? I forget. But he was the—he used to control the meetings. I remember one period—

[00:25:09.23]

IRVING SANDLER: Chairman?

[00:25:09.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Chairman.

[00:25:09.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:25:11.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And well, Harry Holtzman was a spokesman. Holty was a spokesman. Vytlacil talked a lot.

[00:25:24.21]

IRVING SANDLER: Greene?

[00:25:24.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Greene was our editor. He was the editor of our brochures. And he was very good. He was very good at that time. You know, really, we were—considering the issues and the diversity of our group, you may think it was all geometric. But to us, it wasn't.

[00:25:50.11]

IRVING SANDLER: It was not.

[00:25:50.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was very different. And oh, you don't know. When a show was hung, every artist would come there, and he didn't like where his picture was hung. [Laughs.]

[00:26:03.11]

IRVING SANDLER: It still happens.

[00:26:05.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But anyway—no, we got along very well. Well, it still exists.

[00:26:12.42]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:26:12.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: So that's the answer.

[00:26:14.46]

IRVING SANDLER: But not many of the original members—

[00:26:18.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, don't forget that the original members are older and burdened with many responsibilities.

[00:26:26.57]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:26:26.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And there are no longer any grounds to break.

[00:26:29.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Were there groups within the organization? I heard, for example, that there was a sort of uptown group which was composed of Gallatin and Morris, and, I think, Ferren was with them.

[00:26:49.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That might have been after '40. I quit at '40. I can't tell you anything after that.

[00:26:54.55]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, I think they had a couple of shows.

[00:26:57.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Carl could probably tell you about that.

[00:26:59.17]

IRVING SANDLER: I think they had a couple of shows down at the Gallatin—down at NYU.

[00:27:06.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was after my time.

[00:27:10.05]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm. Why did you quit, incidentally?

[00:27:12.45]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I stopped painting.

[00:27:15.15]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, that I know. But I assume Byron also quit.

[00:27:19.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[00:27:20.37]

IRVING SANDLER: No? He remained?

[00:27:22.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was a member until he died. They even showed a picture at

the IBM Galleries after he died, as a special courtesy.

[00:27:29.96]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh. So he remained with the organization?

[00:27:32.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He remained throughout his life.

[00:27:35.77]

IRVING SANDLER: But then at one point, he also—I guess during the period—

[00:27:43.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Let me explain something about Byron to you.

[00:27:45.91]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:27:47.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Byron was kind of an oddball. It wasn't that he couldn't talk, because he taught successfully for 14 years at the League. But he was not a person given to talking. And he resented anything that took him away from painting, which was the reason he didn't join the original group that formed on Eighth Street. Ibram was after him to become a member of the Eighth Street Group.

[00:28:20.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, that became the Club.

[00:28:21.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was at that time—yeah, the Club. He was at that time teaching twice a week, two nights a week, and I think two days a week, two afternoons, at the League. And he was a very well-loved teacher. But he didn't like teaching. He didn't like anything. He was a compulsive worker. He didn't like to stop. He was extremely prolific for that reason. But he thought in paint. He didn't want to do anything but paint. And he wasn't—it's true, he was very young then. And at that time, when we formed the AAA, he was most given to this kind of thing [meeting with other artists –Ed.]. But he wasn't the kind of person that liked to meet. And he had had it, then. And to meet and talk—and he wasn't a drinker. He just wanted to sit and work. That's all he wanted, was to sit and work.

[00:29:22.61]

His great joy was just to take long walks. And when we lived on 15th Street, which for 19 years, he used to walk to the Metropolitan. We had a house in Provincetown. He would walk across the sand dunes. He was a very simple person with very circumscribed tastes for the heroic. He liked Beethoven. He liked Schweitzer. He loved Ingres. And of course, as you can see, you know, so did—he, de Kooning, and Gorky all were crazy about Ingres, and all made paintings like that at one time, which of course, they didn't—at least, Byron didn't show them. And I don't know, he was probably his own enemy, because he was a semi-hermit. And people sometimes took that for a lack of friendliness. His best friend, whom he had met at the National Academy of Design when he was a student there—when he was a child, in their teens—they used to see each other once in a few months. They'd come over.

[00:30:40.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Who was he?

[00:30:41.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Joseph Solman. And he always had much more tolerance for the work of other people than they had for him.

[00:30:50.24]

IRVING SANDLER: That's interesting, because Solman was a member of another group of artists—

[00:30:54.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Federation of Modern Painters.

[00:30:56.18]

IRVING SANDLER: No, that was later.

[00:30:56.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The Ten. Yeah. You see, Byron never was—he used to say that those who waged the battle of the figurative versus the abstract are falsifying the real issues in art, because a form is not figurative, or it's not realistic, it does not make it plastic.

[00:31:22.73]

IRVING SANDLER: What was the connection between the AAA and the Ten? Was the Ten at that time—

[00:31:27.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: None, absolutely none.

[00:31:28.52]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, Volotovsky and Schanker showed with both groups.

[00:31:32.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Schanker, Byron knew a very long time, because they showed before—way before. In fact, I first met him as a kid there at the Secession Galleries run by Robert Godsoe on 12th Street. And Schanker was a member of that group. And he was a friend of Byron's way, way back. But Schanker was never a member of the AAA.

[00:32:01.88]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, he was.

[00:32:02.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Was he? Was he? Was he?

[00:32:04.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Probably check—

[00:32:05.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not that I remember.

[00:32:06.29]

IRVING SANDLER: Have you checked in the '38 book?

[00:32:09.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Schanker. Oh, yes! He is. Yes, I'm sorry.

[00:32:11.92]

IRVING SANDLER: That's an earlier book. That's the '37 book.

[00:32:12.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. You know, it's hard to—

[00:32:18.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, then, would you have known at the time, say, Rothko, whose name was Rothkowitz.

[00:32:24.58]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Markus Rothkowitz, I knew very—yes. I met Sally and all these people—Sally Milton.

[00:32:30.95]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm, Avery and got— [Cross talk.]

[00:32:32.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: There was a man by the name of Vincent Spagna, who was part of the group. Yes, I met them as a child. They were—you see, we knew many people. And Byron liked painting, you know? I mean it's—and he could do what he believed in. But that didn't mean he—he didn't like bad painting. And if it was muddy Social Realism, he didn't like it. If it was good painting, he wouldn't have anything against it. But he wanted to do what he wanted to do, what he believed in, his ideology. But he hated the kind of prejudicial attitudes that developed, like academies that developed within a new movement. And that, he didn't—he didn't like confines. He didn't like to see art restricted, even if it was against what he wanted to do himself. And it probably—well, never mind. That's something separate. But the Ten, I met Markus, yeah, Markus Rothkowitz at Vincent Spagna's, way back when they were Ninth Street, also sometime in the '30s, with his first wife.

[00:33:56.83]

IRVING SANDLER: But his connection with the AAA was—

[00:34:01.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no. He was not doing Abstract work.

[00:34:03.70]

IRVING SANDLER: No, he wasn't. I know.

[00:34:04.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. And neither was Adolph.

[00:34:06.55]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:34:08.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Adolph was very much influenced by Milton Avery at the time.

[00:34:11.74]

IRVING SANDLER: What was the attitude, say, of the AAA to someone like Avery?

[00:34:16.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I don't know what the attitude of the AAA was. We liked him. [Laughs.] We liked him. No, we weren't like that. You mustn't take a group attitude about this, because every individual within the group was a different kind of human being.

[00:34:37.24]

IRVING SANDLER: Just because—

[00:34:39.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Don't forget, we didn't have any powerful tastemakers governing our decisions.

[00:34:46.69]

IRVING SANDLER: No, not then.

[00:34:47.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: They were pure, so that if we were—if we had—we could do what we felt, you know? I mean it wasn't pushed by anything beyond what we believed in.

[00:35:04.39]

IRVING SANDLER: I want to jump for a minute—

[00:35:06.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Sure.

[00:35:07.09]

IRVING SANDLER: —Rosalind, because I'm just trying—this first session, I'm just opening up a lot of things that we're going to get back to.

[00:35:15.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, sure.

[00:35:15.61]

IRVING SANDLER: But at one point around 1945, Byron becomes a member of the Kootz Gallery.

[00:35:27.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:35:28.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, did he know—the Kootz Gallery, of course, at one point becomes identified with, I guess, artists who later are known as the Abstract Expressionists—Gottlieb, and Motherwell, Baziotes.

[00:35:40.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not then.

[00:35:41.82]

IRVING SANDLER: No, not then. Then, Baziotes would have come in around the time he did.

[00:35:46.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Byron and Kootz—Byron and Bill entered the same time, Bill Baziotes.

[00:35:51.27]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:35:51.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, I'll tell you what the history of that is.

[00:35:54.24]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, through the '40s. In other words, what's Byron's connections to—[Cross talk.]

[00:35:57.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right, now what happened with us—now, Kootz was originally interested. Before he had a gallery, he was interested in Davis, Rattner, that group.

[00:36:12.36]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:36:13.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he came up to us. We had a loft on Eighth Street, 55 East Eighth, where Century Furniture is, or was. It was right across the street from Jackson Pollock's brother, Sandy.

[00:36:28.60]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:36:30.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And they tore all those old buildings down. Now, what year was that? That was about—

[00:36:40.42]

IRVING SANDLER: '41, I'd guess.

[00:36:40.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, '40, we moved in there, so it must have been about '41. Yeah, because '43, Steve was born. And we moved out when I got pregnant. So he came up to us. And he said that he would like—he was organizing a big show at Macy's.

[00:37:03.10]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:37:03.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he would like to have some of Byron's work for the show. He also tried us to get Gorky. Tried to get us to get Gorky. But he couldn't snare Gorky.

[00:37:14.12]

IRVING SANDLER: I think Gorky finally did show there.

[00:37:16.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Did he show there?

[00:37:17.20]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:37:17.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, at that time, we had—we did something about it, but I don't remember. I can't remember what we did, but we tried to involve Gorky in it. I don't—I have the feeling that we didn't succeed. But maybe I'm wrong. All right, now, then he did some kind of a book.

[00:37:44.56]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right, something like *Frontiers [of Art –Ed.]* it might have been.

[00:37:47.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Janis did some kind of a book.

[00:37:49.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, Janis's book came out a little bit later.

[00:37:51.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: A little bit later.

[00:37:52.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Was Byron in Janis's book?

[00:37:54.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:37:54.73]

IRVING SANDLER: He was, okay.

[00:37:55.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, sure. Byron was doing Aztec heads with big teeth then.

[00:37:59.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:38:00.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And then Sam—I don't know. He kept popping into our life. Then he decided to organize a gallery. And he asked us if we'd go into contract. And that's how we met Bill Baziotes, Robert Motherwell. Now, Gottlieb, who came in later—and Byron was one of the people who recommended him to Kootz. Kootz asked him if he should take Gottlieb, and Byron said, yes, he was a good painter. Hofmann came in later. Oh, Bearden was one of the beginning people.

[00:38:42.79]

IRVING SANDLER: Bearden was.

[00:38:43.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Bearden. David Hare was one of the beginning—

[00:38:47.38]

IRVING SANDLER: The early ones.

[00:38:48.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:38:52.51]

IRVING SANDLER: No, the question I'm really asking is, what contacts did you—

[00:38:58.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know how he found out about Byron.

[00:39:00.31]

IRVING SANDLER: —did you and Byron, then, have with the group later known as the Abstract Expressionists?

[00:39:06.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, we didn't have any, because—we didn't have any for the simple reason that Ibram, who was one of our very intimate friends—now, it's funny because we were very close. Ideologically, we weren't thinking the same way. But we were very close. And he wanted Byron to be part of that group. Well, Byron went to a meeting or two. I couldn't go because Steve was little, and we had no babysitters. He was a baby.

[00:39:39.01]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:39:39.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And we had no babysitters. And Byron went once or twice, and he says—oh, he came back, and I said, "So, what is it?" So he said, "Oh, they had a lot of girls looking around to be laid." [Laughs.] And he says, "Look," he says, "I can't. I don't have the time for that anymore. They're sitting around and talking." And he just didn't become part of it, which, of course, made—now, this, I don't know for sure. But this is what I heard from a very close friend of mine who was a member of the group for a long time, that they were antagonized because they felt that they were offering Byron a special—you know, that in other words, everybody who was asked and urged to be a member, that this was especially—this was like an honor. And that by turning them down, he was—[laughs]— it was like a smack. He didn't mean it that way.

[00:40:55.17]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:40:55.68]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He didn't mean it that way.

[00:40:57.15]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, sure.

[00:40:57.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But this—we didn't know at the time. This is what turned out later. No, we were never part of that. I can tell you only what I know by close friends of mine who were a part of it. That's all.

[00:41:14.28]

IRVING SANDLER: A couple of things, just to go back to the '30s. Is there any shift in attitude towards Picasso by members of the AAA? In other words, you indicated the admiration and emulation of Mondrian. What was the attitude toward—

[00:41:39.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, no, there was just as much regard for Picasso. Well, the first time I remember being disappointed in Picasso, myself, was when Kootz—and that was the beginning of the end of the first gallery. You know why the first gallery ended?

[00:41:54.50]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, because Picasso—I understand—

[00:41:57.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Because he went—see, he wanted to get Picassos. And Picasso would not give him anything on consignment. And he had to buy them outright. And the Picassos that he brought back, which at that time, people could have gotten for $9,000 or $12,000, which today, are worth $65,000, $75,000, $80,000, $100,000—he couldn't move. He couldn't sell them. I remember my reaction the first show we had of these Picassos that he had brought back. And I—my reaction—now, I don't know how I'd feel if I saw them now,

because people move in their perception. I felt disappointed in the show. Now, that's all I can tell you. I can't speak for anybody else. I think, possibly, Byron might have felt the same way. I wouldn't want to quote him, either, on that, because it's too long ago. But I do remember that reaction, that I didn't think they were great Picassos. Maybe they were.

[00:43:21.74]

IRVING SANDLER: No, but it's interesting that I know other people who— [Cross talk.]

[00:43:24.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That became—and I can tell you how our feelings, personally, our feelings developed, that we began to find—we began to be more discriminating as we developed. And it wasn't every Picasso. Like for instance, right now, the Janis Collection has superb Picasso.

[00:43:50.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, it does.

[00:43:51.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Superb! I never saw that look, that abstract oil. Did you?

[00:43:57.05]

IRVING SANDLER: The little one?

[00:43:58.07]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, the little drawing is superb, too.

[00:44:00.41]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, you mean the large studio.

[00:44:01.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But the medium size—well, there's a large artist and model.

[00:44:04.39]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, the artist and model.

[00:44:05.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, that I've seen many times in reproduction. And I've also seen it in original. No, there's another one that I have never seen, the third one.

[00:44:13.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, yes.

[00:44:14.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And that is beautiful!

[00:44:16.64]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:44:18.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But not all of them hit that. Well, I mean, he's a great giant. And I would say that of Contemporary art with such prolific output, he hits it high more than anybody I can think of. But it was a time, Irving. Don't you understand? It was a time. What was there before? There were a lot of pastiches. There was nobody really understanding plasticity before. Do you realize we are the first—except if you can accept Stanton

Macdonald-Wright who, in his takeoff from Orphism, achieved sometimes a kind of plasticity in these things. But very often, they were tricky, with transparent planes going over, which is for the birds, you know?

[00:45:11.14]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:45:11.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And it was the first major attempt. I mean, if you look at all these earlier people—and I don't mind going on tape for this. Like Marsden Hartley, who didn't understand a thing about Abstraction, or Arthur Dove, who didn't understand a thing about the efforts of Cubism and all this Mondrian or anything like that. I mean, all these people—yes, Max Weber had some concept. Stella was for the birds. I mean, when you stop to think of what we had—yes, there was a guy called Covert, who sometimes hit very good things. But it was so isolated. Here was a whole movement with people who had studied with Hofmann, who first began to dig it. They really began to dig it! So they had to work their way through that and opened the path for the Abstract Expressionists! The Abstract Expressionists couldn't have existed without our opening the path for them, with any validity.

[00:46:13.44]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. In other words, what you're—

[00:46:17.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: They couldn't have gotten it from Dove, believe me.

[00:46:21.74]

IRVING SANDLER: What you're suggesting is that the whole, really, great tradition of modern art was— [Cross talk.]

[00:46:29.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Franz Kline, you know, with all his knowledge in the way he will put these black and white shapes, that comes right out of Mondrian. I mean, it's Expressionism. But it comes right out of Mondrian. It has solidity, and volume, and depth. I mean, this couldn't have been possible if we hadn't struggled with our little shovels first.

[00:46:54.55]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, one of the implications of what you're saying is that Mondrian really played a very simple role.

[00:47:03.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, there were those of us—you see, Mondrian was terribly important. He was particularly important to Abstract Expressionism, because if Mondrian hadn't existed, Abstract Expressionism wouldn't have. They had to react against him.

[00:47:22.41]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:47:22.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now—

[00:47:23.47]

IRVING SANDLER: But in the '30s, the reaction would have been—the response would have been much more favorable.

[00:47:30.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, then the idea was to go into him.

[00:47:33.50]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:47:34.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Then the idea was to find out what he was all about. But we had to start from Analytical Cubism. We couldn't just dig into Mondrian. We had to start from the beginning, and go right to where he took it, just like he took it from his beginning.

[00:47:50.29]

IRVING SANDLER: Analytical Cubism had been—

[00:47:51.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He started as an Analytical Cubist, and he went right into it. And that's how we went into it.

[00:47:56.41]

IRVING SANDLER: Via Hofmann.

[00:47:57.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Hofmann was very important. I think he was very important. Now, you may find people disagreeing with me.

[00:48:05.98]

IRVING SANDLER: No. Well, there are many, many people who do believe—

[00:48:08.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I cried when he died. And believe me, I hadn't seen him personally for so many years. And I cried like the end of the world was coming. I thought, if everybody dies, who's going to know anything? [Laughs.]

[00:48:17.02]

IRVING SANDLER: I was with—I was with him—

[00:48:19.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I mean, they don't teach this today, you know?

[00:48:21.64]

IRVING SANDLER: —two days —

[00:48:22.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Who teaches this in an art class today like he did? Holty, maybe.

[00:48:26.95]

IRVING SANDLER: Holty, yeah.

[00:48:27.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But I mean, how many people teach what he taught—I mean, to painters?

[00:48:31.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, Vytlacil was still teaching.

[00:48:35.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. He doesn't dig it as—

[00:48:38.35]

IRVING SANDLER: I was with Hofmann the two nights before he died. Tell me, what about the Bauhaus?

[00:48:46.45]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We were very interested in that.

[00:48:48.40]

IRVING SANDLER: Tell me about that.

[00:48:49.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Because, you see, we were interested in everything that went on. And we were interested in Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House.

[00:48:57.64]

IRVING SANDLER: That early?

[00:48:58.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes. We had books on the Bauhaus. What do you think? The Bauhaus? This was the '30s.

[00:49:03.22]

IRVING SANDLER: No, not the Bauhaus. I meant Fuller.

[00:49:05.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well there was a book out that we had on the Bauhaus and everything that went on.

[00:49:10.93]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, yes, the Bauhaus. But you mentioned Fuller. What was the interest—

[00:49:15.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, because they had, in an issue that we had, they had all this Dymaxion House, all worked out with all the pictures of it. Oh, sure. I'm sorry I don't have those books anymore. I mean, Byron, you know, we used to have a habit of trading in books.

[00:49:31.93]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:49:32.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Because—to get other books, as his interests moved and changed.

[00:49:38.30]

IRVING SANDLER: But what people of the Bauhaus do you remember? Albers was there.

[00:49:44.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, we were interested in everything that went on, because we were trying to see what it had to do with us. We weren't making decisions then. We were finding out then. At that time, I remember the biggest sculptor and the most—the greatest influence—and especially on David Smith, and on Byron who did occasional, I mean, who did

do sculpture, but he never exhibited as a sculptor—was Julio González. And of course, Giacometti didn't play as big a role then. But Julio González was—gee, he was great! And he was—

[00:50:23.63]

IRVING SANDLER: How many works of his could have been known?

[00:50:25.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, we knew about it. We knew about it.

[00:50:28.40]

IRVING SANDLER: Was it through reproduction?

[00:50:29.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, sure. Mostly.

[00:50:32.06]

IRVING SANDLER: That's interesting.

[00:50:32.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We searched out everything. Yeah?

[00:50:37.48]

IRVING SANDLER: Was Matisse highly esteemed?

[00:50:40.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. Not by our group. But Hofmann esteemed him. Yes, I'll tell you how he was esteemed. I'll tell you exactly how I thought in relation to Matisse. I thought of him in relation to color. You see, color was a very important, new ingredient in the 20th century. The context it was presented in—I mean, color can be anything. Achromatic—everything is color. Nothing exists without color. But what Matisse presented was color in a different degree of saturation, let's say, than we've been used to, and purer colors, cleaner, singing colors, brighter. And Hofmann, his system of teaching color, which I suppose you've heard from many people—

[00:51:39.56]

IRVING SANDLER: No, tell me about that.

[00:51:41.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, what he did—

[00:51:42.89]

IRVING SANDLER: I've heard from many people, but I'm interested in— [Cross talk.]

[00:51:43.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What he did in his class—yeah. What he did in his class was, for instance, you see, color is as important in making the movement. Whether it's in chromatics or it's in achromatics, it's as important as the way you guide your form. Both—you can't separate the two. In other words, color alone, it has to be guided by direction. But it's like separating the head from the body, you know? You can't. You can't. Well, what he'd do is, we would cut out pieces of paper like the shapes in the painting we were making. And we would cut out many of them, you know? And we would paint them different values of the color—we wanted to see which one worked.

[00:52:38.65]

IRVING SANDLER: And this is far back as—

[00:52:40.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This was '35.

[00:52:42.26]

IRVING SANDLER: '35?

[00:52:42.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '35.

[00:52:43.98]

IRVING SANDLER: I hadn't heard of that. I knew he did that late in the '50s.

[00:52:47.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '35, '36.

[00:52:48.82]

IRVING SANDLER: But I didn't know he was doing that in the '30s.

[00:52:50.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. All our pictures—you came into Hofmann's class, you saw pictures with a lot of little pins in them, you know? And then you take them off once you decided what you were going to do. And of course, some people got caught in little squares of color. But it was—you know? But I remember one woman. I think she married Fritz Kiesler later. She was Olinski.

[00:53:19.41]

IRVING SANDLER: Lillian Olinski.

[00:53:20.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Lillian Olinski. Was the monitor for many years of Hofmann. But she was in a mind of—she must have studied with him forever. But she was there when I was there—Lillian Olinski. And it wasn't a big group. Believe me. I can't remember everybody, but I can remember a pretty good list.

[00:53:53.92]

IRVING SANDLER: You know, when you begin to think about it—

[00:53:56.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Mm! Dora McNeil was there too, George's wife.

[00:53:59.92]

IRVING SANDLER: Steve Wheeler?

[00:54:01.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Steve Wheeler. Oh, sure. Oh, he was great. I mean, not as—I'm not talking about as a—he was funny. Steve Wheeler, I don't remember him in my class.

[00:54:13.95]

IRVING SANDLER: Was Kamrowski still there?

[00:54:16.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Kamrowski? I don't—I remember him. I remember him in the AAA. Wasn't he in the AAA?

[00:54:24.63]

IRVING SANDLER: Kamrowski?

[00:54:27.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: K—yes. I don't remember him in Hofmann's class. But that might be just that I don't remember him.

[00:54:35.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Do you remember Bultman?

[00:54:37.68]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not in my class.

[00:54:39.14]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, that was later. Then Kamrowski—

[00:54:41.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Don't forget, I was in the mid-'30s there. And I was there in the mid-'30s. And the '40s, I stopped altogether. So that was that. Now think of a good question you want.

[00:54:58.74]

IRVING SANDLER: For tonight, it'll probably be our last one. But I'll think of a good one.

[00:55:04.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, because the tape is going fast.

[00:55:06.42]

IRVING SANDLER: Hey, you know, we're really just getting into this material. We haven't even really dug in.

[00:55:12.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Really?

[00:55:13.17]

IRVING SANDLER: This is fascinating. How are you enjoying this?

[00:55:16.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, I'm enjoying it. You know me. I got a big mouth. [Laughs.]

[00:55:19.63]

IRVING SANDLER: And it may be, really, very helpful to the—

[00:55:22.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know. I'm sure when you go to a group of people, then one person remembers what the other person didn't. And that way, it becomes the whole picture.

[00:55:33.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. No, no. That certainly is emerging.

[00:55:42.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I can tell you a lot of things that I do remember.

[00:55:45.61]

IRVING SANDLER: Let me just see if I have—oh, well, just because we talked about him earlier, I guess, at that point, of the artists who had some reputation in America—you know, artists who might be called "abstract," because that was a loose term, as you indicated then, I guess Davis would have been the artist with the most recognition.

[00:56:11.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Davis was the artist with the most validity.

[00:56:16.27]

IRVING SANDLER: What was—tell me a little about him and his relation to the members of the AAA, because he was also, at that point, very bound up with the Artist Congress—

[00:56:27.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You're going to be very disappointed, because he frightened me to death. And whenever I sat with him, because Byron knew him and Byron spoke to him, the way he talked—you know, he used to talk out of the side of his mouth.

[00:56:41.63]

IRVING SANDLER: The side of his mouth, yes.

[00:56:42.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he was very tough. And he looked very forbidding. And I was frightened of him. So I never talked to him. So I can't tell you a thing. But I know Roselle very well. I have books on him. I know what he said. But that's not any more than you can get from anybody else.

[00:56:58.49]

IRVING SANDLER: But what was his—

[00:56:59.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Roselle can tell you a great deal about him.

[00:57:02.24]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. And at one point, I would like to sit down with her. You know, I never met him. But I wrote him a favorable review. It was a glowing review in *The New York Post* once, because I've always loved his work. And a couple of days later, I received a card from him. It's one of my prized possessions, saying very simply, postcard, "Thank you for your review of my show at the D-Town Gallery. Like a man who thinks the right way." [They laugh.]

[00:57:37.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Isn't that nice?

[00:57:38.15]

IRVING SANDLER: It's so, so beautiful.

[00:57:39.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. From what I know of him, I gather he was a pretty solid citizen. He was also somewhat like Byron—he was very much unto himself, even though he did go to the Cedar Bar. Now, Misha Reznikoff, who was a very close friend of Gorky's, was Roselle's first husband.

[00:58:07.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, I didn't know that.

[00:58:09.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:58:14.68]

IRVING SANDLER: Gosh. It's astonishing what a small world it really was.

[00:58:20.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was a very small world.

[00:58:21.97]

IRVING SANDLER: It's almost as if—

[00:58:22.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Very small world. And there are so many tentacles that twist into each other. And there are many things I can remember, some of which I don't know that they should go on an Archive tape, because I think for the Archives, the most important thing is—I know the Archives feel they'd want everything, the sex life, the—

[00:58:53.41]

IRVING SANDLER: No, they don't have to get into the bed. But if—

[00:58:56.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But I know that, probably, to build a whole picture—and of course, there's a lot I know on that area. But I just don't know whether it's important, you know, aesthetically speaking.

[00:59:18.65]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Incidentally, Lee Krasner was also—

[00:59:23.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She was not an original member. I knew—

[00:59:26.15]

IRVING SANDLER: No, but she was also a fellow student of yours at the Hofmann School, wasn't she?

[00:59:29.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[00:59:33.15]

IRVING SANDLER: Then she—I wonder if she was—

[00:59:34.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not when I studied there.

[00:59:36.07]

IRVING SANDLER: She must have been later.

[00:59:37.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She was later, probably. I knew her. I think I knew her through

the Artists Union. I knew her. And as I say, I liked her. And I was very friendly with her. But it was somehow a connection that I can't establish how I met her. She was not a member of the American Abstract Artists during our early years up until the time I left in 1940. But I did see her in another capacity. And I thought of her as a talented woman, and I liked her. And she had a lot of political differences with—there was a big business between Trotskyism and —

[01:00:25.14]

IRVING SANDLER: Stalinism.

[01:00:26.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, they didn't call it that then. But they called it something else. But anyway, she was a Trotskyite at that time. And I remember I used to run into a lot of trouble because, when I would be with her, then somebody would say, "How can you associate with a Trotskyite?" And then she would say to me, "How can you associate with this?" [Laughs.]

[01:00:51.64]

IRVING SANDLER: [Laughs] But it seems that the Artists Union—

[01:00:53.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, there were a lot of politics involved then, too.

[01:00:55.54]

IRVING SANDLER: It seems that the Artists Union was open enough to allow all of these people with different views.

[01:01:01.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yeah, they used to have big fights. They used to have big political fights. There was more politics involved than aesthetics, to tell you the truth.

[01:01:09.52]

IRVING SANDLER: And with the same—of course, the same would have applied to the various congresses.

[01:01:15.58]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, the Congress got destroyed by it. The Congress got destroyed by politics.

[01:01:21.55]

IRVING SANDLER: That would have been around '39, with the Soviet-Nazi pact?

[01:01:27.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Something. Yeah. I became a member, and a year later, it was disbanded.

[01:01:37.06]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, Holty, I think, has that story.

[01:01:39.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Yes. I heard rumors about it. But I don't have any facts on it.

[01:01:45.46]

IRVING SANDLER: Tell me, Ros, this is the material that you have—

[01:01:50.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's just what I have accessible. I haven't dug into the other—

[01:01:53.23]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, there is more? Because the next time—

[01:01:55.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know if there was more. I'm going to look.

[01:01:57.61]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Because I thought the next time we met, we could just almost begin to work this over, item by item, just talking about—

[01:02:06.07]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It's not all. I mean, it's not that much, you know?

[01:02:09.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, well, here.

[01:02:10.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It's not that much. But I mean, I have my lecture all written out.

[01:02:16.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, I wanted—

[01:02:17.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I have all these.

[01:02:18.60]

IRVING SANDLER: I wanted to put quite a bit of that lecture that you gave on tape.

[01:02:23.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I will say this much to you for the last bit of the tape, that I first showed charts, which Byron ran for me. He ran a projector at the back. And I first showed charts. I was so scared. I want to tell you it was the first lecture. I think I was about 19 years old. I first showed charts of the structure of the atom and its action. And then after that, I said, "when one body meets another, something happens." And the whole audience roared. It was 400 artists. [Irving laughs.] And I was so disconcerted. But I plowed on.

[01:03:04.18]

IRVING SANDLER: How many artists were there?

[01:03:05.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: About 400.

[01:03:06.70]

IRVING SANDLER: Really?

[01:03:12.07]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And it was—some people still remember it. But I do remember that Gorky gave a—oh, I was inspired by that lecture he gave.

[01:03:24.19]

IRVING SANDLER: I actually hope for future tapes, you might remember some of the specific points he made.

[01:03:29.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, I wish I could.

[01:03:31.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Was he talking about Surrealism then?

[01:03:32.62]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[01:03:34.21]

IRVING SANDLER: It was pretty much Picasso?

[01:03:36.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. Gorky was interested in painting more than anything else. And when I interviewed Walter Murch to do my article on him for *Art News*, he said the reason he loved Gorky so much was because he was more concerned with painting than with Surrealism, even in his most Surrealist period. Because you know, Murch was drawn to the Surrealists. For a while, he admired Pierre Roy very much. And Murch was also very concerned about painting, in his way. And he was a wonderful guy. Oh, I was so dreadfully upset. I didn't know that he died. And I didn't go—

[01:04:21.87]

IRVING SANDLER: It was so sudden.

[01:04:22.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, but I have the *Times* delivered every day. And I didn't see it. And I didn't go to his memorial. I wrote a letter to his wife. But anyway, the thing is that Murch had made that point to me, too. And that's what you felt about Gorky. It was painting that counted. Whatever went through the vehicle of painting wasn't important, because it was the painting that made it monumental. So whatever statement he made—whether it was Surrealism or anything else—would have become important if he did trompe l'oeil painting, if he did a Social Realism, if he did propaganda art. Nothing would have been beyond him if he was concerned first with painting. And that's what he was concerned with first. And this is what attracted Murch to him. And Murch was kind of Surrealist at the time, you know? Murch was very much taken by the Surrealists. He was also tied up with Julian Levy Gallery.

[01:05:21.29]

IRVING SANDLER: And later, the Parsons Gallery.

[01:05:22.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[01:05:22.88]

IRVING SANDLER: Did Murch say anything else?

[01:05:24.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, Murch said a great deal to me.

[01:05:26.66]

IRVING SANDLER: Was it taped? No.

[01:05:28.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I have read it. Yes, it was. And there is a place that has it. Now, I'll look it up. There's a place that has it connected with the Skowhegan School.

[01:05:37.85]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, I see.

[01:05:38.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And it's on the East Side. I'm trying to remember the exact name. I think it was in the obituary, which I have.

[01:05:44.99]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Did he have more to say about Gorky in the talk you did with him?

[01:05:50.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: In the talk? Yes, he had a great deal to say about Gorky. Gorky was a very important force in his life.

[01:05:58.59]

IRVING SANDLER: I know he was. And that tape is—

[01:06:01.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no. That transcript that I used was—no, no. I have notes on that.

[01:06:07.97]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, in other words, you used a transcript—

[01:06:10.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: A transcript of a lecture he gave at Skowhegan.

[01:06:12.62]

IRVING SANDLER: At Skowhegan. Yes, I know where to get that. That will be—that is available to me.

[01:06:16.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But, no, no. What he said to me about Gorky—he worked with him at the Grand Central School of Art. And he said it was a marvelous force in his life, and that what he liked about him—his quote exactly is what he liked about him was that, "He was more interested in painting than in Surrealism."

[END OF TRACK AAA_bengel68_8379_m]

[00:00:02.53]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the second interview with Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, on February 11, 1968, with Irving Sandler. Before we start the interview, I'd like to read an announcement into the tape, 1937. An announcement of the Hans Hofmann School, stating his aesthetic, it's called "Creative Teaching in the Field of the Plastic Arts."

[00:00:34.48]

[Reading:] *To avoid being academic, a school of art must be a vital participant in contemporary aesthetics. Teaching which represents the Renaissance tradition has deteriorated to a method of mere visual reproduction where perspective anatomy, dynamic symmetry, and other scientific formulas have been placed as obstacles to the natural creative process of painting. In America, the general reaction against the academy has been toward an exclusive interest in subject matter and neglect of aesthetic considerations. The aesthetic direction appeals to our sensibilities directly through the medium of painting. The*

organic elements of painting are flatness of the surface used and its plastic medium color. The pictorial development which retains the characteristic of these elements in an equilibrium of volume and forces produce the plastic effect of pictorial space, realistic space, that of the optical illusion is contrary in its character to an instinctive use of the medium. The emphasis today upon the concept of pictorial space and painting, and of the instinctive approach to plastic creation, demands a correspondingly altered method of teaching. A student's talent should be estimated by his instinctive facility of plastic sensitivity. The power when applied to the experience of nature to penetrate the relationship of its colors, forms, weights, textures, et cetera, in painting a similar penetration of the pictorial element to their plastic possibilities, as discerned from the more obvious ability to draw in a facile way. This faculty should be encouraged and brought to consciousness. It is therefore essential that the teacher have the capacity as an artist to demonstrate in a vital way the process of pictorial development, and the critical knowledge to clarify the students intellectually in his aesthetic concept. In a sense, great art surpasses analysis. It affects us most profoundly through the spirit out of which it has evolved, and through the expressive statement of the artist. However, it is equally necessary to discern its aesthetic quality, the form which gives to it its character of solidity as an object to be concrete and durable in the changing circumstances of time. From this aspect do we learn, and upon the understanding of this is built the progress of tradition.

[00:03:00.69]

That's one of the finest statements, I think, of his that I've read.

[00:03:04.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, that article, which incidentally, I haven't been able to find—I have it some place—that he had published in the League magazine was very good about the duality of these [inaudible].

[00:03:17.61]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. This is even more succinct.

[00:03:20.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it's for a catalog.

[00:03:22.23]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Yeah. I just wanted to—wait, before we get started, you said that you had some thoughts about things that were said in the tape last week that you wanted to clarify a little. One was about the Hilla Rebay letter.

[00:03:42.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, well, I found something on that. [Pause.] That was after the meeting I told you about.

[00:03:57.65]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, this is the meeting where there's a party for her.

[00:04:02.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, we gave that, and then she followed by inviting us.

[00:04:07.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, I see. And that was November 25, 1939. And she says:

[Reading:] *I've been asked to invite you to attend a tea at Solomon Guggenheim's apartment at the Plaza this Tuesday between 4:30 and 6:30. Baroness Rebay is giving it, and Harold Bauer will be there.*

[00:04:28.19]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's right.

[00:04:28.97]

IRVING SANDLER: [Reading:] *The Baroness has confided to me that she is considering opening up their new gallery to the young, abstract, non-objective artists, so it might be advantageous for you to attend. You will be able to show free of charge, and there will be no commission on the sale of pictures. I hope I'll see you there.* Signed, *Beverly Silverman.*

Now, what was the policy of the Guggenheim? Did they really keep their word on that? I mean—

[00:04:56.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You got the tape going the right way? [Laughs.]

[00:04:58.19]

IRVING SANDLER: The tape is tape is going the right way.

[00:05:01.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Okay. [Laughs.]

IRVING SANDLER: I hope. But I told about the—

[00:05:08.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I told you about the first meeting where the American Abstract Artists entertained the Baroness. When I received this invitation to attend a tea that she was giving for us, and I just allowed you to read the letter on it, we did not attend because we were completely hostile to her attitude towards—

[00:05:39.62]

IRVING SANDLER: Was that you, or did Abstract Artists attend?

[00:05:42.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, there were a great number of us who did not attend. There were those who did. I cannot at this point remember which ones did go to the tea, and which ones did not. Many of us were antagonized by her patronizing attitude to us when we gave her the party. As I told you over the phone, there are people who worked as guards for the museum. She had them working there in different capacities. John Sennhauser knows all about the whole episode during the '40s. We just washed our hands of the Baroness Rebay and had no contact at all. We cut ourselves off, so I'm not the source of information for her. I know stories that I've heard from artists.

[00:06:37.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Nonetheless, although you indicated last week that you didn't go to her shows, were her shows important? The ones that the Museum put on, say of the Kandinskys, or even the Bauers, two abstract artists at the time?

[00:06:51.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, well, both Kandinsky and Bauer represented the complete opposite of what we believed art was, and what I believed, what Byron believed, and what our close associates believed, because what Hofmann taught us was not what Kandinsky was doing. And our whole approach to Abstract art was on a different level. We had heard about her nepotism in relation to Bauer; we didn't admire it. We only saw him as a kind of little Kandinsky from the Geometric period. We didn't see any great contribution he was making to art. We were young, we were poor, and we were hostile. [Laughs.]

[00:07:43.16]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:07:44.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And there wasn't much, let's say encouragement, public encouragement, or there weren't many avenues to aid us. And she had a lot of money. At least, Solomon Guggenheim had a lot of money. He was still alive, and there was all kinds of gossip about her, and the trio there—Solomon Guggenheim and Baroness Rebay and Harold Bauer. I thought it was Rudolf Bauer.

[00:08:16.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Or Rudolf Bauer.

[00:08:17.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Why did she mention Harold Bauer? I think that was a mistake, don't you? I think she definitely made a mistake.

[00:08:21.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Probably. Did she show Americans, though?

[00:08:25.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, she did in the '40s, when she opened the first—they had another museum before the one was built by Frank Lloyd Wright.

[00:08:37.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Oh yes, I remember that.

[00:08:39.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And she showed Americans then, and there were Americans working as guards. There were a number of people. Let's see if I can remember.

[00:08:46.61]

IRVING SANDLER: Jackson Pollock was—

[00:08:48.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Was he with her? I think Kamrowski. I think Grippe. It's hard for me to be sure.

[00:08:57.20]

IRVING SANDLER: Did you know Kamrowski?

[00:08:58.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he was a member of the group. I haven't seen him for a great many years.

[00:09:03.14]

IRVING SANDLER: He's out in Michigan someplace.

[00:09:05.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, well, I think that's why nobody's seen him.

[00:09:08.17]

IRVING SANDLER: But then he later also became part of the Surrealist group here in the '40s.

[00:09:11.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I know that. Yeah, I know that. But during the '30s, he was a

member. I don't remember him very well. He wasn't one of my—he was just one of the people there, you know.

[00:09:27.05]

IRVING SANDLER: I want to hop around a little today, because there are things that I'm kind of interested in. Last week, you started to talk about the divergent tendencies in the AAA, and you indicated that there was a group that was oriented to Cubism. And from other things that came up in the discussion, you indicated that there was a group that was oriented to a kind of Biomorphic Abstraction, Neoplastic Abstraction and a rather more figurative group. Would you elaborate on this? Because I don't know if I'm getting you right.

[00:10:02.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Actually, nobody was truly figurative. I said that they became very rigid. Certain people in the group became very rigid. If there were the slightest remnant of figuration in a, let's say—for instance, you almost would feel that if Picasso or Braque had submitted one of their Synthetic Cubist still lifes, it would have been rejected by the group. I mean, it was that kind of thing. When I say that there were two divisions in the group, maybe I should clarify it by putting it this way. When I use the word "Cubism," it would include Neoplasticism. It would include, if it were today, Tony Smith. It would include Mark di Suvero because the concept of plasticity is the same.

[00:11:02.13]

Then there was another group, which stemmed from—well, let's say free-flittering form on a two-dimensional surface, which you could relate to Kandinsky. Now, there were people who stemmed from this concept, and there were people who stemmed from the Cubist concept. Cubism evolved to the point where it became Minimal art, but it was still the Cubist concept. So I would say there were those divisions. Now, when I said "Biomprohic," I used the difference also to clarify the different kinds of shapes that were used. There were some that were besides the deep premise, the deep difference of premise, and how space was used. There was also the difference of whether artists were rigidly geometric or they used freer form. Miró at that time was somebody that we were all interested in and admired. Miró at that time was at his height, and he was doing some very marvelous things which combined Cubism with the use of Biomorphic or organic shapes. So the division—Biomorphic and Cubism, isn't as good as the one I just made right now.

[00:12:45.06]

IRVING SANDLER: But such things as the kind of open form that Kandinsky favored in his early abstractions, or that you might have found somewhat later—

[00:12:58.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Turner used open form too—

[00:13:00.75]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:13:01.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —but Turner was plastic like Cubism was, and Kandinsky wasn't. When Kandinsky made a line, it was floating free. It was not part of the space that moved with it.

[00:13:12.74]

IRVING SANDLER: And that would, I guess—

[00:13:14.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Total antithesis to the concept.

[00:13:16.62]

IRVING SANDLER: That I guess, would apply to people like Matta too.

[00:13:21.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, very much so. See, the difference, of course Gorky has done some weak things where he was very much under the influence of Matta, but on the whole, Gorky is a very strong painter, and a very plastic painter, who is, for my money, one of the great American artists. And when he made such a thing, it's like when de Kooning made some of his—oh, I remember there's one thing called Angels, or Backdrop, or something, where I use it in my class. With Kandinsky's, I use these de Koonings, or certain Gorkys, where they also use a great many supposed lines, but the space lifts with every line. And it's amazing. It's really an amazing accomplishment.

[00:14:12.76]

And all this business, which so many so-called abstract—"abstract" is such a big word artists use, where they're showing music in their paintings, and they're making squiggly lines, and forms going like this. To us, that's just a pastiche. It's not an understanding of mainstream plasticity at all. And very early Kandinsky, when he was an Expressionist, when he was part of Der Blaue Reiter—well, very early, occasionally by pure intuition, he hit some good things. But that was, I think, just accident.

[00:14:59.88]

IRVING SANDLER: One more thing that we didn't go into too much, the last week, that is—the influence of the School of Paris was very strong at the time.

[00:15:11.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Very strong.

[00:15:12.35]

IRVING SANDLER: And I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that influence, like which of the Parisian painters, how you found out about them, where you saw the work, museums, galleries, et cetera, but particularly, which of the Europeans, the artists in the AAA, and other abstract artists, found most interesting. You mentioned Miró and Mondrian.

[00:15:37.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, we were interested in—don't forget, I was pretty young at the time, and most of the people, many of the people were at least a decade older than I was. And they had been exposed for a longer time. Did I tell you last week that Gorky was the first one to ever tell—

[00:15:57.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:15:57.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I did. But I did hear and see reproductions because of my very fortunate association with all these older people at the Art Students League. They were young, but they were older than I was, because I was about 16, you know, 17 years old. And it made an enormous impact on me. Harry Holtzman's ideas made an enormous impact on me. Diller. The people who were around me at the time—this was before I met Byron. I met Byron when I was 18, in 1934. And I was very impressed by his entry into the field, and he had come about it in a different way, from the National Academy. He had actually battled far more than I. I was surrounded by a very empathetic environment for my growth. He fought against a tremendously academic environment. And well, that's another story. But what they (the abstract artists –Ed.] liked at the time was not just French. They were very much interested in the Bauhaus. They were very much interested in what was going on in—Where was González? Now I forgot, Julio González.

[00:17:21.53]

IRVING SANDLER: He was in Paris?

[00:17:22.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was in Paris, but the stems, the roots were elsewhere.

[00:17:26.02]

I mean, they came from all over the world to Paris. And I guess it was Germany and Paris—and what was going on that concerned us. You see, even Englishmen were at the Bauhaus, and I'm trying to remember clearly. I've searched very hard for old issues of these magazines.

[00:17:49.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Then you indicate that it was magazines that—

[00:17:52.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, there was the *Cahiers d'Art*. There was *Verve*. there were these magazines that I showed you, the notations in this notebook.

[00:18:01.64]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:18:02.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: *Axis*; *Shelter*. I don't even remember. I don't even remember, but we searched. We used to spend hours at Weyhe, and looking, searching, cutting out, talking to each other. Some of the artists had been to—abroad, to Paris and France. Then they came here. I have one card here.

[00:18:35.78]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, that's interesting.

[00:18:36.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You see?

[00:18:37.45]

IRVING SANDLER: [Reading:] *This is a postcard to Rosalind Bengelsdorf announcing the reception of Mr. Fernand Léger at the Municipal Art Galleries, 3 East 67th Street on Wednesday afternoon, November 9. It will be held from 4:00 to 5:00 instead of 5:00 to 6:00. Kindly notify your guests.*

[00:18:58.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I can't read the date.

[00:18:59.39]

IRVING SANDLER: I can't read it either. Damn. But I would imagine it would be around '36, because—

[00:19:06.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he did a mural with Byron. Byron and Bill de Kooning, Byron Browne, they were both his assistants on the mural. It was for the French Line. That's why I was sure Bill was on the project, because—

[00:19:21.08]

IRVING SANDLER: He was on the project at that point.

[00:19:23.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right. And they both—

[00:19:24.65]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you know the date of that?

[00:19:25.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it must have been around '38 or—It's somewhere—'37, '38. I wish I could remember exactly. Perhaps I could find that for you, but I'm sure there must be other sources, because everybody knows about Léger's mural for the French Line, which never came to pass. I don't know all this work and all these sketches, and they were beautiful.

[00:19:54.33]

IRVING SANDLER: The sketches are still in existence.

[00:19:55.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Well, that was when he was here, so that would be easy to determine.

[00:20:03.86]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Tell me, do you remember Byron's reaction to Léger? What did he come out with? It was an experience of about three weeks, but what did he come out with?

[00:20:14.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Byron was—he became quite articulate as the years went on, but he wasn't articulate except in painting. And in the first place, Fernand Léger only spoke French. Byron didn't speak one word of French, number one.

[00:20:34.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:20:35.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Number two, he didn't find him an empathetic person, but it would be very hard for him to find him an empathetic person with a language barrier.

[00:20:47.54]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:47.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't remember his saying anything strongly against him or for him. I got the impression, without any documentation even in my memory, but my impression was that he regarded him as rather a hard-boiled businessman, and an opportunist who would go whichever way the wind would turn. Now, this is only my memory, and it's only an impression.

[00:21:13.73]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:21:13.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know if he actually said anything of that kind. But sometimes, your memory carries an image of an impression better than it does a word or a—so—

[00:21:28.03]

IRVING SANDLER: I still want to jump around for a minute. Some of this material, we will get back to. And now I want to jump into the early '40s. And again, this involves Byron, because by this time, you had stopped painting. There was what came to be known as a bombshell

controversy that was kicked off by a letter Kootz wrote to *The New York Times*, and Jewell made a big thing of. And there was a bombshell show, and I would imagine that it was perhaps in that show, or organizing the show, that Kootz became aware of Byron.

[00:22:18.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Kootz came to our studio on Eighth Street. Byron and I got married in 1940, and we had a loft on Eighth Street. And Kootz came up. He was organizing a show at Macy's. Now, I don't remember what the name of the show was, but he was organizing a show. And he asked Byron if he would be part of it, and he wanted us to convince Gorky to be part of it. That's my memory of the first meeting with Kootz, when he came up to our loft on Eighth Street. And that was when Byron was with the Pinacotheca, I think. That was in '43?

[00:23:11.96]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:23:14.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right, now, that was Rose Fried's first gallery. He was with her two years. At least he had two shows: '43 and '44. And he went with Kootz in '45. Kootz's first gallery opened. And now, previous to that, Kootz had been interested in Stuart Davis, and Abe Rattner and that whole group. And suddenly, he switched to this interest in the younger people. At that time, Sidney Janis was also interested in our young group. And he put out a book, not too—also about '44.

[00:23:56.64]

IRVING SANDLER: '44, the *Abstract Surrealist Art*.

[00:24:00.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he used one of Byron's Aztec influences. Byron at that time was terribly interested in all kinds of archaic and Primitive sources, and he was making heads with big teeth. And I think that was one of the things that was reproduced, if I remember correctly. I don't have the book. I don't have any of these.

[00:24:22.26]

IRVING SANDLER: Let me get back to Janis and Kootz. There were other artists who were also interested in primitive art at the time. Rothko was. Gottlieb was.

[00:24:32.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Uh, no. Maybe Gottlieb was, but—I was familiar with Gottlieb's work when he did still lifes, when he was part of the Ten, and they were kind of from Avery. I don't remember seeing Gottlieb's pictographs and things like that until we were together in Kootz. And Gottlieb came into Kootz after the Kootz Gallery started.

[00:24:59.59]

And I'd like to put this in for the record that Kootz asked Byron if he should take Gottlieb, and Gottlieb said, "Yes, you should take it."

[00:25:09.73]

IRVING SANDLER: Byron said this.

[00:25:10.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, you should take him, because he's a very fine painter. But what he was doing before he actually showed, I wasn't too aware of Adolph Gottlieb myself. I found out about his relationship to the Ten and to Milton Avery later. I didn't know him then. We actually got to know each other through our association with Kootz. He entered about a year after the Guggenheim Gallery started.

[00:25:38.61]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:25:44.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And as I remember, his first pictures I can remember at Kootz were pictographs. But this was the late '40s.

[00:25:51.50]

IRVING SANDLER: But can you—

[00:25:52.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But that was a different kind of Primitive.

[00:25:57.85]

IRVING SANDLER: Where does this interesting part of Byron come from?

[00:26:04.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Byron—

[00:26:06.10]

IRVING SANDLER: Because why should he—I guess, it would have been in the early '40s—turn to this kind of Primitive imagery?

[00:26:12.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Byron's interest in the past was very similar. It was a separate thing. And Byron's way of drawing, and way of thinking and way of imagining, was different, but for the very same reason that the 19th century artists, and particularly Picasso looked at every source, because for the first time in the history of art, man had the whole of the past exposed to him. Never before did they have so vast a panorama. Primitive art was just regarded as artifacts, except certain archaic high periods like Greek art, through David, and you know, Greek and Roman art to Neoclassicism and things like that. But the general attitude towards early art, especially Primitive art at first, was just that they were relics. They didn't relate it to mainstream culture at all. And it took artists who were able suddenly to see them to realize that the tie-up, the same kind of thinking.

[00:27:33.92]

IRVING SANDLER: But this implies a turn from the more classicizing geometric styles of the '30s.

[00:27:43.89]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, you don't understand. Byron, when he was—in 1930, was doing sculptures like Easter Island. He was always interested in the past, and he used to hide down in the cellar of the National Academy where nobody could see him and do sculptures of these big heroic heads that I have photos of here. He was dying to go to Easter Island. His imagination was fired by this. I was a baby then, you know. [Laughs.] I was just in high school, or something. I mean, and I just started. I was drawing very realistic things, or very awkward things, at the Art Students League. And I didn't know anything of this. But he was fired by that, and there was a time when he wanted to go where Gauguin was, to Tahiti. And he was fired by what had been happening abroad. Everything had come here, after all. We weren't exactly unaware of all these things.

[00:28:52.04]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:28:52.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And anybody with more imagination was going to take up that

lead.

[00:28:59.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, to me, it's interesting that this should have come about in the early '40s. It wasn't done in the '30s.

[00:29:11.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What?

[00:29:11.91]

IRVING SANDLER: This move on the part of guys like Byron.

[00:29:16.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Byron did it in the '30s. He did it in the '30s.

[00:29:22.06]

IRVING SANDLER: But he didn't show those things, did he?

[00:29:24.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He didn't show those things. Yes—his first show had some of those things in '38 at the Artist's Gallery. I have pictures of his first thing. He always had, yes, but he didn't show them the way Gottlieb did them. Byron was a very diverse artist. You see, what ties Byron up is his calligraphy in his image. If you trace his work, you'll see certain symbols, just like Gottlieb has certain symbols. You'll see certain symbols, no matter how he did it or in what format. There are certain symbols. There's a circle. There are stars. There are certain things carried through in his work no matter what the style is, what the change, things that has taken part. Now I showed you this thing. Where is it, that first catalog I showed you? The very next year, he had a show, and in this show, he wrote his own prologue.

[00:30:29.26]

IRVING SANDLER: That would have been '39?

[00:30:30.89]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '39. And he said—

[Reading:] *Those who waged the battle of non-figurative versus figurative are falsifying the real issues in painting. Because a form is not readily recognized does not make it plastic. Every shape, or form that is drawn, painted, sculptured, sawed, or pasted has its counterpart in nature, or a man-made product, and is carried into the picture either by direct visual contact or through the memory channels.*

[00:30:59.08]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:30:59.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: In other words, he hated the idea of having to be either an Abstract artist or a Figurative artist. He wanted to do what he wanted to do, and of course, he was crucified for it all his life. But actually, he has a signature, and a very definite one.

[00:31:20.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, I think just for the record, because this is a rather rare thing, I should just like to read the whole of Byron Browne's thing in '39. Quote—

[Reading:] *The purpose of art at all times has been to insinuate the unknown quality, "x," through the most immediate and realistic means. It is in the nature of man to want to peer beneath the watchcase in order to find out what make makes the wheels go round. A special*

privilege is granted to those who take the greatest leaps into the darkness. They arrive at the greatest results. No work in this exhibition should be considered Abstract or non-objective, regardless of the fact that the object is discernible in some pictures, and not in others. The purpose has been the same throughout. Those who waged the battle of non-figurative versus figurative art are falsifying the real issues in painting. Because the form is not readily recognized does not make it plastic. Every shape, or form that is drawn, painted, sculptured, sawed, or pasted has its counterpart in nature or a man-made product, and is carried into the picture either by direct visual contact or through the memory channel. One cannot paint what one has not seen. The only way the ancients could conceive a deity in their art was by making it in the image of man, or a combination of man, object and animal. The deity today has taken on a much wider scope. It may be the amoeba or the dynamo. Through it—the object—aided by the knowledge given us by contemporary science, we can express life by every conceivable method. On the other hand, being new will not make our work profound. Plastic knowledge plus the intensity of concept is the only thing that will make a painting live. We must beware of the danger of tabloidism, a form of painting that runs rampant in America today. If we are to retain the stature of the great artists of the past, it will be by the same attitude they took, that is, a real interest in the problems involved in the specific art of painting or sculpture, and not remain just picture makers.

[00:33:27.65]

This is very interesting. This is '39.

[00:33:29.51]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It could have been written today, couldn't it? [Laughs.]

[00:33:31.73]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, it could have. And this does indicate an interest in Primitive art, just the reference here to—

[00:33:37.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was interested in all art.

[00:33:42.04]

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

[00:33:43.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He had a much more—I'm sorry you never really knew Byron.

[00:33:47.45]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I didn't.

[00:33:47.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was an unusual man. He was the only artist I ever met who could like people's work that had no relation to his own. He never got quite a return. Oh, he was admired, but he never got quite a return of that generosity from other artists. You know, for instance, he could like people who are very romantic. He was a kind of bold, Baroque painter. He was not what you call a gentle romantic with soft nuances. He could like such a range, really love it, you know, even though it didn't have direct bearing on what he wanted to do or his own work. And I tell you, when I say—I'm very quiet about my husband because I was his wife, but when I say I loved that man, I loved him for what he was to everyone. It isn't just a personal thing, you see, because personally, I could have been very mad at him at times. But he was a most generous spirit.

[00:34:49.60]

IRVING SANDLER: When did Graham write this catalog?

[00:34:52.45]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: 1938.

[00:34:54.13]

IRVING SANDLER: I'd also like to read John D. Graham's introduction to Byron Browne's catalog in 1938. Quote—

[Reading:] *I wish to congratulate the Artists Gallery on its choice of artists and shows. Byron Browne represents a healthy trend in American painting toward clarity of statement and the purity of medium. After the Cesarean deliveries of our accademico, impressionisto, Cezanne-esque drudgery of muddled-up coloring forms, after the hangovers of our successful painters with their stuttering, slobbering speech, a whiff of fresh bracing wind is most welcome. Byron Browne shows a discriminating and exact usage of color and selective usage of articulating shapes. Browne speaks the language. It is the language of oil paint and shapes and tactile statements. It is the sane, graceful, pure and authoritative.* That should read, *it is sane, graceful, pure and authoritative. An exhibition of Browne's paintings is a lesson in good taste and clear thinking to art students and collectors. It clears the road for true American painting instead of clogging it with obsolete and insincere trash of stumbling sentimentality. Browne's art belongs to men who can build direct and man the simple sheets of native canvas sails. Salute to your efforts, Browne. Salute to the Artist's Gallery as the first organized effort in the direction of constructive taste, perhaps the first cultural institution of its kind in America.*

[00:36:28.41]

End quote. This is very rare, and that's one of the reasons I wanted to put it on tape.

[00:36:35.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It's lucky that you asked me for these interviews, because I had one copy, and Diane Waldman at the Guggenheim wanted it. And I wouldn't let her have it, but I wouldn't even give it to her to Xerox. But I took it there myself, and she Xeroxed it and I carried it back home. And now I have a second copy. [Laughs.]

[00:36:58.54]

IRVING SANDLER: I wanted to ask you one thing, again to jump back. You didn't follow the bombshell controversy in the *Times* that closely, then.

[00:37:08.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I might have, but I don't remember it well enough to do you any good. I might even have clippings on it, but I didn't look for them.

[00:37:17.63]

IRVING SANDLER: Another thing that I find interesting is that you speak with sympathy about the Bauhaus.

[00:37:26.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:37:26.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, I understand that Hoffman objected to the Bauhaus.

[00:37:30.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, so do I.

[00:37:32.20]

IRVING SANDLER: Would go into that?

[00:37:33.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. You see, many things, you cannot close your mind when

you're building it. And all these things were playing a part. In other words, you can't come to the formulation of an opinion until you know what you're going to reject. And it was in with the frontiers of what was happening. We had to decide that this belonged more to science than to painting, but before we could decide it, it was very exciting to investigate it and see where the difference was. I mean, that's a very dangerous attitude to reject something unless you've come into confrontation with it, absorbed it.

[00:38:29.91]

IRVING SANDLER: When you finally rejected the Bauhaus, on what grounds was that, Rosalind?

[00:38:34.68]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, that was a slow rejection. That wasn't a quick rejection. It was a slow rejection, understanding. It's like I show my class today the difference between Mondrian and Albers. I mean, a Mondrian is concerned with pictorial architecture, with making space. Mondrian is doing that.

[00:39:00.07]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:39:00.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Did I say that?

[00:39:01.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:39:01.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Okay. Albers is interested in the color vibrations, and he gets very beautiful results. And he even lifts the illusion of color, you know. But when he makes "A Homage to the Square," and he makes three squares of different color relations to each other, and has the color act, it really is just as much—it's exactly the same function as if you're showing charts to your students to show the action of color. He has not in any way destroyed the square by the inclusion of space, where Mondrian does. You see the lines can become positive instead of negative. If you see, like with a Franz Kline, where he has used black and white, either the black or the white can become the positive. It doesn't matter which is in front, but one thing, there's always that tension, the push and pull, the going backward and forward.

[00:40:08.04]

The cube, the square that Albers used, is pristine. The areas around do not enter it in any way. He divides them off. And if you're not sure about it, just from looking at "Homage to the Square," you can look at his whole output. And you can see that he is not involving space in that way, number one. He is even, number two. Mondrian hasn't got two lines alike. He hasn't got two shapes alike. Nothing in nature is made with a cookie cutter. There are no two identical areas in nature, and there are no two identical areas in a great work of art. If you look at some of Albers' earlier things where there were like architectural drawings, where he would make like a perspective thing, you could turn that slide around, and it would be the same action.

[00:41:01.83]

Now, you can turn any word work of art around, and it works in all directions, but it's not the same action, his is the same action, and he doesn't like—he has one thing with a white oblique shape, and he's shown it with orange and yellow and gray. And it's an oblique rectangle, and the color, most of it stays on the same plane. It does not interfere. It doesn't enter. It doesn't become part—one shape has to lead into another. You can't stop the action, no line, or a line—you just don't cut off the action. I have to show you. I can't do this in words.

[00:41:46.18]

IRVING SANDLER: No, no, what you're indicating, however, is that there was a sort of objection to the Bauhaus as a kind of design, rather than—

[00:41:56.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was scientific. It was more closely related. For instance, there are, and have been for many years, mathematical charts—figures for mathematical formulae, and to illustrate what happens in mathematics. And there have been studies in color dynamics. It is for us—the Bauhaus became rather a center for architecture and industrial design than it was, and nothing to do with the creative arts in the sense that we're talking about. The aesthetic was different. The philosophy was different. And the intention—

[00:42:50.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember anything more specifically that Hoffman might have had to say about this? [Hofmann's opinions on the Bauhaus stated in the book *Search for the Real* –Ed.]

[00:42:55.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. No, I only remember about Hoffman what he taught me and that he loved Matisse.

[00:43:00.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Were there people in the AAA who were strongly—well, Albers, of course, showed with them, but he wasn't around. Or was he?

[00:43:10.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't remember him, so I guess he wasn't around much. [Laughs.]

[00:43:15.94]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember people who in the AAA who were rather more positive?

[00:43:22.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: About the Bauhaus?

[00:43:23.61]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:43:24.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Uh—

[00:43:27.03]

IRVING SANDLER: Where was that list?

[00:43:28.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, let me get the list. On this list, see.

[00:43:31.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:43:32.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I knew I wasn't too far wrong, '39.

[00:43:34.38]

IRVING SANDLER: He comes in '39.

[00:43:36.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And John Ferren's in '39, too.

[00:43:38.11]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:43:39.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, let's see. Albers, yes. Bengelsdorf, no. Bolotowsky, no. Bowden, no. Byron Browne, no. Jeanne Carles, no. Cavallon, no. Christie, I wouldn't—he wasn't much of a force. Anna Cohen, no. Diller, no. Drewes, maybe— Werner Drewes, yes. Herzl Emanuel, no. John Ferren, I don't know.

[00:44:09.94]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:44:10.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Suzy Frelinghuysen, no. Gallatin, no. Fritz Glarner, I don't think so. I don't think so, especially not the way he turned out. He turned out with too much of an aesthetic, and he developed so well in his Neoplas—I knew you'd be cold.

[00:44:29.21]

IRVING SANDLER: It's all right.

[00:44:29.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: See? He developed such a beautiful avenue of Neoplasticism. I used his slides all the time. Is he all right? Oh, I shouldn't have—

[00:44:41.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Who's this? I don't know. I haven't heard—

[00:44:43.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Jerry O. Grant— now, you know I don't even know who he is. [Laughs.]

[00:44:46.96]

IRVING SANDLER: He may have been one of the guys they brought in from the West Coast.

[00:44:50.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't know. Balcomb Greene, somewhat. Balcomb Greene, somewhat. He was kind of playing both sides. Gertrude Greene, less. Hananiah Harari, no. Holty, I doubt it. Holty was from Hoffman. Holtzman, no. We were all interested, but I mean —

[00:45:15.40]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:45:16.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Dorothy Joralemon, no. I don't remember her. Ray Kaiser, I remember her, but I don't remember her point of view. Kamrowski, I would have thought he would have stemmed more from Kandinsky.

[00:45:26.26]

IRVING SANDLER: He studied at the Bauhaus in Chicago, though.

[00:45:27.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He did?

[00:45:28.63]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:45:29.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Kandinsky came from there, too.

[00:45:32.05]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. I don't know he was—

[00:45:33.51]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, no, he was, no, he was Blaue Reiter. I'm sorry. Well, that was part—

[00:45:37.69]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus.

[00:45:38.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Now you see, for instance, Feininger. Feininger was part of the Bauhaus. And he doesn't understand anything about Cubism. All those transparent planes, you put sheets of plastic over something. You remove them, nothing's touched. I mean, you haven't involved or changed anything. I mean, there's a whole bunch of—well, no. I don't want to put too much into it. Frederick Khan. I don't know. Paul Kelpe—

[Phone rings.]

[00:46:11.02]

Paul Kelpe was a German. And he did little cubes floating in space. I wouldn't—maybe he did like the Bauhaus. I don't remember. Leo Lances, no. Ibram Lassaw loved Kandinsky. I think he was intellectually interested in the Bauhaus. As far as his emotional expression is concerned, he was as distant from it as you can imagine. He was an Expressionist, really. And I think he came into his own most at certain heights of the Expressionist movement, because—

[00:46:48.58]

IRVING SANDLER: The very late '40s.

[00:46:49.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, he was not a Cubist. A very intelligent man, not a Cubist. He did love Kandinsky, I remember. And I remember our discussions with him, when he wanted us to join the club. Well, all right, that'll come at another time. We're going to stick to one thing. I think he might have been intrigued by the Bauhaus, not seriously involved emotionally. Agnes Lyall, I wouldn't say so.

[00:47:27.65]

IRVING SANDLER: No. No, I wouldn't.

[00:47:29.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Alice Mason, well, she didn't say much. She was very close to Ibram. She was a good friend of his. She didn't say much. George McNeil, no. George L.K. Morris, no. Pereira, I wouldn't know. Margaret Peterson, I don't remember. Reinhardt, not from what I can remember, not from what I can remember. The reason I hesitated is I know he wouldn't take it seriously in his art. But he might have been intrigued with it, to reject—as we all were, you know. Ralph Rosenborg, I wouldn't say so. Louis Schanker, I wouldn't say

so. Charles Shaw, I wouldn't say so. Slobodkina, no. David Smith, definitely not. Florence Swift, I don't remember. Albert Swinden, no. Turnbull, no. Vytlacil, no. Now Rudolf Weisenborn might have been. I don't remember. Warren Wheelock, no. Frederick Whiteman—Frederick Whiteman, I remember him vaguely. Harry Wildenberg, I don't remember what they think. Robert Wolff, I don't remember what they think. The rest of them, no. Beckford Young, Janet Young, I don't remember them. And Wilfrid Zogbaum, no, he was Hofmann. If they were intrigued, it was the way.

[00:48:57.65]

IRVING SANDLER: But if you went through that list again, Ros, just from what you remember, because it might be rather valuable, just those people, of course, you remember. Could you indicate what you remember that they might have been interested in?

[00:49:13.56]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Ilya Bolotowsky was a good friend of ours. I think that—as far as I know, I don't remember his studying with Hofmann. Do you know if he did?

[00:49:30.63]

IRVING SANDLER: I don't know.

[00:49:32.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember the impression that I had of his work at the time. I didn't feel about it as I feel about it, have felt about it since. I felt he had developed. My memory leads me to believe that he was not a Hofmann student, and that he didn't quite, I felt—that I felt, that he didn't quite know what he was doing at the time. But we were very friendly personally. And I have gained a lot of respect for his development since. I think he caught a lot. Harry Bowden was kind of an Expressionist. He loved my work. I think he liked me too, but he didn't have the guts to say anything because I was Byron's girl at the time. Byron, well, you know what he thought. Jeanne Carles, you know, I never became friendly with her. I just liked what she was doing. Hofmann liked her. I mean, Miz was in Europe then.

[00:50:45.60]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:50:46.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And should I put this on tape? Or is it—

[00:50:51.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Why not?

[00:50:52.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it's a little personal touch. I used to—but she was good. I remember the impression of her work was that, gee, I wished that I could get my work—I didn't work the same way. I think she was more—I remember thinking a little bit that her work was like knitting. It was a little too overall for me. There wasn't enough counterpoint. But I liked it. I felt she was successful in what she was doing. Cavallon was a student of Hofmann's. I can't remember his work. He was very quiet, didn't talk much. Christie was a little guy with a red nose. I don't remember much about his opinions. Anna Cohen was a nurse who studied with Hofmann. I don't remember much what she was doing. Diller was a force then, but I can't quote him to you. Drewes, I never had empathy with, never. I feel that he—I'm not talking personally now. I'm talking about—I think he represented the Bauhaus point of view, or Kandinsky or something.

[00:52:00.48]

IRVING SANDLER: I think Drewes had studied at the Bauhaus, incidentally.

[00:52:03.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. And not Kandinsky Expressionist— Kandinsky Geometric.

[00:52:06.59]

IRVING SANDLER: Geometric, yes.

[00:52:07.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, that's right. Herzl Emanuel, yes. I don't know how much basis he had. But I would say he would lean more toward the painting point of view. Ferren, I don't remember what he said. Suzy Frelinghuysen was a wife of—

[00:52:35.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Morris.

[00:52:37.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Morris. Anybody can read these transcripts, huh? [Laughs.] You know, I was just wondering if I should go through this whole thing with you, because there are so many people I don't know about.

[00:52:52.66]

IRVING SANDLER: No, just pick the ones you happen to remember.

[00:52:54.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, pick the ones that I remember.

[00:52:56.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:52:58.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Their point of view?

[00:52:59.80]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, because this eventually will build up into a rather interesting mosaic.

[00:53:02.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, I remember, yeah, I remember that Balcomb Greene, that I used to argue with him about art. You know, I don't know where he stemmed from. I met him through Ibram, I'm sure. And it's funny, he often hit things that you felt had a plastic look, but in talking, and there was some kind of gap in empathy. I remember that distinctly. With his wife, Peter Greene, Gertrude Greene, we didn't discuss art as much. I felt more of an empathy. But we really didn't discuss art as much. Hananiah Harari at the time, there was a lot of empathy with, and with Carl Holty.

[00:54:00.05]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, what was their attitudes—

[00:54:03.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Harari seemed to understand plasticity. He was—well, there was another aspect. There were a few people in this group who were very politically oriented, which made for another kind of difficulty.

[00:54:23.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:54:25.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But we're talking purely on aesthetics now. And on aesthetics, I would say Harari got the message at the time. At least we had empathy. Carl Holty definitely, although, at that time, I don't believe I responded to Carl's work. It was not because he didn't understand push and pull, and not because he didn't understand how to put a picture together. But it was more because there was something cold and mechanical. There was something, you see—Byron and I used to argue about Léger. He liked Léger. He had an attraction for the decorative, you know. Now, at this point in my life now I can appreciate the great Léger. But at that time, Léger was far too decorative for me. I couldn't appreciate Léger.

Now, carrying that over to Carl, I found that the divisions were too even. There was something about it. Even though you say the work was an Abstract Expressionist, it was determined into shape where you could definitely see the shape, like you did in Synthetic Cubism. Still there was that poetry, where every shape was different. There were the pushes, the tensions. Well it was—I rebelled against all kinds of mechanization, which the Bauhaus represented to me. Now, Carl understood plasticity, definitely. And I liked the way he developed and evolved. I mean, he's gotten very much more poetic. And I'm crazy about him. I like him very much, and I like the fact that he is one of the proselytizers, and we need it. And I'm fond of him. But talking about that time, he was, one, an empathetic soul for me. But my reaction to his work wasn't as positive as it is now. Harry Holtzman, of course, I was very empathetic to on the basis of ideas, of his work. It's just that he was so arrogant, he thought—

[00:56:41.81]

IRVING SANDLER: His ideas would have been—

[00:56:43.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Hofmann's.

[00:56:44.57]

IRVING SANDLER: And when, and how about Mondrian?

[00:56:46.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, that was—you see, Mondrian that there was no difference. You see the fact that somebody paints loose, or free, or tight, that's no difference. That's only a small thing.

[00:57:00.38]

IRVING SANDLER: But at the time, was that considered a difference?

[00:57:06.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[00:57:08.03]

IRVING SANDLER: See, I'm still—this came up last week, and—

[00:57:12.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That isn't a difference. It's never been a difference for me, and I don't think it was then. The difference was different than that. [Laughs.]

[00:57:20.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, no, the reason I asked the question, I asked it last week, too, was then, why were there so few people who were oriented to the Expressionists in the AAA. There were very few. Only one that I know of.

[00:57:33.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, because the time—don't you see—do you remember I told

you that when I first redirected my—what I'd learned from Hofmann to the history of art, I first appreciated in the past, the people whom I could understand very well, like Piero della Francesca, Uccello, people like that. It took me many years to appreciate it in Rembrandt and Turner, and people like that. Now, that's one reason.

[00:58:05.60]

IRVING SANDLER: Because—yeah.

[00:58:06.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We had to go through and understand. The second thing is just a historical phenomenon. Neoclassicism was followed by Delacroix and Romanticism. You always have this counterpoint, this reaction. You could—I think I mentioned it last week. You had to go do something after the dead end of Mondrian. Many of us, at that time, were not concerned with just doing what Mondrian had done so well. I mean, who the hell goes on doing that?

[00:58:35.07]

IRVING SANDLER: Just to digress for a moment, would you attribute the decline of the AAA around 1940 to this need for a switch?

[00:58:47.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Was it a decline? They went on.

[00:58:50.47]

IRVING SANDLER: They went on, but other artists, like the Abstract Expressionists, sort of took the attention away from the AAA.

[00:59:03.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, there was something—

[00:59:05.28]

IRVING SANDLER: That's like Jackson Pollock for one, Motherwell.

[00:59:08.83]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well, you're mixing up a few things here. There are historical reasons why, as de Kooning says, Pollock broke the ice, right?

[00:59:18.36]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:59:18.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Okay, this is historical. As far as formats are concerned, artistic, poetic expression, you know, the poetry that goes on in artists, has to assume a change of format, a reaction against what has been, always. This has happened from the beginning of art. That's one reason. In addition to these reasons, there were—and I don't know if I want to be involved in this. But you make up your own mind. There were also art political reasons. Now, if you want to get the story on this, I can give you the people to go to. Attilio Salemme's wife said she knows a good deal about this. Apparently, the story I heard was that André Breton came over. Now this is hearsay.

[01:00:17.79]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[01:00:18.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is not documentation. But this is what I was told. André Breton came over and told the group at Peggy Guggenheim's that if they wanted to make it,

and get attention, he was going to tell them how to do it. And one of the methods was to completely wipe out anything that had happened before. And a few of these people were very adept at doing that. And I would prefer not to mention the people that I know.

[01:00:48.63]

IRVING SANDLER: No, but [inaudible]—

[01:00:50.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: There were hatchet-men involved in this. And there was a deliberate effort to minimize anything that came before.

[01:00:59.61]

IRVING SANDLER: But what—but had anything happened within the AAA, many members—

[01:01:06.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Pollock wasn't involved in it, I don't believe. No.

[01:01:09.01]

IRVING SANDLER: No, but many members leave the group. That would be after '41. But when I— Let's not use the word decline. Let's say that the original group at one point began sort of to leave the AAA; the attention began to be directed to the budding Abstract Expressionists. How would you account for that?

[01:01:36.40]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I could account for it in many ways. First of all, the group at Peggy Guggenheim's were backed by Peggy Guggenheim's money. We had no such backing, number one. Now, number one, it was historically time for a change of format. Number two, it was encouraged and aided by the money of Peggy Guggenheim. Number three, we were at that time becoming enveloped, the whole world, by the philosophy of Nihilism and existentialism. The best artists in the Abstract Expressionist movement were not nihilists. De Kooning was never a nihilist. But this is what was behind the movement. It was one of the reasons we didn't become part of it, because aesthetically, philosophically, we were not nihilists. And it was a mistake, in a way. Actually Byron didn't have the time. He was teaching heavily, and when the group—Eighth Street Group formed, he said we had been through it with the AAA.

[01:02:55.93]

IRVING SANDLER: But that was considerably later.

[01:02:57.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was at the end of the '40s.

[01:03:00.34]

IRVING SANDLER: No, you indicate that in the early '40s there was a sort of change of sensibility.

[01:03:06.70]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, it was, you see—I am trying to draw the picture. You said, how do I account for it?

[01:03:13.58]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:03:13.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I can account for it sociologically. I can account for it through the determined plan of a very, very opportunistic group.

[01:03:29.50]

IRVING SANDLER: But the AAA, during all this time, was showing, proselytizing—

[01:03:35.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, but they were not doing it in this way. They were doing it without—oh, there is a difference when you are doing proselytizing honestly, without trying to—it's—we had no money. We had no gain involved. There was nothing like that. André Breton apparently, according to Lucia Salemme, told them the weakness of the American public, the Madison Avenue tactics to pursue. And it was basically the Surrealists who were involved in this, you see. That doesn't mean that every person in that group was concerned with this. But there were some pretty shrewd men who did this. And as I say, I would prefer not to mention who they were. I don't know too much, but I do know some, and I've heard more.

[01:04:54.24]

IRVING SANDLER: I think we're about running this tape out.

[01:04:57.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. But you see, if they hadn't done it, something else would have happened to change the format. It doesn't really matter—

[01:05:07.86]

IRVING SANDLER: You then do feel that the format had—

[01:05:09.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Had to change, of course.

[01:05:11.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Had to change.

[01:05:11.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Of course, of course. That's why I said that there are sociological and historical precedents for this and reasons for it.

[01:05:21.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:05:22.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But there are always, you know, the reasons—the way things actually happen, the manipulative sources, are not always so pretty, you know what I mean.

[01:05:35.03]

IRVING SANDLER: Here we go.

[END OF TRACK AAA_bengel68_8381_m]

[00:00:03.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Okay. You know, let somebody else do it. [Laughs.]

[00:00:07.54]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the second tape of—the second side of the tape of the—

[00:00:11.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:00:13.11]

IRVING SANDLER: —interview with Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne on February 11, 1968. Irving Sandler. We've talked a little about the reasons for the decline of the AAA, if that, of course, being a question mark—what about the accomplishments? What do you think the organization succeeded in doing?

[00:00:36.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: They succeeded in gaining the acceptance of abstract art here.

[00:00:44.23]

IRVING SANDLER: Just a moment—Go on a little bit more about the accomplishments of the AAA.

[00:00:49.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. I believe that they were the first American artists to continue, on a deep level, what the—well, what I will term bona fide Cubism started in France. Perhaps there were one or two people—I think I've said this before, last session—who did it here in the teens. But with very few exceptions, as a whole movement, there were more people involved, for which, as I said before, I directly credit Hans Hofmann with what he brought to us, and the combine of Hans Hofmann. And if you want to give another reason for Abstract Expressionism, you can also credit Hans Hofmann, because he was the bridge between Analytical and Synthetic Cubism and Abstract Expressionism—the real bridge, the true bridge, because he showed us how to release, you know. We didn't do it all at once. Naturally, you couldn't. But what else did they do? Well, that's it. What else do you want, except that they made Abstract art? They fought all the first battles. After that, the road was won. It's like now. I mean, the kids have trouble because they have nothing to fight for. I mean—and everybody I know complains about the same thing. All the kids think about is money. Well, you know what I mean? [Laughs.]

[00:02:42.64]

IRVING SANDLER: To get back into the '30s, Ros, there was a show just before the organization of the American Abstract Artists that the Whitney put on, which was supposedly to have been on American Abstract art. But I understand, just, was really the older kind of Armory Show generation. Do you remember at all about that?

[00:03:07.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What year was it?

[00:03:07.99]

IRVING SANDLER: It must have been '35, maybe '36.

[00:03:11.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, if it was '35—

[00:03:12.39]

IRVING SANDLER: It was the year after the Museum of Modern Art put on its huge Cubism Abstract art show. And they left the Americans out because they said the Whitney handled it.

[00:03:21.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, the Whitney did include American Abstract Artists. But they were not the whole group. And there were only certain members. I do remember that every year—I know Byron was showing there from '34. The first Abstract—the first picture that he showed was not what could be called his Abstract work. It was semi-abstract. It was kind of Synthetic Cubism, you know? But it was not Abstract. And the following years—'35, '36, '37, '38—I remember those years. Every year, they showed a wider selection of American Abstract Artists. But there were very few.

[00:04:07.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Was there resentment against the Whitney?

[00:04:10.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, there always is resentment towards any museum by any artist who's left out. And all those who were not included in the show—

[00:04:18.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, was it a more general thing?

[00:04:20.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was more general. They had all kinds of American art shown. And of course, during the '30s, the heyday was Social Realism.

[00:04:30.59]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what about the—

[00:04:32.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The popular one.

[00:04:33.47]

IRVING SANDLER: What about the—just to, again, digress for a second—what about the galleries? Do you remember which galleries in the '30s? When does the Pinacotheca open? That would be rather late.

[00:04:45.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, the first show Byron had there was in '43.

[00:04:50.60]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were there any galleries—the Artist Gallery? Was that in existence then?

[00:04:53.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The Artist Gallery? Yes, but they didn't show just abstract art.

[00:04:57.32]

IRVING SANDLER: No, but did they show abstract art?

[00:04:58.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:04:59.78]

IRVING SANDLER: Were there any other galleries that would show Americans that you can remember?

[00:05:04.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, yes, the ACA. I had some material here someplace about that show.

[00:05:09.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, we're going to come to that in a minute.

[00:05:11.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:05:11.45]

IRVING SANDLER: They showed American Abstract Artists?

[00:05:13.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: They had a show where they included all kinds. It was not exclusively Abstract Artists. But it was some kind of a protest against some criticism. I have it here. I pulled—I found it.

[00:05:28.07]

IRVING SANDLER: Hold that for a second, because well, in a minute, we'll just go through all of the files rather systematically. Can you think of any others?

[00:05:36.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I remember—

[00:05:37.34]

IRVING SANDLER: Because the orientation of the ACA would have been more to Social Realism, wouldn't it?

[00:05:40.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember Gorky showed at a number of places, the Brummer Gallery.

[00:05:45.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:05:46.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And there was another gallery whose name I've never been able to remember. It was up on the second floor on Madison Avenue. I think it had a French name. And he showed his black and white drawings there with all the cross-hatching, and the bone shapes—marvelous drawings. That was early. And—well, the galleries that would show abstract art didn't show American abstract art. I'm trying to just think of the people that—

[00:06:14.87]

IRVING SANDLER: American Abstract art is what I'm interested in.

[00:06:17.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, American. No; it was a miserable, miserable scene.

[00:06:21.56]

IRVING SANDLER: That would have been one of the reasons for the organization of the AAA.

[00:06:24.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, we had no place to show. I mean, if you call that having a place to show—in the '40s, Rose Fried came. She didn't come in the '30s.

[00:06:32.63]

IRVING SANDLER: In the '30s, no. Now, what about the role of the Modern?

[00:06:35.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, the New School showed.

[00:06:39.24]

IRVING SANDLER: In the '30s?

[00:06:40.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: New School. Byron had a show at the New School. I think maybe other people did, the Municipal Art Galleries. Those were our outlets. The "Y." There were certain museums and places outside of New York City that showed us on a traveling thing.

[00:06:59.58]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:07:00.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You know? But no, not like now. I mean, there were no commercial galleries to speak of.

[00:07:08.32]

IRVING SANDLER: How would you assess the role of the Modern—Museum of Modern Art?

[00:07:14.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: When?

[00:07:14.62]

IRVING SANDLER: In the '30s. Because they opened in '29.

[00:07:19.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, they were a great source of inspiration to us, in the sense that was where we could go and look at the people we admired. And the Gallery of Living Art down at NYU, the Gallatin Collection.

[00:07:33.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. What about the Societe Anonyme?

[00:07:37.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You mean the Independents?

[00:07:39.72]

IRVING SANDLER: No, that was the one that was Katherine Dreier.

[00:07:44.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, well, that was very limited. She was interested in people like Drewes. And she was interested in Bauhaus and Kandinsky. And she was like—she was a more aesthetic version of the Baroness Rebay. That was before my time. That was a little earlier, in the '20s, '29 or something.

[00:08:08.36]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, but she did go right through the '30s.

[00:08:10.58]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, except that she didn't represent what we—see, what we were doing was pushing the mainstream of Abstract art into America, the mainstream. You know, there's a lot of art done under the name "Abstract" in Europe and every place else. We're just talking about mainstream abstract art. And I don't care what anybody says about me if they read this transcript. But there are a lot of people that will bear me out in this.

[00:08:45.40]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm. There were certain important shows at the Museum of Modern Art that I'd like to ask you what your own reactions and memories of are. There was the large Cubism and Abstract art show in 1936.

[00:09:07.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, what do you want to ask me?

[00:09:08.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, just what you remember about it. Did it make an impression?

[00:09:14.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Sure, it must have.

[00:09:15.64]

IRVING SANDLER: What about the Surrealism show in 1937?

[00:09:19.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, I remember the fur cup and spoon. I remember—

[00:09:23.23]

IRVING SANDLER: Was there—

[00:09:23.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember the Giacometti Cage. I remember—yeah, I remember spotty things.

[00:09:30.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, what was the reaction of, say, the Abstract Artists as—

[00:09:35.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Abstract artists were not Surrealists, as a whole. You see, Surrealism is a funny thing to discuss because there is no great art without its elements of Surrealism in it. I mean, it has to be, because the artist's own poetry in itself is a kind of Surrealism. But intentional Surrealism, the kind of using the utilization of symbols, which—where you either put a chair in the desert or—it's literature. Gorky said it was literature. Murch said it was literature. Any artist will tell you it's literature. However, there are Surrealists who were more concerned about painting than they were about the literary symbol. And they become painters. So you don't care. You see, that's what's important.

[00:10:36.40]

IRVING SANDLER: But there would have been a general antipathy to, say, guys like Dalí or Tchelitchew?

[00:10:43.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It depends on the Dalí. Tchelitchew, yeah, he wasn't very plastic. Dalí sometimes did interesting things. There are good things. Now, he's awful. But I mean, he was—he had some good things in the early work. But I mean—now, how does a guy like Kurt Schwitters get into a Dada movement? He's a plastic artist. I mean, you know, what has he got to do with Dada? And then you take a guy like Marcel Duchamp, who was such a good artist and became a nothing. I mean, he just— [Laughs.]

[00:11:17.28]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember anything about the Bauhaus—?

[00:11:21.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What about it? I wasn't there. [Laughs.]

[00:11:23.65]

IRVING SANDLER: —show— No, of 1938.

[00:11:26.87]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What about it?

[00:11:27.68]

IRVING SANDLER: There was a large Bauhaus show at the Museum of Modern Art.

[00:11:31.70]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, I'm sure I was there.

[00:11:33.59]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I'm—no, I'm just checking, because these were important museum shows. And I just wondered what you remember.

[00:11:40.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: What do I remember? You know, the trouble is, between what you remember of isolated objects you've seen, whole shows, reproductions, all this, you can get all mixed up, you know what I mean?

[00:11:55.60]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, yeah. What I'd like to do now, Ros, is to take these documents kind of one at a time, this whole thing. And this week and next week—I have other questions. But I want to make sure that we go over the documents and don't miss anything. And you know, what we'll do is just turn the tape off, look at a document, and turn the tape back on. And if you have any comments about it, just to record them.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:12:25.19]

There's a document here dated September 1, 1939. It would have been mailed, then, on August 31, 1939, from the ACA Gallery, which reads—

[Reading:] *You are cordially invited to participate in a special exhibition of the Abstract Expressionists, Surrealists, and other progressive art tendencies of painting and sculpture to be held at the ACA Gallery. This exhibition will be held as an answer to the recent editorial which appeared in 'The New York Journal American,' attacking Modern Art in the United States. There will be no jury. For the most effective answer to this attack, it is imperative that the artist should try to send his very best work. Kindly let us know by return mail if you wish to be included in this exhibition. Please note in your reply the title, price, and size of your picture. Each artist will be represented by one work. The painting must not measure more than 40 inches, including the frame, horizontally. The exhibition will be held from September 18 to 30, date for receiving from September 11 to 16. For the committee.* And the committee is *Byron Browne, Herzl Emanuel, Hananiah Harari, and George McNeil.*

Why should the ACA have wanted to do this kind of a show? This wouldn't have been in line with their position. Weren't they fairly Social Realist at the time?

[00:13:51.56]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, they were. They were, but we were doing a lot of propaganda. Don't forget, we had lectured to the Artists Union.

[00:14:04.34]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:14:05.45]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And as I said, there were certain artists that had come into the American Abstract Artists who were Abstract artists, but they were very strongly—what should I say— pink? And we were all kind of that way at the time because of the Depression.

[00:14:24.17]

IRVING SANDLER: Sure.

[00:14:24.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But there were different degrees. And these people were more dedicated. Let's put it that way. And naturally, they would have a greater affiliation with the Social Realists. So when you could meet them on both grounds of painting and politics, then you got their empathy and sympathy. And that was important.

[00:14:48.80]

IRVING SANDLER: How did this show look? Do you remember?

[00:14:50.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think it was a good show. I don't remember.

[00:14:52.88]

IRVING SANDLER: How was it received?

[00:14:54.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: See, who said I had a good memory? [Laughs.]

[00:14:56.54]

IRVING SANDLER: How was it received?

[00:14:57.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't remember. But I think that possibly there might be clippings someplace. I will try to find them.

[00:15:02.15]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I didn't know about the existence of the show. And this might be—

[00:15:05.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I'll try to find clippings on that. I might have it with Byron's clippings, because you see—I'll tell you something about my career. I'm a sentimental woman. And I've kept everything that, every scrap, every note that Byron ever wrote to me. And—

[00:15:25.02]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you have those in scrapbooks?

[00:15:28.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You mean personal?

[00:15:29.28]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I mean Byron Browne's—

[00:15:33.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I have a lot of Byron's material, yes.

[00:15:35.46]

IRVING SANDLER: Maybe next time we could look through some of that.

[00:15:38.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But from my personal—these are my personal papers.

[00:15:41.46]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:15:42.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You're not looking at Byron's, where I have a separate whole file of his work.

[00:15:46.35]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:15:47.17]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The only reason I have this is because Byron nearly died when he saw me moving carton boxes of old papers. And he says, what are you doing with that? Why don't you throw it out? Because he loved to throw out stuff, unfortunately. So that—what I have of his is about a third of what I should have, of course. But I was romantic, sentimental. And I thought I kept more than I did. Apparently, his influence got me to throw out a lot more than I would have.

[00:16:17.60]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. No, there's enough here, certainly, to warrant looking over.

[00:16:22.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right. Now—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:16:24.29]

IRVING SANDLER: [Reading:] *John D. Graham*—this is a 1938 biography. *Born in Russia, 1891, has lived in New York City 18 years, studied at University of Kyiv, Russia, Art Students League, New York, and in France, Italy, and Spain.*

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:16:41.93]

Do you remember anything about Kainen?

[00:16:44.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I know all about him.

[00:16:45.89]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, because he was a critic in the '30s.

[00:16:48.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:16:49.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, tell me a little about him.

[00:16:51.83]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he was a painter. And I don't remember if he was a member of the Ten, but he was—

[00:17:01.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Very close to them.

[00:17:02.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —very close to it. And he was a critic an art critic during the '30s. And then he went to Washington. And he became Curator of Graphic Arts at the Smithsonian Institution. And he was there for many years, about 20 years. And now he's Consultant of Graphic Arts for the National Collection of Fine Arts. And he's a very close friend of mine.

[00:17:29.50]

IRVING SANDLER: Because he wrote some—I thought he—

[00:17:32.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He wrote a terrible review of my work.

[00:17:35.26]

IRVING SANDLER: Of your work?

[00:17:36.07]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[Reading:] *Rosalind Bengelsdorf was eclectic, able, but unnecessarily complex. Good painting, but without positive viewpoint.* [Laughs.] *The same can be said for many others.* [Laughs.]

[00:17:47.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Then his attitude would have been unsympathetic to the American Abstract Artists?

[00:17:51.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, I don't think so. But I don't think he quite dug what we were doing. Now, I didn't read the whole thing. You can read it, if you'd like.

[00:18:06.27]

IRVING SANDLER: Let me just glance at it. This would be *Art Front*, an article—

[00:18:13.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We found a date someplace there. It's in the '30s.

[00:18:16.68]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Well, no. It would have—I think they stopped publication when? Around '37. I guess one could almost find out the date if there are any shows announced here. Well, it would be sometime in April or May.

[00:18:34.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Someplace in that magazine we found a date. You know who I was looking through it with? Francis O'Connor. And we found something to establish—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:18:46.20]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the list of artists in the ACA show. Milton Avery, Rosalind Bengelsdorf, Byron Browne, Francis Criss, Stuart Davis, Burgoyne Diller, Akiba Emanuel, Hananiah Harari, Boris Margo, George McNeil, De Hirsch Margules, I. Rice Perera, Ad Reinhardt, Misha Reznikoff, Louis Schanker, Albert Swinden, Joseph Solman, Nahum Tschacbasov, Joseph Vogel, Basil Yurchenko, Ben Zion, and William Gropper in that list, huh? The sculptors are Herzl Emanuel, Isamu Noguchi, David Smith, Sylvia Wald, Milton Hebald, and H. Ambellan, A-M-B-E-L-L-A-N.

[00:19:37.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was a sculptor.

[00:19:38.24]

IRVING SANDLER: Hey, this is a kind of interesting group, because this is a sort of a mixture of the AAA and of the Ten, and then a couple of guys—like, where does—how does Misha Reznikoff come into this?

[00:19:55.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Misha Reznikoff was, at that time, painting and exhibiting—well, he was painting. Nobody exhibited. But he was a very close friend of Gorky's. He was a Surrealist. And we became very friendly with him because we were very friendly with Gorky.

[00:20:12.50]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:20:13.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And I don't know how he got into that show. But let's say we were all pals.

[00:20:16.97]

IRVING SANDLER: Because Gorky isn't in the show. Who's Joseph Vogel?

[00:20:21.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, he was a member of the Artists Union. I don't remember much more.

[00:20:25.71]

IRVING SANDLER: And Basil Yurchenko?

[00:20:27.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, he was on the project. He was one of the—here. Here is Basil Yurchenko.

[00:20:42.56]

IRVING SANDLER: But this list would have been chosen by that committee that included Byron and several other people.

[00:20:49.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, I don't know how they chose them.

[00:20:52.89]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the first time that Boris Margo's name—was he around at the time?

[00:21:01.58]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he must have been around. I remember him sharing a loft with Byron. Yes, of course he was around. Byron had a loft on 12th Street. And I had a place

at 63 East 11th. That was before we were married. And at one point, Byron shared half his loft with Boris Margo for about a year or so.

[00:21:35.35]

IRVING SANDLER: What about De Hirsch Margules?

[00:21:37.89]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he's dead.

[00:21:39.03]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, I know.

[00:21:39.66]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was a friend of that guy who talked on television, you know, the one who wrote the books? Alexander King. Yeah, we knew him very well at that time. There were all kinds of artists. Don't forget, we were all on WPA. We were all in the Depression, you know? And I don't know. What does that say? Anything to do with what you were interested in?

[00:22:07.65]

IRVING SANDLER: It's curious that Gropper should have—now this is a quote by Baron of the gallery. It's interesting that Gropper should have been in that group.

[00:22:25.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well, probably they tried to make it wide, you know?

[00:22:31.33]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. The show, apparently, as far as the ACA Gallery was concerned, was because it was an attack made in the *Journal American* on the democratic right to self-expression. This is what Baron writes.

[00:22:44.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: So they used all kinds of self-expression, political and otherwise.

[00:22:47.78]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Including abstract art.

[00:22:48.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Political, any kind. Yeah.

[00:22:50.17]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. And here's a statement by Hananiah Harari. This is a crumbling mimeo copy. So I guess it, just for the record, might be worth reading. She writes, quote—

[Reading:] *The artists represented in this exhibition wish their works to be judged and appreciated on their own qualities as works of art. But at this time, we speak as democratic citizens as well as artists. The exhibition is organized in defense of democracy of art and of democracy in art. These are grave times for democracy, and therefore, for art. President Roosevelt, in a stirring a profound speech at the dedication of the new building of the Museum of Modern Art said,* quote*, 'The conditions for democracy and for art are one and the same,'* end quote*. That can well serve as a slogan for all artists and for all humanity struggling for a better life. Democratic principles must constantly be reaffirmed in art, as in government. The gains, sorely won in countless social and aesthetic battles for progress, are often rudely challenged by a selfish minority who, when they hear the word culture, reach for a gun. Is our concern over this question exaggerated? Unfortunately, it is not. Concentration camps and bonfires of a lot of artists and their works in many lands of the Earth. There are groups in this country who want that to happen here, the same groups that*

seek to crush the trade unions, the WPA, the New Deal, and world democracy. They are the blood brothers of Hitler. And like him, they have their bigoted, fanatical, and anti-cultural theories of art. We cannot afford to ignore these groups, nor to allow ourselves to be lulled by the laughter they will provoke in the entire art world and beyond. For their methods are unscrupulous and undemocratic, and they have money power behind them. Our best answer to this advance guard of fascist culture will be the strengthening of our democratic organizations and the taking to heart of another great truth expressed by President Roosevelt, quote*, 'As in our democracy we enjoy the right to believe in different religious creeds or in none, so can American artists express themselves with complete freedom from the strictures of dead artistic tradition or political ideology,'* end quote.

And that's the end of the Harari statement. She was a member of the AAA.

[00:25:20.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's a man.

[00:25:21.49]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, he. I'm sorry. He was a member of the AAA.

[00:25:24.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:25:25.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Therefore, it's interesting that he should use this kind of political—

[00:25:31.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Because he was political.

[00:25:33.03]

IRVING SANDLER: —approach to—

[00:25:33.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was political. But he was also very much concerned about Abstract art. And he didn't see any opposition between the two.

[00:25:46.10]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:25:46.36]

Another document I would like to put on tape is a mimeo copy, falling apart, of a show at the Temporary Galleries of the Municipal Art—well, that would be the Municipal Art Galleries. It's their seventh exhibition, April 29 to May 17, 1936. And the artists in this show are Rosalind Bengelsdorf, Henry Bowden, George Byron Browne, Mercedes Jeanne Carles, Giorgio Cavallon, Ivan Donovetsky, Balcomb Greene, Ray K. Kaiser, Marie Kennedy, Leo Lances, George McNeil, Albert Swinden, Albert Wein, David Burliuk, Ingmark Datz, Joseph DeMartini, Hans Floyd, Harry Gottlieb, A.F. Levinson, L. Jean Liberté, John Lonergan, Moses Oley, R. Paris, Louis Ribak, Moses Soyer, Frederick K. Detwiler, William Howard Donahue, Charles Harsanyi, Harry Herring, Gaston Longchamp, Henry Arthur Miller, Gertrude Nason, Agnes M. Richmond, Samuel Rothbort, Otto H. Rothenburgh, B-U-R-G-H, Herman Trunk, Jr., Herbert B. Tschudy, T-S-C-H-U-D-Y, Winthrop Turney, Edmund Weill, Isabel L. Whitney, Lina Altshul, Melville Bailey, Francis Doonan, Hannah Fabian, Louis H. Fleischer, Anna Glaser, Joe Goldman, Sophie Heyman, Pearl Landsverk, Bessie Levy, Emil Oppenheimer, Ida Orlov, Harriet M. Pollock, and G. Gordon Rothenberg.

[00:27:53.16]

Now, that's interesting. This is the municipal gallery, and from this list, there are a great many Abstract artists in it. It's April 29 and May 17, 1936.

[00:28:04.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, we didn't take it over as a group yet, apparently.

[00:28:06.78]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, therefore, there would have been quite some openness to abstract art. This would have been run by the project, the municipal art gallery.

[00:28:16.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Was it?

[00:28:17.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, I don't know.

[00:28:18.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't, either.

[00:28:19.33]

IRVING SANDLER: But who else could it have been?

[00:28:20.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I'll find that out. That's part of my project. [Laughs.]

[00:28:22.92]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Who else could have run it?

[00:28:25.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I guess the city ran it. It was municipal. And we had LaGuardia.

[00:28:29.71]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. But it's interesting to me that there should have been so many abstract artists included in that show.

[00:28:35.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '36, which was early.

[00:28:37.39]

IRVING SANDLER: This was very early.

[00:28:38.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Very early.

[00:28:38.59]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:28:39.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: So—

[00:28:40.09]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember anything about that show or the situation or the Municipal Art Gallery?

[00:28:46.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I wish I remembered more for my own sake.

[00:28:49.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:28:49.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: For the simple reason that I have this project to do, myself. Now, possibly as I investigate on my own, memories will come to me then.

[00:29:01.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, yeah.

[00:29:04.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Is there any way of private psychoanalysis, where you bring your memories—

[00:29:07.90]

IRVING SANDLER: I don't know.

[00:29:08.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —back?

[00:29:08.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Maybe—say, Rosalind, do you remember the picketing of the Museum of Modern Art by the AAA—

[00:29:14.49]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:29:14.89]

IRVING SANDLER: —in 1940?

[00:29:15.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:29:15.94]

IRVING SANDLER: What do you remember of that incident?

[00:29:18.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember that. We were in—what was it, 19—

[00:29:21.56]

IRVING SANDLER: '40, I think. About PM.

[00:29:22.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '40, was it? Wasn't about PM. It was because they wouldn't show American Abstract Artists.

[00:29:30.88]

IRVING SANDLER: Partly that, but also partly because they were showing a show of illustrations having to do with PM.

[00:29:38.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That, I don't remember. All I remember is that we picketed to make them show American Abstract Artists. Was it as late as '40?

[00:29:47.05]

IRVING SANDLER: I believe it was—

[00:29:48.40]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Was it?

[00:29:48.79]

IRVING SANDLER: —'40s.

[00:29:49.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, yes. I remember very well that thing because we were incensed. We had been turned down every place. And we wanted to have a place to show.

[00:30:09.67]

IRVING SANDLER: Anything else about that protest? Were you on the line?

[00:30:13.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, I was on another picket line.

[00:30:15.97]

IRVING SANDLER: Which one was that? [Laughs.]

[00:30:17.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I was on a picket line, the—well, I was in a picket line for—the account of the WPA. We were always picketing.

[00:30:29.78]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Yeah.

[00:30:32.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: On 57th Street, I think it was, some WPA office. And—turn the tape off for a minute.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:30:44.20]

IRVING SANDLER: We're talking—

[00:30:44.53]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Didn't I tell you that last time?

[00:30:46.17]

IRVING SANDLER: Just—but maybe you'll put it a little better now. We're talking about the Gorky speech that was referred to in our last tape, last week.

[00:30:55.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, and—

[00:30:56.21]

IRVING SANDLER: You took this—

[00:30:56.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Didn't I tell you that last night?

[00:30:58.23]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, you mentioned the apple, but go over it again, because—

[00:31:00.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, as I remember it, as I remember it, he had this wonderful way—first of all, he had tremendous charm in the way he talked. And he said—he drew the shape, the flat shape of the apple, you see, as though you cut it in half, but not the way Ruth cut it in this way, but so it showed a shape, like a Miró shape, like this, with all the curves, very sexy. And he showed it flat, see? And then he showed it as a shape, and then he showed how other shapes would be part. And it was showing the interior of the apple, and—but also showing how the space moved into the apple, which is a very important next step. Yeah.

[00:31:50.65]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, what he was actually doing is something not—

[00:31:52.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was showing Cubism.

[00:31:53.59]

IRVING SANDLER: —from Hofmann. He was taking a natural form and developing it as a pictorial element.

[00:32:01.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was doing that, except that Hofmann did it in the process of our talking—our working for the model, and actual work. But he was doing it in one lecture. And he did a marvelous job. It's very hard to do in one lecture. And he drew with a great deal of verve, and a great deal of—oh, he has that presence. He has—Jesus. For me, he'll always be alive, because he was so tremendous as a force in my life. He was a tremendous force in my life. I felt that he, Hofmann, Byron—these were people—and first Holtzman, who started my thinking going—these were the people that knew art.

And with Gorky and Byron, Bill did—but I didn't—see, Byron knew Bill well. I knew Bill, but not—well, we'd sit and talk after the AAA meetings, and we'd sit and talk, all of us in a group. But, like, personal contact, where we would expand to—no, I didn't see him—I was a woman, don't forget, and I had a certain disadvantage in being a woman. I mean, don't forget, Bill liked women, and—not that he ever—at that time, he was involved with Elaine, and he had another girl. I mean, that was before Elaine married him. And it was—don't you want scotch? Let me give you scotch.

[00:33:39.44]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, whichever—

[00:33:41.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Turn it off.

[00:33:42.30]

IRVING SANDLER: But continue.

[00:33:42.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't want to—

[00:33:43.42]

IRVING SANDLER: What more do you remember about Bill or those talks? This is Bill de Kooning.

[00:33:48.49]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I was saying that—well, I think I told you last week that I think the reason that he didn't join the American Abstract Artists when it was formed was what in toto I remember of his talks. He was a very honest man, always, very honest. My experience was—with Bill has never been—I have no memory of anything contrived, anything false, anything. And what I got was—at the time, was that he couldn't make up his mind. Like, he couldn't come to conclusions. He more or less said to us during the course of that, like, he couldn't finish a picture. He didn't know when it was finished. And he couldn't make, like, a final decision, the final—and anyway, he didn't want to exhibit at the time. And—but I remember that—an empathy, tremendous empathy, was felt—

[00:34:52.24]

IRVING SANDLER: But then—then he was doing—

[00:34:53.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He didn't join our group.

[00:34:54.78]

IRVING SANDLER: No, he didn't, but he wasn't doing abstract pictures, then?

[00:34:57.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I was impressed with the fact that when I saw his mural at the World's Fair—[laughs] let's not mention that—that this, at the time, was the first thing I'd seen of Bill's that was finished, you know? Accomplished; up.

[00:35:15.09]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But he was also doing these—

[00:35:16.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was doing—

[00:35:17.85]

IRVING SANDLER: —pictures and figures.

[00:35:19.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, yes, he was. But so was Byron and so on.

[00:35:23.64]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But he was working—

[00:35:24.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But don't you forget, Gorky, and Byron, and Bill did not do exclusively abstract art. They loved Pompeii. They loved Ingres. They loved all of the past. And they refused to be intimidated into not doing it. Gorky did these things. Bill did these things. And thank God they have some slides of them—

[00:35:50.35]

IRVING SANDLER: Then you—

[00:35:50.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —because I use them with my classes [laughs] all the time.

[00:35:52.98]

IRVING SANDLER: Then you imply that there is something about the American Abstract Artists that was programmatic, and—

[00:36:00.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, some people try to turn it into academy. Is that what you mean?

[00:36:03.79]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:36:04.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, some people. But there were enough reasons—

[00:36:06.02]

IRVING SANDLER: Program.

[00:36:07.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:36:07.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Not an academy.

[00:36:09.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, but that wasn't only the AAA. It's the nature of the times, of any time. They always try to take over and isolate, eliminate everything else. It comes with every movement, as far as I know of art history. It has always been, and always will be. The only difference today is that you get more money when you're on top. A hell of a lot more money.

[00:36:34.86]

IRVING SANDLER: I want to just go over a few figures again, some of whom we talked about last week, but just should there be more that you remember of them. Again, the role that Jan Matulka plays.

[00:36:51.30]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, you know, I didn't study with him. But I must say that the older generation that came from the League worked with him, and it seemed to be very meaningful.

[00:37:03.78]

IRVING SANDLER: To them.

[00:37:05.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And Jacob Kainen told me that he found things of Jan Matulka's that are marvelous, and he's having difficulty convincing the National Collection of Fine Arts to acquire them. And they're so dirt cheap that it's a shame. But he's having difficulty because the National Collection of Fine Arts hasn't heard of "Jan" Matulka. "Yan" Matulka. Isn't that awful? Ugh. But he was a teacher at the League, and the only teacher before Hofmann who taught anything besides the more or less conventional avenues. And they were dead avenues. Because it wasn't like studying with Ingres. It wasn't like studying with Degas. It wasn't like studying with even David, who was another kind, but—or even Meissonier. [Laughs.] It was really dead teaching because it doesn't matter whether you're painting the figure or you're painting an abstract shape, if you have an inspired teacher.

[00:38:09.64]

My husband was luckier. He studied when he was very young at the National Academy with Charles Hawthorne, who was a greater painter and who gave a wonderful feeling for painting with it, so that he was luckier. But in my years, the only one I remember who gave me anything, which I told you last week, was George Bridgeman, simply because when he taught anatomy, he reduced the body to the cube and the rectangle in solid form, and it was very easy for me to make the transition.

[00:38:48.78]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:38:49.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And that was it.

[00:38:50.19]

IRVING SANDLER: Matulka at that time would have been then teaching Cubism?

[00:38:53.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, a lot of—well, I don't know. I didn't study with him. You'd have to ask—

[00:38:57.51]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I just—

[00:38:57.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —someone who did.

[00:38:58.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, well, which I have, but I was just wondering if you remembered any of the talk—

[00:39:04.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[00:39:04.71]

IRVING SANDLER: —around that time.

[00:39:05.07]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, I didn't go to his class. All I know is his students.

[00:39:10.11]

IRVING SANDLER: Just out of curiosity, a little more about Graham.

[00:39:14.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I don't think I can add much to what I told you.

[00:39:17.92]

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

[00:39:19.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: As a woman, and as—I was—Gorky told me when he went to Provincetown with us in the '30s, he's—He said, "You're a very good artist, but you make a lousy wife," because I had a big mouth, you know? And I always wanted to talk about art. And it was an impediment. You see, I felt the necessity of pushing myself a little bit in the

background and listening, but at the same time, my memories are female memories. I don't remember, even though I was an intellectual and an artist—it's funny. Isn't that a duality?

[00:40:18.71]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:40:19.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember female things. I remember John Graham from the context of the fact that he had so many wives. And I was trying to figure out what attracted so many women to him, and the fact that he went ice-skating, and the kind of women he married. And I was very impressed by his taking the collection that he had, the Frank Crowninshield collection. He had a way of talking that did not encourage me to listen. It was kind of very European, and it was a high-pitched voice where I couldn't listen. My mind would wander off. The way he expressed himself, not in when he wrote, but when he talked, was a kind of esoteric way that—I probably responded to a more direct—see, I remember Bill. I remember a kind of poignancy. I remember a kind of empathy I felt with his honesty and the way he presented the fact that he couldn't make up his mind. And I respected that. But there is a certain kind of presentation that my mind goes off and starts thinking about other things. So I would look at him instead of listening to him. So I'm unfortunate, as—

[00:41:46.89]

IRVING SANDLER: What do you remember of David Smith?

[00:41:49.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: David Smith I liked very much. I had a great deal of respect for him. I remember him also by the power of his presence. A lot of these people I do. They had presence. They had tremendous physical presence. All of these people did. Gorky had tremendous presence. I told you about my first meeting with him.

[00:42:10.11]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:42:10.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And so did David Smith. So did Byron. Bill had it in a different way—presence—but it was a gentle presence, but it was a presence. And David was big and burly, and he was married to Dorothy—

[00:42:32.75]

IRVING SANDLER: Dehner.

[00:42:33.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —Dehner. Well, Dorothy. And they lived in Brooklyn Heights. And I remember he had a lot of paintings—not paintings, but, like, drawings, watercolors around of his work at that time.

[00:42:46.52]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. He starts as a painter, and he makes those—

[00:42:48.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, no, he was doing sculpture. And as far as we were concerned, he was it, brother. Byron was at that time also doing these things, you know? Like you see that thing there.

[00:43:01.49]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:43:01.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You know, that—

[00:43:02.84]

IRVING SANDLER: The construction—

[00:43:03.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:43:03.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Metal construction.

[00:43:04.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well, he started doing them very early, too, but of course, his main interest was painting. And of course, for us, David Smith was the extension of Julio González. And he was taking off and taking off in a very positive way. And I don't remember what he said about art, unfortunately for you. I remember there were tensions between him and Gorky. I don't know how serious they were. I really don't believe they were terribly serious. I believe there was a lot of humor involved.

[00:43:40.98]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:43:41.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And there were all these personalities, don't forget. But we hung together, and Gorky was—he made a purposeful thing out of alienating people, but he couldn't really alienate artists who admired him.

[00:44:02.34]

IRVING SANDLER: So David could be very funny that way. I remember shortly before—

[00:44:06.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: David was very sexy, very sexy. I remember his talk was sex, but I can't tell you an incident. I mean, exact quote. But I remember thinking, well, that's a sculptor for you. All sculptors are like this. Because as far as I knew, they were.

[00:44:24.54]

IRVING SANDLER: One thing that you do say is interesting. You said that for you, and I assume you meant for you, Byron, and probably many other people around, he was the sculptor. What about guys like Calder or Noguchi or even Ibram? He was considered out of their class, then.

[00:44:45.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I mean, you're making it difficult for me.

[00:44:46.98]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I—

[00:44:48.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Ibram was—

[00:44:51.54]

IRVING SANDLER: I'm trying to estimate—

[00:44:52.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —a very dear friend, and—

[00:44:54.29]

IRVING SANDLER: No, I don't mean to put anyone down. I just want to know—I'm just curious about his role—

[00:44:59.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Ibram's sculpture went a different road from my way of thinking, from Byron's way of thinking, from Gorky's way of thinking.

[00:45:08.82]

IRVING SANDLER: No, but—

[00:45:09.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: David Smith represented an American extension of the tradition of Modern art. For us, he was the first.

[00:45:20.04]

IRVING SANDLER: You mean, even that early—

[00:45:22.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Calder was lightweight for us. David was heavier.

[00:45:26.70]

IRVING SANDLER: But you mean even that early—

[00:45:28.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes.

[00:45:28.65]

IRVING SANDLER: This would have been, when?

[00:45:29.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes.

[00:45:30.06]

IRVING SANDLER: The middle '30s.

[00:45:31.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: See, Calder was playing around, as far as we were concerned. Now, I show my students the Spiny Stabile with a great deal of seriousness. And I show it with Hellenic Greek slides from Libya, from—yeah, from Cyrene, out in the open. We show them the inclusion of space there, and I show them without—because then they say, "Oh, the environment plays a part." And I'll say, I'll show you a slide with—I show them a slide with a black Calder, the little Spiny Stabile with none, nothing, not even a goddamn shadow. And the volume of the space acts so that they can't miss it. You see? But there aren't too many Calders you can use as an example like that. There are few. And you can use them. But he wasn't the weight that David Smith was at that time, to me.

[00:46:25.42]

IRVING SANDLER: Was this—was your feeling shared by other people at the time?

[00:46:32.11]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was shared by some of my most intimate associates. I couldn't

talk for everyone, and I wouldn't want to on the basis of memory.

[00:46:40.22]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:46:40.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: My feeling was that there were certain people who definitely felt as I did.

[00:46:47.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Was this—

[00:46:47.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But I couldn't tell you the degree.

[00:46:50.92]

IRVING SANDLER: One more thing. What role does Gallatin play?

[00:46:57.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Gallatin played a role as an old man who was—whom we admired because he gave us that to look at. And we had very little to look at.

[00:47:09.43]

IRVING SANDLER: You mean the collection?

[00:47:10.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:47:10.96]

IRVING SANDLER: At NYU.

[00:47:11.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he was also helping us—support us in our activities as a group. And so we were very amiable towards him, but we didn't—as an artist, do you mean?

[00:47:28.48]

IRVING SANDLER: No, as a man, as an artist.

[00:47:30.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: As a man, we felt—

[00:47:31.42]

IRVING SANDLER: What do you remember about him?

[00:47:31.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —he was the right kind of sponsor. He was a very sympathetic and empathetic sponsor at a time when there just weren't any. And that goes for Morris, too. They paid some of our bills, you know.

[00:47:49.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Yeah. Do you remember anything more about G.L.K. Morris? Because he was writing for—

[00:47:57.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he was—

[00:47:58.08]

IRVING SANDLER: —*Partisan Review* at the time, and I guess was in a sense a spokesman.

[00:48:01.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I do remember. He was very good for the simple reason that—I have a definite impression—you see, I have an impression. You see, my memory is better in impression than in exact quote. I have a memory of the presence of a person. George L.K. Morris was the arbiter between the warring factions. He kept the peace. He kept us together. He kept—now, I've been looking for our constitution, and I haven't been able to find it. So help me—I'm sure I didn't throw it out. But does Harry have it?

[00:48:38.83]

IRVING SANDLER: I'll have to call him.

[00:48:39.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, you didn't ask him. But anyway, he would—I forget whether he was Chairman or President or something, but he would conduct the meetings and keep them orderly and keep people from going crazy with rage and/or taking over the floor. He was very good at that. He was wonderful at a kind of cool rationality, a kind of logic in between these—all these ideologies. Really, for a group of artists, and when we—I was Chairman of the Exhibition Committee. And when we had the hanging and people came to look where their pictures were hung, everybody wanted some other place, you know? And the fact that you had these young people, and so pitched, and so concerned and so many really different avenues of thinking, we got along very well.

[00:49:45.45]

IRVING SANDLER: When you—what were some of the wars, if you can remember?

[00:49:51.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, they were—well, they were on—well, the wars that I can remember were on who to admit, and on—I don't think we had aesthetic wars in the general meetings. I really don't. Which is amazing, isn't it?

[00:50:20.23]

IRVING SANDLER: You mean it was all on estimations of the aesthetic worth of the—

[00:50:24.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think we had arguments about how much we should be politically involved. I think there were members who wanted us to be more politically involved. Now, this is just an impression, again. I'm trying to think where the biggest—I don't remember any big issues on aesthetics, openly, in open meeting. I think we had enough respect for each other to leave each other alone.

[00:50:56.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. But the figuration/abstraction thing would come up, I understand from other people—

[00:51:01.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes

[00:51:02.14]

IRVING SANDLER: —again and again?

[00:51:02.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. We argued about, as I said, the admission of members. We argued about to what extent we should be abstract, what did abstraction mean, those things. Yes, I think we did. But—gee, I wish I could remember more.

[00:51:25.86]

IRVING SANDLER: No, no. It'll all add up. It'll all add up.

[00:51:30.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. So probably some people remember more than I do. Well, you see, you have to do this. You have to go to many people, and by the sum total of everything, you can get a picture.

[00:51:45.35]

IRVING SANDLER: That's what the Archives has in mind.

[00:51:47.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:51:47.80]

IRVING SANDLER: That's why they're doing this.

[END OF TRACK AAA_bengel68_8383_m]

[00:00:02.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I'll ask Woodner about it.

[00:00:04.42]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, he would know. This is the third interview with Rosalind Bengelsdorf Brown on, what's the date today?

[00:00:14.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: February 16.

[00:00:15.82]

IRVING SANDLER: February 16, 1968. At her home—the interview is with Irving Sandler.

[00:00:23.62]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: 1936. But, look—

[00:00:26.19]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, on March—

[00:00:29.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Wednesday, [March] 23. Now, I don't know if—

[00:00:32.98]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, let's say in March. In March—

[00:00:34.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: March 25, I have, 1936.

[00:00:36.27]

IRVING SANDLER: —1936, you delivered a speech at the Artists Union about Abstract art.

[00:00:42.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It was called "Basic Approach to the New Realism in Art."

[00:00:45.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, the reason I really want you to go over this speech, because it's in rough notes, is a,), because the notes will be lost; b.), because I want to try to pin down certain ideas that you, and I'm sure other artists, were thinking about, what the sensibility was. I'm going to interrupt you throughout this thing and just ask you if you knew any other artists, or was this a general idea that people were thinking about, or your own idea. But I think this should be valuable. Do you want to just go over your points there?

[00:01:19.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Well, in the first place, I'll answer you. The first thing is that it was my own presentation, my own way of explaining an idea that we shared. Say, that's the best way. Gorky, Byron, Bill de Kooning, Holty—even in spite of anything I felt about his work at the time, was—

[00:01:45.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Greene, too?

[00:01:47.10]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. No, you see, there was a difference. The Hofmann people felt like I did. The people who understood what Hofmann was talking about felt like I did. Now, that sounds like an immodest statement. But it's possible for some people to be more perceptive about what a man's trying to say than other people. And it kind of bears you out, you know? Swinden, those people—we all agreed, Opper, Harry Bowden. It was a huge section that agreed, you understand?

[00:02:25.35]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:02:25.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now my—I was very young then. I was what—[in 1936 –Ed.] I was 20 years old. And this was my first speech. And the way I wrote it, I think, was the way I said it. And I first apologized. The very thing I did was because I know that amidst all this excitement concerning layoffs, speaking of culture may seem to be sidestepping the issue.

[00:02:53.18]

IRVING SANDLER: So there you have an answer to an earlier problem, that there were many layoffs at one point, even as early as '36, in the Project.

[00:03:01.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right. And we always were harassed by layoffs. But we are promoters of culture, first. And art must go on in spite of everything and because of everything. That was the way I introduced it. Now, I will read it to a point and then leave off and explain.

[00:03:20.50]

[Reading:] *The title of my talk is 'Basic Approach to the New Realism in Art.' What is Realism, essentially? To be real is to exist. There isn't a thing consciously conceived that doesn't exist, whether it be an object, a taste, a smell, a touch, or a mental conception. In other words, any thought or illusion is a real phenomenon, since it exists to any degree. This isn't so much a personal belief as a scientific fact arrived at through the discovery of the atomic structure of all matter. Please allow me to enlarge on this a little while, since it will have definite bearing on the plastic medium immediately after.*

[00:04:01.60]

Then I go into the whole atomic—the action of atomic energy, the structure of the atom. And that takes a while. And I showed charts. I showed slides where we had drawings. I made drawings. And we showed slides at that time to show what was happening. Now then, I said —

[00:04:28.06]

[Reading]: *Can you conceive of this platform, every chair in this room, each one of you on a chair, a thought itself that you may be having, the atmosphere of the room holding all this within it, as each being a composite unit of different elements filled with millions of these smaller diverse bodies and guided by the same laws of movement that the atom is?*

[00:04:50.14]

And then I expanded on that. Now to—then I'm skipping a bit, because the thought was continued.

[00:04:59.02]

[Reading]: *To mechanically copy an object is to ignore its actual constitution and its dependency upon immediate form relations. Moreover, such a procedure neglects to fulfill the artist's desire to creatively express himself, that is, to show space movement.* And then I kept saying, "I'll show you what I mean." And it says "diagram." Then I said: *Each line direction in this cube could extend to infinity if it were not stopped by something. It must be stopped, just as water poured from a glass must be halted by whatever it hits, the floor or what have you, as you are limited and dependent on the chair, and if the chair were taken away, you would be stopped again. Therefore, these diverse somethings that limit the cube on all sides are form units in themselves. The planes that limit the cube are also part of the space forms around the cube. These space planes make the cube, just as the cube makes the space planes. Therefore, each plane of this cube is really separate and different, since it belongs to a different environment on each side. The cube is not one solid form, but composed of many flat planes, dependent on the space forms around it. Therefore, the only true way to show form in space and with space is by flat planes in different positions to each other.* Then I said something which I have developed and matured in thought since this point. I said: *Modeling a form does not indicate its real activity, but puts a whole volume on one plane, and is inexpressive of its depth by not considering the many phenomena happening on all sides.*

[00:06:42.04]

Well, the difference in my view now is that I regard chiaroscuro as fuzzy planes as opposed to precise planes, and they have the same action in the old masters. But at that point, I hadn't developed that far. I could only see it through the eyes of Analytical Cubism, and that was the way I was thinking because I was very young.

[00:07:03.40]

[Reading:] *Now, this is why Cezanne's different treatment of each plane was so significant to the younger painters, such as Picasso, Braque, and Mondrian*. Now then, I continued that. I continued the description of what happens on a picture plane. *Now, if I should expand the distance between the planes of this cube so that they are away from each other, it not only makes clear the individual nature of each plane, but makes much greater the volume within these planes. And through making greater the volume, there is more space, and accordingly, more activity. However, there is a fault here. We cannot tell which is the furthest plane back and which is the plane in front. Therefore, it needs space planes within this volume in the cube to make clear the exact position of each plane in the cube.*" So—and I have diagrams. *Why did I put the planes in just this way? Let me show you, please.*

[00:08:07.40]

Ahh—do you want to hear all of this?

[00:08:08.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Keep going.

[00:08:09.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right. Because some of this, I have developed considerably.

[00:08:15.41]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, no. This is a document of the time, a document that was heard by many other artists, and, I assume, reflected thinking at the time.

[00:08:24.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:08:25.26]

[Reading:] *Can you tell me which of these two planes is in front and which is in back? No, because there is no space action indicated.* This is when everybody laughed when I said this. I thought I'd drop through the floor. I said, *When one body meets another, something happens.* [Laughs.] And the whole audience roared. *It doesn't matter how large or how microscopic these objects are. Here, when a pencil is put into a glass of water, aside from whatever else may happen to it, it is obviously broken in shape. So when one plane meets another, as is constantly happening, neither remains untouched. But they are definitely broken by each other like this.* And then I show a diagram. *Immediately, there is the act, the indication of space, since the two planes are on different levels, and the position of each level is definite and clear. Whereas, in the first drawing, both planes are on the same level. Or, if you can imagine different levels, they are arbitrary. In other words, you don't know definitely which is in front, which is in back. And to make it worse, there is created a third plane also on an arbitrary level.* Obviously, I was showing one plane over another like transparent. *This is impossible because every plane in space must have a definite position to show exactly what the activity is. Now, you notice—*" Oh, I showed them something where fallacies existed. And then I said: *You notice that where this fallacy exists there is sometimes different color treatment to indicate in color what they neglected to inform? But this is raw treatment. It does not solve the problem, because since color is a definite part and quality of form, when color changes its character, form must also change its position in shape. Now, if a whole surface were covered with planes, one on top of another, moving only horizontally and vertically, they would not—* See, I was limited at this time. *They would not only be monotonous and lack strong oppositions, but they would be like paper strips one on top of the other with very little volume in between. To make this volume, one must use the diagonal line plane—in other words, juxtaposition—which creates a space expansion through the opposed directions of two planes to each other, as you see here.*

[00:10:49.81]

I don't know quite why I said that, because I like Mondrian.

[00:10:53.26]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, but that would reflect Hofmann's preoccupation with—

[00:10:58.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It would, except that I like Mondrian, you see? [Narrator note: I know now that Mondrian always implied the diagonal by the position of his rectangles. –Ed]

[00:11:00.31]

IRVING SANDLER: —life.

[00:11:01.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Mondrian only moved, in the end, horizontally and vertically.

[00:11:06.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, no, there's a rather strong diagonal, the asymmetrical balance.

[00:11:12.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:11:12.82]

IRVING SANDLER: You can—

[00:11:13.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, yes, you can. You can. I know what I wanted to say, but I could say it much—let's say, much more comprehensively, now.

[00:11:26.55]

[Reading:] *In this painting of Picasso, every plane has a definite position in space. And the inclusion of juxtaposition or opposed directions has created the necessary space experience.* Picasso slide. *Now you notice that every area in this picture is a different size and shape. Of course, I have on each side of me a different environment. And that's a repetition again.* Well, I go into that, about environment being different. *To go on, there is a certain difference made in terminology and procedure between the dominant or object planes around which the picture centralizes, and the space planes surrounding them. The planes of the object or subject are called positive planes or positive space, as the atom has positive charges and hold the picture together. The space planes outside and within the object are called negative planes or negative space, which is the important means of movement in the picture plane. Negative space is usually indicated by what are called space projections. This is what I mean. The lines of an object could extend to infinity if they were not stopped by the space forms next to it, as I showed you in the cube. But the space form does not necessarily have to be another cube of the same size made up by the extended lines of the cube object. On the contrary, the space planes can extend in many directions from a point in the object.*"

[00:13:02.58]

How far—how long shall I go on with this?

[00:13:04.35]

IRVING SANDLER: 'Til you finish it.

[00:13:05.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh.

[00:13:05.61]

[Reading:] *For example, if, from this point in the object, I should extend a line to that corner, to this point in front, and again back to a part of the object, it would indicate a space plane moving in a certain position around the object. This is perfectly legitimate and possible, since the existence of the space planes and forms is a proven fact, which so far, has been infallible to destructive argument. Here on this diagram, I want to show you how it may be applied to the picture plane. I'm going to analyze one painting of Picasso's completely to summarize all I have said. Now there is just—*" Then I did that. *Now there is just one more thing I want to say, a very important point. And then I'll stop talking, since I think I've talked enough.* [Laughs.] *The unit of the picture plane is a living, moving reality in itself, not only through considering the pigments and ground it is made up of, which, incidentally, are chemically active every minute, but also through combination with the formal conception of the artist, which in itself is a reality. If you need any proof of what I say, go to the library, get out medical and scientific books, and learn how cruelly chemical—* boy, was I young—*the activity of the human organisms are, of which the brain is one, I assure you.* [Laughs.] *So the picture plane is not a bottle, a face, or a table, nor a substitute for any of these, because the minute you put materials together of different nature and degree than any of the former examples contain, you are creating a new unit, a thing in itself. The shapes that compose the picture belong to nothing else but the picture. There is no other story told in its own story. And to make this story function as an experience, as you want it to, you must observe those same laws of movement that make all things function—the opposition, the tension, the combining and destroying of planes in a space. I'm sure many of you are thinking, well, what*

good does this basic painting do to help the masses understand the conditions of today? Don't forget, I was talking to the Union. *This is a very important issue and cannot be ignored by the people capable of depicting it. But when your body is dirty and you want to clean yourself, you don't paint your plastic experiences. You take a bath. And the same when you're hungry—you eat. That's if you're lucky. In other words, there is a different solution to every human problem. And as a solution to the need of humanity for the pictorial presentation of their problems, I believe that the black and white satire, the poster, the motion picture, and photo montage are excellent means. But I feel that the plastic painter should research in his medium, as a scientist does in his laboratory, to discover continuously those infinite phenomena that actually make life experience, thereby giving to humanity a better means of dealing with his only defense against natural enemies. And this defense is knowledge.*

[00:15:57.43]

Very young, you know?

[00:15:58.24]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. No, no, but that last paragraph, I think, I would like to use in something I'm writing, if I may paraphrase it.

[00:16:07.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, but I can say it so much better than that.

[00:16:10.29]

IRVING SANDLER: That is now. But I will be doing something about the '30s. Your ideas—oh, do you want to just clarify anything that you—

[00:16:19.32]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. I mean, I think you've gotten the idea. I skipped where it would be a repetition of the general points you know.

[00:16:27.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, that's fine. These ideas were, at that time, very close to Hans Hofmann's.

[00:16:34.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Hans Hofmann was teaching us this, but in his own way. Hans Hofmann—if you read that little catalog description of his course?

[00:16:47.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:16:47.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, you know that presenting things to a large audience of Social Realists—so, you know, propaganda painters of social scene—they wouldn't know what the hell he was talking about. So I put it on a very simple level. Too simple. [Laughs.] No, but anyway—he was very intellectual in his presentation. And it didn't bother us, because we were digging him. We were understanding. And besides, he was right there, and we were working. And he had this way of showing us with arrows, which I use with my students now, the directions and—he made himself quite clear. But we were working with him. He wasn't delivering a lecture. But he meant the same thing. Only he didn't—I don't know if he went and compared it with atomic life. I was doing that to clarify to a lay—this wasn't a lay audience. This was an—but this was a hostile audience.

[00:17:50.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:17:51.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The Abstract art wasn't accepted by the large body of the Artists Union. And therefore, we had a series of lectures—Balcomb Greene, me, and Gorky. And then I remember a man by the name of Louis Ferstadt gave another kind of lecture at that time. I can't truly remember whether it was against or taking it like a debate. I wish I could, but I don't remember.

[00:18:17.67]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember any of the other people who lectured around the time?

[00:18:21.49]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, those are the three I remember.

[00:18:23.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Plus this person.

[00:18:25.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Plus, I think it was Louis Ferstadt, if my memory serves me well.

[00:18:29.38]

IRVING SANDLER: You indicated that there was some difference between your approach and the approach of the group you mentioned earlier, and Balcomb Greene.

[00:18:39.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Balcomb—

[00:18:39.74]

IRVING SANDLER: And I'm curious in that, because Balcomb was also a spokesman for the Abstract Artists.

[00:18:44.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Balcomb, of course, definitely has—whatever emotional reaction you may have to his work, he indicates a very definite knowledge of plasticity. It may not extend to the point of poetry that a Rembrandt does. I mean, there it gets into the different degrees.

[00:19:11.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, I meant in the '30s.

[00:19:12.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: In the '30s, it was different. In the '30s, see, he had been a professor of English at, I think it was Dartmouth. And his mind was a very literary mind. And he was very taken with Freud. And he was a very, what's the word I want? He was interested in the esoteric. He was interested in—well, we were too, to an extent. But he was more interested in the literary aspects of things that were going on than, the way we looked at it. For instance, we all read. And we were all very excited about Rimbaud at the time and Celine. And they stemmed from Baudelaire, and all this.

[00:20:12.22]

But—and we appreciated the beauty of it. But we didn't like the Nihilism involved with it or the negative, you see? We could appreciate the beauty of it. And somehow or other, there was so much concern with mystique that wasn't to do with painting. But when he painted, his work was somewhat in the idiom of Ben Nicholson. It was dry. He was a dry person. And it was done with, let's say, more precision than most of us did who did this kind of Neoplasticism. But it didn't have the feeling he has developed in his work. It was more in the Albers kind of vein, although I think it was more painting than Albers. It's like Ben Nicholson,

to the extent that Ben Nicholson involves more of plasticity than Albers. So did Greene at the time.

[00:21:24.31]

But when we talked about things, we weren't quite reading each other, because I had respect for Freud and for all that went on in the subconscious. But my interest was going deeper than that, you see? I didn't want to get lost in little tracks, in little pigeon tracks, you see? And I wouldn't say—we were very good friends, you know? We got along very well. I mean, Peter and I were very friendly. We used to go all over to all the thrift shops and Salvation Army and pick up all kinds of goodies. And I don't know if I ever kept any of those things, old 1890s blouses and things. And we were always visiting each other. And we went up—where was it? The Beacon someplace, up the—Fishkill, someplace up there with the—we went up there. And so that—we were very friendly. But when you talk about—we probably saw more of each other than, for instance, I saw Bill, socially.

[00:22:34.97]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:22:35.30]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But I felt closer to Gorky, to Bill, to Hofmann, although we didn't socialize. Well, Gorky, we saw quite a bit of. But we didn't socialize, let's say, with Hofmann. He was my teacher.

[00:22:52.04]

IRVING SANDLER: You mean, although Gorky and de Kooning were not Abstract painters, not non-objective painters, you still felt closer to them than you did to their work than you did to—

[00:23:06.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Gorky did do completely non-objective drawings.

[00:23:10.13]

IRVING SANDLER: That's true. He did, around—no, and also some paintings around '36, '37.

[00:23:15.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Now—

[00:23:15.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Just around this time.

[00:23:17.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he did. He was using the bone forms. And he was stemming —

[00:23:21.86]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, at the Whitney's picture called "The Organization."

[00:23:25.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, well that, yeah.

[00:23:26.87]

IRVING SANDLER: It's based on a Picasso.

[00:23:28.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was based on Picasso.

[00:23:29.47]

IRVING SANDLER: And he also did a—those very thick paintings shortly after that.

[00:23:35.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I know them very well.

[00:23:36.98]

IRVING SANDLER: They were completely abstract.

[00:23:38.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. They were abstract the way we were abstract. I mean, I—we both did things like you'll see Byron's mural in WNYC. It's Neoplastic, you know? And I did things. But that wasn't our true avenue of expression. We weren't emotionally Neoplasticists. We liked a little more "umph" in the world. [Laughs.] I mean, you know, we—

[00:24:02.99]

IRVING SANDLER: Your approach in this talk was very formalistic, you know, where you really got down to planes, and interactions of planes, et cetera. Was that the nature of most a talk? Or did it tend to be more philosophical?

[00:24:23.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It depended on the people. It depended on the people. Gorky was one person who talked about art a great deal in this sense.

[00:24:32.06]

IRVING SANDLER: But in that way? More about the plasticity, or more about the—

[00:24:36.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: More about the plasticity, much more. But what he would do, you see, he had a marvelous, marvelous personality, could have been an actor. He could make you miserable, I mean. He had he was kind of devilish about it. If you were a Jew, he'd be an anti-Semite. If you were anti-Semitic, he'd be on the side of the Jews, you know? And he would love to do these little twists. He had this kind of Machiavellian humor.

[00:25:09.25]

But he was a very straight, sincere, romantic guy, pure underneath, very pure. When he talked about painting, when he wasn't trying to dig at anybody—you know, we'd go to openings of shows with him. And he'd say in a very loud voice when the artist was around, he'd cut something to ribbons. And we'd be so embarrassed we wouldn't want it to be seen with him, you know? [Laughs.] But when he was serious—and he loved painting. Oh, how I remember it. Like Byron, they'd go over and they would talk about—I remember at the World's Fair we were together. They had this show of art from Europe, from Vienna, I think. And he loved Poussin. And he loved—oh, they had some marvelous things there. And Gorky would go over and say, "Look, see how this is happening here?"

There were very few people—and there still are very few people, although I'm making my own now for my students. But there are very few people that I could go to a museum with and look at the miracle of what was going on in these pictures. Every time you came to these great masterpieces, new things were happening. You were seeing new formations, you know? It's just like it never stopped. And he would, with such love, he and Byron—they would point it out. And I mean, I was fascinated by this tremendous love. Now, he didn't put it—I put it straight and dry. He always added a lot of color. He was colorful and humorous. He added humor. But it was straight plasticity. See, he made people laugh a little, you know?

[00:26:52.98]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, '30s abstraction—and this, I am sure, comes from the way artists themselves considered it. Some of the words that, when you read the catalogs of the AAA, or

other writings, that seem to occur again and again—an art of clarity, of purity, of universals, or of essentials. Were these important to abstract artists, then, these ideas?

[00:27:27.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:27:27.81]

IRVING SANDLER: You said it negatively before when you said that you didn't read—you read [inaudible] and appreciated him, but his Nihilism had no interest for you.

[00:27:40.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Would you turn off the tape for one second? Because I forgot—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:27:43.40]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. We broke for a second, Ros, but we were talking about this conception that I think '30s Abstract artists had of their art as an art of clarity, purity, universals, essentials. It was an optimistic point of view. Would you talk about the meaning of those and other—

[00:28:09.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Well, what we were doing was trying to express in elementals, because, as I said in one of the previous talks we had, you have to expand from the elementals. I think when I spoke of Hofmann being a bridge to Abstract Expressionism, I said that. You said everybody at that time was more or less formal, you know? They were not Expressionists. And I said, well, you couldn't jump into Expressionism, just like it took me so long to fully appreciate Rembrandt. But our concept of the poetry that is held within a Rembrandt, or within a very fine, Abstract Expressionist painting like a top de Kooning, or a —oh, I could mention a few, I guess. But right now we'll stick to that. That kind of poetry was intrinsic in what we did, because it expressed the miracle of the universe, that each picture was a little expression of the miracle of the universe.

[00:29:25.13]

IRVING SANDLER: So in other words, you thought that the kind of abstraction—or many of you thought that the kind of abstraction you were making had a kind of universal quality to it, an essential quality.

[00:29:37.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We were convinced that that was our aim.

[00:29:40.78]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Therefore, there would have been sympathy, say, to Mondrian's conception of art picturing the underlying—

[00:29:54.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Very much so.

[00:29:55.80]

IRVING SANDLER: —structure of nature, of things.

[00:29:58.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Very much so. If all of us didn't follow Mondrian, it was for two reasons. One is that it seemed like you couldn't go any further than Mondrian in that direction. And that was one thing. The other thing was that some of us, emotionally and temperamentally, weren't geared to restrict our formal expression along such severe lines.

[00:30:19.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Did you go along with Mondrian's "brave new world" idea? Because you know he believed that art would or should structure the future society of man, as a kind of a utopian conception. Was there any of this kind of thinking that you remember, social thinking? In other words, was there interest in Mondrian's social ideas?

[00:30:42.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. I think that I said that in my article, which you probably know about, in this—

[00:30:50.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Look at it again; maybe you can elaborate on that.

[00:30:53.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I will. I called it the "New Realism." And it was a kind of a short article on the same thing that my lecture was about. But I said, here at the end:

[Reading]: *To recognize the fundamental drama of the Abstract painting is to acknowledge all that lives. To investigate the Abstract painting is to study the laws of nature. Our present civilization is caught in the maelstrom of economic disorder and changing standards. An intense need for constructive thought predominates. The message of abstract painting, when utilized to serve this need, will be found to ring in accord with the life concepts of those great economists whose prophecies and plans are being notably fulfilled. The Abstract painter anticipates the time when every man will be better able to enjoy the fruits of culture and the progress of human thought.*

[00:31:50.55]

IRVING SANDLER: And you think that idea—

[00:31:52.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think that was the same thing Mondrian was talking about, yes.

[00:31:55.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember whether—

[00:31:57.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Or, not exactly.

[00:31:58.11]

IRVING SANDLER: —there was any—whether you were thinking along the—it's a long time ago—thinking along that kind of line?

[00:32:04.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't believe that I personally ever believed in utopia. That's what prevented me from being—I told you we were all pretty liberal politically at the time, but I could have never been a true Communist because I didn't believe in utopias. I thought it was against nature. But we were just young enough and just ardent enough to believe that we could improve man's existence. I guess it's necessary for young people to feel of that way.

[00:32:36.48]

IRVING SANDLER: Was this ever used to combat the Social Realists, because they always condemned Abstract art as "ivory tower" or bourgeois, or what have you. Was there, at times, conscious—was this used as a conscious argument at times, that you remember?

[00:33:00.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, but it was more on the basis of the quality of the art than on the basis of the figurative.

[00:33:07.85]

IRVING SANDLER: But not on the social—but what about the social implications?

[00:33:12.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, the social implications, as I said in the lecture, we felt was better served by a poster artist, a satirist, a caricaturist, somebody who makes social commentary. Somebody who's concerned with visual expression is not in plasticity, but totally in social commentary.

[00:33:42.22]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In other words, the more prevailing idea was, sure, be involved in politics, but when it comes to art, be involved with art. And the two don't mix.

[00:33:55.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, we didn't feel that. We felt that underlying all human thought, and all human action was a basic constructive philosophy, an attitude toward the universe, the law of survival. I think I skipped that in the lecture. I didn't read that part to you, that said the law of self-preservation makes us stick together. We're a herd animal. Our desire to live makes us work together. And the same thing that makes the atom live, people follow the laws of self-preservation up the scale, up each more complicated development of —

[00:34:39.91]

IRVING SANDLER: No, what I'm really getting at, Ros, is this was a time of Depression. It was a time of Fascism.

[00:34:48.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's right.

[00:34:49.63]

IRVING SANDLER: It was a time in which the dark side of man was clearly evident.

[00:34:55.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right.

[00:34:57.34]

IRVING SANDLER: And yet, the Abstract Artists seem to consider this as a, one could once say, a kind of momentary aberrant.

[00:35:09.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no. They were very, very much against Fascism.

[00:35:13.42]

IRVING SANDLER: I know they were.

[00:35:14.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, very much. They had a great deal of social feeling.

[00:35:19.30]

IRVING SANDLER: But the dark side, this dark thing didn't find its way into their art, which was an art, it seems to me, as you say, of universals, essentials, purity, clarity.

[00:35:31.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's right, because they weren't concerned with illustrating a social event or a social phenomenon. They were concerned with what was behind all phenomena.

[00:35:43.66]

IRVING SANDLER: But—

[00:35:44.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: In other words, they were trying to tell a timeless story that would give man the courage to live past a bad time.

[00:35:51.67]

IRVING SANDLER: The courage to live past the bad time. It was optimistic.

[00:35:54.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Optimistic. That is why it was very hard to accept Nihilism, because Nihilism was against nature for us. It was also against the laws of self-preservation of man.

[00:36:11.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, one of the things that you stress very strongly in that talk, and I'm sure this was shared by every abstract artist of the time, was the picture as an object, a real thing containing abstract, but nonetheless, concrete borders.

[00:36:31.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. In this sense. For instance, if you painted a continuum, that would not be an object that came to life by itself. It would be an illustration of a continuum, an illustration of infinity. A picture or a piece of sculpture would imply fusion with everything outside, but it would remain self-contained as much as you are self-contained, as I am self-contained, until we die. Whereas something that is endless, that you could cut off by the yard, is just an illustration of infinity. It doesn't show what actually infinity is composed of—many units that are constantly fusing together—showing the implication of that fusion, yet remaining a unit.

[00:37:26.13]

IRVING SANDLER: And there would be an implication here, too, that if you illustrated any other object, it would—

[00:37:32.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Or idea.

[00:37:33.75]

IRVING SANDLER: Or idea, it would detract from the form as a concrete object in the picture.

[00:37:42.90]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: At that time, we felt so. I don't think—I certainly don't feel that way now. At the time, we wanted to show very obviously through the action of planes what happened in nature, you see? Then we realized, as we matured, that the great masters had been doing this for centuries. And it didn't much matter whether a shape had association or not.

[00:38:09.67]

IRVING SANDLER: When we get into the work of Byron, we'll probably talk more about this. But many of the artists of the AAA, at one point, kind of abandoned this sort of abstraction. Balcomb Greene abandons it, Byron abandons it, Gorky.

[00:38:33.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Abandons what kind of abstraction?

[00:38:35.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Say, the kind of abstraction that they did in the '30s.

[00:38:39.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:38:40.39]

IRVING SANDLER: Pictures such as that one. Now, and go counter to—or develop counter to their ideas in the '30s.

[00:38:49.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: They didn't develop counter to it. They developed their individual poetry in relation to it.

[00:38:55.25]

IRVING SANDLER: But it seems to have been—many of the members of the AAA seemed, at one point, to veer away from these conceptions of abstraction, clarity, purity, universals, essentials, elementals.

[00:39:12.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well—

[00:39:12.58]

IRVING SANDLER: Can you suggest why that happened?

[00:39:14.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. There are quite a few reasons. One is that they were getting their influence and their source of inspiration from what Picasso and Braque, the Analytical Cubist stage, and the Synthetic Cubism that followed it. They were getting their inspiration from that. And they wanted to make it go their own way. Now, once, as I say, that it took me the years of development to realize that all the great masters had this story, so they were realizing that they didn't have to be that limited, to say this story. Where the fundamentals were being used to express a philosophy that they were feeling at the time, it also taught them, dealing with the fundamentals, that they could use these fundamentals in a much broader sense than they had at first thought they could.

[00:40:14.89]

IRVING SANDLER: Let me try putting it another way. Was there something about '30s abstraction that, at one point, turned many of the abstract artists off or made them want to move in other directions?

[00:40:29.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, you had many sources of inspiration. Right here in this country, we were looking to Europe. And I guess that, once they had absorbed what had happened there, each man had to make—you see, what was the terrible problem was that they were saying things in a format that they had not necessarily invented, you know? I think the need for individuality was behind part of it, you see? Now, it's true that every artist is individual in his own way. But each artist doesn't feel that at the time he's working. He feels the need—I think there—although, I can't say that we felt it so much in the '30s as a young artist would feel it today. The pressure of the name, the promotion, the Madison Avenue promotion—we didn't have that then.

[00:41:45.28]

IRVING SANDLER: You mean there wasn't that much of a concern with originality?

[00:41:51.56]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Uh—well, I can tell you what influenced Byron. He used to have the name Picasso thrown at him a lot.

[00:41:59.90]

IRVING SANDLER: As did Gorky.

[00:42:00.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, and that used to bother him, because his work, his calligraphy, his way of making shapes were not like Picasso. It was just that he used the same sources as Picasso. And of course, he was interested in Picasso's Cubism. But otherwise, his whole poetry, the whole style—I mean, he's a different temperament. When he made a face, it didn't look like Picasso. He had a certain closeness to Picasso with a few pictures at a certain time. I mean, I have one hanging there in the foyer in the middle that's reminiscent of Picasso.

[00:42:36.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:42:37.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But his whole output was—and he had his own kind of thing. And of course, it bugged him like the devil, I mean, all these critics just looking at the fact of the sources and the fact that he used a centaur or a satyr, which he liked, too. And it wasn't just because Picasso used it. It wasn't Picasso's property. And he was driven, like Picasso, to find many sources in the past.

[00:43:03.12]

And de Kooning also looked at sources. So did Gorky, you know? And you know, Gorky just began to arrive at his—oh, I don't even want to say it because Gorky had his own way all the time. But there were many pictures he did that were influenced by Picasso. Some of them were just like they were right off Picasso, you know? And some of them were right off Miro. And some were right off Matta. But that wasn't his whole output. There was a thread throughout his work that was entirely Gorky's and his own, even from the beginning.

[00:43:44.07]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:43:44.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And nobody made drawings like Gorky made except Gorky. I mean, that's for sure. And to me, he was always Gorky. And I used to defend him, too, against that kind of attack. There was a lot of vicious attack against Gorky when he was alive.

[00:44:01.80]

IRVING SANDLER: But—

[00:44:02.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: By other artists.

[00:44:03.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Nonetheless, originality would not have been valued then as, say it is today.

[00:44:09.42]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, it was valued to the extent that the artist was bugged when the critics would constantly say, looks like this, he looks like that one. They were bugged by that, sure.

[00:44:20.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Talking about critics for a minute, what were the critics like in the '30s? Were there sympathetic people to abstract art outside of Morris?

[00:44:34.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[00:44:35.46]

IRVING SANDLER: And Greenberg would, of course, be—

[00:44:37.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Greenberg wasn't there then.

[00:44:39.49]

IRVING SANDLER: No.

[00:44:40.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The first—I don't remember when—I didn't meet Greenberg myself until these last few years. But I met Harold Rosenberg for the first time at Kootz's house when we were still in the same gallery. And he came up. And it was at a social evening at home. But this was the late '40s. This was '48 or '47.

[00:45:06.26]

IRVING SANDLER: What about men like Jewell?

[00:45:07.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Jewell was against Abstract art. But he was very open to being convinced. And toward the end of his time, he was quite tolerant and quite understanding. I don't think he ever dug it. But he was very fair. He was very open. He was very fair. At the beginning, he wasn't.

[00:45:30.14]

IRVING SANDLER: What about someone like Genauer?

[00:45:32.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, she didn't like it at that time at all.

[00:45:35.25]

IRVING SANDLER: Who were other people? Was [Royal –Ed.] Cortissoz still writing then?

[00:45:42.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he was. I can't remember. I don't remember anybody being a champion of abstract art.

[00:45:48.83]

IRVING SANDLER: No kidding.

[00:45:49.49]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But Jewell was good to us after a while. I mean, he didn't hand us kudos or anything. But he gave us space. And he paid attention to us and acknowledged us.

And he would print letters. There was always a box with letters, big arguments and big fights going on in the *Times*.

[00:46:09.11]

IRVING SANDLER: How early does that start? I know there's one—well, I know there's one in around 1930, and one again—

[00:46:16.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I have some of those clippings in Byron's material where Byron—he used to reproduce Byron a lot in the *Sunday Times*. Byron had a big reputation at one time.

[00:46:28.31]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, several times.

[00:46:30.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he had—

[00:46:31.10]

IRVING SANDLER: How early does his reputation—

[00:46:31.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he had—he started his reputation by winning the Hallgarten prize at the National Academy. He was the youngest person ever to win it in 103 years, 21 years old. So he started that way. And then he went Modern right away, and where I can show you the photos of that. In 1927, which was the year before he won the prize, these were pictures he didn't show. I saw a portrait that he did, which I don't own. It's down in Mexico now. But I borrowed it. Very much under the influence of Cimabue. And then he became under the influence of, it looked like, Modigliani. I don't have these pictures. But I've seen pictures of them. And I have some photographs. And then, when he was—I told you, when he was still in the National Academy, he used to hide down in the cellar and do these great big sculptures like Easter Island heads. Well, he was made a member of the Allied Artists of America. And then their white-haired boy went naughty and modern. And of course, he left.

[00:47:47.45]

IRVING SANDLER: Before we get on to Byron, I want to—

[00:47:50.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was the first publicity, so—

[00:47:52.02]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. Because I went to handle that in a minute, I'd like to ask you one question. And here, of course, you can bring in all, everything that's happened since then. But there's a common idea—and I'm sure it was an idea that came in with Abstract Expressionism—that all '30s art was not very good. Now, there were a couple of people that I ran into who really detested this idea. Ad Reinhardt was one. He said that there was some terrific painting being done in the '30s.

[00:48:29.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he was one of the good ones.

[00:48:30.54]

IRVING SANDLER: It was just different. Now, what is your estimation of the quality of '30s art in general, and '30s abstract art in particular?

[00:48:44.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think we had a lot of very, very good artists, proportionately speaking to the time and to the amount of people working. I would say that the number, percentage-wise, of talent then is greater than it is now.

[00:49:06.73]

IRVING SANDLER: In other words, you feel that, in abstract art in the '30s, there was a great deal of work of high-quality painters.

[00:49:18.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, we had some very fine artists. We had people who just petered out. I mean, Albert Swinden was a fine artist. George McNeil was a fine artist.

[00:49:31.56]

IRVING SANDLER: Tell me—

[00:49:32.19]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Ad Reinhardt was a fine artist. Ferren, at that time, was much better than he is now. I can think Carles was a good artist. You say that you think I was. Byron was a good artist. Gorky was a good artist. Why, I can—can you imagine? I can reach more than both my hands in no time.

[00:49:54.06]

IRVING SANDLER: And de Kooning was, too.

[00:49:55.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. No, well I've mentioned him many times. No, I mentioned him many times. He was an outstanding artist.

[00:50:01.83]

IRVING SANDLER: What about Davis?

[00:50:02.94]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Stuart Davis preceded us, you see.

[00:50:09.27]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:50:10.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, Stuart Davis was not abstract in our sense. He had gone to a point. First of all, half of his output was decorative. And that half that wasn't, he wasn't concerned with abstracting in the sense that we were at that time. So many of his things were—he always had a great deal of figuration that was untouched. Of course, looking at the whole span of Davis's life output, he was a very important figure. And he did some outstanding things. But personally, I think that aside from "The Eggbeater" that the Whitney had, and a few things like that, his greatest pictures were done in the last part of his life.

[00:51:05.38]

IRVING SANDLER: I absolutely agree with you. What about someone like Marin?

[00:51:08.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Marin, we never dug. We used to look at him quite seriously when we were young. But—and we used to look at a lot of people that, right now—because we were very open to learning. And we were—well, we welcomed people who worked close to our area because there were so few of us. But Marin did not dig Cubism at all.

[00:51:39.91]

IRVING SANDLER: Were there any non-abstract artists that were esteemed by the group, American scene, or Social Protest artists? What about someone like Hopper? Would he have had any sympathizers among the abstract artists?

[00:51:58.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I can't answer you on anybody else but us. We didn't.

[00:52:04.89]

IRVING SANDLER: Was there any one of the Realists—

[00:52:07.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, Kuniyoshi. And of course, we did have respect for Davis. We wouldn't have called him a Realist.

[00:52:18.30]

IRVING SANDLER: Any others?

[00:52:20.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Possibly. Well, that's not a Realist—Max Weber.

[00:52:23.86]

IRVING SANDLER: Weber, yes. Well, you were mentioning—

[00:52:25.48]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Weber. Abe Rattner's earlier work, it was sort of a—let's see. I'm not really dealing with the people in the social scene. Remind me of some of them.

[00:52:42.07]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, well, say you take the three biggest American scene painters—Wood, Benton, Curry.

[00:52:49.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[00:52:50.20]

IRVING SANDLER: What about people like Shahn; Evergood?

[00:52:53.83]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Shahn, yes. Shahn, yes. Evergood, occasionally—he did more interesting things years ago than now. Shahn, more.

[00:53:03.15]

IRVING SANDLER: What about Gropper?

[00:53:06.44]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Gropper, not too much. I'll tell you who Byron had respect for, but he felt that his satire sort of overwhelmed his feeling for painting, and that was Jack Levine. But that was a little later.

[00:53:20.92]

IRVING SANDLER: Later. What about people like the Soyers?

[00:53:25.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not truly, no. No, not at that time. No.

[00:53:28.87]

IRVING SANDLER: What was the feeling about the Mexicans?

[00:53:33.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, at that time, I remember an interest in Orozco. Now of course, we had a great deal of contact, on account of the Union and everything. I remember when I was about 16, I think it was at the John Reid Club, I was taken to a meeting where Siqueiros came and showed us how he did his tempera. He used his medium then. He had this complicated medium. And I remember once—oh, no, no. No, wait a minute. Siqueiros came later. He came to the Artists Union. It was Diego Rivera and his wife that I heard at the John Reid Club. And we personally, the only Mexican artist I was attracted to, was Tamayo in the earlier years, before he got kind of—when he first came out.

[00:54:31.89]

IRVING SANDLER: What about his work in the '40s?

[00:54:33.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And then there was—well, wasn't that the good time?

[00:54:37.08]

IRVING SANDLER: Of, well—

[00:54:37.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Of—I don't remember when I first saw a Tamayo, you know? I don't remember when I first saw his work. It might have been in the '40s. And then there was a man from Cuba, Wilfredo Lam?

[00:54:50.94]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:54:51.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But that also came in the '40s. That isn't the '30s. No, that isn't the '30s. The Mexicans, now you see, I heard a lot of talk about Orozco. I personally didn't react too much.

[00:55:03.21]

IRVING SANDLER: But he was talked about.

[00:55:04.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:55:05.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Now I'm going to ask you the same question I did before, but in a slightly different way, because I asked you, which artists did you admire most of the abstract artists? But within every group, there's a kind of consensus—it's a loose consensus—about the quality of work. For example, the Abstract Expressionists always recognized de Kooning, that kind of thing. Now within the AAA, was there this kind of consensus about any of the artists, where everyone agreed, yeah, he's one of our best? Or yeah, he's probably—

[00:55:48.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: How would I know that?

[00:55:49.84]

IRVING SANDLER: Just from talking around at the time. Do you remember if there was this kind of feeling? It may not even have been spoken, that of the membership, certain artists

seemed—I don't know exactly how to put it. They sort of seem to be the—in the same way that de Kooning was.

[00:56:16.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: One person like that? No.

[00:56:19.21]

IRVING SANDLER: A couple, then. In other words, what was the group consensus of its own membership? Was there any kind of agreement about the relative accomplishments of the members? You understand the question?

[00:56:35.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I understand what you mean.

[00:56:36.30]

IRVING SANDLER: It's a difficult one. And it may not be answerable. But I'm just curious, because—

[00:56:41.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: See, I can answer for myself, and I can answer for Byron.

[00:56:44.55]

IRVING SANDLER: That's what you just did. But I wondered if there was a more general kind of consensus.

[00:56:50.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not that I can remember. I know that they liked Byron. They liked me. I know that, as a whole, we all liked the Greenes. I know that we liked Ad. I know that we liked—let's see, well, we liked—um—now, Jesus.

[00:57:17.18]

IRVING SANDLER: Were there—put it another way, were there artists who were—

[00:57:20.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: If I go and give you an opinion, then it's on tape.

[00:57:23.51]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, no. No, no. This is just as you sensed it. And I say, it's a very difficult question. But were there artists that the group looked up to, as artists? Maybe that would be.

[00:57:35.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well, the people I mentioned. Who did I leave out? Swinden?

[00:57:39.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:57:40.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was looked up to. I think that the original group, the charter group, looked up to each other.

[00:57:50.10]

IRVING SANDLER: But would the people who came in—

[00:57:51.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: With a few minor exceptions.

[00:57:52.98]

IRVING SANDLER: Would the people who have come in later have had an attitude like that, that yes—

[00:58:02.45]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You see, the group got kind of big. There were about 40-some odd members. And what everyone thought, it became kind of diversified in—I know that we thought a lot of each other in the original group. This I know. So there you have a nub. Even when there were differences that happened between us, ideological differences like I mentioned, a difference between Ibram and us, we still had a feeling and a love of his work, you see? So that we may have disagreed on premise or something, but I can remember very distinctly the things he did at the time. And I wouldn't remember them if I didn't like them, you see? We were very simpatico to each other, the original group. Now, that was at least a dozen people.

[00:59:10.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, to put it another way, were there—and this doesn't necessarily have to exist—were there stars?

[00:59:19.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. There were no stars. You see, you mustn't compare it to the Abstract Expressionist group. You know how that started, don't you? The Eighth Street Club?

[00:59:32.44]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:59:33.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I mean, it was a group of Bill's friends that started it around him. They were admirers of Bill's. And that's why Bill was the star.

[00:59:41.70]

IRVING SANDLER: Not at the very beginning. That happened a little bit—

[00:59:43.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no. At the very beginning. That's how it formed.

[00:59:46.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, I don't think Ad Reinhardt, who was a charter member—

[00:59:50.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, no. No, that was after they—when they began to have members and call in people like—

[00:59:57.01]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. No, there were a bunch of guys who met. But you're right about one thing. In the original group, de Kooning may have been the star, but there was a kind of sense of equality that—because he really wasn't that well known in 1949.

[01:00:17.56]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, but he was very well-liked. And—

[01:00:19.33]

IRVING SANDLER: And admired, as an artist.

[01:00:21.13]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —by—yeah. He was different from Byron in the sense that he was a social person who sat and talked a lot, you know?

[01:00:33.41]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[01:00:33.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: So that he drew around him these people who were very excited by what he represented. And it formed rather informally. It was kind of a social thing. You see, after the American Abstract Artists, after this early period, it kind of—we all got off someplace. And we were no longer meeting so much and talking about our art. Don't forget, we began to have kids. And we began to have responsibilities. I think possibly one of the things that started it was the need for that kind of meeting again between artists. And that might have started it. But there was also a philosophy behind the group, the Abstract Expressionist group, which was different from the philosophy.

[01:01:27.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, that's true. That's true. But if I grab the thrust of what you're saying —

[01:01:36.62]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: There was no one star like Bill. No.

[01:01:38.89]

IRVING SANDLER: No, no.

[01:01:39.38]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, not that I can remember. There were a group of artists that generally respected each other.

[01:01:49.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. No, I was just curious about that. And of course, they're—Good. Just one more last question—we've gone into several of the extra aesthetic justifications for Abstract art, the references to science that you made, also a little bit about social thinking. Offhand, are there any others you can think about that weren't talked about?

[01:02:20.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well—

[01:02:21.28]

IRVING SANDLER: Reasons for painting abstract pictures.

[01:02:26.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think I've given you the reasons.

[01:02:28.54]

IRVING SANDLER: All of them.

[01:02:29.47]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: At least the ones that are important. So much was said. Oh, incidentally—it might be interesting to you—I spoke to Calvin Albert about David Smith. And I said, I couldn't remember anything he said about art. And he says, he never did talk much about art. [Laughs.] So it wasn't so much my memory, you know what I mean?

[01:02:54.75]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[01:02:56.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: So that was it, really. I mean—because I get a little distressed when I can't remember things.

[01:03:04.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, no, no, no. I mean, look, this was—gosh, how many? Some 30 years ago.

[01:03:11.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, 30. Certainly 30.

[01:03:14.27]

IRVING SANDLER: And certainly, your memory is not going to be sharp anymore. Well, I can't think of anything that we haven't covered about the '30s. So let's get over—work over Byron's work, now.

[01:03:34.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right.

[01:03:34.74]

IRVING SANDLER: Wait. This is the end of the first tape of the third interview with Rosalind Browne. It should just run out.

[01:03:45.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. I don't know if it's important to say that without the WPA, we could have never developed.

[01:03:52.90]

IRVING SANDLER: You did say that.

[01:03:53.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Okay.

[01:03:54.34]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. That you made very clear in the first session.

[01:03:57.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right. [Laughs.]

[END OF TRACK AAA_bengel68_8383_m]

[00:00:05.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: [Laughs.]

[00:00:06.58]

IRVING SANDLER: This—

[00:00:06.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: His mind was good. Yeah.

[00:00:08.63]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the second side of the third interview with Rosalind Browne. Ros, just some general material about you and Byron. I understand that his name was George Byron Browne, but he changed it to Byron Browne because there was an academician—

[00:00:31.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: By the name of George Elmer Browne.

[00:00:33.14]

IRVING SANDLER: —Elmer Browne.

[00:00:33.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And he didn't want to be confused—

[00:00:35.81]

IRVING SANDLER: With him.

[00:00:36.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —with him, so.

[00:00:37.25]

IRVING SANDLER: When do you meet Byron?

[00:00:38.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I met Byron in 1934. And I met him at the Artists Union. I think, as a matter of fact, it was the Artists Committee for Action, a group within the Artists Union. And Gorky was there that night, too. And I was introduced to him by Nathaniel Kaz.

[00:01:00.44]

IRVING SANDLER: The sculptor.

[00:01:00.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. And I had—I met Nathaniel Kaz when I was 13 and he was 14, or vice versa, at the Art Students League, when he was studying with Bridgman.

[00:01:11.34]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember what you were protesting, incidentally, at that meeting?

[00:01:15.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. [Laughs.]

[00:01:17.08]

IRVING SANDLER: Just curious.

[00:01:18.93]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I wasn't listening. I was too busy looking at Byron. But anyway, I was very impressed with his appearance because he was very, very good-looking, but I was a very snotty—you know, I was a cocky little intellectual, and I thought he looked like a big football player, and he wasn't my cup of tea. But he was attracted to me, and he arranged—Niky Kaz and I shared a loft. He had the front, and I had the back half on—I think it was 22nd Street, East 22nd Street. And he arranged with Niky to be out when he came ostensibly to see him, and I'd be in. And he knocked on his door, and nobody answered, so he came and knocked on mine, and said, "Is Niky there?" And of course, I asked him in. And he admired a tablecloth of mine, so I said he could have it. And then he said he had one he'd exchange with me. And well, oh, some months passed. I mean, we saw each other at group things. But

the first time I came to his studio, ostensibly to get the tablecloth, we knew we fell in love.

[00:02:39.95]

IRVING SANDLER: When did you get married?

[00:02:42.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We got married in 1940, July 16. I must say that what made me fall in love with him totally, what I was conscious of making me fall in love, was I was so impressed by the sight of his work in his studio, that the whole thing—his tremendous physical attraction and the strength of his talent, the whole thing came together and hit me like a ton of bricks, besides which he was ten years older than I was, and he knew how to make love to me. So the whole confetti. [Laughs.]

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:03:15.73]

IRVING SANDLER: Recording. Good. Now, we have a scrapbook here of Byron's work, but along with this scrapbook and your own memory, why don't you talk a little about his ideas, the development of his career, his painting, almost as you think of the development?

[00:03:36.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, well, it's very hard to look at him as—in a whole span, when I've had so many personal experiences and so much intimate contact with his work. But I have had the opportunity in the last six years since he died, to do this. I can say that my feeling of him in toto is that he was a truly Byronic figure. He was very romantic, very romantic about art. He had a strong feeling for the decorative without being a decorator. He knew how to make—crossed the margin in at least 70 percent of his output between straight decoration, and making it plastic.

[00:04:32.96]

But the quality about his art, his love for the stylized formats of many of the archaic societies, many of the primitive cultures, always attracted him. He was an imagist. He always liked sharp, definite shape. But he was very tender in the way he wanted to put these together. He did have conflicts that I can think of, because he always liked to do women heads, particularly big heads of women, more than the whole woman, with their hair hanging down, and flowers in their hair. And he always felt very heroic. I mean—well, it's more or less reflected in what he liked. He liked heroic things. He liked Beethoven. He liked Schweitzer. He liked Einstein. He liked symphonic things rather than chamber music. He liked the corrida, the bullfight, but through the whole history, from the time of Crete, and all it implied of the tragedy of life and death. He always liked heroic things. He was not what you call a tender, gentle painter, like, well, for instance, Herman Rose or—

[00:06:03.90]

IRVING SANDLER: Not an intimist.

[00:06:05.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not an intimist.

[00:06:06.04]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:06:06.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No. And occasionally in his life, he has done isolated pieces of this nature. But it wasn't his natural—

[00:06:13.86]

IRVING SANDLER: Where does he get his early art training? Do you know what makes him

turn to art?

[00:06:19.35]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, yes, I do. His mother was a very talented woman. She was married to a physician. His father was an eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist. And their marriage broke up when my husband was seven years old. And she used to decorate china as a hobby when she was married, and then she began to—she earned her living, and she refused to take any support from his father. And she earned her living by decorating china, doing—decorating altarpieces for the Catholic churches, doing all kinds of craft. And I think he inherited the feeling for the material and the coordination between his eye and his hand, and his mind and his hand, from his mother, who was a very skilled craftswoman.

[00:07:16.70]

IRVING SANDLER: So there wouldn't have been any parental opposition to a career in art?

[00:07:19.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, there was. His father had nothing to do with him because he wouldn't become a doctor. When they were divorced, his father—

[00:07:28.91]

IRVING SANDLER: He stayed with his mother?

[00:07:30.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He stayed with his mother. He had a sister, too. His mother raised them both, working night and day. And she lived with, for a while, uncles, her brothers. And he was born in Yonkers, New York. And I found a clipping just when I was looking through my stuff for you. I found a clipping of an award he won in high school, which isn't on the Archives, some kind of a thing which I have in the drawer there. And he tried—they were very poor, terribly poor. And he unfortunately destroyed—his mother had given me things he did at the age of 14, illustrations for stories: gnomes with warts on their faces, wandering through woods with gnarled trees, and all the graining of the wood shown underneath the—his draftsmanship, his ability to draw, and the sensitivity, and the imagination, just seemed to come—just was there all the time because this is before formal training. They were so magnificent. He wanted to sell these things to pick up some money. And I don't know how successful he was because the times weren't very good, but his mother had given me these things. And when he died, I could never find them. Like a fool, I gave them to him. I mean, and he used to destroy—he destroyed a lot of things. Half his output, at times, he destroyed.

[00:09:10.60]

IRVING SANDLER: Where does he get his art training?

[00:09:12.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He got his art training at the National Academy of Design.

[00:09:16.27]

IRVING SANDLER: And you mentioned, but it wasn't on the tape, that he made quite a reputation there, won many prizes. Could you go into that?

[00:09:25.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he won a distinction by being the youngest—at 21, he was the youngest student in 103 years at that time of the Academy's existence, to have won a Hallgarten prize. And incidentally, he destroyed the picture. He burnt up the picture he won the prize on. And I have the picture right here. It is a still life. It's called "Old Iron and Copper," and I have the plaque, the bronze plaque, but I don't have the picture.

[00:10:03.58]

IRVING SANDLER: This is—

[00:10:03.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He burnt that up.

[00:10:05.08]

IRVING SANDLER: This is a highly academic picture—

[00:10:08.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Highly academic.

[00:10:08.89]

IRVING SANDLER: —in the tradition of the Academy.

[00:10:09.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And here is another one. Yes.

[00:10:12.09]

IRVING SANDLER: How does he move—before I ask you how he moves to more advanced modes, do you remember who he studied with at the Academy?

[00:10:21.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I remember some people he told me about. He studied with Charles Curran. And he studied with Charles Hawthorne

[00:10:29.89]

IRVING SANDLER: What did he think of Hawthorne?

[00:10:31.75]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He thought he was great. He had a great deal of respect for Hawthorne. But I don't know if he felt the same about Curran. This was a picture he did the same year as he did the—

[00:10:45.31]

IRVING SANDLER: The still life.

[00:10:45.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —the still life that he won the prize on. And that's the painting I mentioned to you that I don't own, that's in Mexico, that I had borrowed.

[00:10:53.17]

IRVING SANDLER: That's a picture of 1927.

[00:10:54.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Same year. And this, you can see, is no longer academic. He's begun to use shapes and planes. And I said that was very close to early Renaissance art, began to become stylized. And the next year, which is—it's reproduced in 1929. He has the date of his doing it as 1928. He began to remove all the shadows—

[00:11:32.43]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:11:33.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And become—

[00:11:34.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Simplify the model—

[00:11:34.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —simplified.

[00:11:35.45]

IRVING SANDLER: Work more with—

[00:11:36.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Simplified.

[00:11:36.68]

IRVING SANDLER: —planes.

[00:11:37.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. And this was reproduced in *The Arts*, December 1929, by Forbes Watson, Editor. And then, as you see, in 1930, he was under the influence of Modigliani, but still in his own way, not with the tenderness of Modigliani, but with a very sharp designation.

[00:11:59.15]

This, incidentally, is a photograph of not one of the most sensitive pictures he did at the time, because I saw some color shots that a man by the name of Philias de Lalanne showed me. He owns these pictures. You know, Byron either gave them away or sold them for five dollars, or one dollar, or whatever he could get for them at the time. And they were also under the influence of Modigliani, but extremely sensitive. The color was quite good. But they were distinct. They were his own. But I say, you could see that he had this separate personality. Now, in 1930, he did these large heads under the influence of the Easter Island sculptures. He also did these bas reliefs. Now, you can see in this bas relief, 1930, how much he was taken by early Christian and archaic art. Mostly the earlier periods of these civilizations attracted him.

[00:13:00.85]

IRVING SANDLER: Could you talk a little bit more about Byron's attraction to Primitive art? It happens for him very early.

[00:13:10.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was always attracted to the Mediterranean cultures, and he felt that some way, way back in his origin, he came from—he was English, Irish, maybe a bit of Scotch. His grandmother was—they were Protestant, but Protestant Irish. And English—his grandfather was born in London. His father was Canadian. He felt that somewhere way back, he came from the—[laughs] from the Mediterranean, because everything about the Mediterranean, he liked. And for this reason, he was very attracted to—although, you know, it's a certain kind of Jewish, but he liked—he seemed to be attracted to warmth and the Jewish temperament. However, they—I mean, this is the kind of thing I don't quite know if it fits in. But he loved everything Mediterranean, Spanish, North African, anything around that area.

[00:14:21.76]

IRVING SANDLER: What did he feel about the tradition in Modern Art that looked to the Primitive arts? Did he feel that—did he feel there was—that he was part of a tradition, too, in a sense?

[00:14:33.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, yes. He felt he was part of a tradition. But he, like myself,

came first to the Abstract, and then went back over tradition. It's like Holty said to me when I saw him last, and, you know, we were talking about Hofmann, and Holty had some personal dissatisfactions, but he agreed with me, and we both agreed, that Hofmann had opened our eyes. And by opening our eyes, he had opened our eyes to the whole going back again into the history of art. So as Byron developed, he began to go more towards Rembrandt and Goya, and people like that, than when I first met him. When I first met him, he was more attracted by the art where the shapes were very sharply defined. Like, I first liked Piero della Francesca. He liked Primitive art. He liked highly stylized art—

[00:15:38.09]

IRVING SANDLER: This—

[00:15:38.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —like Etruscan art.

[00:15:39.59]

IRVING SANDLER: This, before he became an abstract artist?

[00:15:43.67]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, no, it was synonymous.

[00:15:45.59]

IRVING SANDLER: At the same time.

[00:15:46.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. It was synonymous. It was at the same time. And of the contemporary art, he loved everything that I loved. He loved Picasso very much and—

[00:15:57.46]

IRVING SANDLER: Did he consider this looking to Primitive art as a way out of the academy?

[00:16:04.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, he wanted to make shapes. They attracted his imagination. And he wanted to go to Tahiti. You know, used to love Gauguin—oh, that was one of his loves, Gauguin at one time. That was before I met him. And he had "Noa Noa" [the book –Ed.] and he was all set to try to get there, and repeat that kind of existence. That was when he was younger than when I knew him, you know?

[00:16:28.55]

IRVING SANDLER: Although he begins as a painter, it seems as if he also does sculpture very early. This is a sculpture from 1929.

[00:16:37.40]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he always wanted to do sculpture. And he was, in his heart and soul, as much a sculptor as a painter. But he felt an artist couldn't do too many things. It was hard enough to paint. So he satisfied himself with doing pieces, isolated pieces, from time to time. Incidentally, these beautiful marble and granite heads, which were quite large —they were about, oh, four feet, three feet—three feet tall. He couldn't afford to move them during the Depression, so except for a few heads that are owned by people that I don't know somewhere out in the West, they were all wrecked with the building. Yeah.

[00:17:28.25]

IRVING SANDLER: They're very beautiful.

[00:17:29.56]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is the mural he did for WNYC.

[00:17:32.46]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, before we get to that, when and how does Byron turn to abstract art?

[00:17:43.26]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he turned first in these kind of things that were approaching—approaching Cubism, you see? Before he had studied with Hofmann, just from his own investigations, he has—the way he was painting when I met him—as you can see, that's 1934. This oil called "Constructive Elements"—I believe it was shown in the Whitney Museum.

[00:18:16.61]

IRVING SANDLER: And reproduced in the—

[00:18:17.96]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, this is reproduced—

[00:18:18.89]

IRVING SANDLER: —*New York Journal-American*—

[00:18:19.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, but that was a memorial show.

[00:18:23.17]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:18:23.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:18:23.87]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:18:24.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And that was reproduced February—

[00:18:26.35]

IRVING SANDLER: February—

[00:18:26.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —3—

[00:18:27.19]

IRVING SANDLER: —3, 19—

[00:18:27.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —1962.

[00:18:28.87]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:18:30.99]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: So as you can see, he was looking at Picasso and Braque very carefully.

[00:18:36.93]

IRVING SANDLER: It's also a kind of a caricature, almost a cartoon quality.

[00:18:41.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right, right. He—let's say he was taking the look of Synthetic Cubism in his own way. But you can see how knowledgeable he was. He brought this plane into here. He didn't keep it flat. He had an instinctive knowledge of plasticity, even though, let's say, that later he wouldn't be as inclined to outline a window that way, as he did here, you see?

[00:19:16.49]

IRVING SANDLER: When did does he study with Hofmann?

[00:19:19.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he studied with Hofmann when I studied with Hofmann. I think I gave him a—I sort of sold him a bill of goods, you know? We used to have a wonderful time communicating about art together. When I met him, I was full of talk, and I think I had begun to study with Annot. I had known about Hofmann at the League and had begun to study. And then when I decided, since we had already established kind of a love affair, when I went to study with Hofmann, he went, too.

[00:19:58.65]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What did he what did he think of Hofmann?

[00:20:00.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He had a little more trouble understanding him than I did because I had parents with European accents. And when Hofmann said "plon," I knew he meant "plane." And when he said "nihil," I knew he meant "and so." And Byron had a little more trouble being—you know.

[00:20:19.62]

IRVING SANDLER: Were there many students who had difficulty understanding Hofmann?

[00:20:23.34]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think that there were some. I think there were some. So this was—

[00:20:29.85]

IRVING SANDLER: Wait, before you move there, when—this is a work of when? Do you remember?

[00:20:36.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is 1936.

[00:20:39.15]

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

[00:20:40.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He did that the same year he did that white still life.

[00:20:42.45]

IRVING SANDLER: It's curious, because in 1937, he does a Neoplastic—somewhat Neoplastic mural for—that would be the radio station?

[00:20:56.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. That was—

[00:20:57.55]

IRVING SANDLER: WNYC.

[00:20:57.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —WNYC.

[00:20:59.15]

IRVING SANDLER: And at the same time, he does a very—or around the same time—

[00:21:03.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:21:03.90]

IRVING SANDLER: —he does a very full-blown—

[00:21:06.62]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well—

[00:21:07.46]

IRVING SANDLER: —a nude figure.

[00:21:09.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was interested—and he and Gorky and Bill de Kooning. But I know especially about—I know Bill de Kooning was, but especially—see, the three of them kind of saw each other, you know? But they both were attracted to Gorky, you see. It wasn't so much that they were attracted to each other as that they were both attracted to Gorky. And Gorky was very interested in Ingres, and Byron and Bill were very interested in Ingres. And under the—you remember—you read on one of the tapes, that thing from 1939 that he wrote where he said "those who waged war of figurative—"

[00:21:50.28]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:21:50.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: "—versus not—" He never felt that because he did a Cubist picture or a picture based on Cubism or an abstract picture that he couldn't do a realistic picture at the same time. He didn't see any reason why he couldn't.

[00:22:06.12]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And this, in a sense—was this done around the same time as the mosaic?

[00:22:09.43]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This was the mosaic that he did for the project. And it's here in the U.S. Passport Service Office in the International Building in Rockefeller Center. It dates from 1936.

[00:22:20.07]

IRVING SANDLER: 1936. Around the same time—and this is a kind of semi-abstract—I guess you could call that in a way, Picasso.

[00:22:32.01]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, actually not. Picasso didn't draw these shapes this way. You would never mistake it for a Picasso. I would say that it combined what he learned from looking at Picasso with his love of archaic and Primitive art.

[00:22:51.12]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But it's interesting that at this time, he paints—he works in three—with three totally different kinds of imagery, with this very highly modeled, illusionistic sort of figure, to this semi-abstract, very flat figure, to a geometric. That didn't—

[00:23:17.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well this—

[00:23:17.55]

IRVING SANDLER: —bother—

[00:23:17.79]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —the mural was isolated.

[00:23:19.89]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, the mural was isolated.

[00:23:20.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, he did not work in Neoplasticism.

[00:23:22.53]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember why he chose that form for the mural?

[00:23:25.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well—

[00:23:26.19]

IRVING SANDLER: Because it would have probably been easier for him had he not.

[00:23:29.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I think at the time that he was supposed to do this mural, both of us were interested in Neoplasticism, but I told you, we didn't stay with it. As you remember—

[00:23:41.32]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, I remember.

[00:23:41.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —I did a few things, too, but I didn't stay with it, either. And no, I would say that this way, and the way of the white still life there, the classical still life—

[00:23:56.28]

IRVING SANDLER: We're going to have to be a little more specific. You're talking about the semi-abstract—

[00:23:59.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I'm talking about—

[00:24:00.78]

IRVING SANDLER: —mural, the mosaic, rather? And this is a white, fairly non-objective

painting. It has certain remote figural references, but you would say that between this semi-abstract and that more abstract—you were going to go on.

[00:24:18.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I would say that these are really the two veins that he worked in. The Ingres, the influence of Ingres—he did not exhibit that work. He always liked to do it, though, and I have many drawings, very fine drawings, where he made these beautiful, classical heads at the time. I always liked that. Now, as you can see in the first exhibition of the American Abstract Artists at the Squibb Galleries in 1936—now, you see, it is 1936. It wasn't '37. I'm sure it was '36. I don't know why it's '37. [It was 1937 –Ed.]

[00:25:00.76]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:25:01.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But anyway, this I think might have been Peter Greene's.

[00:25:07.73]

IRVING SANDLER: The construction, yes.

[00:25:08.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. But these were absolutely typical of his work. That was the way his work looked at the time. And this was Swinden.

[00:25:21.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Yes.

[00:25:25.45]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: These were mine. That's Peter Greene.

[00:25:28.12]

IRVING SANDLER: And these were non-objective pictures that he showed?

[00:25:33.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, two years later, in 1938, when he had his first show, you can see how he wanted to go into the figure again.

[00:25:43.42]

IRVING SANDLER: Could you talk a little bit about his reasons for wanting to go back into the figure around '38?

[00:25:49.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, yes. I can say that throughout his life, Byron felt a very strong urge to bring Humanism back into his art. He always felt the Humanistic element was very important. That plastic element, naturally, but told with some Humanistic—in some Humanistic terms, you know, and imagery, associative imagery. And whatever it brought out in him was important to him.

[00:26:25.61]

IRVING SANDLER: Does he continue, however, to paint some abstractions?

[00:26:28.91]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, always.

[00:26:30.59]

IRVING SANDLER: I see. One more thing. The figures in—of 1938 seem to be made up of clearly defined planes.

[00:26:42.24]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:26:42.45]

IRVING SANDLER: And in that sense, they do relate to the more classicizing abstractions that you showed at the AAA.

[00:26:50.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right.

[00:26:50.79]

IRVING SANDLER: The reason I mention it is that this later changes in his work. He becomes more calligraphic. And I wanted to ask you about that when we come to it.

[00:26:59.61]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Right. Well, as you can see in this—all right, you want me to progress chronologically, or do you want me to say now that if you look at this large "Primavera" that's reproduced on the cover of *Art Voices*, which is the way he went toward the end—

[00:27:16.62]

IRVING SANDLER: That's April-May 1964. Yes.

[00:27:18.72]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, well, this was a '61 painting, when he died, the year he died. Well, this kind of thing—and if you look at those abstract collages with—full of Expressionism and where the planes aren't so strictly informal, you can see the correlation. As his abstract moves, so his figurative moved. You see, there was always a correlation between the two.

[00:27:43.67]

IRVING SANDLER: You used the word "Expressionism." You feel that—

[00:27:47.03]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, it was Expressionism, but still restricted to a certain extent within formal means. Now, if you know the "Garden of Sochi—"

[00:27:56.81]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, the Gorky picture.

[00:27:58.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Gorky picture, the one where he has the negative space coming into the configurations—he has kind of a taupe background, and he has configurations that this taupe weaves into—

[00:28:19.67]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[00:28:20.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: All right. I have a color slide of Byron's which, if you shut the tape for a minute, I'll show you.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:28:27.92]

IRVING SANDLER: The point that you were making, Ros, is that the feelings of both Gorky and Browne were very close.

[00:28:37.58]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, except that—all right. Except that at the time, when Gorky became more Surrealist—now, believe it or not, Byron has elements of that, but it's not quite as Surreal as Gorky put in to the—you remember the thin series where he had these very fine calligraphy, and the very thin washes of color floating through, and all the forms are very phallic?

[00:29:08.01]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, phallic.

[00:29:08.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he didn't ever go into Surrealism quite that much.

[00:29:16.40]

IRVING SANDLER: How do—

[00:29:16.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: More symbolism than Surrealism, you know?

[00:29:19.37]

IRVING SANDLER: How do you use the word "Surrealism" in this—

[00:29:21.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, in the sense that in those things of Gorky's, it was directly—you could connect it with Freudianism, or sex, in that sense, not in the sense of Dalí, not in the sense of de Chirico.

[00:29:36.87]

IRVING SANDLER: And you say that these ideas were not that interesting to Byron.

[00:29:42.09]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, Byron didn't get that—he didn't get that obvious, let's say, about—I would say that Gorky went into Freudianism more, and Byron stayed with kind of general symbolism, you know, symbolism that could kind of refer to more than just definitely sex.

[00:30:05.58]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:30:06.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You know?

[00:30:06.33]

IRVING SANDLER: Like he was more interested in things like bullfights. There were other—

[00:30:10.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Things that represented a symbol that was used throughout humanity to represent a tragedy of life and death or to represent a certain kind of heroic

sentiment, you know, or romanticism, flowers in the hair. I mean, the kind of thing that have kind of dotted art as general symbols, which you can—

[00:30:37.44]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. And would you say, too, that Byron is more explicitly figurative than Gorky in the '40s? Because Gorky doesn't seem to refer that much to visual phenomena.

[00:30:59.88]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I would say that Byron did more of the figurative things than Gorky. He was—you see, Byron was very prolific. I don't know if you realize that.

[00:31:16.18]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, I do.

[00:31:16.68]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was extremely prolific. So he could be doing just as many abstract things as Gorky, and still at the same time be doing a lot of figurative things. But if you mean in the interest, the interest of Gorky's was less than the figurative at that time than Byron's

[00:31:32.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Than Byron's.

[00:31:33.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. And there was a point I wanted to make, that Byron did, during the '40s, make a symbolism that was totally his own. And he evolved that symbol from that point on. And that was the crustacean image, where he—you see, he always wanted the symbol of man in his work. And out of our experiences in Provincetown of the skates and the shellfish that were thrown up, broken on the beach, he devised a half-human, half-crustacean totem, which he worked in different—with his imagination—Byron always worked in series. And one series led to another.

[00:32:20.33]

For instance, it started with a butterfly, which was abstracted, but it started with the butterfly. The butterfly evolved into a crustacean. The crustacean evolved into a bat. These evolved into figures of women. He tried—let's say—he was such an explorer. He moved into—one thing suggested another thing. Once, my son was sitting on the floor next to him. He used to work all the time. And he was sitting next to him. And he was a little kid, about four years old. And he was making a tree. And my husband was drawing. And he was making a tree, and the shape went like a triangle, with all little lines going up to indicate the tree trunk. And there was a little bit of green on top to indicate the top of the tree. And my husband looked at this and said, "Stevie," he says, "if you let me borrow one of your shapes, I'll let you borrow one of mine." So he took that tree, and it became a clown's neck. It became so many things. You know, that's what he did. He was—

[00:33:26.67]

IRVING SANDLER: This would account for the tremendous variety in his work, too.

[00:33:29.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, his imagination was constantly—the variety was of, let's say, presentation, but if his work is examined with a really perceptive eye, he uses certain symbols and certain formations throughout the whole of his work. And his calligraphy is always the same. So let's say the—well, anyway, now, to go on from there, now—

[00:34:01.11]

IRVING SANDLER: Byron is a member of the American Abstract Artists.

[00:34:05.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He was a charter member. He was one of the first formers.

[00:34:08.82]

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

[00:34:10.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: With me.

[00:34:10.89]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:34:12.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And with Diller, and—

[00:34:12.75]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, no, I just wanted to get it—

[00:34:14.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, he's—

[00:34:14.84]

IRVING SANDLER: —in this section, too.

[00:34:15.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, sure. He was one of the moving forces. And then—

[00:34:26.34]

IRVING SANDLER: This is very—

[00:34:27.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is in the Brooklyn Museum.

[00:34:29.10]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. That that's very Synthetic Cubist, the Brooklyn Museum—

[00:34:32.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:34:32.59]

IRVING SANDLER: —picture.

[00:34:33.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's right. Same feeling, same time. Now, he used to make constructions like this, which he destroyed.

[00:34:44.37]

IRVING SANDLER: What material is this construction?

[00:34:47.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That was, I think, iron.

[00:34:49.26]

IRVING SANDLER: That would have been—

[00:34:49.80]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Sheet iron.

[00:34:50.26]

IRVING SANDLER: —one of the very first open metal constructions, then.

[00:34:54.83]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Yeah. He did a lot of these things. Here, I have the drawings for it right in this pile. I pulled it out to show you.

[00:35:03.26]

IRVING SANDLER: Are there—do any of those still remain?

[00:35:06.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, I only have photos, and I only have the very latest he did. Because he—when he got too crowded, he used to throw things out. I mean—[laughs] we never had enough room. This is the first time we have a big place. I mean, and he died six weeks after we moved here. We were always crowded. He never wanted to have a separate studio because he—oh, he had a big loft on 12th Street. That's right. And he had—he didn't do much sculpture at that time. But that wasn't too long. Now, this was one of the Ingres period.

[00:35:45.08]

IRVING SANDLER: And you say that he doesn't show these Ingres pictures?

[00:35:49.07]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I showed them, but he didn't.

[00:35:51.14]

IRVING SANDLER: They weren't shown at the time.

[00:35:52.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, no. I think Rose Fried had shown this in the back room with a show of his. She hung it in the back room, but not with the show.

[00:36:02.13]

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

[00:36:03.51]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, that's what happened. After this came again the stylization.

[00:36:10.01]

IRVING SANDLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:36:10.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: See, shapes were very important to him. This is when he looked like Picasso, that picture.

[00:36:15.50]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, yes.

[00:36:16.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, he never wanted to do commercial art. And so rather than work and do these drafting jobs, when you had to either do defense work or be in the Army, he worked as a shipfitter in the Navy yard.

[00:36:32.24]

IRVING SANDLER: The picture we're talking about was reproduced in the *New York Post* March 29, 1943, page 8.

[00:36:41.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Now, this is another way his work began to evolve, '43. He was always drawn to the image. He always worked from an image, or from nature. It was an imaginary image, but he worked very often from still lifes and things. Like, the two slides that I showed you where I drew a relationship between Gorky's "Garden in Sochi" and those—they were worked from still lifes, not the "Azoic Fugue," but the other one. It was worked from still life. It doesn't look like anything, you know? But it was originally.

[00:37:25.38]

IRVING SANDLER: In other words, he liked that—reference the nature to begin with. But he also worked from the model.

[00:37:33.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, every week of his life. I have piles of drawings in the model. So anyway, I wouldn't say every week of his life, but every week that he could. That's why I have more nudes than anything else. That's why I sell them cheaper than anything else. [Laughs.] Now—oh, I started to show you this. See, that was—you see, he was—always had an icon of some kind. This was—at that time, that was a picture done about '46. And now, this also has a Primitive source. This is part of his crustacean image. This came at the crustacean time. It was an evolvement.

[00:38:16.07]

IRVING SANDLER: The claw-like form.

[00:38:17.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: The—yeah, these claw-like forms. And this was rope pasted on the canvas. The collector who bought this was an alcoholic. And he came—he wanted to get rid of it so he could get something to drink, you know, some—and he came and asked me if I would buy it back after Byron died. He bought it about 1946 or so. And I bought it back, and then I promptly sold it again for a great deal more than—I gave him what he originally paid for it, and then he was mad. [Laughs.] But this is a—yeah, that's—anyway, this is when Kootz first—now, there's 1943, his catalog at Pinacotheca was written—the introduction was written by Samuel Kootz. And as you can see, thought a lot of Byron at the time.

[00:39:26.73]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. He later took him into his gallery.

[00:39:29.19]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: When he formed, he was one of the original people he put in. Yeah.

[00:39:33.33]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:39:34.89]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He had his gallery. And it's from a still life. See, at that time, he also worked like that. Now, how am I going to describe these pictures for a tape? I can't

really.

[00:39:48.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, you can identify. This is the—

[00:39:50.40]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: These are—

[00:39:50.76]

IRVING SANDLER: —what you were talking about was in the—is in the collection—

[00:39:54.12]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No, it isn't anymore. He gave it to some museum. I don't know where.

[00:39:57.49]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, it was in the collection of Roy Neuberger.

[00:39:59.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:39:59.79]

IRVING SANDLER: And the other picture there is—

[00:40:03.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: "Woman on the Beach."

[00:40:04.71]

IRVING SANDLER: Reproduced for *Newsweek*, July 30, 1945.

[00:40:08.76]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I believe it's in Cornell.

[00:40:10.17]

IRVING SANDLER: Incidentally, all of this is—has been photostat by the American Archives, the scrapbooks. So—

[00:40:17.73]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think so.

[00:40:18.62]

IRVING SANDLER: —I would imagine it is available—

[00:40:20.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:40:20.61]

IRVING SANDLER: —can be cross—

[00:40:21.06]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is the Whitney. This—

[00:40:23.01]

IRVING SANDLER: Cross-referenced.

[00:40:23.28]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is—yeah. This has been—this is owned by the Whitney. This is the one that Roy Neuberger still retains.

[00:40:30.24]

IRVING SANDLER: "The Jazz Player."

[00:40:31.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. That was when he was with Kootz.

[00:40:32.97]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Kootz had a show of—on jazz, I think.

[00:40:36.81]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:40:37.02]

IRVING SANDLER: All of the artists—

[00:40:37.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, right. I have the catalogs. And that was his circus period.

[00:40:45.48]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, just about some of his periods—he has a bullfighter period. He has a circus—

[00:40:52.83]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, that came later.

[00:40:53.25]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah. He has a circus period, also.

[00:40:55.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Jazz musician period.

[00:40:57.03]

IRVING SANDLER: Could you—what would prompt—were there specific things that would prompt him to, say—

[00:41:04.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he loved the circus.

[00:41:05.51]

IRVING SANDLER: —choose a—

[00:41:07.02]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He loved the circus. This—I'm trying to think what led him into the circus things. I can't remember exactly right now what led him into it. But I think it might have been—because it came right after this Aztec period that—where he's looking at pre-Columbian art. It came right after that that he became interested in the circus. And much of the imagery came—moved right—flowed right from one into the other. And it worked itself out. It [the circus –Ed.] was a very popular period. This is the tree form I told you about.

[00:41:52.61]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:41:56.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And that was distinctly a Browne lion. And I remember how annoyed I was when I saw a picture of—I believe—I can't remember if it was Kuniyoshi or Ben Shahn [it was by Shahn –Ed.], or somebody who, in one of the Whitney Annuals when it was on Eighth Street, had a lion, where they stole Byron's lion. It was very well known. Oh, this was a wonderful thing written by Weldon Kees on Byron. That was a marvelous thing. But that is also in the Archives.

[00:42:34.16]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:42:34.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This was a catalog for one of his shows at the Kootz Gallery.

[00:42:40.40]

IRVING SANDLER: Were you and Byron close to Weldon? Did you know him at all?

[00:42:43.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We met him in Provincetown in 19—what was it? I guess we must have met him before, if he—well, we I guess we met him through Kootz, and then we became friendlier with him. Yes, if he had written—because '49, the Kootz Gallery was already closed, the first Kootz gallery. So we must have met him before, through Kootz. And then when they had Forum '49 in Provincetown, where they formed a cooperative gallery, he was there, and we became friendlier with him. But then I didn't see him for many years.

[00:43:20.06]

IRVING SANDLER: What was he like?

[00:43:21.77]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, I—

[00:43:23.39]

IRVING SANDLER: Because he's sort of one of the forgotten figures.

[00:43:27.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I understand he has some reputation, though.

[00:43:31.17]

IRVING SANDLER: No, more as a poet and writer—

[00:43:33.95]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:43:34.20]

IRVING SANDLER: —than as an artist.

[00:43:35.56]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, that's what he was.

[00:43:37.38]

IRVING SANDLER: He did, however, paint at the time.

[00:43:39.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I know. But I don't remember him as a painter. I remember him more as a poet and a writer. He was kind of a spokesman for art. And I remember him that way. I can't remember him in too much detail. I just vaguely remember what he looks like, because I don't believe we saw much of him after that summer. But he certainly was very sympathetic to Byron.

[00:44:06.69]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember anything more about that summer? It was a kind of lively time in Provincetown. [Cross talk.].

[00:44:12.69]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, I remember that that was when Elaine and I both covered the show.

[00:44:20.43]

IRVING SANDLER: Is that Elaine de Kooning?

[00:44:21.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. We both covered the show. She covered it for one paper. I covered it for the "Provincetown Advocate," and she covered it for a Cape newspaper. And we both wrote them up. And I remember that she had started working for *Art News* shortly before that. I had started—no, she had started working for *Art News* the same year that I started working for *Pictures on Exhibit.* I guess that was '47. And yes, I remember. It was very active—

[00:44:58.20]

IRVING SANDLER: Was de Kooning in Provincetown that summer, too?

[00:45:00.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: No.

[00:45:01.29]

IRVING SANDLER: She was there alone.

[00:45:01.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: She was there alone. Yeah.

[00:45:03.12]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember the forum that they had on French versus American art? Did you attend?

[00:45:09.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I remember Adolph Gottlieb talking. Yes. You mean in Forum '49?

[00:45:13.68]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:45:14.04]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Adolph talked. And he caused quite a commotion because —I wish I could remember what he said. Maybe if I tried hard enough I could eventually. But I do remember that he made some very arrogant statements.

[00:45:34.13]

IRVING SANDLER: Pro-American, anti-French?

[00:45:36.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, yeah, it was—I can't right now tell you exactly in what context. But it—everybody got—[gasps] you know? [Laughs.] It was sort of very brazen remarks, you know? And the whole audience was in a dither.

[00:45:51.59]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember—what was Browne's attitude to this "French versus American" thing?

[00:46:00.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He wasn't nationalistic about art. He didn't care what country it came from. [Laughs.] Neither am I.

[00:46:09.12]

IRVING SANDLER: So he wouldn't have been very sympathetic to what Gottlieb said?

[00:46:13.49]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Not what he said, no. I don't see why they call Adolph an Abstract Expressionist. He was never an Abstract Expressionist.

[00:46:22.52]

IRVING SANDLER: Well, when you really go down the list, probably none of the people called Abstract Expressionists are Abstract Expressionists.

[00:46:30.08]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes, they are.

[00:46:30.97]

IRVING SANDLER: Like who?

[00:46:31.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I mean—well, Esteban Vicente was an Abstract Expressionist at one time. And Milton Resnick, and Philip Guston, and—oh, I can think of a whole bunch who are really Abstract Expressionists. Now, Motherwell wasn't. He always worked formally, except maybe in the later work, you know.

[00:46:53.75]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, but when you get down to it, de Kooning has been considered an Abstract Expressionist. Well, a good deal of his work isn't Abstract. Now, Rothko was certainly not Expressionist in the art historical sense. Neither is Newman; neither is Motherwell. The term is just—

[00:47:11.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: It's a mishmash.

[00:47:12.27]

IRVING SANDLER: A mishmash.

[00:47:12.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But what I think of—possibly the best example for me of Abstract Expressionism—you see, I think of what de Kooning evolved into as Expressionism, you understand? And it's certainly—a good deal of it was abstract. But it was also very plastic. Now, Philip Guston at times was plastic. Oh, you know who's a good example? Franz Kline.

He's a good example of Abstract Expressionism.

[00:47:42.36]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, but I mean, some of the people it does apply to, but as a name for —a general name that—

[00:47:49.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I think it's more of a name of people who believed together in existentialism. [Laughs.]

[00:47:55.83]

IRVING SANDLER: Would you consider Byron an Expressionist?

[00:47:59.97]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: In a different sense.

[00:48:01.16]

IRVING SANDLER: Did—

[00:48:01.57]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now I think he evolved into Expressionism.

[00:48:05.24]

IRVING SANDLER: Did—

[00:48:06.54]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't think he always was, unless you're making it very broad and saying all art is expression.

[00:48:12.60]

IRVING SANDLER: No, no, no, no, I'm being more specific.

[00:48:14.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, in the being more specific for the look of work, I would say that he was. he Became gradually more of an Expressionist.

[00:48:24.46]

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember much talk about existentialism, say—

[00:48:27.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:48:27.88]

IRVING SANDLER: —in Provincetown in '49?

[00:48:29.41]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Sure. Sure. That was—I think that there's been a great deal of misunderstanding of existentialism. And I think the way it has been expressed by certain poets, writers, and playwrights and—is a misunderstanding because they translated it in nihilistic terms. And I don't think it was originally intended to be a nihilist philosophy. But let's say as existentialism was presented to us via our colleagues, we rejected it.

[00:49:10.92]

IRVING SANDLER: But it was talked about in the '40s.

[00:49:12.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:49:15.16]

IRVING SANDLER: Because there was some contradiction there. Some people say no, they really—don't know too much about it, or care too much about it—

[00:49:23.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, it was very much related with Rimbaud, and Celine, and Breton, and Apollinaire and—I have more in the kitchen. I just didn't want to get up on account of the tape. And so yes, I think that's all part and parcel. There was an element to certain people, a certain way of thinking, that we felt wasn't optimistic.

[00:49:57.98]

IRVING SANDLER: Now, this takes us to around 1948 in Byron's work.

[00:50:04.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. This is about '47. You can see. He's always doing—these were drawings. You know. Now, this was '49, '49. That's after the Kootz Gallery closed.

[00:50:18.77]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:50:19.46]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. And then this—I have—this is—that was in the State Department, had a show at the Metropolitan Museum. And then later, they sold the State Department collection, or they—and that became part of Auburn University collection. This was the beginning of the crustacean period. Later, it became much more interesting. That's a more decorative—

[00:50:45.89]

IRVING SANDLER: That would've been in 1949, or actually '48, '49.

[00:50:50.22]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: '48, '49. He went through periods of this. He went through periods of the crystals of the earth, underneath—mineral shapes, forms. He went through—he had different—throughout—what was it—about 35 years of his career, he went through different visual imagery, you know? But this was a very good period. Not this particular one. This particular one is too decorative for me. But he had some great things at that time.

[00:51:28.72]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:51:29.05]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: You know, I'm very objective about his work.

[00:51:31.45]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, I see.

[00:51:32.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Most people wouldn't think it's possible. This is a beautiful one. That's a variation of the "Azoic Fugue" I showed you. And that picture—see, I don't have any that I own as good as these. But that's not as good, but it's close in feeling. I think it was done about the same time. This "Flying Disc"—that's in Texas. That evolved from this, but you know, later.

[00:51:56.20]

IRVING SANDLER: That would have been done about what year?

[00:51:59.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, about '50.

[00:52:00.00]

IRVING SANDLER: '51?

[00:52:01.21]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: This is '51. Look how different that is. And see, then it evolved into "The Bat." At the same time, he was doing these. And he was doing these.

[00:52:11.68]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:52:11.98]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: [Laughs.] So this—I believe all these things are—here is a statement that he made for the Art Students League, but I'm sure it was taped by the—

[00:52:27.67]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, by the—

[00:52:28.39]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Now, these junk sculptures he did between 1947 and '57 in Provincetown, and he threw them out at the end of the summer, or else people would go and take them away. And he did—he was very unprecious about his work. He used to have millions of them all over in the house, outside the house, on the grounds. [Laughs.] Millions of them. [Not quite millions! –Ed.] We'd go to the city dump. Then later, he welded one together, like that.

[00:52:55.00]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:52:55.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: We retained that. This is a period, too, that's evolved from the crustacean.

[00:53:00.15]

IRVING SANDLER: Relates—

[00:53:01.60]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, it relates to the crustacean. It came out—it's '53, it says there. That's when he was still going strong. Cover of *House and Garden*.

[00:53:12.01]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah, let's date that cover of "*House and Garden*," November '53.

[00:53:16.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: November '53. And this is a head he has in the Whitney Museum. "And true study of art lies in the endless diversity that exists in the spectacle of nature. The act of painting is not enough, or it is always about something." But it's a contradiction in a way. It's about something, but I know what he meant. That isn't a clear statement.

[00:53:41.79]

IRVING SANDLER: What did he mean?

[00:53:44.85]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He meant that—I think what he was trying to say there is that you have to have a definite—a definite statement, an ideology, that you are trying to say, whether it's about Humanism or something. But it's not like when an ape paints.

[00:54:08.38]

IRVING SANDLER: Yeah.

[00:54:08.74]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: [Laughs.] I mean—

[00:54:09.94]

IRVING SANDLER: He also says, "Art is neither the airing of personal idiosyncrasies, nor the willful making of anarchy." And then he ends off with "Draw, draw, every day of your life."

[00:54:20.14]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah, that's—yeah.

[00:54:20.80]

IRVING SANDLER: You would say, then, that drawing was central to his—

[00:54:23.92]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, yes. He was.

[00:54:24.58]

IRVING SANDLER: —conception of picture making?

[00:54:26.71]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, no, he thought in color and planes. I mean, many of his pictures are not done with drawing at all. But he was a true—he loved to draw, and he was a terrific draftsman, fantastic draftsman, so that drawing was terribly important to him. He had this, he took from Ingres, I believe.

[00:54:44.89]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:54:45.25]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: That's a quote.

[00:54:45.91]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:54:46.36]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Now, well, they very—see, he loved these imagery, this image. This is another thing.

[00:54:57.62]

IRVING SANDLER: That's the—

[00:54:58.31]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He broke it up.

[00:54:59.39]

IRVING SANDLER: —the, what, satyr image?

[00:55:02.64]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: "The Satyr and a Muse." He always used the satyr and a muse. This is a very good one. He had a whole lot of still lifes. I don't know where they are, and I don't even—I don't know where that is. I don't know where a lot of them are. Now, whose art ranges from Primitive Aztec to ancient Byzantine civilization? See, he liked Catalonian art. He was crazy about it. And well, you can tell a lot from looking at his stuff. And—

[00:55:34.37]

IRVING SANDLER: Did he get—did he ever get abroad to see—

[00:55:37.82]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes, we went to Spain.

[00:55:39.23]

IRVING SANDLER: What year was that?

[00:55:40.16]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: 1958.

[00:55:41.57]

IRVING SANDLER: Rather late.

[00:55:43.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. We never—oh, it took me a whole year to get him to go. He said all he had to do was sit in one room. He says, "You didn't have to go someplace." You could—here. And as a matter of fact, this article says something about it. Here, he says:

[00:55:58.86]

[Reading:] *Yet Mr. Browne's highly successful paintings, his huge collections of scrapbooks, the love of adventure in far places which cries out from his work, and especially his warm feeling and understanding for distant cultures, particularly the Primitive ones—all this would make one think he had traveled to the ends of the earth. 'Not a bit of it,' Mr. Browne told me. 'Travel is not necessary, not when you've got life and its photographs and omnibus and adventure on television every Sunday afternoon.'* [Laughs.]

[00:56:28.68]

I'm telling you, he was the most unpretentious man. He could work in a toilet. I mean, he never needed any conditions, you know. All he needed was paper, canvas, the tools. That's a picture of his. It was very abstract. It was never a favorite of mine, but it's one that he liked among his pictures. And that's some magazine. It might be *House and Garden* or something. This is one he got—the last portraits of the artist, which started—

[00:56:56.05]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, he did it—

[00:56:56.65]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —about '54.

[00:56:56.92]

IRVING SANDLER: He did a series of portraits—

[00:56:58.15]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes.

[00:56:58.45]

IRVING SANDLER: —of the artist?

[00:56:59.20]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Series of portraits. That was a late one. I don't have that. This was the start of that period. And then they got—they got—see how Expressionist he got?

[00:57:12.08]

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

[00:57:12.17]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I don't have that picture, but—I think this is a beautiful piece. There he is on a jury with—

[00:57:23.08]

IRVING SANDLER: Richardson and Boucher.

[00:57:24.84]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. This is a very good portrait of Milton that Chrysler owns. And I don't know when I'll ever see it again.

[00:57:35.35]

IRVING SANDLER: That's—

[00:57:36.63]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Milton Avery.

[00:57:37.57]

IRVING SANDLER: —Milton Avery. Yes.

[00:57:38.55]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. And, well, that more or less takes you—this is at NYU, shortly—you know, I mean, a brief summary of his career. But he was cut off quite young. And I think he was just beginning to get to something that he wanted to evolve for himself. Like, everything coming together, all these experiences, not that—each thing, each period he went through produced some wonderful works in themselves that were complete, yet as a total man, as a total artist, I think he was trying to make a meeting between the abstract and the figurative for himself that was something different. And something heroic, like he—and Baroque. He was kind of a Baroque man, I think. Don't you?

[00:58:42.08]

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, very much.

[00:58:43.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah.

[00:58:43.34]

IRVING SANDLER: Very much.

[00:58:44.33]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: So that more or less—of course, there's so much you can say

with—

[00:58:49.99]

IRVING SANDLER: There's one more—

[00:58:50.30]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —living with an artist—

[00:58:51.05]

IRVING SANDLER: —question—

[00:58:51.29]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: —for 27 years.

[00:58:52.28]

IRVING SANDLER: Perhaps we should have dealt with it before. But at one point, there was a change from the flat, clearly defined form to the painterly calligraphy in his work.

[00:59:09.00]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, he always—I can show you—if we go into the studio, I can show you drawings he did in the late '20s and '30s. He was always a draftsman. I mean—

[00:59:23.58]

IRVING SANDLER: But I'm thinking about the difference between, say, the form and some of the '30s figures and abstractions, the very clear, flat—

[00:59:34.59]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yeah. Oh, the change—

[00:59:36.60]

IRVING SANDLER: —unmodulated form to the more open, calligraphic sort.

[00:59:41.37]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Oh, that happened—that began to happen—well, it's hard to say. I sold a head to Harris Kline, a big head. I swear, if it weren't for the definition of—a big, kind of—oh, what's the word I want? Atavistic. It's kind of like a head that—oh, help me with the word. It looks like a Baziotes shape, the shape of the head. But within that head and within out that head—I swear, it's just like Jackson Pollock. It's full of drip and everything. This was 1940. Whirls and drips, just completely like that. Only it was a head. It wasn't—so that freedom showed spottily, periodically. But overall, doing it all the time, I would say it really got underway during the early '50s, or beginning of the '50s and then increased all during the '50s.

[01:00:59.31]

IRVING SANDLER: One thing—Byron taught throughout most of the latter part of his life at the Art—

[01:01:07.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: He taught for 14 years.

[01:01:10.30]

IRVING SANDLER: At the Art Students League.

[01:01:11.23]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: At the Art Students League.

[01:01:11.72]

IRVING SANDLER: What was his approach?

[01:01:16.78]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: I never watched him teach. I know that I took a few cues from him when I started to teach because I know when—he used to borrow slides from the Metropolitan. And at that time the Museum of Modern Art had a rental library. He would take them home and go over them. And he would throw the camera out of—the projector out of focus, and I picked up that trick from him.

[01:01:39.90]

IRVING SANDLER: Why would he do that?

[01:01:42.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: And—so that the students would not be confused by association, and they could see the areas, and how they counted and move and work. And I think that he had made charts, which I don't know what happened to them. When he first died, I was so overwhelmed by his death, which was such a shock, that I did not collect his stuff from his locker at the League. I don't know what happened to it. And his monitor was supposed to bring it to me, and—anyway, I never got those charts. He had colored charts that he used to show his students preliminary steps of the movements of planes in space. I don't know. I never attended one of his classes. I don't know how he taught. I must say, he turned out some very good students.

[01:02:32.11]

IRVING SANDLER: Who were some students?

[01:02:33.52]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, Stephen Pace, Seong Moy, Robert Rauschenberg.

[01:02:43.57]

IRVING SANDLER: Rauschenberg studied with him?

[01:02:44.68]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Yes. Not exclusively with Byron.

[01:02:47.47]

IRVING SANDLER: No, no.

[01:02:47.86]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But he studied with him. Oh, there's so many of them. I think Hultberg. Oh, golly. Jenkins. Now, how Jenkins got—I mean, Jenkins wasn't—I don't think Byron was teaching very well. Jenkins was not only a student of his, but he's one of the very few people that talks about how wonderful Byron was and talks about his being his teacher. Most people never want to mention who their teachers were.

[01:03:23.73]

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

[01:03:24.18]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: But he does. He's a very, very friendly guy. I don't agree with the way he paints at all. But he's a very personable, you know, charming, warm person. And he was Byron's monitor, I believe, at that time. And oh, there were a lot. I can't think of them all now. Irving. It's hard. There are a lot of students. Some of them were good.

[01:03:55.46]

IRVING SANDLER: Gosh, it looks like we're—

[01:03:57.50]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Coming to the end of the tape.

[01:03:58.63]

IRVING SANDLER: —towards the end of the tape. Is there anything else that you can think of that you think might be interesting?

[01:04:05.27]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: About Byron?

[01:04:06.05]

IRVING SANDLER: About Byron, or any of the things we've talked that jumps into your mind.

[01:04:11.45]

ROSALIND BENGELSDORF: Well, I will say this. The thing that's very important to me is the lack of concern today for plasticity. I think that the young artists are searching again for it. It terrifies me that hundreds upon thousands of MFAs are coming out of college without any knowledge of this at all, and that they're going to be turning out more people. And the very thought of it upsets me and would upset Byron, I know, except that I realize that it's always been this way, and that there are always a very few that do this, and practice it and practice it with resolution. And so it must always be the same. It's just hard to live through. That's about all.

[01:05:08.69]

IRVING SANDLER: Good. This is the end of the second side of the third interview between— with Rosalind Browne. I think it's just run out. Yep, there it goes. But—

[END OF TRACK AAA_bengel68_8384_m]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]