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## Oral history interview with Gerome Kamrowski, 1976 January 22

Funding for this interview was provided by Matilda Wilson. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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## Transcript

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#### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gerome Kamrowski on 1976 January 22. The interview was conducted by Dennis Barrie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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.

#### Interview

DENNIS BARRIE: Today is January 22, 1976. I'm in the home of Gerome Kamrowski, artist and teacher. My name is Dennis Barrie. This is the first of a series of tapes we're going to do on Gerry's life and career, the people he's known and worked with, and his own development as an artist. Since this is the first tape, Gerry, what I thought we'd do is start with some very basics about your background. I wonder if you would just go into your family background somewhat. I know you're Minnesota-born, and that might help explain some things.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I think I'd rather talk about sort of the hinge points.

DENNIS BARRIE: Okay.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: In other words, I'll sort of talk roughly about persons, places, sort of destinies and divination.

DENNIS BARRIE: Okay. Fine.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: And probably one of the earliest hinge points was the New Bauhaus. And that was primarily one meeting place for people who—

DENNIS BARRIE: W- We're discussing the New Bauhaus and its architectural structure.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: And its ultimate demise. And finally in my moss garden from the Marshall Field mansion. It's now parking lots. But my point is that the New Bauhaus became essentially a meeting place for people whose ideals couldn't be accommodated in the structure of most academic or artistic institutions at the time.

DENNIS BARRIE: Is that why you went there?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes. The comings and going of some of the people were really quite fantastic. *Time* magazine did a story on the New Bauhaus. There is a photograph of Moholy-Nagy with two students: Richard Pavlichek, of St. Paul, Minnesota, and myself. We are in this early

picture in *Time* magazine. I didn't stay at the Bauhaus for too long. The place itself was interesting as a meeting place. It brought people together. For instance, standing in front of the doorway, a limestone lintel with aluminum letters announcing the New Bauhaus, was this very strange figure wearing a hat and banker's suit and looking like he's come from a race track. This was none other than Tony Smith. He looked like he was going to Wall Street rather than to art school. Allen Leepa was there. Pavlichek was there; myself; Koppe; and Alexander Corazzo was there. He came from Minnesota. Corazzo and I had a studio on 23rd Street. Tony Smith and the other people lived further down on the street on Prairie Avenue. Prairie Avenue was not the great Prairie Avenue area of 1900, but it brought all these people together. After one year or maybe less than a year at the Bauhaus, many of the people—Fritz Bultman, Allen Leepa, and myself—went to Hans Hofmann's summer school in Provincetown. Tony Smith I think went back to New Jersey, or he may have gone to work with Frank Lloyd Wright. So the original group dispersed itself very, very quickly. The obvious dissatisfactions with the Bauhaus were its high reliance on high energy design, its servility toward the machine, its rather rigid functional definitions which, in many respects, are very dated today. We don't see any pure—if we see any architecture at all, we see less of the Bauhaus influence than ever before.

DENNIS BARRIE: Were you disillusioned very soon after you got there?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, strangely enough, I think that all these people who went there really didn't go there to study painting. They went to study architecture. It was considered to be an architectural school. Leepa was a painter, Tony Smith was a sculptor, Fritz Bultman was a painter-sculptor, but they went to study architecture. Walter Gropius came down several times from Harvard where he had a program going, but either through lack of idea, support, or something, there weren't able to instigate a substantial building or an architectural program in the school.

DENNIS BARRIE: How did your own philosophy conflict or jell with the philosophy of the Bauhaus?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, I've always felt that the Bauhaus represented an over-commitment to the machine and that the functional definitions overlooked a lot of life. For instance, in later aspects of surrealism, the poetry was essentially a functional kind of thing. And essentially the definitions of it were kind of, oh, constructivist. Puritan aesthetic, with, again, servility to the machine, which they were never able to be completely successful about. The great success of the Bauhaus was that it became an academic commodity for the teaching of design. But let me talk a little bit more about the people.

DENNIS BARRIE: Okay. Fine.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Richard Pavlichek and Alexander Corazzo who were from St. Paul originally came to the New Bauhaus. Later on they transferred to Mies van der Rohe's school, the Armour Institute, later Illinois Institute of Technology. Before that time, Alex Corazzo and Leroy Turner were involved with the Paris-based abstract group, *Abstract-Creation*. There was a short-lived magazine published in Paris called *Abstract-Creation*, and there was a contact established between Corazzo and Leroy Turner and this magazine. I'd say this was in the mid-thirties, or possibly even in the early thirties, so that the New Bauhaus didn't necessarily bring abstract art to America—it was known here. When we came down to the Bauhaus, we weren't completely innocent about abstract art. After I left the Bauhaus there was the Hofmann summer school at Provincetown. Then I went to New York either in the fall of 1937 or 1938. Among the people I met there was William Simmons. Simmons introduced me to Bill Baziotes. In the late thirties there was a place on West Tenth Street where Francis Lee had a loft. This was essentially a meeting place for a lot of people. It was a large loft. There were a lot of parties, a lot of people coming and going. I think it was Bill Simmons who brought me over to this place first because there was some sort of residual kind of Bauhaus group, a studio school or something of that kind in New York where we went to. Later on, about seven years later, Tenth Street became the home of a lot of cooperative galleries. These galleries were quite successful for a time, but ultimately they faded. Now it's sort of gone into the SoHo development. But I'm talking about the early thirties when Tenth Street was, oh, a kind of Bowery-like street with a lot of employment agencies for restaurant help, temporary help for parties, for catering services. So the stoops would be loaded with people waiting to be called for these temporary jobs. I met Bill Baziotes through Francis Lee and through Bill Simmons and that group. Bill Baziotes was on the WPA project. When I got to New York I was on a grant that I got from Baroness Hilla Rebay of the Non-Objective Guggenheim. Then later on I got on the WPA project. Bill Baziotes was on the Project at that time. I think I was living on Sullivan Street at that time. This must have been in the very

late thirties or probably the early forties when this was going on. Bill Baziotés and Francis Lee were sort of interested in surrealism. I remember that Francis Lee gave a party for Wolfgang Paalen who published a magazine called *DYN* (D-Y-N) in Mexico City. It was a typical loft party with a lot of people. It was sort of a centering place there. Later on Matta got involved with Bill. And even before Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell were involved Bill Baziotés had contacted some of the ideas of automatism in painting. I think to go back to, say, Leepa who now teaches at State, and Dick Pavlichek who shared an apartment with me, came to New York to make films—You'll find that some of the experimental techniques that we were working on at that time antecede and really preceded, by several years, the things that were done with Hofmann. Quentin Fiore, who was a friend of Tony Smith's and also a close friend of mine, did a book— And both Allen Leepa and Richard Pavlichek can attest to the fact that Baziotés and I were sort of fooling around with experimental techniques more or less based on some of the surrealist ideas way back—I think it must have been in 1939. Let's just take a little break.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

DENNIS BARRIE: Just to backtrack for a minute before we go into some of the surrealist and abstract movements, you were with Hofmann just prior to you coming to New York?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes, that's right.

DENNIS BARRIE: Let's discuss Hofmann and the school. What effect did it have on you? How did you react to it?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, Hofmann was a great teacher. I mean that's obvious. He was a drawing master. I think nobody ever had the experience of working as intensely as they could with him. He had the ability to really inspire the work spirit in his student. To that degree it was extremely successful. Here again was a situation like the Bauhaus: he was the only center, he was the only modern teacher in New York at a time when everybody else was American Scene-oriented, or illustrative-oriented, or portrait-oriented, or whatever. So that he was the only art teacher that really had any connection whatsoever with what you'd call the modern movement. I think he was very Matisse-oriented. I think when Baziotés and I—I was close to Mrs. Hofmann—Miz—through Fritz Bultman, Dick Brookbank, and Jane Brotherton, this group of people who came back from Munich when World War II was threatening. Mrs. Hofmann got out of Germany just before the Holocaust. Miz was quite a friendly person. I was quite friendly with these people. I had this place on Sullivan Street. So I was sort of living in two worlds. I was sort of experimenting in surrealist techniques which were really quite different from the Matisse-oriented Hofmann. At a certain point, Hofmann, indirectly through Miz, exercised a kind of censure. Fiore is a communications-media person. Tony Smith and Fiore were very aware of this. In a certain way it was a kind of putting down. And yet, on the other hand, it was one of the kinds of things where Hofmann very soon caught on and later on—What I thought was one of the more dismal aspects around in a railroad station trying to catch the last train out of town. But nevertheless I think ultimately he gained from that experience and was able to junk the Matisse discipline and afford his own spontaneity, and essentially the best aspect of Hofmann's painting probably is his French sense of color.

DENNIS BARRIE: Do you think you gained technical skill from him?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I developed work habits. And it seems to me that everybody who worked with Hofmann knew how to draw.

DENNIS BARRIE: But your own interest put you in conflict with him—right? I mean it wasn't a situation that you continued with?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes. Ultimately the French system was exhausting itself. It didn't have the satisfactions, or it wasn't enticing people particularly. World War II was coming on. Gorky at that time was even sort of working on Mirós and doing sort of Picasso version pictures. So essentially the scene was eclectic. It was only when the surrealists brought in their devices and methods that these people were able to unhinge themselves from, say, such an over-awesome aspect of French painting. Which was still pretty tremendous. I mean certain aspects of Picasso, Braque, Miró were still tremendous.

DENNIS BARRIE: They still are.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: What was your own work like in, let's say, that Hofmann-early-New York period?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, strangely enough, I have a thing here. I've sent some slides of it to Lee Krasner. I think she and Lieberman are doing a catalogue raisonné on Jackson Pollock. I did this at that time on Bleeker Street. Bill Baziotis was a very experimental person with a lot of enthusiasm and he was fooling around, too, with different media. Everybody knew Bill and his wife Ethel. I knew Bill before he married Ethel. He and Ethel had a relationship that was very, very close. When Bill died of cancer I think Ethel went completely bananas. Bill was teaching at Hunter College prior to his death. From what I understand they tried to get some kind of retirement income for Ethel. It was quite a problem. Ethel and Bill were so very close that his death was a disaster for her. There was a person at Francis Lee's who got involved with a secretary—a boy—I can't remember his name. He was the person who sort of tipped us off as to what was going on. There was this whole ménage that existed there of French surrealists. And they were an awesome group. Peggy Guggenheim herself with her wealth and her parties was really something that for people like us who were oriented on the WPA like, oh, Baziotis, Pollock, myself—it was really two different worlds. Franz Kline had been on the Project but really wasn't involved at this time. And this one particular person and Howard Putzel himself were more or less involved with sort of making the bridge between these two worlds. The surrealists were very aristocratic. Max Ernst was married to Peggy Guggenheim. She brought over a whole troupe of the surrealists in her airplane, including Andre Breton. I think those people possibly would have been liquidated in many ways by Hitler in the invasion of Europe.

DENNIS BARRIE: Was the period a difficult one for you? Did you feel that your own style and so forth had to change, or was changing? How were you evolving in this period?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, the St. Paul School of Art, at which I had studied—the group there with Leroy Turner and, in some ways, with Cameron Booth, were oriented towards a kind of abstraction based on cubist forms and cubist space, and involved a mathematical and geometric construction of their pictures. It was a completely different ball game. And yet some of the things they did, I thought, in their own way, had a quality that was quite different from American Scene. And I don't know—when you consider all the paintings that were done on the WPA and Federal Art Projects that were done, say, of farms, street corners, and stuff like that, it makes you wonder where all those pictures have gone. We do have some residual personalities out of that kind of realism, like—well Charles Burchfield did a lot of American Scene paintings. Grant Wood was a kind of American Scene painter in the Midwest. Painting had a more regional character. Everybody was doing it. I mean there wasn't a silo or an old barn or an old street corner that somebody wasn't painting.

DENNIS BARRIE: What did you do for the WPA?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I did some murals. In Minnesota I did murals for the Northrup Auditorium at the University of Minnesota. I did a series of murals in Rockville, Minnesota in their school and community center.

DENNIS BARRIE: What kind of style? Did this take an abstract style?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: These were, say, highly designed. They were figurative symbols. Possibly the nearest way to describe them was that they were sort of cubist-oriented surface pictures, but they did have certain symbols involved of that kind.

DENNIS BARRIE: Did you find it a restraining kind of situation to work on the WPA?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: The WPA went through several phases. In Minnesota it was an enormously successful thing. There are still a lot of them—whatever buildings are left though slum clearance and remodeling, a lot of the work has become assimilated into the State and into the areas. So it was an enormously successful thing. When I got to New York it had reached its success and became a political football. Orson Welles was with the WPA Theater. It had taken on political overtones. Some congressmen were out to kill it at all costs. They had theater for 35¢, Orson Welles' productions that were really quite something in those times. It was so successful that the first thing they killed was the Theater Projects. And then the other thing they sort of slowed down—At the time Gorky was doing murals for the Newark Airport. He did symbols of airplanes and things like that. Strangely enough, I had several photographs of that mural Gorky gave me. I had several of those and I've lost them completely. I may have gotten them from Burgoyne Diller who was on the Project at the time. So most of them, Pollock and all these

people, were involved on the physical side through the mural painting project. But before the surrealists came, it never occurred to them that it's possible to do, say, a large portable picture. The large easel painting was probably sort of an insistence by Breton. Matta, for instance did large paintings. Max Ernst did large paintings. Americans up to that time had never conceived of, say, a portable large picture, unless it was in a fixed position. When I had my first show at Betty Parsons' gallery she really hassled me on that. I had to get Barnett Newman and Tony Smith to sort of assuage her nerves.

DENNIS BARRIE: Why? Because your paintings were so large?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, because she just couldn't take the framework. She'd say, "Who would accept this?"

DENNIS BARRIE: It was too large?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes. At that time the American Scene paintings—if you look at a Grant Wood or any of these people—who was that guy in Wisconsin that did—?

DENNIS BARRIE: Curry?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes, Curry. You'll find that essentially those paintings are less than three by four feet. So Betty Parsons didn't quite know what to do with anything larger than that.

DENNIS BARRIE: What size canvas were you doing?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I was doing four by sixes. I think I was probably the first person to show large paintings. In Peggy Guggenheim's Salon—which is what she called it—the early Pollock's were never larger than three by four feet.

DENNIS BARRIE: Very small.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: In your experience do you think it was more the meeting with surrealists, or more the working with the large mural that started you thinking large in your own work?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: It was the union of the two. In other words, it was sort of like saying, "America is a big country. Why don't you think big?" When you think of the French easel paintings of Picasso—I don't think anybody up to that time had painted a picture that I know of—Like Gorky's version of Picassos were relatively small, whereas, let's say, *Picasso's Studio* was a picture maybe, oh, five by seven feet roughly, and asymmetric painting. That was probably one of the large ones. Or the *Woman Before a Mirror* was a large painting. Those were the largest easel paintings that had been seen up to that time.

DENNIS BARRIE: Was anybody else around you doing this sort of—you know, grasping the same kind of thing—large...?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, in this process, after Baziotés there was another person involved. That was Peter Busa who was close to Gorky. Pete did a panel with Matta in Minneapolis, of all places. Which struck me as a sort of inconceivable situation.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yes, I thought that myself.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: And he talked about some of the circumstances then. This was the earlier thing. Then later on after the Peggy Guggenheim thing came on there was a kind of pressure of where—and Matta was involved in this fight—of where the surrealists and the Dalíesque thing and the highly illustrative thing were felt to be inadequate. And even the Max Ernst things were taken on a highly literal thing. They started to do portraits as if they were intimidated by any ideas. Matta was sort of saying, "Well, we should have support for this other aspect. If you believe in free play of energy, why don't we have this?" And then he got Motherwell and Baziotés and Pollock and myself involved. And we had meetings in groups at the same time. In the meantime don't forget that it wasn't entirely a simple world. There were other people outside of it. John Cage was on the scene. I remember having a dinner. Kiesler came up for lunch or dinner or whatever it was. And then also Matta became friendly. In other words, it was sort of a very open circumstance. And everybody that was doing things at that time before it became, say, really heavily institutionalized with, let's say, the Artists Studio when they had a going thing, and they realized they were going to cash in on it. It almost became a union at that

point. But I'm talking about the earlier—the first days when people were doing it because it was the venturesome thing to do.

DENNIS BARRIE: The nature of the meetings that you people had—ideas were tossed out? Technique was tossed out? Politics were tossed out?—What type of thing happened there?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, it was a sort of loosely connected thing. We'd meet in somebody's studio. For instance, on the thing that I have—this happened earlier—Baziotes brought Pollock over to my place. This is regarding that picture I was talking about earlier. Baziotes was working with display lacquers. They were sort of dissatisfied with the whole way oil paints were used. With oil you sort of wound up painting street corners or doing like American Scene paintings. So he began to use mediums that would sort of resist that, that you could build up a heavy surface, you couldn't blend. Actually it lent itself very, very easily to flowing and to dripping. At this particular meeting we were sort of talking. Bill would say, "This is what I'm talking about," and Bill would ramble on a great deal and then he'd sort of lead you into it. He asked me, "Do you have an old piece of paper or an old canvas around here that you don't want?" I said, "Yes," and got him something. Bill said, "Let me show you what I mean." Of course Jackson never said anything; he was smoking cigarettes. Bill opened up the can of paint to demonstrate the thing. Jackson sort of would get involved. Bill said to him, "Why don't you see what you can do with it?" You know, wanting Jackson to actually get involved in it so he'd have some idea and a commitment from him. Well, this was on kind of very, very early experience. At other meetings sometimes we'd get a little dialectical, a little power-ridden. The political aspect was not that heavy at the time. I think it was more or less a case of trying to assert themselves in yet a new way.

DENNIS BARRIE: During that period you joined with—

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

We left off with a thought I had—I know that you became involved with the American Abstract Artists movement organization. I'd like to explore your association with that. First of all, how did you become involved? Why did you become involved?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, the St. Paul School of Art was very abstract-oriented. I mean Turner and Corazzo were very abstract-oriented. And after the Bauhaus, it was an easy thing to gimmick; it was a natural thing to do. So I approached Carl Holty and some of the people there. And also at that time—I'd have to check my dates on that—but I do know that, for instance, Mercedes Matter (or Mercedes Carles) was a member of the group. George McNeil was a member, and a lot of Hofmann people were members of the group. It may have been that the components of that group—if one were to break it down in retrospect—that half of them were Hofmann students, and the other half were sort of half abstract, more or less sort of Bauhaus type of abstractionist, or non-objective artists; a lot of the non-objective artists were there. It was a non-objective as it was abstract; it was a non-figurative group.

DENNIS BARRIE: It was a non-figurative group?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: How early were you involved? You just told me that you were involved with the earliest exhibition in 1937?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes. I'd have to check on that. I was in a show in San Francisco at the time of the World's Fair there.

DENNIS BARRIE: At the Golden Gate Bridge?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: In 1939. Yes, the Golden Gate thing. I had some things there. I was starting to phase out of it. In other words, these were after the fact. I've had some of the abstract things circulating when I was no longer interested in it.

DENNIS BARRIE: You were no longer interested in the abstract?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: In what you'd call the geometric, highly constructed, abstract thing.

DENNIS BARRIE: How omnipresent was that group? As a member did you attend meetings?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Oh, yes. It was full of tensions, energy, and dynamic quality. It was sort

of interesting because there really wasn't any kind of media kind of fortune to be seized as there was later on. In other words, I think that after Pollock hit it—One day—I think it was a September day—there were two big success stories: Frank Sinatra was swinging big at the Paramount Theater—he'd made like thousands of dollars—and Jackson Pollock had gotten this contract from Peggy Guggenheim. He was the first American painter that I know of to receive a contract in my time as a painter.

DENNIS BARRIE: You were in the 1939 Annual of the American Abstract Artists. A statement came out by the member of that Annual essentially to the effect that a lot of the expressionists, abstract painters and so forth were alienated and eventually left the group. In fact, some of the original founders left: George McNeil, Rosenberg and so forth. How aware were you of the tensions in the group? And what were people trying to do with the abstract painters group?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: That's a hard one to answer. Today everything is abstract, and there are subcultures and subcultures. Naturally there were divisions. For instance, Gorky was an abstract painter. He never showed with the group at all. On the other hand, Léger and Mondrian showed. And Holtzman showed. So it wasn't entirely a simple-minded thing.

DENNIS BARRIE: But did you feel a sense of rivalry with people who were not doing the same kind of abstract work? Was there a sense of rivalry among the group itself?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: There's a certain rivalry in any group, you know, certain goals to be realized, certain ideals that they're trying to satisfy. So naturally rivalry was there. But the group had its own momentum and carried on for quite a few years.

DENNIS BARRIE: When did you first become involved with the Peggy Guggenheim group?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: There was a collage show. In fact, I have a collage here on the wall that I showed at that place. Do you remember this person I met at Francis Lee's whose name I can't remember? I'm sure I'd get a recall if I were talking to Pete Busa, or Jimmy Ernst would know—Jimmy Ernst was involved in there, too. When Jimmy first came to America, he worked at the Museum of Modern Art as a docent, or, you know, he wore the uniform of a guard there. Then I think he got into some sort of theatrical advertising and finally into teaching painting. Jimmy was involved with that, too, and Jimmy worked for awhile at Peggy's, just in the sense of getting a job. It took some doing just to survive those days.

DENNIS BARRIE: So you were drawn into Peggy's through Jimmy Ernst? Or --

GEROME KAMROWSKI: And this other person whose name I can't remember, yes. And then, of course, Howard Putzel was more sympathetic.

DENNIS BARRIE: What kind of contact did you have with Putzel?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Putzel had a gallery in California. I think it was like a Hollywood gallery. Cameron Booth, who was a teacher at the St. Paul School of Art, had a show at Putzel's. Putzel used to have Marcel Duchamp organize painting shows for his gallery in California. The gallery never made—I don't know how Putzel managed. He was a terribly nervous person. I remember that at St. Paul, we had shows of Tanguy, or Braque, and selections of French paintings that came from Putzel's gallery and were going on their way back.

DENNIS BARRIE: Had you ever met Putzel prior to being around Peggy?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: No.

DENNIS BARRIE: What influence did he have? Did he speak directly to the artists? Did he deal with you?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Peggy was sort of removed, and she was sort of involved. She was a little—Bob Gennaro said that the only time you could ever pin her down—she had this sort of aloof quality—was when you started to talk about money. Then she'd begin to concretize.

DENNIS BARRIE: So essentially when artists dealt with Peggy they were really dealing with Putzel?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes, in the early days.

DENNIS BARRIE: You showed at Peggy's in one of her major first shows?



GEROME KAMROWSKI: No, I didn't—I showed at Peggy's in a collage show. And I showed in the Salon.

DENNIS BARRIE: I see. What was your first New York show?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: It was at Betty Parsons.

Dennis Barry: This was when you did these large canvases?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes. And also a lot of watercolors.

Dennis Barry: What was Betty Parsons' reaction to all these things going on around her? Was she sympathetic or disinterested in the new concepts?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I think Betty's background—You know, *New Yorker* magazine did a Profile on her. She had this Wakefield Bookstore. When she first started a gallery, she was working for Mortimer Brandt. Mortimer Brandt had this large space which is now the Sidney Janis Gallery. Brandt had all that space. He was selling old masters. He had the room he wanted to use, and he had Betty Parsons organize the modern gallery for him. Later on she sort of sublet the space from him. Then ultimately I think she took over that lease. Of course, that's a scandal, too, that lease thing, where Sidney Janis sort of finally booted her out. It was a really choice location and people were used to coming there. Kootz first sublet from her or got the front part. And later on Janis did and ultimately Janis took over the whole floor.

DENNIS BARRIE: How successful were you with that show? Were things going over? Were people selling in that period?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I sold quite a few things. I got into a lot of prestigious collections. And I got into a lot of major national shows.

DENNIS BARRIE: What year was that, do you know?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Oh, God, I'd have to look it up in the catalogue.

DENNIS BARRIE: Was it in the forties?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes, it would be in the forties.

DENNIS BARRIE: By that time were people like Baziotés selling and so forth? Were they making any money?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Baziotés was selling a little bit. He was also teaching.

DENNIS BARRIE: How did most people sustain themselves, I mean in the forties?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Rothko, Ibram Lassaw—Ad Reinhardt was a cartoonist for *PM* magazine. He was a GI; he got his degree and became a teacher. Essentially most of the people were teachers. If I'm not mistaken, Motherwell and Tony Smith had independent incomes.

DENNIS BARRIE: I know for sure that Motherwell did. In that period who do you think influenced you the most, and vice versa? Where do you find your strongest ties in that period intellectually and artistically?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I think there are certain aspects of Breton's imaginative qualities that are quite interesting: the idea of a poetic mentality as opposed to, say, the Bauhaus idea of functional definition. Of course it still remains to be seen whether or not some of the political ideas have validation because I think some of the idealism has gotten corrupted a great deal.

DENNIS BARRIE: But Breton was an influence on yourself?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Oh, I think anyone who ever met him was influenced by him. There's no doubt about it.

DENNIS BARRIE: What were his qualities? I mean, what was he like personally? How did he affect you?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I think that the whole group had a great deal of confidence in themselves

even thought they were sort of on tender edges economically in a strange land. In other words, art was an integral part of their lives. Art wasn't something that they bought to put over the fireplace; it was something that they were finding themselves in. Their destiny was involved in it; their survival was involved in it. They were sort of jumping out of the frying pan and coming here. So it was a rough deal. Dalí at that time was doing society portraits of wealthy people, you know, with like a kind of extravaganza surrealist background. Max Ernst was married to Peggy Guggenheim for survival.

DENNIS BARRIE: What did Breton do for survival?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Leon Kochinsky had Overseas Broadcasts. And Breton did the overseas Broadcasts for the government—I don't know what you call them—well, I think they were just called Overseas Broadcasts. I remember a terrible incident when we were at a sort of half-dinner or lunch group. Breton had gotten \$50 and had lost it. It represented like half a month's survival. Somebody said, "Well, you should have put it in the bank." Today you wouldn't think anything of \$50. But in those days it was absolutely crucial. The excitement it engendered made excitement for a week about how do you manage money. So I think it was always very tenuous for him.

DENNIS BARRIE: What do you think they gave to you? I'm still trying to grasp this sense, this poetic sense. But beyond that what do you see of them in your own work?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, it's a more imaginative approach. The WPA artists and the American Scene artists were really very proletarian. And even Sandler makes the point that the surrealists in a way had a certain amount of elegance to them, so that instead of being as pedestrian, you know, sort of walking for the so-called workers' revolution and suffering with them—There's a very funny story whether it's true or not that Howard Wise of the Howard Wise Gallery took Franz Kline and Bill de Kooning to the "21" Club for lunch. They felt very uncomfortable there. They felt like, "What are doing here with all these rich people. We ought to liquidate them. They're living off of us poor." In "21" I suppose there were movie stars and radio personnel and so on. Somebody pointed out to Kline and de Kooning that they were as rich as anybody in the room.

DENNIS BARRIE: Did you have any of this proletarian feeling politically or anything like that that the group had?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, I think you sort of get like the Artist Congress and the WPA: one got a good political education. From my experience all those people, the most active politicians would up like the richest bankers.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yes, that did turn out to be the case.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: In other words, it was a good school for economists, probably more so than for artists.

DENNIS BARRIE: How much time could you really spend doing your art in those situations? You know, with people kind of forced to make ends meet, did you have enough money for paint? In a previous interview you talked about—I can't remember whether it was Rothko or whoever—just using solid black poster paint—

GEROME KAMROWSKI: It was Pollock.

DENNIS BARRIE: —Pollock—poster paint or whatsoever because financially it was a burden just to cover a canvas with black paint. How did that affect you?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, I think maybe that gave a character to the paint. And they could get an image out of that. The early Pollock's certainly were that. And there was a period when Gorky—Peter Busa knew Gorky very well, and I had a remote connection with Gorky. I mean not as close as Pete had, but nevertheless I think I understood Gorky very well. Gorky did a whole year of just doing pen and ink drawings because he wasn't able to swing the cost of canvases.

DENNIS BARRIE: What kind of things did you do when you didn't have any money?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, you sort of—One time I was talking to Gorky. You know, he was very critical and very competitive. He was looking at my hands. He said, "What happened to your hands?" I said, "Well, they're just broken out, and they're sore." He said, "What did you do?" I said, "I was scrubbing the oil paint off an old canvas." You know, I've never heard of anybody

doing that since. They'd throw it out. But your supply of canvases would get exhausted and you'd want something else. Gorky said that he had the same experience. Then he showed me the canvas he had. It was done quite differently. I was doing it on sort of a cotton canvas, and his was a linen thing. He used almost like a brown resin, like it was a very heavy rabbit skin glue probably. But he experienced the same thing where he actually felt that the canvas wasn't materializing completely to satisfy him with just soaking and sort of cracking the paint to get it off the fabric that was left.

DENNIS BARRIE: And this was a fairly common practice.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: And it was a bad mistake.

DENNIS BARRIE: But financially it was almost impossible to do otherwise?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Did you find yourself forced to do work that you really wouldn't have wanted to do just to sell, or to—?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: There was a kind of political pressure from the Artists Union which wanted a certain kind of thing. And yet it was loose. Essentially the Project itself was so successful that there was a kind of thing to really put it down. There was leftist activity but yet it wasn't a completely leftist thing. Burgoyne Diller was head of the mural project. He was a substantial painter and a Hofmann student. He had many of the abstract painters doing murals for Radio Station WNYC, for example. I remember during the second year of the New York World's Fair we were assigned to repaint some of these murals that had started to erode. This was Diller's idea. We all went out on the subway; there was a carload of us; I was with Gorky and Ruth Gikow and de Kooning. In the meantime it was really quite an impossible interview. We were catching the bus from Flushing. John Graham had gotten a piece of Congo African sculpture. It was four feet in size, quite light wood. He was carrying it like a baby. Graham, Gorky and I were sitting together riding from Flushing. I would like to have had a tape transcription of that conversation. It was very pleasant. You might ask, "How could people be relaxed?" And yet there was a conversation going on all the time. There was no malice, there was no competition. There was just sort of like—In some ways if you were looking for a contest of this to answer your earlier question—In many cases there was a sort of resignation because people were much closer and the friendships were much more solid possibly than today. I think we've gotten into a kind of paranoid situation where people distrust everybody. Ad Reinhardt is complaining that Newman is career-oriented. You know, it's gotten to be that kind of thing. And that never existed then.

DENNIS BARRIE: So there could be these two styles coexisting like obviously with Graham and Gorky on the bus—?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes. But then they weren't too far apart either.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yes. Did you ever find censorship in the Projects that manifested itself?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: The worst censorship was by a person named Increase Robinson. She was out of Chicago and had charge sort of the Midwest area. "Increase" is a real Puritan name, and she was Puritan. In an article in *Time* magazine she said that "no nudes, no abstractions were allowed on the Project."

DENNIS BARRIE: Did you have to deal with her ever?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, remotely.

DENNIS BARRIE: This was in Minnesota?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: On the other hand, instead of having a plane, you could always make a figurative thing. But it was remote, and it wasn't difficult. It gave the people on the Project a certain amount of indulgence because you were operating on a social level. In many cases many of the material that people were given to work with were quite substantial. And they had a direct contact to many of the community areas that even today you don't have.

DENNIS BARRIE: And that was very valid?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Did it give you enough so that you could buy canvas and you could work?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Generally, when you were on the Project itself they had a substantial supply of materials.

DENNIS BARRIE: Could you take some home and do your own kind of thin?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: No, not really. If you wanted material you'd be commissioned like at a neighborhood house, a schoolhouse, a village center, and you'd be given the materials. If I remember correctly, the buying, the receiving institution would pay half of the expenses.

DENNIS BARRIE: How did people like Bazziotes and de Kooning react to the Project?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, Bazziotes would check in. He was essentially doing easel painting. They had divisions on the Project—easel and mural. I think he had a kind of—Of course it wouldn't matter a great deal because he'd have to say what's noble. The abstract issue wasn't particularly involved. Most of the abstract painters at that time were on the mural project. Gorky was one of those. Some people were on the easel project, but they were more or less client-oriented. Now in trying to trace where some of the work that was done on the WPA Project ended up when PDA was liquidated, or folded up—which was inevitable—I understand that in New York they at least auctioned off the work. But I understand that in Chicago they literally took some stuff and put it in the dump. And out of curiosity I wonder what's happened, say, to some of the things that were done on the Minnesota Project. But on the New York Project, they're very sure that these things were auctioned off.

DENNIS BARRIE: The only thing that's missing is Gorky's Newark mural. They think a general walked off with it.

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I don't know. We never know. The simplest thing that could have happened was that things were just painted over, or they might have knocked a wall down to make, say, a cafeteria or a restroom.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yes. But someone like Bazziotes—he didn't feel demeaned to do this? Or was it against their sensitivity? Or your own sensitivity? I don't know—did you feel that? Or—

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, I think you're laboring the wrong point. You're laboring a little much—There was some of that but it wasn't that intense. Lee Krasner, the widow of Jackson Pollock, used to feel that there was a kind of political issue involved. Some people used to call her a Trotskyite because she was contrary. And yet Lee could really, you know, put up a fight and argue. You must have heard that story where somebody said they'd rather have cancer than get into a fight with Lee Pollock.

DENNIS BARRIE: Can we just sum up briefly because I know we're running out of tape. Who do you feel was your close circle during that period? You know, who were the individuals that you respected and felt closest to?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Well, I think at one time Matta had a lot of energy, and it was really Matta who like sort of swung the thing. I'm not talking about an artistic influence; I'm talking about a figure thing. And I don't know—in the age of drugs today we'd find out what kind of pills he might have been on because it took a lot of optimism. World War II was coming on; the inevitability of it was enormous. Xceron was a fairly food painter and had a show at the Guggenheim; he was an American sort of *Cahiers d'Art* painter. He would say, "Well, this is the death of art." And any kind of sort of optimal view was just there. And then there was in the intellectual air of the idea that, well, painting is dead a there's no place for it in the world. You know, like the absurdity of some of the Bauhaus arguments, you know: we should all be designing for the new society that's going to emerge. So that the period was enormously depressing. Matta did have that excitement. I think his energy was the kind of this that influenced people. In an artistic sense he influenced Gorky. Some of their twin paintings are really collector's items now. I think Matta was important because of his enthusiasm, and people sort of built up their own enthusiasm. It may have been false hope but it materialized successfully in the long run very well.

DENNIS BARRIE: So do you think that without Matta, your own views would have changed? Were you convinced that, you know, your painting would weather this kind of pessimistic thinking?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: On the other hand, they had surrealist shows in Minnesota. I have copies

of the magazine *Minotaur* that I got in Minnesota. I think they've reissued them now. But I had almost the complete set of the *Minotaur* up to a certain date. And I had a fairly good surrealist library at one time. So that in coming in operation, it wasn't Matta's invention. And some of these things were public knowledge. So that was also a sense of other things existing there, too.

DENNIS BARRIE: Again, in your circle, if you had to name four or five people you felt closest to, aside from Matta, who would you name?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: I was close to Baziotos. Baziotos was sort of like—At that time people didn't have girl friends. He had a love affair. And, you know, you'd wonder how people managed especially when you were sort of on such a tenuous edge as trying to be a painter. And then maybe on the Project, which employed hundreds of people, there were probably less than ten or twenty people that you could take seriously. Now some of the other people like Guston, for instance, had a thing going; they were getting contract murals from the government. But I'm talking about the people that were sort of in there, you know, young and hungry and sort of chewed at.

DENNIS BARRIE: Was everybody borrowing ideas? That's a terrible way of putting it. But I mean, you said you had experimented one time—

GEROME KAMROWSKI: You had certain ideas. Then it was like you'd trace down votes. You'd talk. You'd see people in the museums. You'd see Gorky in a museum. Baziotos and I used to go to the museums a lot; we'd look at things. Sometimes it was just because you wanted to get out of the studio. In the meantime you learned something.

DENNIS BARRIE: One of the questions that one of these other people asked you was about the meetings you attended in 1942. Do you recall those?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Bill Baziotos was sort of the catalyst for those. He brought all these people together. They were held in different people's studios.

DENNIS BARRIE: Was this sort of an extension of these earlier things you did?

GEROME KAMROWSKI: Yes. In other words, Bob Motherwell has a real taste for success. Of course in New York at that time there was not only the Artists Union. Everybody had a group. There were millions of groups. It was like Hyde Park, and everything was up for grabs. Essentially Baziotos had a more lyrical sense about it and could manage it. But I'm sort of amazed that Bob Motherwell with a sort of straightforward manner could sort of hold the thing together and write about it seriously.

[END OF SIDE 1.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]